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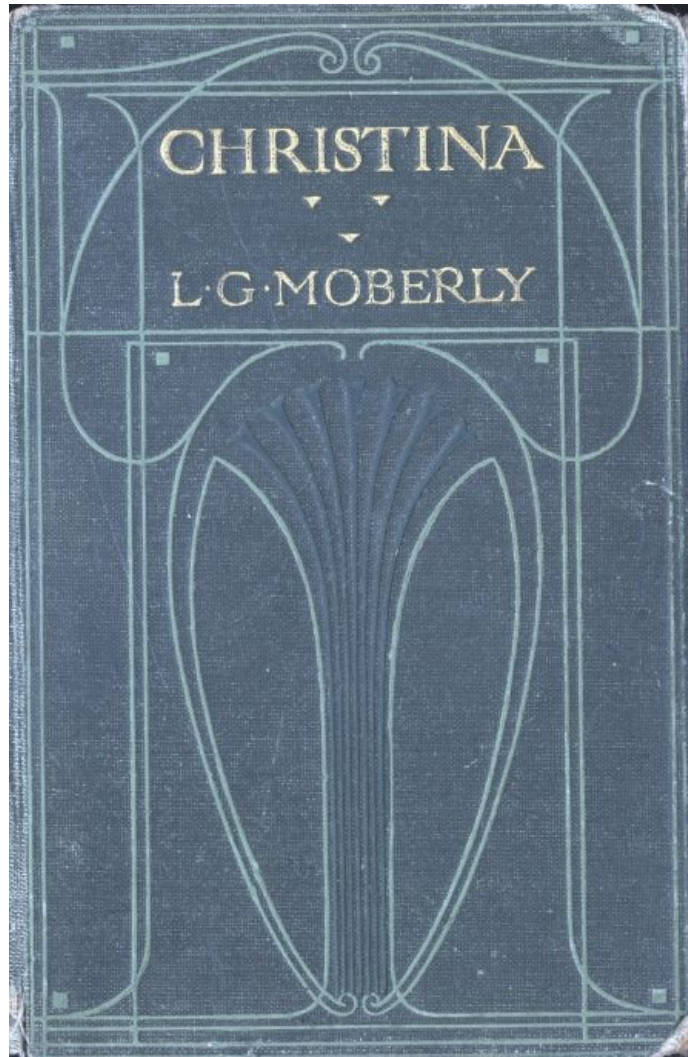
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CHRISTINA

BY

L. G. MOBERLY

Author of "Hope, My Wife," "That Preposterous Will," etc.

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
LONDON, MELBOURNE & TORONTO
1912

Dedicated to
WINIFRED V. WALKER,
WITH MUCH LOVE.

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CHRISTINA.

CHAPTER I.

"THE LITTLE PRACTICAL JOKE."

"Don't be a silly ass, Layton. Do I look the sort of man to play such a fool's trick?"

"My dear fellow, there's no silly ass about it. You, a lonely bachelor, and not badly off—desirous of settling down into quiet, domestic life, would like to find a young lady of refined and cultured tastes who would meet you with—a view to matrimony. I'll take my oath you are as ready as this gentleman is, to swear you will make an excellent husband, kind, domesticated, and ___"

Further speech was checked by a well-directed cushion, which descended plump upon the speaker's bronzed and grinning countenance, momentarily obliterating grin and countenance alike, whilst a shout of laughter went up from the other occupants of the smoking-room.

"Jack, my boy, Mernside wasn't far wrong when he defined you as a silly ass," drawled a man who leant against the mantelpiece, smoking a cigarette, and looking with amused eyes at the squirming figure under the large cushion; "what unutterable drivel are you reading? Is the *Sunday Recorder* responsible for that silly rot?"

"The *Sunday Recorder* is responsible for what you are pleased to call silly rot," answered the young man, who had now flung aside the cushion, and sat upright, looking at his two elders with laughing eyes, whilst he clutched a newspaper in one hand, and tried to smooth his rumpled hair with the other. "The *Sunday Recorder* has a matrimonial column—and—knowing poor old Rupert to be a lonely bachelor, not badly off, and desirous of settling down into quiet domestic life, etc., etc.—see the printed page"—he waved the journal over his head—"I merely wished to recommend my respected cousin to insert an advertisement on these lines, in next Sunday's paper."

"Because some wretched bounders choose to advertise for wives in the Sunday papers, I don't see where I come in," said a quiet and singularly musical voice—that of the third man in the room—he who a moment before had flung the large cushion at young Layton. He was sitting in an armchair drawn close to the glowing fire, his hands clasped under his head, his face full of languid amusement, turned towards the grinning youth upon the sofa. Without being precisely a handsome man, Rupert Mernside's was a striking personality, and his face not one to be overlooked, even in a crowd. There was strength in his well-cut mouth and jaw; and the rather deeply-set grey eyes held humour, and a certain masterfulness, which dominated less powerful characters than his own.

In those eyes there was a charm which neutralised his somewhat severe and rugged features, but in Rupert Mernside's voice lay his greatest attraction; and a lady of his acquaintance had once been heard to say that with such a voice as his, he could induce anyone to follow him round the world.

Why he had remained so long a bachelor had long been matter for speculation, not only to the feminine portion of the community, but also to his men friends; but thirty-five still found Rupert Mernside unmarried, and the manoeuvres of match-making mothers, and of daughters trained to play up to their mothers' tactics, had hitherto failed to lead him in the desired direction.

"My dear Rupert," his young cousin said solemnly, after a pause, "you are a bachelor—the fact is painfully self-evident; you have enough money to—settle down and become domesticated. There are hundreds—no—thousands of young women in the world, who would 'meet you with a view to matrimony.' It seems a crying shame that you should waste your sweetness on the desert air—when you might be blooming in a fair lady's garden."

"You utter young rotter," Mernside ejaculated, laughing as he rose, and stretched himself, "if you are so keen on matrimonial advertisements, why not put one in on your own account?"

"Awful sport," Layton ejaculated; "think of the piles of letters you would get from every kind of marriageable woman—old and young. And you might arrange to meet any number of them at different places, and have no end of a ripping time. You only have to ask them to meet you with a view to matrimony; the matrimony needn't come off, unless both parties are satisfied."

"Silly ass!" Mernside exclaimed again, with a laugh that mitigated the words, "one of these days you'll find yourself in some unpleasantly tangled web, my boy, if you play the goat over matrimonial advertisements. Better leave well alone and come up to Handwell Manor with me. Cicely wants a message taken to the Dysons."

"Cicely's messages are like the poor—always with us," the younger man answered flippantly; "no, thank you, Rupert; on this genial and pleasant November afternoon, when you can't see half a mile ahead of you for the mist, and the country lanes are two feet deep in mud, I prefer the smoking-room fire. Besides, I have letters to write."

"I'll go with you, Mernside"; the man who had been lounging against the mantelpiece straightened himself, and flung away the end of his cigarette; "Cicely won't be down till tea-time; she is spending the afternoon in the nursery, looking after the small girl. Confounded nuisance for her that the nurse had to go off in a hurry like this, for my respected sister was not intended by nature for the care of children."

"Fortunate she has only one," Mernside answered; "what would she have done with a large family party?"

"Managed by hook or by crook to get a party of nurses and nurserymaids to mind them," laughed the other man; "she's the dearest little soul alive, but Cicely never ought to have been a mother, though I shouldn't say that, excepting to you two who are members of the family, and know of what stuff Cicely and I are made."

Mernside and Layton joined in the laughter, and the younger man said lazily:

"Cicely's just Cicely; you can't imagine her less perfect than she is, and you, Wilfrid, being merely her brother, are not entitled to give an opinion about her. Rupert and I, as cousins, see her in a truer perspective. Bless her sweet heart! She makes a perfect chatelaine for this delectable castle, and the small heiress couldn't have a sweeter guardian."

"Hear, hear," Mernside murmured, touching Layton's shoulder with a kindly, almost caressing touch, as he and his cousin, Lord Wilfrid Staynes, went out of the room, leaving the young man in sole possession.

Left alone, Layton stretched himself again, yawned, lighted a cigarette, and, strolling to the window, looked at the not very inviting prospect outside. Bramwell Castle stood on the slope of a hill, and on even moderately fine days, the view commanded, not only by the window of the smoking-room, but by every window on that side of the house, was one of the wildest, and most beautiful in the county. But, on this Sunday afternoon in November, nothing more was visible than the broad gravel terrace immediately below the house, and a grass lawn that sloped abruptly from the terrace, and was dotted with trees. Everything beyond the lawn was swallowed up in a white mist that drifted over the tree-tops, and clung to the dank grass, blotting out completely all trace of the park, that swept downwards from the lawn, and of the great landscape which stretched from the woodlands to the far-away hills. Park, woods, and hills were visible to Jack Layton only in the eyes of his imagination; he could see none of them, and, with a shiver and a shrug of the shoulders, he turned back into the warm fire-lit room.

Thanks to his close relationship to Lady Cicely Redesdale, the mistress of the house, to whom he had always been more of younger brother than cousin, he had *carte blanche* to be at the Castle whenever he chose, and to treat the house as if it were in reality, what he assuredly made of it—his actual home. Both to him—and to Cicely's other cousin, Rupert Mernside—the late John Redesdale, her husband, had extended the fullest and most warm hospitality; and since his death, it had still remained a recognised thing that the two cousins should spend their weekends at Bramwell, whenever Lady Cicely and her little daughter were there. The kindly millionaire who had married the lovely but impecunious Cicely Staynes, one of the numerous daughters of the Earl of Netherhall, possessed a host of hospitable instincts, and the Castle had opened its gates wide to Cicely's relations and friends. Only one reservation had been made by honest John Redesdale. No man or woman of doubtful reputation, or damaged character, was allowed to be the guest of his wife; and the shadier members of Society never set foot within any house of which the millionaire was master. Jack Layton, strolling idly now across the smoking-room, whose panelled walls and carved furniture had been Redesdale's pride and joy, glanced up at the mantelpiece, over which hung a portrait of the dead man.

"Poor old John," the young man reflected, as he kicked a coal back into its place in the fire; "he was one of the best chaps that ever lived—even if he hadn't many good looks with which to bless himself." He looked up again at the plain but kindly features of the man in the portrait, and a smile crossed his pleasant young face, as his eyes met the pictured eyes above him.

"It wasn't a love match, of course," his thoughts ran on; "at least, I don't suppose Cicely loved the dear old fellow. Well; he was thirty years her senior, so who could wonder? But they were jolly happy, for all that; John worshipped the ground her pretty feet walked upon, and he was her master, without ever letting her feel his hand through the glove. Cicely wants a master—all women do want a master," Jack wagged his head sagely, when his thoughts reached this point. Having attained to the ripe age of twenty-five, he felt he had plumbed the nature of woman to its lowest depths, "and Cicely was lucky to find a master who could give her a place like this." He sauntered away from the fireplace, and next surveyed the well-stocked bookcases, but although they contained every variety of literature, nothing he saw appealed to his fastidious taste of the moment—and, yawning afresh, he once more picked up the *Sunday Recorder*, which he had flung upon the floor.

That someone who is perennially ready to turn idle hands to account, was watching over this idle youth on that November afternoon, may, on the whole, be taken for granted, for as Jack's blue eyes ran down the columns of the paper, a sudden mischievous light sprang into them, a low laugh broke from his lips.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "What sport, what ripping sport. Why on earth didn't I think of it before? And—as I start for a four months' trip with Dundas on Saturday—I shan't have to pay the piper, so to speak, yet awhile. In fact, by the time I come back, good old Rupert may have forgotten the little practical joke." Whilst he soliloquized, he was making his way towards the writing-table, where, having seated himself, he drew towards him a blank sheet of paper—and began to write a letter, glancing frequently at the *Sunday Recorder* beside him. An expansive grin lightened his features as he wrote, and at intervals he chuckled softly to himself, murmuring under his breath:

"Poor old Rupert. If only I could be there when he gets the answers. But one can't have everything," he went on philosophically, whilst addressing an envelope to the Editor of the *Sunday Recorder*; "it will be pure joy to think of the dear soul's dismay, horror, and disgust. 'Tis a mad world, my masters'—and, oh! to see our Rupert's face when the letters pour in. For they *will* pour in." During this rapid soliloquy, he was writing a second letter, which gave him less trouble, and needed less thought, than the first. Indeed, it ran very briefly:

"DEAR SIR,—I am desired to ask if you will be good enough to forward all letters in response to the enclosed advertisement to R.M., c/o your newspaper, to 200, Termyn Street, S.W.—Yours faithfully,

"J. LAYTON."

With a final chuckle, the young man put both letters into an envelope, and having stamped it, went whistling from the house, and through the park to the village, to post the missive himself at the little village post office.

"Quiet and cultivated gentleman of good family and means, is anxious to meet a young lady of good birth who needs a home, etc., etc., etc.," he murmured as he walked slowly back to the Castle through the dripping November mist. "Oh! what sport—what utterly ripping sport!"

CHAPTER II.

"MUMMY'S BABA—DAT'S ALL."

In the great Free Library of a crowded London district, the gas burnt dimly; the yellow fog of a November morning crept even into the big room, and the few readers shivered a little in its cold clamminess. At this early hour, for the building had only just opened its doors on a Monday morning, merely a scattered number of men and women were to be seen in the place, and those who were there clustered round the advertisement columns of the newspapers. Both men and women alike were a sorry-looking crew, and the sad words "out of work," were stamped upon them all. Their clothing bore the marks of much wear and tear; their faces were worn, and in the eyes of each of them was that strained expression, that rises from much looking for that which never comes. Old and young men were there, searching the long columns of the papers for work that might suit their pressing needs; old and young women were there, too—women whose faces gave eloquent testimony to their hard fight with fortune—whose eyes glanced hungrily along the printed lines, whose hands tremblingly wrote down this or that address, which might by some merciful chance give them, if not exactly what they wanted, at any rate that which would ensure their earning a pittance, however scanty. Almost every member of the forlorn group eyed every other member suspiciously, with furtive glances, that seemed to say: "If you are lucky enough to get a job out of those columns, then I shall fail to get one. We are cutting each other's throats here. Your success is my failure." And as each one finished jotting down the addresses that were likely to be of use, he or she moved silently away from the library, speaking no word to the rest—like cowering animals who, having received a bone, or the promise of a bone, slink away from their fellows, fearful lest even the small thing they have gained, should be snatched from them.

The greater number amongst the searchers for work, consisted of those who, for want of a better title, may be described as belonging to the middle classes. They were neither the very poor—in the recognised acceptation of the words, though heaven knows they were poor enough—neither could they be classed amongst artisans, or mechanics. Their appearance would lead an onlooker to suppose that the men were accustomed to office work of some description, and that the women were governesses, companions, or perhaps lady housekeepers—all respectable, all possessing certain ideals of life and propriety, all struggling to maintain the degree of gentility, which would keep them above the high-water mark of degradation. A girl who stood a little apart from the rest, looked round the dimly-lit room with pitiful eyes, and a shudder ran through her slight frame, as she watched the faces and forms of these women who were no longer young, but who were yet still engaged in this hand-to-hand fight with destitution. The girl was young; it was

impossible to suppose that more than twenty years had gone over her head, though the deep shadows under her eyes, and the lines of anxiety, about her mouth, might have made a casual observer regard her as an older woman. Like the rest of her sex who scanned the advertisement columns, she was dressed in clothes which had plainly seen better days—much better days. But, whereas some of the other women had already begun to drift into untidiness, and into the slovenly ways which mark the first step along a downward road, this girl was exquisitely neat from head to foot. Her hat, in spite of its age, was well brushed; her threadbare coat and skirt were tidy, and showed no traces of dirt or grease; her gloves, though they were white at the tips, had no holes; and there was no sign of neglect or disorder in the arrangement of the dark hair, that showed in soft, dusky curls below her hat.

"Poor things! Oh! poor things!" was her thought, as she looked at the sad string of humanity filing its slow way to the door. "Some of them have been every day for weeks, and they are getting older every day. And the older one gets, the harder it is to find work. Some day I shall be like that, old, and tired, and worn out; and then—work will be more difficult to get than it is now—and I can't get it—even now—when I am young."

The thoughts that had begun in sheer pity for those other battlers with the waves of this troublesome world, ended in a shuddering realisation of her own position; and not only of her position for the moment, but of the future that stretched inimitably before her across the years. She, Christina Moore, was only twenty, and in all human probability another sixty years of life might be hers, for she dimly remembered hearing her mother say that both she and her husband belonged to long-lived families. That they two had been cut off in the prime of life by a virulent epidemic of typhoid fever that swept the village like a plague, did not alter the fact that they came of races famous for octogenarians; and Christina, the last of two long lines of ancestors, shivered anew at the thought of the weary, weary years of struggle that might still lie before her. It was seldom that she was assailed by such depressing reflections; her youth had a way, as youth has, of asserting itself, and rebounding from its own despair; and there was an abundance of pluck behind those queer, green eyes of hers, and no lack of resolution in her small square chin. But the fog outside, the chilly atmosphere of the big library, whose fires were barely alight, and the sight of the same unemployed men and women who for weeks past had, as it were, dogged her footsteps, all combined this morning, to send Christina's spirits down to zero. Matters had not been improved by the calculations over which she had busied herself before leaving her lodgings an hour earlier. Whilst eating her dry bread, and drinking tea without milk, because both milk and butter were luxuries she no longer dared to give herself, she had written out her pitiful accounts upon a half-sheet of paper; and the result of the reckoning had given her a terrible feeling of desperation. For two years since her parents' death, she had occupied the post of nursery governess in the family of a Mrs. Donaldson, to whom her mother had once shown some trifling kindness. But three months earlier these people had left England for Canada, and no longer required her services—and Christina, untrained to any profession, with a few pounds in hand, and with nothing but a strong personality, and an innate love for little children, to offer as her stock in trade, found herself amongst the hundreds of other unemployed—just a waif in a great city!

Relations, as far as she knew, she had none. Her father had been an only child. Her mother had cut herself off from her own people by marrying against their consent, and Christina was even unaware of who they were, or to what part of the country they belonged. Long ago, she had grasped the fact that she was alone in the world, and when the Donaldsons went away, she had no intimate friends in the old country—two years of life with them in a London suburb having effectually cut her off from the very few acquaintances she had left behind, in the Devonshire village, where her parents died.

Alone in the world, with no work, after nearly three months of fruitless search for it, and with her small stock of money growing beautifully less each day, it was no wonder that on this morning in November, Christina Moore's heart sank in despair.

Save for one or two men still busily engaged in extracting addresses from the papers, she was alone in the library, before she herself began her daily search along those monotonous columns, whose lines seemed to her tired eyes to run into one another, and become lost in an infinite haze. So many people appeared to require nursery governesses, companions, and mothers' helps; and yet, as bitter experience taught her, there were many more applicants for the posts than there were posts to fill; and it was with a half-hearted sense of intense discouragement that she noted down some of the addresses. She even wrote down some that she had hitherto despised—those who offered only a home and no salary in return for services; for, as she reflected despondently, "even to have a roof over one's head, and meals to eat, is better than to have no lodging, or food—and no money to pay for either."

Having glanced down the advertisements in the chief dailies, her hand idly turned the pages of one of the Sunday papers close by, and her eyes glanced down them, more with the idea of distracting her thoughts, than with any conception that she might find anything there, that would be of use to her. And her lips parted in a smile, as she read, in large print:

"MATRIMONIAL NEWS."

"How funny," she mused, whilst she read that a gentleman of means wished to find a lady of fortune who would take pity on his loneliness; or that a lady no longer young, but still handsome,

wished to meet a gentleman with a moderate income, with a view to marriage.

"How funny—how very funny!" she mused again; then paused suddenly, her glance riveted to a sentence that caught and held her attention, almost against her will.

"Quiet and cultivated gentleman of means," so the paragraph ran, "is anxious to meet a young lady of good birth, who needs a home. No fortune is necessary, but marriage may be agreed upon if both parties are mutually satisfied. Reply by letter to R.M., Box 40,004, *Sunday Recorder* Office, Fleet Street, E.C."

Over the girl's white face there slowly spread a stain of vivid colour; into her eyes crept an odd light. She drew the paper more closely into her hands, reading and re-reading the paragraph, until every word of it was imprinted upon her mind.

"Young lady—who needs a home—no fortune necessary," she murmured. "Oh! if only it didn't seem so cold-blooded and horrid, what a way out it might be! Only—it seems—so—so mercenary—and not what I always thought of when I was silly—and dreamt—things," her musings ran on. "Once—I dreamt about a fairy prince—who would—just come—and—make me love him—and he and I would—be—all the world—to each other. But—of course—one couldn't be all the world to a person one had arranged to meet through a newspaper."

Another smile broke over her face, and when she smiled, Christina's face was very sweet.

"It may be just some dreadful trap to catch a silly girl," she reflected sagely, "and if—if I did really think of answering it, I should have to be very careful what I said—and where I arranged to meet R.M. Of course I—shan't really answer it at all—only—if I did—and if he were nice—and if—it all came right—there wouldn't be any more of this dreadful struggle!"

She noted the address of this advertisement amongst the others in her little pocket-book, and then made her way out of the library and trudged homewards through the yellow murk, buttoning her very inadequate coat tightly about her and shiveringly speculating whether, if she really answered R.M.'s advertisement, there might be a chance of obtaining clothing more fitted to resist the penetrating chill of a November fog. Her own small room looked dingier than usual when she entered it, and it was so full of fog and damp, that she rolled a blanket round her before lighting a candle and seating herself at the tiny table, to answer some of the advertisements she had copied. The room was bare of all but the most necessary furniture. A camp bedstead stood against the wall, whose paper was of that indeterminate drabness affected by lodging-house keepers; a deal table occupied the centre of the room, with the common cane-chair on which Christina sat; and a painted chest of drawers nearly blocked up the one tiny window. There was no wash-hand stand; a cracked white basin and a still more cracked jug stood upon the top of the drawers, a looking-glass of ancient and battered appearance hung over the mantelpiece, and an open cupboard in the wall served Christina as sideboard and larder combined. Beside the bed was a narrow strip of much-faded carpet, but of comfort and homeliness the room showed no trace whatever, save in the tiny touches of home the girl had herself striven to impart to it, by hanging on the walls one or two sketches of the Devonshire village she loved, and by putting on the mantelpiece a few treasured photographs. But her best endeavours had failed to make the room other than a most dreary and dispiriting abode, and the view from the window, of the backs of other houses looming darkly through the fog, was not calculated to lift the cloud of despair that for the moment had settled heavily upon her. She felt listlessly disinclined to state her qualifications as nursery governess, or mother's help, to the various ladies who hankered after such commodities. Involuntarily, but continually, her thoughts returned to that paragraph from the *Sunday Recorder*, which was not only engraved upon her mind, but which she had actually copied also into her book.

"Quiet and cultivated gentleman of means is anxious to meet a young lady of good birth, who needs a home. No fortune is necessary." At that point in her reading, Christina paused.

"No fortune is necessary," she said aloud, in an oddly deprecating voice. "R.M., whoever he may be, only asks for a young lady of good birth, who needs a home. Well," she turned her eyes towards the foggy roofs just visible outside her dirty window-panes, "well, as far as I know I am of good birth, even though father only taught music; and some people seem to look down on musicians. And—I certainly need a home."

Her glance left the gloomy world without, and went ruefully round the scarcely less gloomy prospect within. "And if I suited R.M.—perhaps—perhaps, he would be good to me. Should I suit him, I wonder? I'm not pretty, and certainly not amusing, and I'm dreadfully shabby, and nearly as poor as it is possible to be. There is not one single thing to recommend me." She pushed back her chair; and, rising from the table, moved slowly to the mantel-piece, over which hung the tarnished glass whose powers of reflecting objects satisfactorily had long since departed. Into this unpromising mirror, poor little Christina, holding the candle far above her head, peered long and earnestly, her small white face looking all the whiter, because of the background of yellow fog; her eyes seeming more green than was their wont, because of the dark shadows that underlay them.

She had thrown off her hat, and the soft masses of her hair lay in curly confusion about her head. It was a shapely little head, and particularly well put on, but these were points of which

Christina took no special account, being intent on finding beauties in her face, and failing to notice that there was anything admirable in the turn of her neck, in the poise of her firm chin, and in the straightforward glance of her eyes.

"If R.M. met me casually in the street, he wouldn't look at me twice—no man would," she exclaimed with a sigh, as she turned away from the glass, "I am horribly ordinary. The only thing is—if I could screw up my courage to answer him—and then to meet him—he might like to find a girl who didn't want anything but a quiet home; who would be satisfied to go without gaiety or amusement." She sighed again, and a wistful look crept into her eyes. "I haven't really ever had any fun, so I shouldn't miss it, and I could just try to make a happy home for R.M., if that is all he wants. And—after all," she went on, still speaking aloud, "there isn't any harm in answering his letter. It may all come to nothing; and yet—it might be worth while—and—it almost seems presidential that I just happened to see that paragraph in the *Sunday Recorder*."

The letter she sat down to write as the outcome of all these conflicting meditations, was the most difficult she had ever written in her young life; and before it was finished, and finally consigned to its envelope, she had torn up many sheets of paper, and allowed fully two hours of the morning to pass by. Twelve o'clock was chiming from all the clocks in the neighbourhood, when, with her answers to some of the other advertisements in her hand, she once more pinned on her hat, and ran downstairs to the post. The fog had thickened considerably during the morning, and Christina found the street lamps alight—tiny points of brightness set high above the prevailing gloom, and producing very little effect upon the darkness. Indeed, there was something almost bewildering about those far-off lights; they seemed to heighten, rather than diminish, the all-pervading blackness, which deepened every moment.

The girl walked slowly, feeling her way along the area railings, and guiding herself as far as possible by the rumble of traffic along the roadway, though the confusion of sounds made even this guidance a very uncertain one. Drivers shouted, horses slipped and stumbled; and the shrill voices of boys carrying flaring torches, added to the pandemonium. Earlier in the morning the fog had merely been of the familiar yellow variety known to every Londoner. It was now a black and total darkness that seemed to engulf the world. To cross the road to the pillar-box was a matter of no small difficulty, but Christina, with a dogged determination not to be outwitted by the elements, stepped off the kerb and into the seething mass of carts, cabs, and other vehicles, that jostled and struggled with one another in apparently inextricable confusion.

On the far side of the street she plunged into a comparatively quiet square, where the fog had lifted somewhat, and was no longer of such Cimmerian blackness, but merely a drifting and bewildering white mist.

The pillar-box at the corner loomed faintly through it, and Christina had just dropped her packet of letters into it, when there struck upon her ears the soft cry of a little child. There was such a note of fear, of lonely misery, in that soft cry, that Christina, a child-lover to the core of her being, paused, and listened intently. Everything about her was very still; the square was a quiet one, though separated only by a short street from a main thoroughfare; and, excepting for the distant noise of traffic and shouting, nothing was to be heard, until again the little whimpering cry became audible on Christina's right.

"What is it?" the girl said gently. "Don't be frightened, dear. I'll take care of you," and as she spoke, she heard a gasp of relief, and a shaking, childish voice exclaimed:

"Baba's most drefful fightened; please take Baba home."

"But where is Baba?" Christina was beginning cheerily, when, through the fog, she caught sight of a tiny figure coming quickly towards her, and, stooping down, she gathered close into her arms a little child, of perhaps three years old, a little child who clung to her with a desperate, terrified clutch, lifting a tear-stained face to hers.

"Take Baba home," the baby voice wailed again, and as the fog rolled back a little more, Christina saw that the child was no street waif, but obviously the daintily-clad darling of some great house. Her golden head was bare, and the tangle of curls was like a frame about the lovely little face, whose great blue eyes looked appealingly into Christina's own. A red woollen cloak hung over the child's shoulders, but as the cloak fell back, Christina saw that her frock was chiefly fashioned of exquisite filmy lace, and that a string of pearls was fastened round the little white throat.

"Where is Baba's home?" she questioned softly, lifting the child right into her arms, and kissing the flower-like face, on which the tears still lay like dewdrops in the heart of a rose. "Tell me where you live, sweetheart, and I will take you home."

"Baba doesn't know where she lives," the child shook her yellow curls, and her big eyes filled again with tears. "Baba's awful, drefful fightened. The door was open—and Baba did just run out to see the pretty horses—and then—it was all black—and Baba was lost."

"I don't think Baba ought to have come out by herself in a fog," Christina said, a gentle reproof in her tones; "and now we must try to find out where your home is, little girl. Tell me what your name is—besides Baba."

"Baba—Mummy's Baba—dat's all," the baby answered, with a conclusive shutting of her pretty mouth. "Baba's forgot her other name—she's only just Mummy's Baba."

"But Baba—what?" Christina said patiently, walking slowly along the square, the child in her arms. "Try to remember your other name, my sweet; then I can take you safe home to mummy and nurse."

"Baba hasn't got no nurse, nurse's gone away. Mummy minds Baba now, and Baba can't remember her other name. She's got a bone in her head," quoth the baby, smiling deliciously into Christina's troubled face, and evidently paraphrasing some former servant's excuses. "Baba likes you—pretty lady—come home with Baba!"

"I wish I could," Christina said gravely, feeling rather helpless, as she looked from the child in her arms to the stately houses in the square, and back again. "I wonder where you live, you queer mite; and how I am going to find out who are your belongings. They are probably moving heaven and earth at this moment to find you."

The baby laughed. She did not follow more than half Christina's words, but her infantile fancy had been caught by the girl's gentle manner and motherly ways, and she put two dimpled arms round her rescuer's neck, and rubbed her face confidently against Christina's white cheeks.

"Baba's not frightened any more," she murmured contentedly; "you just take Baba home—and we'll find mummy—and then Baba will be all right."

"Yes; it will be all right when we find home and mummy," Christina answered with a short laugh but her arm tightened round the soft little body, her lips pressed themselves against the tangled curls, and all the time she pursued her slow way along the square, hoping that so small a person could not have travelled very far, and that presently someone in pursuit of her would put in an appearance. They had gone the length of the square, and down the line of houses along one of its sides, when all at once the baby uttered a shout of triumph.

"There's James—over there," she exclaimed; "now Baba can see her own house. James—James!" she cried excitedly, and Christina saw that on the side of the square at right angles to them, a footman stood on the doorstep, looking distractedly to right and left of him. At the sound of the uplifted baby voice, he left his post at the door, and ran quickly up to Christina, who had paused to await his arrival.

"That's my dear James," the child cried; and, with the easy fickleness of her years, she unclasped her arms from Christina's neck, and held them out to the footman. "Baba was lost," she said to him confidently. "This lady finded Baba, and brought her home."

The footman took the baby into his arms, and turned a scared face to Christina.

"She've just been missed," he said breathlessly; "must have run out when the door was open; and we was all in a taking. Where did you find her, miss? I'm sure it's very kind of you to have brought her home."

"She was on the far side of the square, and very frightened in the fog. I am so glad she is safe."

"Baba quite safe now; Baba going home with James; good-bye, pretty lady," and waving her hand to Christina, the small girl was carried away in the arms of the breathless James, who was still too distracted to reflect that his mistress might wish to thank the young lady who had brought back the child.

"What a dear wee thing!" Christina reflected, as she wended her way back to her lodgings. "I wonder who she is. Somebody important, if she lives here. I wish——" then she sighed and fell to wondering whether anything would result from all the answers to the advertisements she had just posted. "I'm glad I didn't post the one I wrote to R.M.," she said to herself; "now I can think over it all day long, and if I haven't changed my mind by then, perhaps I will re-write it and post it by the last post. But—I am not sure whether I shall be brave enough to do it."

CHAPTER III.

"ONE OF THE BEST THINGS LEFT."

The chambers in Jermyn Street occupied by Rupert Mernside, had a character which seemed to reflect their owner. Perhaps all rooms in a more or less degree are reflections of those who live in them: human beings, whether consciously or unconsciously, stamp their personalities upon their surroundings, and create their distinctive atmospheres, even in hired lodgings. Rupert's rooms, filled as they were with the furniture he had from time to time picked up, the walls hung

with pictures his fastidious taste had chosen, the bookcases filled with his own special collection of books, were, to those with eyes to see, a mirror of their master's nature. Simplicity was the keynote of the whole. There were no expensive hangings, no luxurious rugs or heavily upholstered chairs and couches; there was nothing of what Mernside himself would have described as "frippery," nothing effeminate or over-dainty. Matting, with here and there a soft-coloured rug, covered the floor of the sitting-room; the walls, tinted a pale apricot yellow, were hung with water-colour sketches, each one of which bore the mark of a master hand; the bookcases were of carved oak, as were the one or two tables, whilst the chairs, of a severely simple pattern, and even the few armchairs, spoke rather of solid comfort, than of any undue luxury. Upon the breakfast table, pushed near the window, stood a bowl of chrysanthemums, touched into jewelled beauty by a faint ray of November sunlight. Seeing the sunlight on the rich coloured blossoms, Rupert smiled, as he entered the sitting-room a week after his return from Bramwell Castle. It was not his habit to fill his rooms with flowers: he had a fancy that such a custom savoured of womanishness; but Cicely, his pretty little cousin, had rifled the greenhouse for him with her own hands, and Cicely's fashion of giving would have made even a dandelion a charming and acceptable gift.

Mernside was early that morning, and he had seated himself in front of the silver coffee-pot and covered dishes, before Courtfield, his irreproachable servant, brought in the letters.

"Good Lord, man!" his master exclaimed, as the salver was handed to him, "those letters can't possibly all be for me," and he eyed the huge pile with the disfavour of one who regards a letter merely as a rather tiresome piece of business, which must perforce be answered.

"Well, sir, I should gather they were all for you," Courtfield answered respectfully, whilst his master gathered the packet of envelopes into his two hands. "I thought myself at first that there must be some mistake, seeing that they are only addressed in initials. But the number is correct, sir."

"By Jove!" Mernside exclaimed, gazing with stupefied eyes at the unprecedented batch of correspondence, and observing that every letter bore the initials only, "R.M.," and had been forwarded to him from a newspaper office.

Courtfield noiselessly left the room, but his master's coffee remained in the pot, and his breakfast untasted, whilst he sat and stared with a petrified stare at the pile of unopened letters, with their extraordinarily unfamiliar address. A dusky flush mounted to his forehead, and he turned over one of the letters distastefully, as though its very touch were odious to him.

"I am not in the habit of being addressed by initials only," he muttered, "nor of corresponding through newspapers; the wretched things are probably not meant for me at all—unless it's some confounded hoax," he added, after a pause, at the same moment tearing open the top letter of the pile, one addressed in an untidy, uneducated handwriting.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, pushing back his chair, and staring down at the letter he unfolded, with the disgusted stare of one who sees something unexpectedly horrible, "is the woman mad? or am I mad?—or—what does it mean?"

His eyes travelled quickly down the written page, the large, sprawling writing imprinting itself upon his brain.

"DEAR SIR" (so the epistle ran),—

"Having seen your advertisement in yesterday's *Sunday Recorder*, I beg to say that I should be pleased to enter into correspondence with you—with a view to meeting, etc. Am twenty-one, tall, and said to be elegant. Some call me pretty. Have large blue eyes, fair hair, and a good complexion. Am domesticated and sweet-tempered. Would send photograph if desired.

"Yours truly, ROSALIE."

"PS.—Should be pleased to cheer your loneliness."

Mernside read this effusion to the end; then one word only, and that a forcible one, broke from his lips, and with grimly-set mouth, and eyes grown suddenly steely, he began to open and read one after another of the other letters, his expression becoming sterner and more grim as he laid each one down in turn.

"My opinion of women is not enhanced by my morning's correspondence," he reflected cynically, during the course of his reading; "could one have believed there were so many silly women in the world—or so many plain ones?" and with a short laugh he picked up two photographs, and looked with scornful scrutiny at the wholly unattractive features of the ladies of uncertain age, and quite certain lack of beauty. Before he had waded half through the packet of letters, his table was strewn with his correspondence, and the look on his face was one, which, as his best friends would have known, indicated no amiable frame of mind.

"Domesticated." "Would make a lonely man intensely happy." "Only long for a quiet home such as you suggest."

"Such as I suggest—/!" Mernside looked wildly round him. "Do I appear to be in search of a quiet home?" he exclaimed, apostrophising the pictures on the walls; "do I want a domesticated female? 'Am considered pretty'—oh, are you, my good young woman? You can't write a civilised letter, that's certain. 'I have a slender income of my own—amply sufficient for my modest wants—but I gather you do not require a fortune with the lady—only a companion for your loneliness.'

"A fortune with the lady? I don't require the lady, thank you," Rupert soliloquised, picking, out sentences from the letters as he read them, and flung them one by one upon the pile. "I have been lonely for so *long* myself, that I can *fully* understand what a lonely man feels. I am no longer in my first youth, but I have a heart *overflowing* with tenderness. Your happiness would be my first, my only care, etc., etc.'

"Pshaw—what tommy rot!

"All my friends say I am cheerful. I have often been called a little ray of sunshine"—Rupert lay back in his chair, and shouted with sudden laughter. "I would make your home a heaven of bliss."

"Oh! Good lord! Good lord!" quoth the unhappy reader, "who in heaven's name has played this confounded practical joke upon me? And what am I to do with these abominable letters and photographs? I should like to burn the lot!—but oh! hang it all, the silly women have taken some rotten hoax for earnest, and"—he paused, as though struck by a sudden recollection, then bounced out of his chair with a good round expletive.

"That young ass, Jack Layton! I'll take my oath he was at the bottom of this tomfoolery. Wasn't he reading some matrimonial humbug out of—wait!—by Jove! it was the *Sunday Recorder*," and without more ado, Mernside strode across the room and rang the bell.

"Get me a copy of the *Sunday Recorder* of the day before yesterday, at once," he said curtly, when Courtfield appeared. As soon as the man had vanished, he returned to the table, gathered up the letters he had read, and thrust them into the bureau near the fireplace; and by the time Courtfield came back with the paper in his hand, his master was decorously eating a poached egg, and deliberately opening the nineteenth or twentieth letter of his morning mail.

There was little deliberation in his movements when, alone once more, he feverishly turned the pages of the *Sunday Recorder*, until his eyes fell on the words, "Matrimonial Bureau." Yes—there it was. The wretched thing seemed to leap into sight as though it were alive, and to his disordered vision the lines appeared to be twice the size of the ordinary print.

"Quiet and cultivated gentleman of means, who is very lonely, is anxious to meet a young lady of good birth who needs a home. No fortune is necessary, but marriage may be agreed upon, if both parties are mutually satisfied."

"Oh! may it indeed?" Mernside said scathingly, flinging the paper upon the floor. "A young lady of good birth!" His thoughts went back to the letters he had just been perusing, most of them ill-written, many mis-spelt, some genteel, some sentimental—but all bearing the unmistakable stamp of having been penned by the underbred and the vulgar.

"A young lady of good birth." Again he reflected grimly, continuing to eat his breakfast, and to open letter after letter mechanically, expending over their contents a force of language which would greatly have surprised the writers, could they have heard it. "Not one of these good women has the most elementary conception what the word 'lady' means. No lady would be likely to answer such an advertisement," his thoughts continued contemptuously, as he picked up the last letter of the pile, and glanced idly at the writing of the address. That writing held his attention; it was different from the others; yes, it was certainly different. It did not sprawl; it was not exaggerated or affected; it was merely a round, simple, girlish hand, with unmistakable character in the well-formed letters and clean strokes. And when he had drawn out the contents of the envelope, and read them slowly, some of the grim lines about his mouth faded away, a softer look came into his eyes.

"This is different," he said, "very different," and for the second time he read the terse phrases.

"c/o Mrs. Cole, Newsagent,
"100, Cartney Street, S.W.

"DEAR SIR,—

"I should not have answered your advertisement, but that I cannot find work. I need a home very much. If I could make things better for somebody else who is lonely, I should be very pleased. I am not at all pretty or clever, but I can cook a little, and I can sew.

"Yours truly, C.M.

"I am twenty."

"Poor little girl," Rupert murmured, "if this is genuine, I am sorry for C.M. She is the only one of the lot who writes like a lady, and the only one who does not suggest a meeting, or actually appoint a meeting place. Those are points in her favour. But, had I ever any intention of marrying, I should not make my matrimonial arrangements through the medium of a newspaper!"

Each writer of the letters which had so disturbed Mernside at breakfast time, received a few hours later a short note, and the wording of all the notes was identical.

"DEAR MADAM,—

"I regret that both you and I should have been the victims of a hoax. The advertisement in the *Sunday Recorder* was inserted without my knowledge or consent. Regretting any annoyance this may cause you.

"Yours faithfully, R.M."

But when, having laboured through the mass of "Rosalies," "Violets," "Lilians," and "Hildas," he finally reached the little note signed "C.M.," Mernside paused.

"I—don't think I can let this little girl know she has been the victim of a hoax," he mused, a pitiful tenderness creeping about his heart as he thought of the girl who was without work or home; "the others are fairly tough-skinned, I am ready to swear. This one"—he looked again at the round, characteristic handwriting, the simple phrases—"this one—did not make up her mind to write such a letter, excepting under stress of circumstances, I am sure of that. This one—is different. And if that incorrigible young ass, Jack Layton, hadn't started on a yachting cruise last week, I—should jolly well like to give him a thrashing."

Feeling the need, as he himself expressed it, of a balloon full of fresh air after his distasteful occupation of the morning, Rupert went out at about eleven o'clock, taking with him the pile of letters he had to post.

"Can't leave them for Courtfield's inquisitive eyes," he muttered. "Good chap as he is, Courtfield would think I had gone raving mad, if he saw all these things addressed to Christian names and initials. I'll get rid of the horrors, and then see if Margaret can take the taste of them away from me."

The letters posted, he made his way briskly along Piccadilly, and across the Park, to a quiet road in Bayswater, where he stopped before a small detached house, standing a little back from the pavement, in its own garden. His ring at the bell brought to the door a middle-aged servant, whose plain but kindly face expanded into a smile when she saw him. He was evidently a frequent and welcome visitor, for to his cheery "Well, Elizabeth, how are things this morning?" she answered with another smile—

"We've had a bad two days, sir, but Mrs. Stanforth is better now. She is downstairs, sir," and, opening a door on the right of the tiny hall, she ushered Rupert into a long narrow room, whose windows at either end gave it an unusual look of brightness and sunshine. A piano took up a large share of one wall, and over the piano hung some fine photographs of Old Masters, chiefly of the Italian school. The fireplace was flanked by bookshelves, and drawn close to one of these was a couch, on which lay a woman of such rare and startling beauty, that Mernside, familiar as her face was to him, caught his breath as he entered, and for a moment stood still, looking silently down at her.

Her cheeks were very white, but it was the whiteness of a pure white rose, and gave one no sense of ill-health, although there was about her a certain air of fragility. Her hair, soft and dark, waved back from her forehead in dusky masses, that made just the right background for her exquisitely chiselled features, and for the eyes, that seemed to concentrate in themselves all the loveliness of her face. They were wonderful eyes—dark, deep, unfathomable—with a mystery in their depths that enhanced their strange fascination. Those dark eyes with their sweeping lashes, and the crimson line of her beautiful mouth, were the only points of colour in her face, and as she turned her head to greet the visitor, the gleam of light that shot into those eyes, might well have turned a stronger head than Rupert's. Meeting her glance, his pulses quickened, and his own eyes grew bright; but his voice was very quiet, very self-contained, as he said—

"I am three days too soon—I know it, you need not tell me. But—I had to come to-day."

She put one of her hands into his, but she did not move from her prostrate position on the couch, and her visitor seated himself on a low chair by her side, whilst she gently withdrew the

hand he still held, and said softly—

"Why especially to-day? You must not break through the stipulation, Rupert. If there is a particular reason now—I—will forgive you—but—we must keep to our bargain."

Gentle as was the voice, gentle as was the look in her eyes, a look of almost maternal tenderness, there was evidence that behind the tenderness, lay a most unusual strength of character. The woman with the beautiful face, although she lay prone upon a sofa, and was obviously an invalid, showed in her personality no trace of weakness. Her eyes met the eyes of her visitor squarely and straightly, there was almost a hint of severity in the set of her lips.

"Why did you come to-day?" she repeated, when he stirred uneasily in his chair, and kicked away a footstool in front of him, with a touch of irritability.

"When I begin to put it into words, it sounds a babyish reason; but that jackanapes, Layton, has been playing an idiotic practical joke upon me, and I—was fool enough to mind it. I wanted soothing down; and—I wanted your advice about a girl."

"About—a girl—you!" A note of excitement was apparent in her accents; she looked at him narrowly. "Has it—come—at last, Rupert?" she questioned, and her quiet voice shook just a little.

"No—no—my God—*no!*" he exclaimed, "nothing of that sort is ever likely to come into my life—again"—he uttered the last words under his breath, and his eyes rested hungrily on her beautiful face—"there is no question of—my caring for any girl—only—young Jack Layton has made me responsible for what may make a perfectly innocent girl unhappy." And forthwith he plunged into a full description of the sheaf of letters received that morning, winding up with a mention of the terse little letter signed "C.M." His listener's eyes twinkled mischievously as he told the first part of his story in wrathful accents, and over some of his quotations from the letters that had reached him she laughed—a frank, delicious laugh that seemed oddly out of keeping with the tragic mystery of her eyes. But as he described that last letter, with its simple wording, her face grew grave again, and when his voice ceased, she uttered the precise words that had fallen from his own lips three hours earlier.

"Poor little girl—oh! poor little girl!"

"I am sorry for her," Mernside said impetuously, "and it doesn't seem fair that she should perhaps suffer for that idiotic young fool's love of practical jokes. Goodness knows what hopes she may have built upon this letter, and upon me. Of course, I can't give her a home, and I don't want to meet her—with a view to—anything. There is no place in my life for women, even as friends. There is no place in my life for more than—one woman," he ended vehemently.

"Hush!" she said softly. "Remember—you promised; and—if you break your promise, I can't ever let you come here again."

"I know—I know!" he cried, with an impetuosity very foreign to his usual self-control; "but, Margaret, is it to be like this always? Will a time never come when you—when I——"

She put out her hand and laid it over one of his, with a firm touch that had a curiously quieting effect upon him.

"You and I are great friends, as we have been for—longer than we care to think. But—there could not ever be an idea between us of anything else, not even the thought of such a thing. It is out of the question. It always has been out of the question. You know that as well as I do, and you must not come here at all, unless you can keep to our agreement in spirit as well as in letter."

"Is our friendship nothing to you?" he asked sullenly.

"It is—so much to me—that I will not risk spoiling it for ever," she said firmly; "but if you talk as you are talking now, I shall tell Elizabeth I cannot see you."

"And you are putting up this fence between us, when—I might be some comfort to you," he exclaimed, almost roughly, getting up as he spoke to lean against the mantelpiece, and glower threateningly down at her, "when every reasonable being would tell you that he——"

"Ah! hush!" she cried, and the sudden sharp anguish in her tones gave him pause; "don't let us go into it all over again. Whilst I feel—as I do feel—I must go on in the way I have marked out for myself, one can only follow the right as one sees it. Besides which——"

"Besides which—his little finger is more to you than——"

"Ah! don't—*don't!*" she interrupted him again, her eyes darkening and deepening with agony. "Rupert, I can't bear it; there are some things I am not strong enough to bear."

"I was a brute," he said, his rough tone changing all at once into caressing tenderness; "I let myself go—I was an utter brute. Forgive me, dear—and—try to forget."

He sat down beside her again, and his face, which had shown the same strong emotion that had rang in his words, resumed its quiet look of strength. A great relief swept over the woman's

beautiful features, but she was shivering from head to foot, and in her eyes there still lay a haunting anguish. With an effort—how great an effort only she herself knew—she regained her self-control, and her voice, though still shaken, was very gentle again.

"Tell me now about the poor little girl, and the matrimonial letter. Can we put our heads together to devise any way of helping her?"

"I might conceivably get her some work," Rupert answered, "but people are a little chary of engaging employees recommended by bachelors like myself. Cicely might help her, but, first of all, I must find out if she is genuine. I couldn't impose a stranger, even on Cicely, good-natured, easy-going little soul that she is. And to find out anything about this girl will entail—meeting her!"

Margaret Stanforth smiled.

"Poor Rupert!"

"I am not by way of making rendezvous with young women," he said with sarcasm; "it is not a pastime in which I have ever indulged. At the same time, I don't want to let a fellow creature go empty away, if I could really help her."

"How would it be if you suggested her coming here? I could see her too, and—two heads being better than one—we might be able to do something really helpful. If the letter is sincere, it is obvious the girl is not a mere husband hunter; she is at her wits' end, and—I can't bear to think of any girl stranded in this great hungry London. I myself"—she pulled herself up short, leaving her sentence unfinished, then went on more quietly: "Write to C.M. and appoint a meeting here. Say this is the house of a lady of your acquaintance, ask her to come and see me—and incidentally to see you."

"It is like you to make such a suggestion about a total stranger," Rupert exclaimed, "but—she may turn out an entire fraud—an arrant adventuress—and I could not be responsible for bringing such a person here."

"Such a person! My dear Rupert, even if she were all the terrible things you describe, I don't think she could hurt me. I have seen—so much of the seamy side of life." For a moment Rupert looked at her silently. Long as he had known her, Margaret Stanforth was still largely an enigma to him, and it often seemed to him that the mysterious depths of her eyes veiled mysteries of her life which he had never fathomed.

"For my own sake, for this girl's sake, I should like to jump at your offer," he said, after that long, searching look into her face, "but——"

"There is no 'but,'" she put in gaily, a sudden smile momentarily chasing away the sadness of her face. "Write a civil, non-committal letter to C.M., and ask her, as I say, to come here. Surely, between us, we can do something for this poor little waif and stray. Why not fix to-morrow afternoon, at five o'clock? If the poor girl's need is urgent, we ought not to delay."

"And—you forgive me for all I ought not to have said this morning," Rupert said when, ten minutes later, he rose to depart. "I—have not hurt you?"

"No, you have not hurt me; but in future, you will remember—our bargain? And there are some things—I can't bear."

Rupert Mernside walked slowly away from the house, his brain and heart full of the woman he had just left, who, after his departure, lay back amongst the silken cushions on her sofa, with a look of profound exhaustion.

"There now, my dearie, you didn't ought to let him come and tire you this way; you get worn out with him coming worrying." The faithful Elizabeth had entered the room with a salver in her hand, and stood looking into her mistress's white face, with distress written all over her plain kindly features. Margaret opened her eyes, and smiled up into the loving ones fixed upon her.

"No, he doesn't worry me; he is—a comfort, he helps me. Don't scold, nursie dear; his friendship is one of the best things I have in life—one of the best things I have left out of all the wreckage; but to-day—he brought back some of the old memories, and—I—am so silly still. They hurt; sometimes it all feels—unbearable."

The ring of almost uncontrollable pain in her voice, brought a spasm of answering pain into the other's face, and she laid a work-roughened hand tenderly upon the dusky head against the cushions. "There, my dearie, there—there," she murmured, speaking as if her beautiful, stately mistress were a little child; "there's nothing so hard in this world but what it can be borne, if we look at it in the right way. The strength comes along with the sorrow, and 'tis all for the best."

"Is it?" Into the dark eyes there flashed for a second a look of bitterness, and then Margaret drew the other woman's hand down to her lips, and kissed it. "I wish I had your simple straightforward faith, dear old nurse of mine," she said wearily; "you are so sure things will come right, and that what hurts us is for our good. And I—I can't say, 'Thy will be done'; at least, I can't

say it as if I meant it. But what did you bring in on that salver?" she asked, after a moment of silence, and with an effort at brightness.

"There, my pretty; I nearly forgot it after all. It came when I was speaking to the butcher on the doorstep, and Mr. Mernside was here, so I waited to bring it in till he was gone."

She had a purpose in lengthening her story, and chatting on garrulously whilst Margaret opened the orange envelope, for the faithful creature had seen the sudden dilation of her mistress's dark eyes, the whitening of her lips; had seen, too, how her hands shook as they unfolded the telegram.

"I don't understand it," Mrs. Stanforth whispered shakily, when her eyes had scanned the few words before her. "I don't know what it means—Elizabeth—but—I must go—I must go—at once."

The servant drew the flimsy paper from her trembling hands and read the message, shaking her head in bewilderment, as the sense of it penetrated to her brain.

"I'm sure I don't know what it means no more than you do, dearie," she said.

"Graystone.

"Come at once; prepare for surprise.

"MARION."

CHAPTER IV.

"I SUPPOSE IT WAS AN HOUR."

"Poor dear James is the worthiest soul, but he has no more brains than a pin—the small kind of pin that you get in change for a farthing!"

"James always seemed to me a good footman."

"Rupert! He is an admirable footman. I haven't a word to say against him in that capacity. He does his duties with the beautiful regularity of an automatic machine. But move James from his own dear little beaten track, and he is lost, hopelessly, irrevocably lost!"

"What beaten track has he left? and why is he rousing your ladyship's wrath?"

Lady Cicely Redesdale, lying back in the cosiest chair of her cosy boudoir, swung her pretty foot to and fro, and glanced up at her tall cousin with one of her gay little laughs. Rupert Mernside, the son of her mother's sister, had always been to her more of elder brother than cousin, and from their earliest youth there had existed between them a frank *camaraderie* which had never degenerated into flirtation, or drifted into any sentimental relationship. Cicely was in the habit of saying that Rupert was the person of all others from whom she would not only ask, but take, advice; because his judgment was so sound and he possessed a really well-balanced mind. This opinion of him had been endorsed by her late husband, who had only qualified it with one limitation.

"Rupert's got as sound and balanced a mind as any man could wish for, but once let the right woman get hold of him, and she will twist him round her little finger."

Those words of her husband recurred to Cicely now, as she lifted her eyes from their contemplation of her own dainty shoes and looked up into Rupert's rugged face.

"I should rather like to see a woman twist you round her little finger," she said irrelevantly.

"A woman—me? What on earth have a woman and I got to do with James's delinquencies?"

"There is method in my madness, but the lane that led from James to your little finger, and the not impossible she, is so long that I can't take you back along its windings. It all comes of the power of association. I shall have Baba taught everything by association. I am planning a scheme of education that—"

"Where does James come in to the plan for Baba's education?" Rupert contrived to ask, his grey eyes shining, a whimsical smile playing round his mouth.

"Oh! my dear boy, I had completely forgotten James, though talking of Baba would soon have reminded me of him—poor silly thing! Baba ran away two days ago in that appalling fog—and

—"

"*Baba ran away?*"

"Well, the door was open; I suppose the outside world looked rather fascinating and mysterious, and she has no nurse just now, you know; so there was no one with her; and, of course, Jane, the nursery maid, was fetching something from the kitchen—and—well, the long and the short of it was that Baba ran out into the street, and was promptly swallowed up by the fog."

"My dear Cicely!"

"Providentially, as I now consider it, I was out. I had an early appointment with Mathilde."

"Your dressmaker?"

"My dressmaker. Wasn't it kind of luck, or whatever it is, to let it all happen when I wasn't there. Rupert, if I had been at home, and they told me Baba was lost, I should have gone straight off my head."

"That would have been an eminently useful and practical thing to do," was the dry retort.

"You have never been a mother; you don't know what a mother feels like about her only child," Cicely said with an attempt at dignity that sat quaintly upon her small person and drew an amused laugh from her cousin. "I believe it would kill me if anything really happened to Baba," she went on, more gravely; "you think I'm just a silly, frivolous thing, but—Baba is all the world to me."

"I know, dear; I know quite well," Rupert answered kindly; "and nobody could think you silly. But go on and tell me what happened two days ago. We haven't got to James's shortcomings *yet*."

"Baba ran out into the square, and nobody missed her at first. Then, when that goose of a Jane came back from her wanderings in the kitchen, she found the nurseries empty, and Baba nowhere to be found. There was a tremendous hue and cry; the servants seem to have been on the verge of distraction, and ran off in all directions like frightened hens, leaving James on guard at the door. And, after a few minutes, when the fog lifted, James caught sight of Baba in a strange girl's arms, evidently quite at home with her, and very happy. You know Baba's ducky way of making friends with everybody. James flew out, seized Baba, seems to have thanked her rescuer, and bustled back to the house with the child, without ever dreaming of asking the stranger her name."

"What sort of a person was she?"

"Oh! I don't know. When I asked James he could only say: 'Well, my lady, she seemed a nice respectable young person'; but heaven knows what James means by a young person. He further volunteered that she was rather shabbily dressed; and I can't bear to think that she went away with no thanks from me, and with no reward."

Rupert smiled down into his cousin's pretty, eager face.

"Perhaps the thought of reward never entered her head? There are still some disinterested people left in the world. And Baba is a very fetching little being to rescue from the dangers of a fog."

"She looked so fetching that morning, too. I came in just after she was brought back, and there she was, the little monkey, in her red cloak which she had found in the hall, where, needless to say, it ought not to have been; with no hat, and all her curls in a delicious tangle, her face so soft and pink, and her eyes shining. She looked a delectable baby, but, Rupert, she had on the most valuable lace frock, and pearls round her neck. Only think what might have happened if some horrible person had found her. My pretty baby," and Cicely's face grew suddenly white and grave, whilst she shivered at the picture conjured up by her own mind.

"I asked James why he hadn't told the 'young person' to give him her name and address, and he could only say feebly that 'it never crossed his mind.' Poor James, I don't believe he's got a mind."

"You could advertise for the young lady. If you really want to find her, an advertisement in some leading paper should unearth her for you. Perhaps, too, if she was shabbily dressed, a reward might be a god-send to her."

"Oh, Rupert! perhaps she's fearfully poor. Do, do advertise for me. I can't bear to think that a girl may be in difficulties when I have more money than I know what to do with. Will you advertise for me?"

"Yes; of course."

"I don't know what I should do without you," she continued, looking at him gravely, but with no hint of coquettishness in her glance. "I do miss John so dreadfully; I do want a man to help me

and advise me."

"You can have me whenever you want me," her cousin answered with equal gravity, knowing that her words, which in another woman's mouth might have implied a desire to change their friendly relations for something more lover-like, on Cicely's lips held merely their surface meaning—no more.

"I always hope that some day you will marry again," Rupert went on with brotherly frankness; "you have been alone three years now. Your great property is a big handful for a woman to manage, and John would wish for your happiness above everything else in the world."

"John never thought of anything but my happiness," was the gentle answer. "I don't think any girl ever had a better, dearer husband. People thought, perhaps you thought so, too, that I just married him for his money. It wasn't true. At first—quite at first—when father showed me what a huge difference it would make to them all if I married a millionaire, I *did* think more of John's fortune than of himself. But, it was only quite at first. After that, I knew I would rather live in a cottage with him than in a palace with anybody else. I—don't think—I shall marry again—unless I find I am too weak and silly to manage Baba's fortune by myself."

Rupert looked silently down at her bent, bright head, a new reverence stirring within him for the little cousin. Hitherto, he had regarded her with the kindly affection of an elder brother for a small sister whom he considers scarcely more than a child; but this grave Cicely was showing him depths of whose existence he had never been even dimly aware.

"But that's enough of being solemn," Cicely exclaimed, shattering his new conception of her with characteristic suddenness; "talking of marriage, the thing I hanker for most in the whole world is to see you married, Rupert. You don't look a bit like a soured old bachelor, and yet—here you are, more than thirty-five, and not one single woman's name has ever been mentioned in connection with yours."

"For which mercy let us be humbly and devoutly thankful," her cousin answered, laughing, though how sincere was his thankfulness only his own heart knew, and into that heart there flashed as he spoke the vision of a white face and dark eyes, deep with unfathomable mystery; "if I don't want to marry, why hustle me into the holy estate? I believe the Prayer Book strongly urges us not to undertake it lightly or unadvisedly."

"Now, you are flippant. As if you would be marrying lightly or unadvisedly, if you wait until you are within five years of forty, before choosing a wife. When I think of the hundreds of really charming girls I've introduced you to, with——"

"With a view to matrimony," Rupert ended the sentence, punctuating his words with a laugh. "Let me recommend you to study the matrimonial columns of some of the papers. You will possibly find an eligible husband there for some of your charming girls."

"*Rupert!* don't be so incorrigibly low and horrid. As if any girl with a rag of decency or self-respect would answer one of those advertisements. Why, men who advertise for wives can only be seedy adventurers, the sort of person one reads of in books and never meets in real life."

"Seedy sort of adventurers," Rupert repeated slowly, turning, as if by chance, to survey his own reflection in the mirror over the mantelpiece; "there are adventurers and adventurers. Perhaps some of those who advertise do it—for a joke."

"Just like a man if they do," his cousin answered vehemently; "and then some poor girl takes the wretched creature seriously, and thinks he means his stupid joke. I should despise a girl who answered such an advertisement, but I should much more despise the man who inserted it."

"Don't scorn them too much. Everybody has different ideals, and it takes all sorts to make a world. Your sort don't advertise for husbands and wives, but our section of society is not so faultless that we can afford to throw stones even at people who marry through a matrimonial bureau."

"It's so low. The sort of thing a shop girl might do."

"Not lower than displaying your daughters in the best market, as the Society mother does," Rupert answered sternly; "not lower than running a man to earth, as shoals of women do, and do it without an ounce of shame."

"But, answering an advertisement like that is almost asking a man to marry you."

"Perhaps, and when poor old Donkin lost his wife a year ago, a lot of women wrote and proposed to him. Yes, *actually wrote and offered to marry him!* He told me so himself, and those were women of your class, well born and well educated. Well, we have the consolation of knowing that he refused the lot."

"Horrid beasts! no wonder you men lose your respect for women, if you think we are all capable of doing that sort of thing."

"We don't think so," Rupert's contemptuous tones grew gentle again; "we know the difference between the womanly woman and the others. Thank God, there are plenty of the right sort left," and Rupert stooped suddenly and took his cousin's two small hands into his.

"You aren't going?" she exclaimed. "I wanted you to see Baba, and there are thousands of things I meant to say to you."

"So sorry, but the thousands of things must be postponed. I have an appointment at five, and I must keep it."

"You will advertise for the 'young person'?"

"Yes; I won't forget the 'young person'—and—by the way, Cicely," a slight trace of embarrassment showed on his face, "didn't you tell me you wanted to find a sort of nursery governess for Baba?"

"Certainly, I do; but, my dear boy, what do you know about nursery governesses?"

"I don't know anything about them," was the reply, but Cicely's quick eyes still noted embarrassment in both voice and manner, "but I heard the other day of a girl who—who might be wanting a post."

"A girl who might be wanting a post," Cicely exclaimed mockingly; "the person I engage for Baba, would have to be somebody much less vague than that, and she must have unimpeachable references."

"Unimpeachable references," Mernside reflected as he left his cousin's house; and, side by side with Cicely's words, other words tossed to and fro in his brain, words written in a clear, girlish hand that had an odd character of its own.

"I cannot find work, and I need a home very much."

"Probably she is quite impossible," his reflections ran on. "Cicely had a good deal of right on her side when she talked about shop girls and matrimonial advertisements. I daresay I shall find C.M. belongs to that class of girl, and if so, what am I going to do about her? Ah! well; Margaret will help."

It was this thought that buoyed him up during his walk across the park from the Redesdale's mansion in Eaton Square, to the small white house in Bayswater; but as he pushed open the familiar gate and walked up the garden path, a shock of surprise awaited him. The blinds of the room to the right of the front door were pulled down, and his repeated ringing of the bell brought no response from within. The bell clanged in the kitchen regions, its echoes dying away forlornly, but no footstep sounded in the hall, no hand lifted the latch of the door, and as he stepped back and looked up at the house, Rupert saw that no smoke was coming from the chimneys. A sick fear smote at his heart. What had happened? What could have happened? The day before, he had been here, sitting with Margaret in that very room over whose windows the blinds were now so closely drawn. She had seemed tired, it was true, but not more tired than he had often seen her, and he had no reason to suppose that she was more ill than usual. She was always fragile; he was accustomed to find her one week on the sofa, another week sufficiently strong to be moving about the room, and even going out of doors. But that her house should be barred and bolted against him was inexplicable. He felt as though the ground had been cut away from under his feet, as if the very foundations of his life had been shaken. Why! to-day was the day she had herself fixed for his interview in her house with the girl of the advertisement. Margaret had arranged the hour; it was by her suggestion that he had written to C.M., proposing a meeting at 100, Barford Road, and now he found the house locked up and apparently empty, with no word of explanation or apology. Could Margaret have been suddenly taken ill? If so, why had she not let him know? Yet, if she was ill, she would be in the house, and Elizabeth with her. Somebody would have answered his ringing, which had grown more and more imperative as each ring remained unanswered. Could she have gone away? Gone away without letting him have the slightest hint of her intended going? Was that more conceivable than his theory of sudden illness? Again, sick dismay knocked at the door of his heart, and with it came a wave of hot anger against Margaret. Surely his years of faithful devotion, of willing service, had entitled him to more consideration than this at her hands. He had made few demands upon her, but this sudden and unexplained disappearance was a strain which even the merest friendship should not be called upon to bear.

Once again he pealed the bell, and even knocked vigorously at the knocker, but neither sound produced the slightest effect, and he was perforce turning away, when the gate clicked and he saw a breathless personage of the charwoman class hurrying up the path.

"I'm sure I beg your parding, sir," she panted; "just like my luck to a' popped out for a minute twice in the afternoon, and each time somebody called."

"Are you in charge of this house?" Rupert asked, his own agitation making him speak more sternly than the occasion quite warranted.

"Yes, sir; and I'm truly sorry, sir," the woman whimpered, wiping her much-heated face with a grimy apron; "come here yesterday, I did, all of a sudden, Mrs. Stanforth and Miss Herring, her

maid, going away unexpected, and me havin' a extra lot of washin' and all. But I says to Jem, my son, 'Jem,' I says——"

"Yes, yes," Rupert interrupted impatiently, "but where is Mrs. Stanforth? Did she leave any message? Any note? Did she tell you to say anything to people who called?"

"Lor', no, sir. Went off in a hurry and didn't leave no messages nor nothin'. And I'm sure I'm sorry I wasn't 'ere when you come, but I'd popped out for a minute, and let out the kitchen fire, too, and I just 'ad to see to my bit o' washin', and there, I run back a half an 'our ago, and there was a young lady in a rare takin' then, and so——"

"A young lady," Rupert again broke into her stream of words.

"Pore young thing, she did seem upset over it, too. Said she was expected, and she was to be 'ere at five, and all. There! I was sorry for 'er. Seemed to strike 'er all of an 'eap when she see the shut up 'ouse. She says quite 'urt like: 'Well, I s'pose it was an 'oax.' Them was 'er very words."

"I suppose you explained to her that the lady had gone away unexpectedly?" Rupert exclaimed with growing irritation; "you didn't let the young lady think she had been brought here for a *joke*?"

"Well, o' course, sir, I didn't know nothin' about it," was the offended retort; "if you ask me, I should say there was somethin' queer in tellin' somebody to come to an 'ouse at five o'clock, and then for the 'ouse to be shut up. Which I should say it was a pore joke meself. She says: 'Ain't Mr. Mernside 'ere?' and I says, 'I don't know nothin' about nobody o' that name,' and she looks as took aback as if I'd 'it 'er, and so——"

Rupert uttered a smothered oath, then mastered himself, and asked more quietly:

"And how long has the young lady been gone?"

"Best part of a quarter of a hour. Quiet young lady she was, too; dressed very plain; you might say shabby; and went orf lookin' fit to cry with disappointment. And I just popped out agin to git me bit o' relish for tea, and *you* come; lor', it do seem strange."

The good lady was left to address her rambling remarks to the shrubs in the garden, for Rupert, unable to bear more of her discursiveness, turned and fled, shutting the garden gate with a sharp clang behind him, and feeling that his world had all at once gone wrong, very wrong indeed.

CHAPTER V.

"I KNOW THIS IS WORTH A LOT OF MONEY."

"I suppose I was stupid to think it could be anything but a hoax. But the letter seemed so kind, not as if it were written by a horrid person who would want to play a practical joke."

Christina, having climbed the stairs to her room with weary, dragging footsteps, sat down on her one chair, feeling tired, depressed, and indignant. The dire necessity of saving her every penny, drove her to walk from Bayswater to her far-off lodgings in the S.W. district, and as a fine rain had begun to fall long before she was half-way across the park, she was not only worn out and miserable, but very wet as well. In their best days her serge coat and skirt had not been thick; much wear and tear had reduced them to a threadbare condition quite incapable of resistance to weather. The drizzling rain had penetrated her inadequate coat and thin blouse; her skirt hung limply about her legs; she felt, what she actually was, wet to the skin, and too tired even to exert herself to make some tea over her spirit-lamp.

"I expect it is true what Mrs. Jones says," she reflected; "she says men are all brutes, and you can't trust one of them. I used to think she only said it because Mr. Jones drank himself to death, and drank away her earnings first, and beat her. But, now, I don't know." With cold fingers she drew the hatpins from her sodden hat, threw off the wet coat that clung so chillily to her shivering form, and took from her pocket a letter addressed in a bold, masculine hand.

"C.M., c/o Mrs. Cole, Newsagent,
"10, Cartney Street, S.W."

"It looks like the handwriting of a gentleman," the poor little girl's reflections ran on; "I

shouldn't have thought a man who wrote like that could be a brute, and his letter isn't a brute's letter either," she added pathetically, drawing the letter from its envelope and reading the words, which were already engraved upon her mind.

"DEAR MADAM,

"I think perhaps I may be able to be of some use to you if you could make it convenient to call at 100, Barford Road, Bayswater, at five o'clock to-morrow (Wednesday). We might have a little talk. My friend to whom the house belongs, will be very glad to see you.

"Yours faithfully,
"R. MERNSIDE."

"And then I find the house shut up," Christina said shakily, and aloud, "and an old charwoman tells me she never heard of Mr. Mernside; and I suppose it was just all a mean practical joke." Two tears, tears of sheer fatigue and of bitter disappointment, welled up in the girl's eyes, and dropped slowly down her cheeks. She was so tired—so tired and cold and miserable—and she had built more hopes than she quite knew upon the answer to her timid little letter. The entire absence of any allusion to matrimonial prospects in Mr. Mernside's note had quieted her fears, and many hopes had mingled with the nervous doubts that had filled her soul as she set out that afternoon on her strange expedition. Some faint idea that this unknown Mr. Mernside might be instrumental in helping her to find work, sustained her through the long walk to Barford Road; she had been so sure, so very sure, that the writer of the terse, kindly letter, was a gentleman, and a good man to boot, that the sight of the shut-up house came to her with the force of an actual blow, whilst the caretaker's unfeigned ignorance of anybody of the name of Mernside, made Christina's theory of a hoax seem more than probable.

"And not one answer to all the letters I wrote about situations," she exclaimed wearily, pulling herself up from her chair, and taking the spirit-lamp from its place in the cupboard. "I wonder whether there are lots of other girls as poor as I am, and without any relations or friends. In another week, I shan't have enough money to pay my rent; and Mrs. Jones won't let it run; she's said so over and over again." Another shiver ran through her, and this time dread apprehension of the future was more responsible for the shiver than even the damp chilliness of her condition. "I don't know what I shall do when the money is all gone. Oh! I don't know what I shall do," and a little sob broke from her, as she took from the cupboard the materials for her tea. It was a meagre enough meal that her cold shaking fingers spread on the old deal table, and she was repeatedly forced to brush away the tears from her face, so fast did they run down it now that exhaustion and misery were at last finding an outlet. Her lunch had consisted of a glass of milk and a bun, bought at a neighbouring shop; since lunch-time she had walked some miles, had incidentally become wet through during the process, and her walk had been crowned by a cruel disappointment. It was not wonderful that the girl, plucky little soul though she was, should feel now as if the end were reached, and she could hope no more.

To add to her misery, everything seemed to go awry. The matches were only found after a prolonged hunt for them; for many minutes the lamp refused to light; and when, at last, a flame shot up, Christina thought that the water in the kettle boiled more slowly than water had ever boiled before. Dry bread had never tasted more unappetising; and milkless tea (though it was certainly warm, and in that respect carried a certain amount of comfort with it), tasted bitter and nauseating.

The girl longed, with an almost childish longing, for something more to eat and drink. Visions rose before her of the Donaldsons' cosy nursery, of a plate piled high with hot buttered toast, of a big home-made seed cake, that could be eaten as quickly as the nursery folks liked, without any dread of future want, and she pushed away her plate, and laid her head down upon the table, sobbing as though her heart would break. Hot buttered toast and seed cake are unromantic sounding things enough, no doubt, but when one is very hungry, and very heartsick, and only twenty into the bargain, the thoughts of past plenty make present poverty seem well nigh intolerable.

Good stuff must have gone to the making of little Christina, and whoever those ancestors on her mother's side had been, they had passed on to her a goodly heritage of courage and endurance. Her storm of sobs was of very brief duration. Giving herself a little shake both actually and metaphorically, she raised her head from the table, resolutely dried her eyes, choked back her sobs and forced herself to finish eating the dry morsels of bread, and drinking the nauseous draught of tea. Either the food itself, or the effort she had made to eat it, sent a tingling of new strength along her limbs, and she broke into a faint laugh over her own despair.

"You perfect goose," she said firmly, rising to wash up her tea things; "crying won't make anything better. Mr. Donaldson used to say, 'Don't look for your bridges before you come to them,' and so I won't look at the bridge. Mrs. Jones will put up for me about the rent, until I am really going to step right on to it. And before I give up every bit of hope, I ought—perhaps I ought to try and pawn the pendant, only I can't bear doing it. I can't bear it."

Mrs. Jones was not at all the pleasant and kindly landlady of fiction, who succours and helps her tenants, and plays the part of mother to them. The only part Mrs. Jones understood playing was that of the cruel stepmother of fairy legend, and Christina did not err in thinking that to allow rent to remain unpaid, was no part of her landlady's methods. Mrs. Jones's own life had been a hard one. Grinding work in her early girlhood, a brutal husband, and much grinding poverty during her married life, and in her widowhood an unending struggle to make two ends meet; these made up the sum of the landlady's existence, and she treated the world as she found herself treated by the world. She expected nothing from others, and she gave them nothing. She asked for no help from her fellow beings, and she most assuredly bestowed none.

She was lighting the gas jet in the hall, a hard-featured, tight-lipped woman, when, half an hour later, Christina went out again, a small brown paper parcel in her hand; and Mrs. Jones's thin lips tightened more than ever as her sharp eyes fell upon the parcel.

"Goin' out to pop somethin'," was her grim thought, and the thought was displeasing to her. Not that she particularly pitied her lodger. Pity was a virtue not cultivated by Mrs. Jones. But she instinctively dreaded the moment when her lodgers began to slip out stealthily with parcels under their arms, or in their hands. The significance of those parcels was well known to her, and she was fully aware that lodgers who once began to pawn their goods passed by easy stages to backwardness in paying their rent, and then followed eviction and new tenants. No; Mrs. Jones mistrusted brown paper parcels, just as much as she mistrusted the look, half-shy, half-frightened, which Christina cast at her in passing, and the flood of colour that dyed the girl's face, when she met the landlady's glance.

Some of her smarter clothes Christina had long ago sold to an old clothes' shop round the corner, but this was the first time she had visited a real pawnbroker, and her heart beat like a sledge-hammer, as she stood outside the window of a jeweller's shop, over which the three balls were displayed. She had shrunk from going into the establishment of Mr. Moss, the recognised pawnbroker of that squalid neighbourhood, and had gone further afield, thinking that from a jeweller, even though he engaged in pawnbroking as well, she would meet with more consideration, and perhaps receive a larger sum of money. But, looking through the glass doors at the two men who lounged behind the counter, her spirits sank to zero, and she allowed ten minutes to slip by before, taking her courage into her hands, she finally entered the shop.

Coming in out of the damp of the November evening, the pleasant warmth was grateful to her, but the brilliant gaslight dazzled her eyes, and sheer nervousness made her stumble hopelessly over the sentence she had been committing to memory, ever since she had left her lodgings.

"I called to ask whether this pendant was of any value," she had intended to say. But instead of that, she found herself stammering breathlessly, "I—I came—would you please tell me—if you can give me something on this," and she thrust her parcel into the hand indolently stretched out for it, by one of the young men behind the counter.

His eyes looked her up and down with an insolent stare that sent the blood flying over her face, and his smile gave her an impotent longing to strike his fat, sleek countenance.

"How much do you want for it, my dear, that's the question?" the man said jauntily, his eyes never leaving the girl's flushed face; "we are always pleased to accommodate a pretty young lady like you, eh, Tom?" with an odious leer he nudged the elbow of his companion, who emitted a hoarse guffaw, and winked facetiously, as Christina turned a distressed glance in his direction. Unfortunately for her, the master of the shop was absent, and she was at the mercy of two of those underbred, mean-spirited curs, who regard any defenceless woman as lawful prey, and take the same delight in baiting her, as their ignoble ancestors took in baiting an equally defenceless dumb animal.

"You tell us what you want, miss," the man called Tom struck in, leaning across the counter, and tapping the girl's hand; "anything you ask in reason we shall be pleased to oblige you with. Now, what's this thing, and this thing, and this very pretty thing?" he ended facetiously, whilst his fellow shopman unfastened Christina's parcel, and opened the cardboard box it contained.

"It is a pendant," Christina faltered, afraid to show the indignation she felt, lest the men should refuse to give her what she needed; "it has been a long time in my family—and—I know it is very valuable."

"Oh! you know it is very valuable, do you?" queried the first man, mocking her trembling accents; "now, it is for us to tell you its value; not for you to tell us, you know. Hum! old-fashioned thing," he ejaculated, holding up to the light the piece of jewellery he had drawn from its box; "this sort of antique article may have suited our grandmothers, but it doesn't go down nowadays!"

"That is not at all the case," Christina answered boldly; "everybody likes antique things now; and that pendant is worth a great deal, as you know."

Anger was beginning to conquer her nervous tremors, and the odious smile with which her remark was received by both young men, made her draw herself up proudly.

"Hoity, toity!" said the man called Tom; "as we know, indeed. If Mr. Franks, my excellent friend and colleague," he made an exaggerated bow to his companion, "considers the bauble old-fashioned and worthless, it certainly is worthless and old-fashioned."

"It is certainly nothing of the kind," Christina cried, anger driving away the last semblance of nervousness. "I should be much obliged if you would tell me at once how much you can advance me upon it. If you are unable to give me anything, I can take it elsewhere." As she spoke, she looked straight into the smiling, insolent faces before her, her own grown rigid and proud; and in spite of her shabby clothing and obvious poverty, she suddenly assumed a look of imperial dignity, which had an instantaneous effect upon her tormentors.

"Come, come, miss; don't talk like that," the man called Franks said sheepishly; "we were just having a bit of fun over it, that's all. And I'm sure we'll give you the best we can for the pendant."

Christina's threat of taking the jewel elsewhere, had brought the shopmen sharply to their senses, for it had needed no more than a cursory glance, to show them both that the jewel the girl had brought them was of no small value, and they were uncomfortably aware that the vials of their master's wrath would be emptied upon their heads, if they allowed such an article to be disposed of in another establishment.

"It is a very pretty piece of work," the first man said, taking the pendant in his hand, and looking over it with a fine assumption of carelessness; "family initials, I suppose, in this twisted monogram?"

"I suppose so. I cannot give you any history of the pendant; I don't know its history myself. It came to me from my mother." Christina gave this piece of gratuitous information, feeling uneasily that it might be supposed she had stolen the beautiful piece of jewellery; and, with the thought, all the old associations that were interwoven with it swept into her mind, and almost choked further utterance.

"A.V.C.," the young man said slowly, deciphering the monogram, which, in exquisitely-chased gold, surmounted the pendant itself. This latter consisted of an emerald, remarkably vivid in colour, and set in the same finely-chased gold as that which formed the monogram. "A.V.C. would have been some ancestor of yours, no doubt?" he asked jocularly, and with another wink at his companion.

"I don't know," Christina repeated; "as I tell you, I know nothing of the jewel's history. I believe it to be a genuine emerald, and I am sure it is very valuable."

Both men simultaneously shrugged their shoulders and laughed, odious, deprecating laughs.

"My dear young lady," said Franks, who seemed to occupy a position superior to the other, "someone has been, as we say, 'getting at' you, if they told you this was a *genuine* emerald. Why! if it was an emerald, a *real* emerald, mind you, it would be worth"—and he raised his eyes to the ceiling, and lifted up his hands, as if to demonstrate the magnitude of a sum he could not mention in spoken language.

"It *is* a real emerald, and it is worth a great deal," Christina said firmly, "but if you do not care to advance me what it is worth, I will take it away," and she put out her hand for the pendant, from which the gleams of light flashed brilliantly.

"Now look here," said Mr. Franks persuasively, "you believe me, missy; this is no more an emerald than I am, but it is a nice little bit of paste, and the gold is well worked. I'm taking a good bit upon myself in making the suggestion, and goodness knows what the boss will say to me when he comes home. But I'll take it off your hands for five pounds. There!" he ended triumphantly, as though convinced that the generosity must be a delicious surprise for his hearer.

"Five—pounds!"—Christina's voice rang with indignation—"five pounds for what you know as well as I do is worth twenty times that amount."

Franks laughed contemptuously, and began putting the ornament back into its box with elaborate care.

"You have an exaggerated idea of the thing's value," he said. "I couldn't undertake to offer you more than five pounds for it, and if you take my advice," he added darkly, with a swift glance at his colleague, and back at the girl, "you'll accept the offer, and let us have the thing altogether. You see," he coughed significantly, "awkward questions might be asked about a thing like this, with initials. If I did my business properly, I ought to ask you where you got it."

The colour ebbed out of Christina's face; the possibility that had confronted her a few minutes ago, had all at once taken definite form. This man was hinting—nay, more than hinting—that the pendant had come into her hands by unlawful means, and she had nothing but her word to prove her own statement.

"I have told you—that it belonged to my mother," she said tremblingly; "it is an old family ornament, and—I cannot part with it altogether."

"Look here, miss"—the man's voice became rough and harsh—"it's no use your coming old family ornaments over me. People with old family ornaments don't come to places like this pawning them. What price your 'old family,' eh?" He ended his coarse speech with a coarser laugh, at the sound of which Christina shrank and shivered.

"I will take back my pendant, please," she said, trying to regain her courageous tone. "I do not wish to sell it outright, and if you will not advance me anything on it, there is nothing more to be said."

"Not so fast, not so fast," the man called Tom exclaimed, pushing back the hand she once more extended towards the box. "What Mr. Franks says is very true—how do we know where you got this pendant? The more you go on making difficulties over letting it go, the more doubtful the whole affair looks. Now if you're really so badly in want of cash," he went on brutally, "you take what we offer—five pounds down. If you don't, we may feel ourselves obliged to send for the police—and—"

Quite unable, in her innocence, to understand that the two cowards were bullying her to the top of their bent;—already worn-out by the events of the day, and by many days of fatigue and under-feeding, a panic terror seized upon her. Before the astonished men were aware of her intention, she had reached over the counter, snatched the box from Franks's hand, and fled out of the shop and down the street, her heart beating to suffocation, her eyes wide with terror.

Never once looking back, she threaded her way along the pavement, oblivious of the expostulations of passers-by, against whom she brushed; almost unconscious of their very existence, in her frantic desire speedily to put as great a distance as possible between herself and the objectionable jewellers.

Heedless of the traffic, she dashed headlong over the crossings, and plunging into a network of by-streets, ran on still at full speed, possessed by the horrible fear that those men with the dreadful smiles, might already have put the police upon her track.

"I can't prove the pendant is mine," she panted breathlessly. "I have no proof that I didn't steal it. What can I say if they take me up as a thief?" The bare thought made her redouble her pace, although she was already on the verge of exhaustion, and her breath was coming in great gasps. Beads of perspiration stood on her forehead, and when at last she reached her own room, she was powerless to do more than sink upon a chair, shaking in every limb.

For many minutes she could only lean back, with closed eyes and ashen face, drawing long painful breaths, each one of which was a sob; but as a sense of safety grew upon her, she roused herself to light her lamp, and to draw off her damp clothing, preparatory to going to bed. Even with the slender supply of blankets Mrs. Jones allowed her lodgers, it would be warmer than sitting up without a fire; and she dared not allow herself the luxury of a fire, especially now that her last hope of raising money had been snatched from her.

"For I shall never dare take the pendant to show to anybody again," she thought, with a shudder. "The next person I went to might send for the police then and there. And perhaps it was horrible of me to think of pawning mother's pendant at all—only—I don't believe she would have minded, if she had known how dreadfully, dreadfully poor her little girl was going to be—and how hard it is for a girl even to get bread enough to keep from starvation. And I know this is worth—oh! a lot of money," she exclaimed pathetically, once more taking the ornament from its box, and holding it before her in the light of the lamp. As the green gleam of the stones flashed out before her eyes, the dreary room in which she sat, her squalid surroundings, even her own misery faded from her mind; she was back in the past—back in her mother's bedroom in the dear Devonshire home—her mother's dying voice sounding in her ears. Through the open window had drifted the song of the sea, mingling with the hum of bees amongst the roses that climbed to the very sill, and made the room fragrant with their sweetness. And a bird had sung—ah! how it had sung, on that last night of her mother's life, when Christina felt that her life too was going down into the dark for ever.

"My little girl"—how faint the gentle voice had been!—"I—can't stay—now father has gone; he—and I—could not ever be apart. He is my world—all my world." The dim resentment which Christina, the child, had sometimes experienced, because those two beings she loved best had seemed so remote from her, so perfectly able to live their lives without her, had smitten the girl Christina afresh as she listened to her mother's words. Her father and mother had been so wrapped up in one another, always so wholly sufficient for each other's needs, that their child had played a very secondary part in their lives. And the child had dimly resented it.

Through all the sorrow that filled her heart as she stood beside her mother's deathbed, that smouldering resentment would not be wholly stilled. Her mother could barely spare a thought for the girl she was leaving to face the world alone, because her husband filled her whole soul; she could remember only that he had gone before her into the silent land, and that she must hasten to join him again.

"You are so young," the dying voice had murmured on, whilst the fast dimming eyes looked, not at her little daughter, but at the blue sky outside the window, "somebody will want you some day—as—Ronald—wanted me—as—he wants me still."

Christina did not answer, only her eyes followed her mother's glance out to the deep blue sky framed by the nodding roses round the window; and she wondered dully whether anybody would really care for her some day, or whether there was something inherently unlovable in her, seeing that her own father and mother had seemed to find her so little worthy of love.

The bitter thought passed. She bent over her mother, and gently stroked back the damp hair from her forehead.

"I shall—be able—to take care of myself," she said bravely, "and——"

"Be good, my little girl," the murmuring voice broke in, "be good—and come to us some day—Ronald and I will be there—together. I want—to tell you—the pendant—the emerald pendant"—a look of excitement flashed into her eyes; she made a great effort to raise herself in the bed, but such effort was far beyond her feeble strength—"I can't tell—you—now," she gasped; "later—after—sleep—the pendant—take—the—emerald; tell Arthur"—and at that word her strength suddenly failed, her eyes closed, she slipped down among her pillows, in an unconsciousness from which she never again awoke.

All through the fragrant summer night following that sunshiny afternoon, Christina had watched beside her, hoping against hope that some faint knowledge of outward things would return to her, that the strange unfinished sentence might be ended.

"I want to tell you," her mother had said. What was it she wished to tell her daughter? What was the meaning of those strange words that seemed so incoherent and without sense?

"The pendant—take—the—emerald—tell Arthur——"

But no glimmer of consciousness crossed the still white face; the eyes that had last looked at the sunny sky of June, and the nodding roses, opened no more upon this world's sunshine and flowers, the faltering voice was silenced for ever; and in the grey dawn of morning Christina's mother had passed to the land where she and the man she loved would part no more.

The vision faded. Christina was back again in the present—the dull light of the oil lamp shining on the jewel she held—in the clammy cold of a November evening, that was as far removed from the sunny sweetness of June, as her sordid room was removed from the rose-scented fragrance of her old home.

"I wonder what she wanted to tell me," the girl mused again; as she had mused countless times before; "what could she have meant when she said those words:

"The pendant—take—the—emerald—tell Arthur——"

"I wonder who Arthur could have been."

CHAPTER VI.

"BABA LOVES YOU VERY MUCH."

"Will the lady who on Monday morning brought Baba home out of the fog, kindly call at 100, Eaton Square, any time between eleven and one o'clock?"

The words seemed to start from the printed page before Christina's eyes, and she read them over and over again with growing wonder. It was Friday morning, two days after her two disastrous visits—one to the shut-up house in Bayswater, the other to the insolent jewellers—and with difficulty she had managed to crawl round to the Free Library, feeling that she dared leave no stone unturned in a fresh search for work. The day before she had perforce spent in bed, for her day of fatigue, emotion, and exposure to the weather, had been followed by a night of fever and aching limbs; and on the Thursday morning she could scarcely lift her head from the pillow. But on Friday, realising affrightedly that each day brought her nearer to absolute destitution, she made a herculean effort, got up and dressed, and, feeling more dead than alive, dragged herself to the library, to study the monotonous advertisement columns of the newspapers. And having wearily glanced down the familiarly-worded lines, in which nursery governesses and companions were asked for, at wages that would not satisfy the average kitchen-maid, she turned to the front page of the *Morning Post*, and found herself confronted with the advertisement that now held her astonished eyes:

"Will the lady who on Monday morning brought Baba home out of the fog, kindly call at 100, Eaton Square, any time between eleven and one o'clock."

Unless there were two Babas in the world, and two ladies who had taken them home out of the fog, she herself was clearly the person indicated by the advertisement; and as the square in

which the bewitching baby had been taken from her by an excited footman, was certainly Eaton Square, she had little doubt but that the advertiser wished to thank, and perhaps to reward, her. A hot flush came into her white cheeks as the word "reward" entered her mind; all her instincts revolted against the notion of being rewarded for doing what had been a most obvious duty. But with the instinct of revolt came also a little rush of hope. To the tired girl the advertisement seemed like a friendly hand outstretched towards her; and though pride whispered to her to pay no heed to it, and to ignore it altogether, the sense that kindness towards a total stranger had prompted the advertisement, fought hard with pride. After all, if she went to 100, Eaton Square, she need accept nothing at the hands of the inmates: that they should wish to thank her for the safe return of their little one was only natural, and it would be churlish of her to refuse to be thanked.

In her excitement, she omitted to take down any addresses of employers; for the first time since she had begun to haunt the Free Library, she went out of its doors without a list of names to which letters must be written, setting forth her own qualifications for tending children, or amusing the elderly. She had actually forgotten to draw from her pocket the sheet of notepaper she never failed to bring with her on her morning quest, so full was her mind of the coming visit to Eaton Square. Her weary limbs still refused to hurry, and she walked slowly back to her lodgings, "to make herself tidy," as she put it, before venturing into what was to her an actually new world. Her heart was beating very fast as she rang the bell of the great Eaton Square mansion, and, thanks partly to nervousness, partly to fatigue, her legs were trembling so much, that she was obliged to clutch at the wall for support, to prevent herself from falling. A footman flung open the door—a tall, rather supercilious footman, whose face was not the good-natured, foolish face of the James who had lifted the red-cloaked baby from her arms. This man looked the visitor up and down with a comprehensive stare, which held in it both enquiry and contempt, and had the effect of banishing Christina's small remnant of courage.

"Could I—see—the lady of the house?" she asked.

"What might you want with her?" the servant demanded with a sniff.

"There was an advertisement in to-day's *Morning Post*," the girl answered, her voice shaking with nervous weariness; "it said, 'call between eleven and one'—and I came to—"

"Come after the place, have you?"—the footman's tone changed to one of huge condescension. "Oh! well, step in, and I'll see if her ladyship can see you."

"The place!—her ladyship!" Christina looked at the man with bewildered eyes, and said faintly—"I don't know anything about a place. I have not come for that. Only the advertisement said, 'call between eleven and one o'clock.'"

"Step inside," came the short order, whilst Henry, the first footman, inwardly remarked that he wished her ladyship wouldn't go putting in advertisements, and not mentioning them to the establishment. "Take a seat there, and I'll ascertain whether her ladyship is disengaged."

Had Christina been in her normal health, the man's grandiloquent manner and language would have amused her. With her nerves at high tension, her limbs trembling, and her whole frame exhausted and weary, she felt only a great inclination either to flee out of the front door, or to sit down and cry. The hall, softly-carpeted and warm, fragrant with the flowers massed in great pots at the foot of the staircase, and quiet with the stillness of a well-ordered house, oppressed her. The solemn voice of a grandfather clock in the corner, had only the effect of making the prevailing silence more noticeable, and Christina experienced a wild longing to scream, or to burst into uncontrollable laughter, just to break the stillness which weighed upon her like a nightmare.

"Will you come this way, please?"

She started violently as the footman's voice sounded close to her. His footstep on the thick pile of the stair carpet had been quite inaudible, and she was surprised to see him once more beside her. At his bidding she rose mechanically, and followed him up the wide staircase, whose soft carpet was a bewildering novelty to the girl accustomed to the simplest surroundings, across a landing, fragrant, like the hall, with growing roses and exotic plants, into a small boudoir, in which she found herself alone. In all her twenty years of life she had never before been in a room like this room, and, standing in the centre of it, just where her guide had left her, she looked round her timidly, and drew a long breath of admiration and amazement.

The murkiness of the November day that darkened the world outside, did not appear to enter into this lovely apartment, which gave Christina a sense of summer and sunshine.

"It is just like a pink rose," she said to herself, her eyes wandering from the walls, delicately tinted a soft rose colour, to the sofa and chairs upholstered in a deeper shade of the same colour, and the carpet, whose darker tint of rose harmonised with the paler hues. Every table seemed to the girl to overflow with books and magazines; bowls of flowers, vases of flowers, pots of flowers, stood on every available shelf, and in every possible corner. The windows were draped with rose-coloured silk curtains, that made even the grey sky beyond them look less grey, and the pictures on the walls drew a gasp of delight from Christina's lips. They were mainly landscapes, and in

almost every case they represented wide spaces, open tracts of country, that gave one a sense of life and freshness. Here was an expanse of sea, blue and smiling as the sky that stooped to meet it; there, long green rollers swept up a sandy beach, whilst clouds lit up by a rift of sunshine, lay on the horizon. On this side was a moorland, purple with heather, bathed in the glory of the setting sun; on that side, a plain, far-reaching as the sea itself, soft and green and misty, bounded by mountains, whose snow-crowned summits stood out in serried stateliness against the faint blue sky. In a looking-glass hanging on the wall, Christina caught sight of her own reflection, and a shamed consciousness of her white face and shabby clothes, gave her a sense of the incongruousness between her own appearance, and the loveliness around her. But this uneasy sense of discrepancy had barely entered her mind, when the door opened, and there entered a tiny personage, whose daintiness made Christina all at once feel huge, awkward, and ungainly.

"It was sweet of you to come," the little lady exclaimed, holding out to the girl a white hand flashing with diamonds, "you are the kind lady who brought my Baba home? Henry was very incoherent; he always is, in a grand, long-winded way of his own. But I gathered from his meandering remarks, that you had come in answer to my advertisement."

"Yes," Christina answered; "I saw it—the advertisement—in the *Morning Post* to-day. I thought it was so kind of you to advertise, that I came. But, of course, when I brought the darling baby home, I only did what everybody else would have done," she added, rather breathlessly.

"A lady—and very proud," the thought ran through her listener's brain; but aloud the little lady only said:

"I can't put into words how grateful I am to you, all the same. You see, my little girlie is my ewe lamb—my only child—and she is very precious. If anything had happened to her, I—oh! but we mustn't talk about dreadful things that might happen, when I hope they never will. Baba was a naughty monkey to run out alone. But she is rather a sweet monkey, isn't she?"

"She is one of the dearest babies I ever saw," Christina answered simply, sitting down in the chair her hostess pushed forward for her, and feeling some of her awkwardness slipping from her, in presence of this kindly, dainty little lady. With girlish enthusiasm her eyes drank in the loveliness of the other's fair face, its delicate colouring, its crown of bright hair; the perfection of the tiny form, the gracefulness of the dead black gown, that fell in exactly the right folds, and was hung as no dress of poor little Christina's had ever been persuaded to hang.

"Baba—we call her Baba, because her own name, Veronica, is so big for such a baby—has managed to get rather out of hand since her nurse left. We do try not to spoil her, but we don't always succeed very well. I think you must be very fond of children—aren't you? You made a great impression on Baba."

"I love little children," Christina answered, with the simplicity and sincerity which characterised her; "since I have had to earn my own living, I have been a nursery governess."

"It is very absurd, but I don't even know your name, and I daresay you are equally ignorant of mine?" the little lady in the armchair exclaimed, with a gay laugh. "Rupert did not put any name in the advertisement; he said it was wiser not—but I am Lady Cicely Redesdale, and Baba, as I say, is my only child, and—very precious." Lady Cicely's blue eyes looked thoughtfully at Christina, her last words were spoken absently.

"I did not even know into which house the small girl was carried on Monday," Christina replied, laughing also; "the footman ran along the pavement when he saw us, and until I read your advertisement to-day, I had no idea which number in the square was the one he had come from. My name is Moore—Christina Moore—and I live in Maremont Street."

"In Maremont Street? But— isn't that rather a—wretched neighbourhood for you? Do your people live there?"

"I have no people," the girl answered, an unconscious wistfulness in her eyes that appealed to Lady Cicely's kind heart. "I lost my father and mother three years ago, and since then I have been living with some friends, and taking care of their children. But now they have gone to Canada and I am alone in the world." It was said without any *arrière pensée*; no thought of exploiting her loneliness crossed Christina's mind. The sympathetic glance of the blue eyes watching her, led her on to frankness of speech, and to speak to an educated lady again was a delight, to which for the past few months she had been an entire stranger.

"And you—are obliged to work for yourself?" Lady Cicely put the question with hesitating kindness.

"Oh, yes"—a faint smile crossed Christina's face—"and just now it is rather hard to get. Nobody seems to want the sort of work that I can do. You see, I have had very little education—not enough to teach big children—and I have no certificates or diplomas, or anything. I don't think my father ever dreamt that I should have to earn my own living, or he would have had me trained to do it."

"But you have taken care of little children?" again Lady Cicely's eyes searched the girl's face earnestly—"and you are very fond of them?"

"I love them," Christina said, for the third time, "and I am never tired of being with them, and taking care of them. But there are such lots of other girls like me, with very few qualifications, and so, though I answer ever so many advertisements, I can't get a place."

"Do you mind waiting here just a moment?" Lady Cicely asked abruptly. "I—I should like you to see Baba before you go; perhaps we might find—we might think—" and with this vague sentence, the small lady went out of the room, leaving Christina puzzled and wondering.

Lady Cicely meanwhile hurried downstairs to the library, where a man sat looking over a mass of legal papers.

"Rupert," she exclaimed impetuously, "it is the girl who brought Baba back, and my brain is teeming with plans for helping her."

"Is she a young person?"

"No, no—a lady. Very shabby, very tired-looking, very poor, I should guess; but unmistakably a lady. And—I'm so sorry for her, Rupert; she is just a slip of a girl, who looks as if she wanted mothering."

"Now, Cicely, do you wish to embark on the mother's rôle? As one of your trustees, let me warn you I shan't allow any quixotism."

"Leave those tiresome old papers for five minutes, and come and see this girl. I don't want to be quixotic, and I am ready to abide by your judgment, but come and look at Miss Moore."

"The tiresome old papers are fairly important deeds connected with your estate, and the future inheritance of your daughter, Miss Veronica Joan Redesdale," her cousin answered with a laugh; "but I suppose your ladyship's whims must take precedence of your property. Where is Miss Moore?"

"In my boudoir, and very shy. I am sure she was afraid at first that I meant to offer her money, there was a sort of proud shrinking in her eyes—and she has very pretty eyes, too. Of course, my idea *had* been to offer her money, because I imagined she would be of the shop-girl type, but I should as soon think of offering you money, as of suggesting giving it to Miss Moore."

"Come along, then; let us get the inspection over. But, if you can't give her money, what do you propose to do with her?"

"I—thought"—Lady Cicely paused, glanced into her cousin's grave face, and glanced away again—"I fancied, perhaps, I might help her to get work. She is horribly poor, and she looks half-fed, and so tired. I—well—I—really and truly, Rupert, I wondered whether she could come here as nurse to Baba."

A low whistle was Rupert's response, then he said slowly—

"You didn't suggest this to her, did you? You are so kind, so impulsive, but, remember this girl is a perfect stranger. She may be—anything. As you yourself told me two days ago, you must have unimpeachable references with anyone who takes charge of Baba."

"Of course I said nothing to her. Now, Rupert, I know I am impulsive, but I am not entirely devoid of all common sense. Come and give me your opinion, and I promise—yes, I absolutely *promise*—to be guided by you."

Rupert's grey eyes smiled down with brotherly affection into his little cousin's face, and he followed her obediently from the room, and upstairs, wondering vaguely why it was, that, much as he cared for and admired Cicely, she had never inspired him with any deeper affection. Like an elder brother to her from her earliest childhood, the brotherly relation had continued between them after Cicely's marriage, and it had been by her dead husband's most earnest wish, and specified instructions, that Mernside was one of her trustees and Baba's guardians, and Mr. Redesdale had bidden his wife consult Rupert about everything connected with the estate and its baby heiress.

On the landing at the head of the stairs a small figure with flying golden curls, and filmy white frock, flung herself upon her mother, shrieking delightedly.

"Baba's runned away from Jane. Now Baba come with mummy."

"Oh, Baba, you are not a good baby," Cicely exclaimed, with an attempt at severity, which only produced a chuckle from the small girl; "it is time mummy found a very stern nurse. Nevertheless her appearance is opportune," she said, *sotto voce*, to Rupert. "I told Miss Moore I would fetch Baba, and I don't want her to feel she is being inspected. Run on into mummy's boudoir, sweetheart," she added aloud to the child, "there's somebody there for Baba to see."

It was a pretty sight which greeted the two elders when, a moment later, they entered the rose-coloured room; and Rupert paused for an instant in the doorway, to look and smile. Baba, after one short glance at the stranger, who had risen from her chair, made a rush across the room towards her, clasped her round the knees, and cried fervently—

"Dat's Baba's lady, what found her in the ugly fog. Kiss Baba," and, at the moment of their entrance, Rupert and Cicely saw the girl stoop and lift the baby in her arms, with a tenderness that marked a true child lover, and an absence of self-consciousness induced by her ignorance that two pairs of eyes were fixed upon her.

"Baba loves you very much," the child babbled on, her soft fingers touching Christina's white face, "and thank you for bringing Baba home. Pretty lady," she added suddenly, "Baba like when the pinky colour goes all up and down your cheeks." For, at that moment, the girl had become aware of the presence, not only of Lady Cicely, but of a tall stranger with grave grey eyes, and a rosy flush swept over the whiteness of her face.

"Baba has not forgotten you," the former said, with her gay little laugh. "Rupert, this is Miss Moore, who so kindly brought naughty Baba home out of the fog. My cousin is Baba's guardian, Miss Moore, and he is as grateful to you as I am."

Christina, in her embarrassment, did not observe Lady Cicely's omission of the tall stranger's surname; Cicely herself was unconscious that she had not said it, and Rupert was only intent on setting the girl at her ease.

"Baba seems to be bestowing her own thanks in her own violent way," he said, as the child's dimpled arms were flung again round Christina's neck, and her soft face pressed against the girl's flushed one; "but we all owe you a debt of gratitude for having found, and brought her back. London streets are not the safest place for little babies of that age, with pearl necklaces round their necks."

"That was what I thought," Christina exclaimed impulsively; "at least—I mean," she stammered, "I couldn't help being glad that I was the first person to find her, and that it was not one of the dreadful people who do prow! about in fogs, who saw her first."

"We are most thankful for that, too," Rupert answered; and then, being a man of the world, he skilfully led the conversation to more general subjects, until Christina was soon talking quietly and naturally, with no more tremors or self-consciousness.

When, a few minutes later, she rose to go, Lady Cicely held her hands in a clasp that was very comforting to the weary girl, and said gently—

"I am not going to worry you with more thank-yous; but I want you to come and see me again in a day or two. I think, perhaps, I may be able to hear of some work that would suit you."

As Christina wended her way homewards, she felt, tired though she was, as if her feet trod on air. Hope was once more fully alive within her. Lady Cicely's lovely face and charming manner had bewitched the girl, and she was sure—quite, quite sure—that if the sweet little blue-eyed lady said she would do something for her, that something would infallibly be done. And—the tall cousin, with the grave grey eyes, and the mouth that seemed to Christina to be set in lines of pain? Those grey eyes and that firmly-set mouth, haunted her during the whole course of her walk, and through her mind there flashed unbidden the thought—

"I—wish I could comfort him. I am sure he is unhappy."

Her way led her past the newspaper shop kept by Mr. Coles, and the little man himself was standing at his door surveying the world.

"There is a letter in here for you, miss," he said good-naturedly; "it came yesterday morning, and the wife and I made sure you'd be in for it."

Christina started. The events of the day had obliterated from her mind all recollection of the matrimonial advertisement, and the letters that were to be addressed to Mr. Coles's shop. The memory of Wednesday's disappointment came back to her, and as Mr. Coles put into her hand a letter addressed "C.M." in the same bold, strong hand that had addressed the other letter, her momentary inclination was to return it to its writer unopened.

"Perhaps there is some explanation," was her next and saner reflection; and, walking along the street, she opened, and read the letter, feeling a certain compunction as she did so. The address was still that of the newspaper office, and the letter ran—

"DEAR MADAM,—

"I deeply regret that you found the house, at which I had asked you to call, shut up. I reached it a few minutes after you had left, and to my own great surprise found—as you had done—no one there but a caretaker. My friend must have been called away suddenly, for on Tuesday, when I saw her, she most kindly arranged that her house should be at my disposal. Please forgive what must have seemed to you most strange. Would it suit you to arrange any meeting-place that would accord with your wishes? With renewed apologies.

"Yours faithfully,

CHAPTER VII.

"A VERY BEAUTIFUL PENDANT, WITH THE INITIALS 'A.V.C.'"

With all her undoubted strength of character, Christina was only human, and the courteous apology she had received from the man signing himself "Rupert Mernside," sorely tempted her. Curiosity to see the writer, and a lurking feeling that he might really be able to find work for her, were mingled with a girlish longing for adventure, and for some of the youthful joys she had missed; and all these sensations made her more than half inclined to assign a meeting-place to this Mr. Mernside. She had known few men, either in her quiet Devonshire home, or when she was in the Donaldsons' service, and any pleasant social intercourse with the other sex had never come in her way at all. There rose before her a vision of meeting this man of the bold, characteristic handwriting—of perhaps being taken by him to tea in one of those tea-rooms about which she had heard—tea-rooms where the waitresses were ladies, dressed in soft lilac gowns, with dainty muslin aprons, and where delicious music was played to the fortunate tea-drinkers. To have tea in such a place, with a man whose business it was for the moment to look exclusively after her and her well-being, would be such a treat as she had never enjoyed in all her life. Her parents had not encouraged any social gaiety; thinking over it now, it seemed to Christina that for some inexplicable reason they had avoided society, and actually warded off those of their neighbours who were inclined to be friendly. And with a sudden revolt against her own loneliness and dullness, the girl felt as though at any cost she must seek friendship, amusement, distraction.

"Of course, I haven't any clothes in which to go to a really smart tea-room," she thought, when, in the shelter of her own small room, she read her letter for the second time; "but there maybe somewhere not too smart, where he could take me; and he leaves me to decide where to meet him—and—oh! I do want some fun; I do dreadfully want it!"

The man who would be the central figure of the entertainment, entered little into her calculations. She was far more interested in her vision of tea-rooms, and the smart folk she might be fortunate enough to see there, than in the man whose "open sesame" was to admit her to the sacred precincts. And only when some chance train of thought reminded her of her recent interview with Lady Cicely, did she reflect that the person who would sit beside her, and attend to her wants at the tiny table in the enthralling tea-room, would be a stranger to her, perhaps even an objectionable stranger.

With the remembrance of her visit to Eaton Square, came also the recollection of the tall man with the grave grey eyes, the man introduced to her by Lady Cicely, as "my cousin," and a hot flush of shame rushed to her face, as she wondered what he would think of her, if he knew she was planning to meet a person she had never seen, and of whom she had only heard through a matrimonial advertisement.

He would certainly despise her; and it was not nice to contemplate the kindly glance of those eyes turned to scorn and contempt.

Although she knew it was absurd to suppose that Lady Cicely's cousin could ever be aware of, or interested in, the doings of so insignificant a person as herself, she shrank oddly from doing anything of which he would disapprove.

"To arrange to meet a strange man isn't really a very womanly thing to do," she said, when she sat down to write her letter to the unknown Mr. Mernside. "I shouldn't ever have answered the advertisement at all, if I had not been so dreadfully poor, and I shouldn't like to look Lady Cicely's cousin in the face again if I met this man."

The letter was not so difficult a one to write as the first had been, and its recipient both smiled and sighed, as he read the terse little sentences in the round, girlish handwriting.

"DEAR SIR,—

"Thank you for your kind letter, but I hope I now have a chance of getting some work, so that I need not trouble you any more.

"Yours faithfully,
"C. MOORE."

"Well! that's a relief," Rupert ejaculated, throwing the note into the fire; "what I could have

done with the girl if she had agreed to meet me, heaven only knows. Margaret would have helped me—but Margaret—"

His meditations ended abruptly; he drew from his breast pocket a letter that had reached him a post or two before Christina's arrived, and for the fiftieth time read it from end to end. The sense of it had long since imprinted itself upon his brain, but it gave him a painful pleasure to let his eyes rest upon the well-formed letters of the handwriting, though a resentful indignation towards the writer stirred within him. She had not treated him well, and yet—she was the one woman in the world to him—this woman of the dark eyes and rare white beauty, who signed her letter with the one word, "Margaret." No address stood at the head of the letter, it was undated; and the postmark was that of the West Central district.

"Forgive me for having left London so abruptly, and without telling you of my intention," she wrote. "I was summoned away by telegram, and in my hurry and anxiety, I forgot to let you know. I cannot tell you my address just now, but Elizabeth is with me, and I am safe and well. I have often warned you, have I not, my dear, faithful friend, that much in my life must always seem to you strange and mysterious. I can give you no explanation now. But trust me still. MARGARET.

"Letters sent to me, c/o Mrs. Milton, 180, Gower Street, will be forwarded."

Mernside wrote four letters, each one of which in turn he tore up and flung into the fire as soon as it was written, finally writing a fifth, which appeared to satisfy him, for, having addressed and stamped it, he put it into his pocket when he went out.

"Drive sharply to 180, Gower Street," were his directions to the driver as he swung himself into a passing hansom, and leant forward on the closed doors, watching the traffic with listless glances, which only saw a woman's dark eyes, set in a white face.

"No, sir, I couldn't tell you Mrs. Stanforth's address," was the uncompromising reply to his question, and Mrs. Milton's inflexible countenance, and flat, rigid form were as uncompromising as her speech; "she bid me say to anyone enquiring, that she was gone in the country for a time, and I can only answer the same to you, as I answers to the rest. Letters and people—they come on here from Barford Road, and I says the same to all of 'em."

Rupert's creed as a gentleman forbade his pressing for the address of a woman who wished to keep herself hidden, but with all the hatred of his sex for mysteries, he moved impatiently away, speculating grimly on the eccentricities of women. Why, when she had a house of her own, did Margaret have her visitors and letters sent to Gower Street for information, or re-addressing respectively? What object was being served by all this mysterious behaviour? And why was she sometimes so apparently frank with him, at other times so strangely secret?

True, that her very uncertainty was part of her charm; but, without swerving in his unshakable loyalty to her, he felt himself occasionally wishing that Margaret had some of the transparent candour of his little cousin, Cicely Redesdale. Cicely was incapable of dark secrets, or hidden, mysterious actions; she and Baba were children together, and one was scarcely more innocent and crystal pure than the other—which reflections brought him by easy stages to his cousin's estates, and his own trusteeship; and the memory of a paper needing Cicely's signature, made him retrace his steps to his own chambers, and thence to Eaton Square, where he found Cicely and her small daughter enjoying the delights of tea together, in the bright nursery at the top of the house.

"Jane has got a sick mother," Cicely explained dolefully; "Jane was imperatively needed at home, at an hour's notice—and behold me, head nurse and nursery-maid rolled into one, and Baba in the seventh heaven of bliss. If you want any tea, Rupert, you must have it here—hot buttered toast and all. Dawson won't approve, but I am tired of trying to live up to him." Dawson was the butler, a magnificent personage who had only condescended to anything more insignificant than a ducal mansion, in consideration of Mr. Redesdale's generosity in the matter of wages; and Dawson regarded any departure from the orthodox, with disapproving eyes.

"You will never succeed in reaching Dawson's criterion of correctness," Rupert laughed; "meanwhile, nursery tea is much jollier than the drawing-room meal. We can eat double as much, and we can spread our own jam."

"But you know, Rupert, I can't spend my whole life in the nursery," Cicely began, when the appetites of the baby and the big man had been partially satisfied. "Baba has chosen a new nurse for herself, but—I can't let her decide anything so important; I am afraid you will call me quixotic if I say I am half inclined to—"

"Is it the young person—James's young person?" her cousin broke in. "I knew that girl with the green eyes and shabby clothes was making indelible marks on your kind heart. But—you know nothing about her, dear, and, as you told me, you must have unimpeachable references."

"Rupert, to remind a woman of the things she has said in a remote past, is like driving a pig

towards the north, when you want him to go there. When you have a wife, you will understand the inwardness of my remark."

"I shall never have a wife," was the quick retort, "and am I to infer from your remark that you are intending to engage a nurse who cannot produce the necessary references?"

"I don't know what she can produce yet, but I have written to ask your green-eyed friend of the shabby hat, to come and see me, and—then I thought we could talk things over."

"Then 'things' are a foregone conclusion," said Rupert, with a laugh. "I know you, Cicely. The girl seemed to have a way with children; she looked and spoke like a lady, and——"

"And Baba loved her"; Cicely lowered her voice, but the child, absorbed in putting a consignment of dolls to bed, gave no heed to her elders; "and ever since the girl came here, Baba has gone on saying: 'Baba would like that pretty lady to live with her; can't the pretty lady come?' And sometimes children and dogs have wonderful instincts about people, don't they? Baba's instinct may be just the right one."

"It may. Let us hope it will. There was something very straightforward about that girl's eyes, and her voice was particularly pleasant. It reminded me of somebody, but who the somebody is I can't for the life of me remember."

"By the way, didn't you tell me the other day you knew of a nursery governess who wanted work? Can she come and see me as well? Perhaps you have found out more about her by now?"

"She has just succeeded in hearing of work," Rupert answered, and Cicely noticed that, as before, he spoke with a trace of embarrassment. "I have found out nothing more about her, but I hear she is, or hopes to be, 'suited,' as the servants say."

"I am very strongly inclined to try the girl who brought Baba in from the fog. Something about her appealed to me, and she must be able to produce some kind of reference. She can't just have 'growed,' like Topsy, into her present position. Oh! Dawson, who and what is it?" she broke off to say, as the butler's stately form and impassive face appeared in the doorway.

"Sir Arthur Congreve wishes to see your ladyship very particularly," was the reply.

"I will be down in one moment," she answered; and, when the door had closed noiselessly after the butler, she turned to Rupert, and made a small grimace.

"Now, what has brought that tiresome old person here to-day," she demanded of the world in general; "you don't know him, do you? He is a cousin of John's; and the most intolerable bore ever created to worry his long-suffering relations."

"I know him by name, naturally; but I never had the pleasure——"

"Come and have it now." Cicely sprang to her feet, and rang the bell. "I must get a housemaid to take care of Baba; and you come and be introduced to my pet bugbear. He and his wife hardly ever come to town. They look upon it as modern Babylon, sunk in iniquity. He is hugely rich, and their jewels are amazing, but very few people ever see them. He lives in a very remote corner of the country, somewhere on the Welsh border, about ten miles from every reasonable sort of place, and my private opinion is that he is more mad than sane."

"Why?"

"Oh! a woman's reason. I think him so, because I think him so. No; but without joking, all sorts of queer things have happened in that family—dark mysteries, and I fancy even crimes; but John never told me details. Sir Arthur is a most unspeakably conventional person, but I believe some of his relations were quite the reverse. Come and help me entertain him," she added, when a housemaid had entered the nursery; "he will probably disapprove of you, and tell me later on that your presence in the house is damaging to my reputation," she added as they went down the stairs together.

The elderly gentleman who stood on the drawing-room hearthrug, surveying the room with an air of disapproval, was, Rupert thought, one of the handsomest men he had ever seen. White-haired, with a heavy white moustache, his complexion was clear and healthy as a girl's, and his refined, well-cut features were almost cameo-like in their perfect chiselling. His eyes were dark, and very bright, and they fixed themselves at once upon Rupert with a glance of suspicion.

"My dear Cicely," he said, shaking her stiffly by the hand, "urgent business, tiresome family business, brought me to this city of dreadful night for a few hours, and I thought I must call and enquire after your health, and the health of Veronica."

"Thank you, Cousin Arthur; do sit down; I am very flourishing, and Baba is in rude health. We don't call her Veronica yet, you know; she is really only quite a baby still."

"I strongly deprecate the calling of children by fancy names," Sir Arthur answered pompously. "Veronica is a name in our family; a name about which, alas! cling many sad associations. But still, I am convinced that if her poor father had lived, your poor daughter——"

"I haven't introduced you to my cousin," Cicely cut in unceremoniously, feeling that any comments upon her husband's possible conduct would be unendurable from Sir Arthur's lips. "I believe you have never met him. Mr. Mernside, Sir Arthur Congreve."

Sir Arthur bowed stiffly. Rupert's greeting was pleasant and friendly; the older man's rigid attitude merely amused him.

"No; I have certainly never met Mr. Mernside," Sir Arthur said coldly; "as you know, my dear Cicely, I never come to this terrible Babylon, unless absolutely driven to do so by irresistible circumstances. And in your husband's lifetime, I do not ever remember to have seen your cousin," he added, with a severe glance at Mernside.

"If you had been much in town in John's lifetime you would often have met Rupert," Cicely answered quickly. "Rupert was one of John's greatest friends, and is Baba's trustee and guardian. But you," she tried to speak more lightly, "you and Cousin Ellen bury yourselves so completely in your country fastness, that you know nothing of the troublesome world in which we live."

"Troublesome world, indeed," answered Sir Arthur, wagging his head and looking at her solemnly. The saving grace of humour had been omitted from his composition, and he took himself, and the whole world, with a seriousness that could not be shaken; "in this dreadful city, you frolic like children on the edge of a volcano, but one day the eruption will come, and——"

"And then we shall all be little bits of lava, shan't we?" Cicely asked, her blue eyes wide and innocent, her lips parted in an engaging smile.

"You are sadly flippant, Cicely. I had hoped that walking through the vale of misery, your flippancy would have fallen from you. But I fear you are determined to turn this vale of tears, this troublesome world, as you so justly call it, into a mere playground."

"A very delightful vale—sometimes," Rupert said, in his slow, charming voice; "the troublesome world can be beautiful, as well as troublesome, you will allow, especially if you live in the country."

"Beautiful?" Sir Arthur glared at the speaker. "But all to be burnt some day—all to be burnt. When I am asked to admire the mountains near my home—the woods, the river—I say the same thing always; I say, 'It is all being prepared for the burning.'"

"Perhaps we may enjoy its beauties during the time of preparation," Rupert said smiling; "until—the conflagration, the beauty is ours."

"I did not call to-day to engage in flippant small talk," Sir Arthur answered sternly. "Like Babylon of old, London is rushing on its doom, and I have no doubt that the fashionable throng which numbers you amongst its members, has long ago resigned every serious thought and effort. Conversation is as loose as manners and morals, and——"

"My manners and morals are not conspicuously loose, Cousin Arthur," Cicely said demurely; "but I don't belong to the smart set, and I don't even want to belong to it, and I expect that is what you meant by the fashionable throng. We live very quietly, Baba and I."

"Quietly? In all this luxury, this pomp?" Sir Arthur glanced round the exquisite room with a shudder. "One of my designs in coming here to-day, was to ask whether you would ever care to come and pay us a visit at Burnbrooke, but we could offer you no such luxury as this. If, however, you would care to come, we have peace there."

"It is very kind of you, and of Cousin Ellen to have thought of it," Cicely faltered with a recollection of a depressing fortnight spent in Sir Arthur's home, during her husband's lifetime; "perhaps in the spring or summer you would let us come and see you."

"We have been away so frequently during the last three years that we have seen few people. My poor wife being a martyr to rheumatism, has had to visit foreign watering places; we have, as you know, been little at home, and we have invited few guests to Burnbrooke. If you will come, we shall be happy to see you; or if at any time you would care to send Veronica with her nurse, to breathe some other air than the pernicious air of this dark town, pray send them."

Cicely made a courteous and smiling rejoinder, but Rupert thought he could read, in the mutinous setting of her pretty lips, that she had small intention of allowing her little daughter to breathe the salubrious air of Burnbrooke.

"You are in town on business only, not for pleasure?" the little lady asked, taking a certain malicious delight in seeing Sir Arthur's start of horror.

"Pleasure? I here for pleasure? Heaven forbid. I have come on troublesome business. I am anxious about the news of my unfortunate brother-in-law and his wife, my poor, foolish sister. Ah! well you never knew her, did you?"

"No, never." Cicely shook her head, wildly trying to unearth from the depths of her mind, any fragments of knowledge she might ever have possessed about Sir Arthur's brother-in-law; but

finding herself entirely at sea, gave up the attempt.

"Poor, misguided soul," the visitor went on, with a solemn shake of the head; "she would never listen to reason; never believe what I told her. My sisters—Ah! well, well, I must not trouble you with our family skeletons. I have come up to try and find out if I can where my brother-in-law is, and to avert worse scandals than already exist."

Cicely, still completely at sea as to the drift of his conversation, murmured something non-committal and sympathetic, and he continued speaking with unabated energy.

"I also have some business to do with Scotland Yard," he said importantly; "my wife has lost a piece of jewellery which she greatly values, and which I also value exceedingly. The loss is a very strange one; and, after serious deliberation, I have decided to put the case into the hands of the Scotland Yard officials."

"Have you had a burglary?"

"No, nothing of that kind at all. We can only account for the loss in one way. We were travelling home last week, after a visit, and at Liverpool station my wife's maid put her mistress's dressing bag into the carriage, she herself standing beside the door. One person was in the compartment, a quiet-looking young lady, so the maid describes her. We reached home. My wife discovered the loss of the jewel she so much values. It had been put into the bag at the last minute before we left our friends' house, as she had been showing it to a visitor. The bag, it is true, was unlocked, but the maid vows she did not leave the carriage door, and that the young person in the carriage seemed to be a lady. The fact remains that the pendant has vanished."

"A pendant, was it?" Cicely asked with interest.

"A very beautiful pendant, one that, to my mind, is unique. It is made of a single and very remarkable emerald, set in beautifully chased gold, and above the emerald there are three initials twisted together in gold; the initials A.V.C."

CHAPTER VIII.

"IT IS A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH."

"And the Prince had the dearest face in all the world. It was not exactly handsome, but it was very strong, and when you looked at it, you knew that he was good. And his eyes were grey and very kind, and——"

"And did he wear white armour, all shining, and a silver crown on his head?"

Baba's voice, clear and imperious, interrupted Christina's dreamy tones, and her dimpled fingers seized and shook the girl's hand, in order to attract her attention, which, as the baby was vaguely aware, had wandered from the fairy tale in process of being told. "Did the Prince have white armour?"

"Yes, I expect so," Christina answered, with momentary hesitation, flushing as a vision flashed into her mind of a tall figure in well-cut dark blue serge, that bore no resemblance whatever to silver armour; "he—he put on armour when he had to go and fight dragons, but when he was in the Castle with the lovely Princess, he wore a velvet tunic, dark blue velvet, and a silver crown upon his head."

"And the Princess was just 'zactly like you," Baba said lovingly, pressing her golden head more closely against Christina's breast, and looking into the girl's face with adoring eyes, "just 'zactly like my pretty lady."

Christina laughed softly, running her hands through the child's curls, and bending down to kiss the uplifted face.

"You are a little monkey, Baba," she said, "and a flatterer. You mustn't call Christina a pretty lady. She isn't a bit pretty, and she's only just your nurse."

"Baba will call Christina just 'zactly what she likes," the child answered sturdily, enunciating her words with the clearness often found in an only child who is constantly with grown-up people. "Christina's a very pretty lady, and Baba loves her."

"Baba's a goose, and we must put on our things and go out in the sunshine and see what we can find in these nice lanes." She put the child off her lap, and, going into an adjacent room, brought out the red cloak in which she had first seen her, and wrapped it round Baba's graceful little form, drawing the hood over the golden curls.

Barely a fortnight had gone by since Christina had first entered Lady Cicely's service, after an interview which had ended precisely as Rupert had laughingly declared it would end, in the engagement of Christina as Baba's nurse. The references the girl had produced from her late employer, Mrs. Donaldson, from an old clergyman who had known her in Devonshire, and from her father's solicitor, had seemed to Cicely to justify her in taking this step, even though the Donaldsons were in Canada, the old clergyman dead, and the solicitor gone to South Africa.

"She looks genuine; I am sure she *is* genuine," the little lady said afterwards to Rupert; "and she was so overwhelmed with delight and gratitude at the idea of coming to us."

"No doubt she was," Rupert responded drily; "well! no great harm can come of giving her a month's trial. I am glad you had the saving grace to suggest that. And during the month you will be able to see what she is made of."

But the month had not fallen out quite as Rupert had naturally supposed that it would. Lady Cicely, driven nearly distracted by a scare of scarlet fever in the near neighbourhood, and unable to use Bramwell Castle, which was in the builder's hands, had sent Christina and Baba off, almost at a moment's notice, to Graystone. In this remote hamlet on a remote Sussex border, Mrs. Nairne, an old servant of the Staynes family, owned a small farmhouse, and also received lodgers; and here, for the past ten days, Christina and her little charge had been rejoicing in the country sights and sounds, which even in early December had a fascination all their own.

To Baba, the farmyard was an unfailing source of delight; and to Christina, the great spaces of moorland, the deep lanes, the woods whose soft brown hues gave colour to the hillsides, were a welcome change from London streets, and the squalor of London lodgings. To the girl who for so long had been tossing on a sea of struggle and privation, her quiet life at Graystone was like a haven of rest; and her one passionate prayer was, that at the end of her month of probation, she might still find favour in Lady Cicely's eyes, and keep the situation which seemed to her a more delightful one than she had ever dared to hope for in her wildest dreams. With the help of a little pony cart, she and the child could make quite lengthy excursions about the country side, and Christina often found herself wondering why it was the fashion to talk as if there were no beauties to be found in the country in winter time. She revelled in the great sweeps of moorland that rolled away to far hills on the horizon, hills scarcely less blue than the soft blue of the winter sky. And, if the moorlands were no longer clad in their robe of purple heather, or pale pink ling, the duns and browns of heath and bracken, the dark green of fir-trees, and the brightly tinted leaves of the bilberry plants offered no lack of colour. On the oaks in the lanes bright brown leaves still hung; and the trees that were leafless—delicate birches, sturdy ashes, smooth-stemmed beeches, made so dainty a lacework of bare boughs against their background of sky, that the leaflessness was in itself beautiful. The sunlight poured a flood of radiance on the upland road, as Christina and Baba jogged peacefully along it, in the wake of the small black pony, who meandered on at his own pace, just as the fancy took him. Larks sang in the sunlight; in the copse under the hill the thrushes were already beginning to learn their songs of spring; and Christina, drinking in all the loveliness about her, laughed aloud for sheer gladness of heart.

They had driven for some distance along the main road, when they came to a spot where four roads met, and towards one of them Baba pointed a fat forefinger.

"Let's go along there," she said; "it's such a ducky wee road, and there's a pond."

Christina was lain to confess that the road indicated had special attractions of its own. It wound down from the upland, between hedges which in summer must be a tangled loveliness of briar roses, honeysuckle, and clematis; and, skirting a common where a pond reflected the sunshine on its small ruffled waves, turned down again between woods that climbed steeply up the hill-side on either hand. The lane narrowed as it wound onwards, and Christina was beginning to wonder whether it would end in a mere grassy track, when she saw a clearing in the woods on the right-hand side, and became aware of chimney-pots showing above a very high wall.

"What an extraordinarily lonely place," the girl reflected, looking with a little shudder at the height of the wall, and at the dense woods which hemmed it in on every side. Excepting where the space for the actual house itself had been cleared, and where the lane meandered past it, it was entirely shut in by woods—beech, oak, and birch on the lower levels, pines climbing upward to the summit, closing the building in from all observation. Thanks to the steep hills and the overhanging woods, only a very small proportion of sunshine could filter into the lane, and Christina shivered again, feeling that there was something sinister about this secluded spot, and the house that was barely visible behind its encircling walls.

"Baba thinks p'raps the Princess lives behind there," said the baby, looking with round blue eyes at the frowning walls; "it's a awful, dreadful place; and p'raps the Dragon's got the Princess safe in there; and she's waiting for the Prince to come and get her out."

"The Prince will come in his shining armour," Christina answered brightly; "and then the Princess will come away, and be happy ever after."

At the moment they were driving past a green door in the wall; and as she spoke these words, the door was hurriedly opened, and a tall woman stepped out into the lane. She was closely

wrapped in a dark cloak, and some magnificent black lace draped her hair. But it was the sight of her face that made Christina draw in her breath sharply, for she thought she had never seen anything more beautiful than its white loveliness, anything more sad than the glance of the great dark eyes. She panted a little, as though she had been running; there was a strange mingling of fear and anguish in her expression, and she held up her hand with so pleading a gesture, that Christina pulled up, and leaning from the cart, said gently:

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

The dark eyes met hers, a startled look, one would almost have said a look of recognition swept over the white face, then she exclaimed breathlessly:

"Why—I thought—you were—I beg your pardon—it was foolish of me—of course, I have never seen you before."

"No, never," Christina answered emphatically, knowing that the lovely face of this woman, once seen, could never have faded from her memory; "but, I am afraid you are in trouble; can I help you?"

"A doctor," the other panted. "I must have a doctor; and yet—I am afraid—I am afraid," she wrung her hands together, and her lips quivered pitifully.

"We are driving back to Graystone. Can I send a doctor if there is one in the place? Or, can I send over to the nearest town?" Christina asked, struck afresh by the anguish in the other's eyes, and realising that only some vital necessity could so have moved her.

"I must have a doctor," the words were reiterated, and the woman put her hands upon the cart, and leant heavily against it. "I can't let—him—die—and yet—no one must know if the doctor comes here," she exclaimed, suddenly pulling herself upright, and speaking fast and earnestly; "not a living soul must ever know; and the doctor himself? If you find a doctor for me, promise to make him swear that he will never divulge where he has been, or what he sees in this house."

Christina looked the bewilderment she felt, and a faint wonder flashed across her mind whether this woman could be sane. Her speech savoured of melodrama, her hurried, breathless sentences, the nervous glances she cast over her shoulder, and the strangeness of the words she spoke, all tended to make the girl doubt the speaker's sanity. But the dark eyes, unfathomable and sad as they were, looked straight into hers without a trace of madness; and though she was plainly afraid of something or somebody, it was not the unreasoning fear of insanity.

"Is there someone ill in that house?" the girl questioned practically; "is it of great importance to have a doctor?"

"It is a matter of life and death," was the broken answer; "when I heard wheels in the lane I came out, hoping it might be someone who would help me. I—cannot leave him myself; I have no one to send—it is all that my servant and I can do to manage——" she pulled herself up abruptly, adding after a moment, "for pity's sake help me if you can."

"I will do the best I can," Christina answered, bewildered surprise still her dominant sensation. "I am a stranger in Graystone. We are only staying in a farmhouse there, but by hook or by crook I will get a doctor for you."

"I think you will carry through whatever you undertake," the other answered, a smile flitting across the wan misery of her face, as her eyes rested on the girl's square chin, and firmly cut lips; "you look as if you would not easily be beaten."

Christina smiled back at her and shook her head.

"I was very nearly beaten a little while ago," she said, gathering up the reins and preparing to turn the pony's head up the steep ascent again; "when one is poor, and hungry, all the fight seems to go out of one. But I don't like being beaten, and I shall find a doctor for you."

She nodded her head cheerily, and was touching the pony lightly with the whip, when the stranger clutched the side of the cart again, and laid a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Remember, no one must be told that the doctor is coming here; and he himself must be sworn—*sworn* to secrecy. Promise me you will not tell a soul you have seen me, not a living soul." She was labouring under strong excitement, and it alarmed Christina to notice how the whiteness of her face had extended to her very lips, and what black shadows of suffering and fear lay under her eyes.

"Promise," she repeated, her grasp tightening on Christina's shoulder.

"I—promise," Christina answered slowly. "I will not tell anyone that I have seen you, or what you have said to me; and I will—do as you wish about the doctor."

Having received the girl's assurance, the woman drew back from the cart, and stood watching it retrace its way up the hill, her hands wrung together in anguish, her dark eyes wide with pain.

Baba had been a silent spectator of the strange little scene, understanding very little of what passed between her two elders, but watching the face of the beautiful stranger with an intent scrutiny, curious in one so young.

"That was a beautiful Princess," she said, after the cart had driven a short distance. "Baba hopes the Prince will come soon, and take her right away."

"Perhaps he will," Christina answered absently, relieved that the child had woven the strange lady into a fairy tale, thus obviating the possibility that close attention would be paid to remarks Baba might make about their encounter with her; and speculating vainly over all that she had just heard and seen, and over the striking personality of the woman who had commissioned her to do so strange an errand.

Resourceful as nature and necessity had made her, Christina was nevertheless a little puzzled to think how she could make enquiries about a doctor, without betraying what she had been especially conjured to keep secret; but during the drive home her plans were matured, and, having reached the farm, and put Baba into her cot for her afternoon nap, she went to the kitchen in search of Mrs. Nairne.

That worthy dame was engaged in making scones for tea, and turned a flushed but kindly face to Christina, who had already won her heart.

"Well, missy, you and the precious baby's had a nice drive; and I'm sure you're wise and right to take her out early, in the sunshine, and let her rest a bit before her tea—a prettier baby never was."

"She is a darling," Christina answered, "and if she hadn't the sweetest, most wholesome nature in the world, she would be spoilt, everybody adores her so!"

"There! and who can wonder, miss. The little dear! I was baking some scones for her tea and yours, miss, and——"

"That is very good of you, Mrs. Nairne. I was going to ask whether you would be so kind as to look in upon Baba presently; she is asleep in her cot, and quite safe there. But, if you would look at her now and then I should be so grateful. I haven't had the cart, sent round to the stables, for I must go up to the post office."

"And I'll do it with pleasure, miss. You go out with a light heart; no harm shall come to that little dear, that I'll promise you."

The post office, which occupied one side of the tiny general shop, was at the end of the straggling row of houses Graystone called its village street; and Mr. Canning, the postmaster, besides watching over His Majesty's mails, served customers with bacon and butter, sweets or string, sugar or tea, as occasion required. He was weighing out very brown and moist looking Demarara sugar when Christina entered the shop, and he looked at her over his spectacles, with all the absorbing interest felt by a villager for the stranger in their midst.

"A shillingworth of penny stamps, please," Christina said, when with much deliberation he had tied up the parcel of brown sugar and handed it to his customer, "and a packet of halfpenny cards." Then, when the customer had departed, she asked a few questions about the neighbourhood, adding, with well-feigned carelessness:

"I suppose in such a small place as this you have no resident doctor?"

"Well, no, miss," the man answered; "we have no one nearer than Dr. Stokes—Dr. Martin Stokes. He lives on the other side of the hill at Manborough. I hope the little lady is not ailing?" Mr. Canning asked sympathetically, for Baba's gracious little personality had endeared itself to the postmaster, and to the rest of the villagers.

"No; oh, no!" Christina answered quickly; "she is very well, and we like this lovely place so much. It is a good thing, though, to know where the doctor lives, isn't it?" she added, brightly and evasively.

"Ah! there you are right, miss. Getting the doctor in time saves fetching the undertaker, as I've said more than once," and Mr. Canning bowed Christina out of his shop, with all the empressment of a courtier.

"Manborough—the other side of the hill." It was, as the girl knew, at least three miles off, and Sandro, the fat pony who stood lazily flicking his tail before the shop door, was not to be hurried under any circumstances.

"A matter of life and death!" Those words, and the anguished tones in which they had been uttered, recurred to her, as she stood looking thoughtfully up the village street, and before her eyes rose the white, agonised face of the woman who uttered them.

"I think you will carry through whatever you undertake." Other words spoken in that same voice, came back to the girl's thoughts, and she looked with a puzzled frown at Jem, the farm boy,

who stood at the pony's head.

"Taking the short cut over the moor, I believe I can walk there as quickly as Master Sandro would juggle along the main road," she reflected, saying aloud after that second of reflection:

"You can take the cart back, Jem; and please ask Mrs. Nairne if she will be so very kind as to give Miss Baba her tea; and say I have been detained."

The boy nodded and drove off, whilst Christina walked away in the opposite direction, following the main road to Manborough, until she reached a point some way beyond the village, where a steep path—the short-cut she had recollected—struck across the open moorland. She had just reached this point, and was about to turn into the by-path, when the hoot of a motor sounded behind her, and turning, she saw a large car coming slowly up the road. It contained only two occupants; and with a leap of the heart at her own audacity, Christina suddenly resolved to stop them, and ask for their help.

"A matter of life and death!" the words still rang in her ears, and with the resourcefulness in emergency which belonged to her character, she held up her hand to the two men in the car, and signalled to them to stop. The great car instantly slowed down, and Christina, flushing rosily at her own audacity, stepped forward to speak to one of the two men who bent towards her. Both were gentlemen, she saw at once, and one of them she recognised, and her heart almost stopped beating, when her eyes met the grey eyes of Lady Cicely's cousin.

He looked at her with grave courtesy, but evidently with no idea that he had ever seen her before; and, indeed, on the one and only occasion when they had met in Lady Cicely's boudoir, he had paid very scant attention to the girl, beyond observing that she was white and thin, and very shabbily dressed. The girl who stood now beside his car was neatly and becomingly gowned in garments of soft dark green, which had the effect of making her eyes look very deep and green; she was flushing rosily and becomingly, and the wind blew her dark hair into fascinating little curls about her forehead.

"Oh! please forgive me for stopping you," she exclaimed breathlessly, "but—are you going to Manborough?"

"Yes," Rupert answered, "we are going through Manborough. Is there anything we can do for you?"

Christina noticed again, as she had noticed on the occasion of their first meeting, the peculiarly musical quality of his voice; its tones sent little thrills running along her pulses, and a dreamy conviction crept over her, that, if only he would go on speaking, she could willingly stand here for ever, listening to his deep, vibrating voice. His question roused her to the absurdity of her thoughts, and, flushing more vividly, she answered:

"I hardly dare ask you what flashed into my mind to ask, when I stopped you. But I am very anxious to get quickly over to Manborough to the doctor; it is an urgent case, and I——"

"Of course we will drive you over," Rupert broke in quickly, opening the door, and holding out his hand to help her into the back part of the car. "I am very glad we happened to be passing."

"It was dreadfully audacious of me to stop you," Christina answered, smiling in response to his smile, "but I do so want to get to the doctor as fast as I can, and when I saw the car, I thought of nothing but what I wanted to do."

Rupert glanced back at her, an amused twinkle in his grey eyes.

"You don't let obstacles hinder your attaining your goal?" he questioned.

"I—don't think I do," was the reply; "and especially when it is a matter of real importance—one of life and death." By this time they were whirling along the road at a pace which rendered conversation difficult, and Christina sat back in her comfortable seat, looking first at the man who had spoken to her, and was now steering the machine, then at his companion who sat beside him. Now that Rupert was no longer smiling pleasantly at her, she observed how grave and worn was his face, what new deep lines seemed to have carved themselves about his mouth, what a shadow of pain, or of some gnawing anxiety lay in his eyes.

"He is in trouble," the girl thought, her heart contracting with pity, as her eyes rested on the strong, rugged face. "I wish I could help him; he looks as if he had lost something he cared for with all his soul, and it is breaking his heart!"

From the strong face, with its lines of pain, her eyes turned to his companion—a slight, alert man, military in build—and with fair, good-humoured features devoid of any marked personality.

His blue eyes had brightened when Christina stopped the car, and whilst she talked to Rupert, he watched her expressive face with growing admiration. They had only proceeded a short distance on their journey, when he turned round to the girl, and said kindly:

"We are going a great pace, and you are not dressed for motoring; you must be cold. Will you

wrap yourself in this?" and, drawing from behind him a heavy fur coat, which he had brought as an extra wrap, if necessary, he handed it to Christina, who gratefully rolled herself in its warm folds.

"By Jove! she looks more fetching than ever, with her face looking out of all that fur," the blue-eyed young man reflected, when he again glanced over his shoulder at her, "those green eyes of hers are like no others I ever saw," and Christina, little as she was in the habit of considering such things, could not help noticing how often during their three-miles' drive, the young man turned to look at her, or to shout a remark. The grey-eyed man looked round only once, to say shortly but kindly:

"Quite comfortable?" But even those two words in the vibrating voice, had, as before, an oddly thrilling effect on Christina's pulses.

That rapid drive across the moorland, in the low sunlight of the December afternoon, seemed to her for long afterwards, like part of some extraordinary dream—a dream in which she, and the grey-eyed man, and the beautiful white-faced woman, were all playing parts; a dream which had no real relation at all to the commonplace details of everyday life.

"Here is Manborough," Rupert called out, when, over the brow of a steep hill, they came in sight of clustering red-roofed houses amongst pine woods; "now where does the doctor live? What is his name?"

"Doctor Martin Stokes is his name; I don't know what his house is called, but Manborough is only a small place," Christina answered. "If you will very kindly put me down in the main street, I shall easily find the right house."

"Oh, no, we will drive you up in state," was the laughing rejoinder; and the car once more slowed down, whilst Rupert put a question to a passing rustic, who jerked his thumb to the right.

"Doctor's house be up among they pines," he said; "Doctor calls 'un Pinewood Lodge."

"Unromantic and ordinary person, that doctor," said Rupert, with a short laugh; "this country and those woods might inspire a man to invent a name with some sort of poetry in it. Ah! here is the lodge in question—and as ordinary as its name," he concluded, stopping the car before a closed brown gate, through which a well-kept drive led to a red-brick house, that might have been transplanted bodily to these heights, from a London suburb.

"I don't know how to say thank you properly," Christina said a little tremulously, when she stood by the brown gate, helped out of the car by the blue-eyed young man, who had skilfully forestalled Rupert in this act of gallantry; "it is very, very good of you to have helped me, and will you please forgive me for being so bold and stopping you as I did?"

Rupert laughed and held out his hand.

"Don't think twice about it," he said heartily. "I am very glad you did stop the car, and very glad we were able to save so much time for you. I hope the doctor will pull your patient well through the illness." His hand closed over Christina's small one, the blue-eyed man likewise shook her by the hand, and before the door bell of the doctor's house had been answered, the car had whirled out of sight.

"Poor little girl, she was very prettily grateful," Rupert said to his companion. "I wonder whose illness she is agonising over. Plucky thing to do, stopping us as she did."

"She is a young woman of resource," the other answered. "I like that sort of 'git up and git' way of tackling a difficulty. Now, in her place, I should have just begun to think what might have happened if I *had* stopped somebody's car, by the time the car was two miles further down the road."

"My dear Wilfred, you hit your own character to a nicety," Rupert answered with a laugh; "but it's only your confounded laziness of mind that prevents your being as much on the spot as that little green-eyed girl."

"Very fetching eyes, too," Wilfred mused aloud, "and a smile that she ought to find useful. Can't we come back this way to-morrow, old man? We might find she wanted some errand done in the opposite direction, and I'll keep a sharp look-out for her all along the road!"

"As it happens, I have every intention of coming back this way," Rupert answered drily, "though not in order to enable you to rescue distressed damsels. You were not intended for a knight-errant, my good Wilfred; leave well alone. But I am bound to come back through Graystone. I promised Cicely that on my way home from Lewes, I would look in on Baba and her new nurse. They are lodging at old Mrs. Nairne's farm, and it's somewhere near Graystone village. Cicely wants to know whether the new nurse is all she should be; we will look in upon them on our way back."

CHAPTER IX.

"A VERY BEAUTIFUL LADY."

The doctor's consulting-room was as uninteresting as the rest of the house, inside and out; and whilst Christina looked at the orthodox red walls, the few conventional engravings, the closely-curtained windows, and the severely correct chairs and tables, a feeling of depression stole over her. Almost unconsciously she had hoped that the doctor of whom she had come in search, would prove to be an individual of no ordinary description; she had an odd fancy that the situation with which he would have to deal, would be one that was out of the common, and the bare thought of sending a commonplace, country doctor to help the beautiful lady with the anguished face, was intolerable to her. More than once, whilst she sat and waited in the dreary room, whose outlook into the depths of the pine woods was as depressing as everything else about it, she half-rose, with a determination to go elsewhere and seek another doctor. Remembering, however, the urgency of her message, and the uncertainty of finding another medical man within any reasonable distance, she was deterred from acting upon this impulse, though her heart sank with apprehension when the door at last opened. But the man who entered was in no sense the kind of man she had dreaded to see; there was nothing ordinary or commonplace, either in his own personality or in his greeting of her, and Christina could only feel devoutly thankful that she had not been misled by the mere externals of house and furniture.

"Now will you tell me what I can do for you?" The voice was cheery and kind; it gave her a sense of helpfulness, and the man's personality, like his voice, brought into the room an atmosphere of power and strength.

He was a short man, with very bright brown eyes, a clean-shaven face, and a mouth in which humour and determination struggled for the mastery. But beyond and above everything else, it was a reliable face: Christina knew, with a subtle and sure instinct, that whatever this man undertook, would be carried through, if heaven and earth had to be moved to bring about the carrying.

"Doctor Stokes?" she said enquiringly.

"No, I am not Doctor Stokes," he answered. "Doctor Stokes is away; he was summoned away suddenly. My name is Fergusson, and I am doing Doctor Stokes's work."

"I am very glad," Christina exclaimed naïvely, with a fervour of which she was not aware, until she saw the twinkle of amusement in the brown eyes watching her.

"Oh!—I—beg your pardon," she stammered. "I ought not——"

"It is not my pardon you must beg," the doctor answered, laughing a spontaneous, and very boyish laugh, "and I will promise not to tell Doctor Stokes what you said," he added, his eyes still twinkling as he saw the girl's confusion.

"But indeed—please—oh! do understand," she faltered; "I don't know Doctor Stokes. I am a stranger here, and I never saw him in my life, but——"

"Then why were you so glad to find I was not he?" asked Fergusson, his amused look turning to one of puzzled enquiry.

"It sounds so silly," Christina said with seeming irrelevance, "but—I didn't think the person who lived in—this kind of room—was the sort of doctor I wanted to find."

Fergusson threw back his head and laughed.

"Do you judge all humanity by the rooms in which it lives?" he asked.

"Nobody but a commonplace person could live contentedly in a room like this," Christina answered vehemently, "or call his house Pinewood Lodge, or have a house just like this house."

"I rather agree with you, but Doctor Stokes is a total stranger to me too; we may be libelling him entirely; and—meanwhile, what can I do for you?"

"I have come to ask you to go somewhere, on a matter of life and death," she answered, "but——"

"Life and death?"—the doctor's smiling face grew grave—"then we must not delay. Where am I wanted?" He touched a bell by the fireplace. "I will order the car at once. Tell me all details as briefly as possible."

His humorous accent had dropped; he spoke in terse, business-like tones, his brown eyes looked searchingly at her.

"Bring the car round immediately," he said to a man who answered his bell. "Now, tell me everything quickly," he went on, turning back to Christina.

"Before you go, I have to ask you to promise not to tell any living soul where you have been; and you must swear to tell nobody what you see and hear when you get to the house."

Fergusson stared at her blankly.

"Swear secrecy about where I go, and what I find there?" he said.

"Yes—swear it," she answered, quailing a little before the sudden sternness of his eyes.

"But why?—in heaven's name, why?" he questioned, his voice growing imperious. "What reason can you have for making such extraordinary conditions?"

"Oh!—I have nothing to do with the conditions," Christina cried, "and please—*please* don't look doubtful, and as if you didn't mean to do what I ask. I have only come here as a messenger. There was nobody else to send, and the poor, beautiful lady seemed nearly distracted with grief."

"What poor, beautiful lady? You are talking in riddles. Try to tell me quietly where I have to go, and what is the name of the lady who needs me."

"I—don't know," Christina faltered, conscious of how strangely her words must fall upon his ears, when she saw the bewilderment deepen on his face.

"I was passing a house," she said quickly, before he could speak, "and a lady came running out—a very beautiful lady. She asked me to fetch a doctor. She said it was a matter of life and death, and she made me promise to ask the doctor to swear secrecy—absolute secrecy. That is all I know—really all I know. But I am sure she is urgently in need of help."

"What an extraordinary story!" the doctor said in a low voice, "and you don't know who is ill? or what is the matter?"

"Not in the least. I conclude the patient is a man, because the lady spoke of 'him' and 'he,' but I know nothing more than I have told you. You will go to her? You will make the promise she asks? I can't bear to think of her sad, beautiful face, and her wonderful eyes."

"I will go—yes, certainly I will go," Fergusson exclaimed, after a moment's pause; "if it is really a matter of life and death, I have no choice but to go."

"And—you will promise?"

He looked into her face with a curiously grave and questioning glance.

"You know of no reason why I should refuse to take such an unprecedented oath?" he asked.

"I know nothing!" she answered emphatically. "I know of no reason, either for or against your doing it. Only—when I think of her beautiful face, and of her eyes that seemed to hold all the sorrow in the world, I feel as if you could only do what she asked you."

"And if I refuse to swear?"

"Then I shall refuse to tell you where the lady lives," she answered with spirit, "and I shall go and find another doctor. But—oh! please do what she asks."

A smile broke over Fergusson's grave face.

"I don't half like the business," he said; "I am not fond of swearing in the dark, so to speak, and what guarantee have I that I am not going to mix myself up in some discreditable affair?"

"The lady I saw could not do anything discreditable," Christina exclaimed warmly; "it is unthinkable."

Fergusson's smile deepened.

"She has a warm advocate in you; you are not a friend of hers?"

"I never saw her before," Christina answered. "I am staying near Graystone. I am nurse to Lady Cicely Redesdale's little girl, and it was only by chance that we were passing the beautiful lady's house to-day."

"There comes the car," Fergusson said, as the crunching of wheels on gravel became audible; "now I will drive you as far as our ways go together, and you shall tell me where I am to go. I will not take my man, lest there should be any risk of my destination being discovered. And—I will take the required oath. Mind—I do it much against my will, but, if it is a matter of life and death, I—can't refuse it. Come—your beautiful lady's secrets will be absolutely safe with me."

As well as she was able, Christina gave a minute description of the lonely house in the valley, where she had received the strange message, and Fergusson, having deposited her safely within

a very few hundred yards of Mrs. Nairne's farm, raced on across the moor and down the steep lane, which the little cart had traversed so short a time before.

"Never knew there *was* any house down here," he mused, as he drove further and further along the lane; "uncanny sort of place." The short December day was drawing to a close. No ray of the sunshine that still shone on the moorland above, penetrated into this valley, whose steep, thickly-wooded sides threw deep shadows across it. "What on earth possessed anybody to build a house in this gloomy hole, when all the uplands were there to be built upon?" So Fergusson's musings ran on, whilst the shadows thickened round him, the gloom of the place beginning to oppress him like a nightmare. The roughness and steepness of the road obliged him to proceed slowly and with great caution, and the fast-fading light made his progress a difficult one. It was a relief to him, therefore, when, through the semi-darkness, he became aware of a high stone wall on his right, and descried, above the wall, the dim outline of a chimney, from which smoke issued.

"This, presumably, is the place," he muttered, stopping the car before a door in the wall; "and now, how does one get into such a very prison-like abode?"

He had by this time alighted, and was standing in the lane, looking first at the closed green door, then at the frowning wall, and finally up the steep way by which he had come—a way which, in the fast-falling darkness, was beginning to resemble a long black tunnel.

Now that the sound of his car's machinery had ceased, the silence around him was very eerie, and Fergusson found that some words of the burial service were beating backwards and forwards in his brain—

"The grave and gate of death ... The grave and gate of death."

He made a great effort to shake off his uncanny sensations, but they were only heightened by the gloom about him, and by the death-like silence which brooded over the valley. The lane, as he could faintly see, ended only a few yards beyond the gate at which he stood, and merged itself into a grassy track amongst the densest woodland; and the house, with its surrounding wall, was so enclosed by woods, that they seemed to be on the point of swallowing it up altogether.

"What a place for a crime—for any number of crimes," Fergusson reflected, with a shudder, as he peered about the green door, trying to discover any means of making his presence known to the inmates of the house beyond the wall. But neither bell nor knocker was visible, and the doctor, after banging vainly on the wood of the door, moved away, and walked slowly round the wall, seeking for another entrance. A narrow, grass-grown path, evidently rarely used, ran close under the wall, but Fergusson made the whole circuit of the place without finding any other means of entrance, excepting an old iron gate, rusty with age, choked up with weeds and rank grass. It was obvious that the gate had not been opened for years, and that it was certainly not reckoned by the inhabitants of the house as one of the entrances. Fergusson peered through the bars, but the light was so dim, and the grass and undergrowth so thick and high, that beyond getting an impression of a neglected garden, he saw nothing. He fancied, however, that he could catch a distant murmur of voices, and he called out loudly:

"Is there any means of getting in here? I am the doctor." Total silence answered him, a silence only broken by the sharp clang of a closing door inside the house. When the echoes of the sharply clanging door died away, silence settled down more deeply than ever upon the place; and Fergusson, as he completed his circuit of the walls, and found himself once more at the green door, felt strongly tempted to climb into his car again and drive away.

But the remembrance of the girl who had so lately stood in his consulting-room, looking at him with wistful eyes, speaking in so appealing a voice, determined him to make one more attempt to gain access to the inaccessible house, and, lifting up his hands, he battered on the green door with heavy thuds that reverberated loudly in the silence.

"They must be all deaf or dead, if that fails to bring them out," he exclaimed grimly, pausing for a moment to take breath; then, when no one responded to his efforts, he was beginning again to hammer at the door, when the sound of a footstep fell on his ears, and a woman's voice from within the gate cried—

"Who is there?"

"The doctor—Dr. Fergusson," he answered impatiently; and upon that, he heard the grinding of a key in the lock, bolts were shot back, and the door was opened. A woman stood in the aperture, a woman whom Fergusson took to be a servant, and she stood aside, a little, as though inviting him to enter.

"I was asked to come here," he said. "Is there someone ill? Am I wanted?"

"Yes, sir," the woman answered quietly. "Will you come in? I am sorry there was any delay in answering the door, but—I—couldn't get away."

Her voice was low and shaken, and Fergusson now observed that she was trembling violently.

"Come—in—quickly, sir," she jerked out. "I am afraid what may happen—come quickly!" Whilst she spoke, she was locking and bolting the green door again; then, without uttering another syllable, she led the way up a flagged path, across a bare and deserted garden, to a white stone house, through whose open front door a stream of light fell across an unkempt, overgrown lawn.

"This way, sir," the woman said, when, having entered the door, she turned across a wide hall; "this way—quickly!" As she uttered the last word, a little cry broke the stillness of the house—a woman's cry, sharp with fear, and the doctor's guide, her face suddenly grown livid and pinched, broke into a run. They were passing along a corridor, which intersected the hall at one end, and even in his hurry Fergusson noticed the thickness of the carpet beneath his feet, and the heavy curtains that shrouded the windows on his right; noticed, too, that after that one short sharp cry, a silence had fallen over the house again—a silence as sinister and uncanny as that in the valley outside.

His guide paused before a door on their left, and as she turned her plain but kindly face towards him, he saw how strained and ashen it had grown, and what a great fear looked out of her eyes.

"It is so quiet," she whispered in low, horror-stricken accents, "so quiet—I—am—afraid!"

Pushing her aside, Fergusson opened the door, ashamed of feeling how hard his own heart was knocking against his ribs, ashamed of that momentary shrinking from what he might find inside the room; but his involuntary shrinking did not bring with it even a second of hesitation. He opened the door widely, and stepped straight into the apartment. Excepting for a night-light burning on a chest of drawers, the room was in darkness, and he could make out nothing of his surroundings. Then, as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he uttered a short exclamation of horror, and moved hurriedly forwards, calling to the woman behind him to bring a light, and to bring it quickly.

CHAPTER X.

"IT IS ONLY HE WHO MATTERS!"

Christina's thoughts that evening often travelled to the silent valley, and to the beautiful woman with the anguished face, who had made so profound an impression upon her. Having tucked Baba safely into her cot, and heard the soft breathing which indicated that the blue-eyed baby was sleeping, Christina returned to the sitting-room, and drawing an armchair close to the fire, took up a novel in which she was deeply interested. But to-night her thoughts refused to follow the chequered fortunes of her heroine, and she no longer felt herself the least thrilled over the approaching climax of the story. The strange piece of real life into which she had been unwittingly plunged, interested her far more than any heroes or heroines of fiction, and she soon found herself with her book on her lap, and her own eyes fixed on the glowing coals, whilst her mind recapitulated all the events of the past few hours.

"It is just like something entrancingly exciting in a melodrama," she reflected: "that lonely house, and the beautiful lady with the white face, and that silent valley." Remembering the silence in the valley, she shuddered a little, and wondered whether the lady of the unfathomable eyes ever minded the loneliness and silence; whether sometimes she was afraid—down there in the stillness of those sheltering woodlands.

"I don't suppose I shall ever know any more about her," the girl's thoughts ran on, "but I should like to see her again. I never saw anybody like her in my life before, and she looked so sad; I wish I could have helped her more." From this point her reflections passed on to subsequent events of the day: to her own audacious stopping of the big motor; to the grey-eyed man whose failure to recognise her had given her just a tiny pang of regret; to the blue-eyed man, who had looked at her with an admiration to which she was quite unaccustomed. The memory of it brought a little flush to her face, even now that she sat alone in the firelight, and brought with it, too, a stab of resentment.

"I don't think I quite like anybody to look at me like that," she thought; "and, after all, even if I am only a nurse, earning my own living—I—am still a woman." She drew up her head with a proud gesture characteristic of her, and then her reflections slipped away from the two men who had driven her to the doctor's house, and wandered on to the doctor himself.

"I like *that* man," she murmured emphatically, lifting her foot to push a protruding coal between the bars; "he wouldn't ever look at any woman as if he didn't respect her, and a woman might put her whole trust in him; so she might in—that other!" Rupert's face rose again before her mental vision, and she wondered as she had wondered many times that afternoon and evening, what was the pain that had carved such deep lines in his face, and brought so haunting

a look of misery into his eyes.

"His eyes seem as if he was looking all the time for something he has lost," she thought, repeating her former musings; "perhaps, if he is Lady Cicely's cousin, I may see him again some day. I wonder what his name is—besides Rupert? I only heard him called Rupert." She leant back in her chair, her book still upon her knee, her eyes seeing many pictures in the coals—pictures in which a man with a rugged face, and kind grey eyes, seemed to be continually walking beside a tall lady with a beautiful white face, and eyes of unfathomable sadness and mystery, until the pictures merged themselves into dreams, and Christina slept peacefully. A loud knocking at the door startled her into wakefulness, and jumping to her feet, she confronted Mrs. Nairne, who looked at her with injured amusement.

"Been asleep by the fire, missy, I suppose. I couldn't make you hear nohow, knock as I might. There's a gentleman in a motor-car at the door, wanting to speak to you all in a hurry."

"A gentleman—in a motor—wanting *me*?" Christina asked, feeling that she must still be in the world of dreams.

"Well, he said he wanted to speak to the young lady who was staying here, with the little girl," Mrs. Nairne answered, and Christina, a faint hope stirring at her heart that Lady Cicely's cousin might have come to ask her about Baba, went quickly to the farmhouse door, to be greeted by Dr. Fergusson, who awaited her with obvious impatience.

"I came to see if I could get some help from you," he said, with no other preamble. "I have been to the house in the valley, and things there are pretty bad."

"But—how can I help?" Christina asked.

"I want you to come back with me to the house, and stay there for the night, with the lady of whom you told me to-day."

"I could not do that," Christina answered decidedly; "it is out of the question. I am here in charge of a little child. I could not go away for the night, and leave her."

"Wouldn't she be safe with the woman of the house?" Fergusson asked imperiously; "she looked to me a very reliable body."

Although they were alone at the door, he and Christina spoke in low voices; perhaps some of the mystery of the lonely valley and shut-in house, lingered with them still.

"Mrs. Nairne is in every way reliable, but Lady Cicely, my little charge's mother, has trusted me so entirely, I should feel I was abusing her trust if I did what you ask."

"I am at my wits' end to know what to do," was the answer. "I don't profess to be able to understand the inwardness of all I saw at the house I have just left, but it is plain that there is some vital need for secrecy. I can't possibly send a woman from the village to these people, and yet they must have somebody for the night. I came to you, because I am sure you can hold your tongue."

"Certainly I can do that"; Christina laughed a little, and drew more closely round her the cloak she had snatched from its peg as she came to the door, "and I would gladly—oh, most gladly, do anything I could to help that poor lady. But, my duty seems to lie here."

"I should only ask you to come for a few hours. I will undertake that you shall be back here before your little charge is ready for you in the morning. It is vitally necessary that someone should be with 'that poor lady,' as you rightly call her, and my thoughts flew at once to you."

"I wish I knew what was right to do," Christina said wistfully; and at her words, Dr. Fergusson sprang from his car and seized her hands in his.

"I will tell you," he said firmly; "it is right to come with me. I will explain to Mrs. Nairne as much of the circumstances as it is necessary she should know, and I have no doubt she will come to the rescue. Go and fetch whatever you will need for the night; it will be a night spent in sitting-up, not in bed; and I will settle with the good woman."

Swept off her feet by the masterfulness which brooked no resistance, Christina obediently did his bidding, and when she returned to the door, found Mrs. Nairne in close conversation with the doctor.

"There, missy, that'll be all right, never you fear," she said as Christina appeared; "the doctor, he've been telling me there's a poor lady in great trouble, and that you could comfort her by sitting up with her a bit. Why, I'll sleep with the little missy with all the pleasure in life, and you can feel as safe about her, as if you was here yourself."

When the doctor had handed her into the car, and they drove swiftly away, the girl felt as if she were merely a puppet, whose strings were being pulled by Fergusson's strong hands. She had a curious sense of helplessness, that was not wholly unpleasant. So dominating was the personality of the man who sat beside her, that she was convinced he was only doing what was

right in whirling her away with him through the darkness; and his brown eyes were so steadfast, so reliable, that when their glance met hers, she felt safe. He spoke scarcely at all to her, until they had turned off the moorland into the steep lane, that led to the house amongst the woods. Then he said quietly, steering the car at a walking pace:

"I found an uncomfortable state of things in the house to which we are going, when I got there to-day."

"Was someone very ill?" Christina questioned; "the lady said 'a matter of life and death.'"

"It was certainly that," he answered grimly, "considering I was only just in time to save her from being murdered, by as violent a homicidal maniac as I ever saw."

"Oh!" Christina exclaimed with horror.

"At first, I couldn't get into the place at all. Then a servant came to the gate, and she seemed in a terrible state. No wonder! She took me into the house, and in one of the rooms I found the lady of whom you have been speaking, in the grip of a madwoman, lighting for her life. My God! I was only just in time. It seems the woman had been ill, and had had paroxysms of what they thought was delirium. As a matter of fact it was acute mania; and, as I say, I was only just in time."

"What have you done with——" Christina broke off with a shudder, but Fergusson saw that her face was white.

"With the unfortunate madwoman? I have secured her for the time, and I mean to drive her over to-night to the nearest asylum. But I must take the servant with me, and that is why I want you. Your beautiful lady cannot be left alone."

"I thought it must have been a man who was ill," Christina said; "she certainly spoke of 'him' and 'he.'"

"I saw no man, only the madwoman and a servant."

"And why is there all this mystery?" Christina said, with bewilderment in her voice; "what makes so much secrecy necessary?"

"Ah! that I do not know," the doctor answered gravely. "I can't understand it myself, but it is quite obvious that for some reason the lady of the house is most anxious to keep her whereabouts hidden from the world. And—when one looks at her, one feels it is impossible to do anything but respect her wishes, and help her keep her secret—whatever it may be," he added under his breath.

"My beautiful lady has bewitched him, too," Christina reflected shrewdly; and, for the rest of the way, spent her time in silently speculating upon what lay before her.

The green door stood ajar now, and a lighted lantern had been placed on the ground just inside it. By its rather uncertain light, Fergusson led her across the garden and into the hall, where a wood fire was burning brightly. They did not, however, linger here, but, crossing it, ascended a wide staircase to the floor above, on which were several rooms. The door of one of these stood wide open, a stream of light from it flooded the landing, and the doctor, tapping gently on the door, entered, Christina following him half fearfully, dreading what she might see. But no dreadful sight met her gaze. She saw only a simply-furnished bedroom, and in the bed, propped up by pillows, and with her face turned anxiously towards the door, lay the beautiful woman, whose image had haunted the girl ever since the afternoon. She looked, if possible, even whiter than when she had accosted Christina in the lane, and her eyes seemed darker and more heavily pencilled with shadows; but she greeted her visitors with a smile, and held out her hand in welcome.

"How good of you to come," she said, grasping the girl's hand in a nervous, clinging clasp; "how very good of you. I think I should really have been quite safe just for a few hours, but the doctor would not let me stay here——"

"Alone?" Fergusson exclaimed, when her sentence remained unfinished; "certainly not. Now, see here, Miss——" he paused and looked at Christina.

"It sounds very absurd to say so, but I don't know your name," he added.

"Moore," she answered.

"Well, Miss Moore, all I want you to do is to sit with this lady, see that she takes some food through the night, and don't allow her to worry about anything."

A faint laugh broke from the woman in the bed.

"What an easy order to give, and what a hard one to carry out," she said; "but—I will promise—to try and keep my mind at rest—as far as possible," she added under her breath; "and you are taking poor Marion where she will be safe and well cared for?"

"I am taking her where she will do no one any harm," Fergusson answered grimly, "and I will bring your servant back as soon as I can. She is a treasure, that servant of yours."

"I think she is worth her weight in gold," was the quiet answer; "she is more than servant; she is a friend—a faithful, loyal friend."

"You are fortunate to have found such an one," Fergusson smiled, "and now I must go and get that poor soul away; and Miss Moore will keep you company, and take care of you, until I bring your servant back."

As he spoke the last words he was gone, closing the door softly behind him, and carrying with him some of the sense of health-giving strength and vitality, with which his very presence seemed to fill the room.

Unusual as was the position in which she found herself, Christina had sufficient perception to see that the nerves of the woman she had come to tend, were already stretched to breaking point, and that a normal manner, and matter-of-fact way of taking the situation for granted, would do more than anything else to relieve the tension.

She took off her hat and cloak, therefore, with quiet deliberation, unrolled the dressing-gown she had brought with her, and was proceeding to hang it over a chair before the fire, when her patient said suddenly:

"Watch them go; tell me when they have gone. Tell me when you and I are alone."

Christina moved from the fire to the bedside.

"You want me to see them off from the gate?" she asked, and the other nodded.

"Yes. Lock and bolt the gate after them. When the doctor comes back, we shall hear him. But the door must be locked behind them now." Her voice rose in feverish excitement, her hands moved restlessly on the sheet, her eyes were bright with eagerness, and Christina could have sworn that fear looked out of them, too.

"Of course I will go and do as you wish," she said very gently, her hand stroking the restlessly moving hands; "you will lie very quietly here whilst I am gone?"

"Yes, oh yes!" the accents were impatient. "Only go—go down now. They must be ready to start."

Slipping on her cloak again, Christina ran downstairs, pausing half-way as she heard a sound of voices and footsteps coming from the corridor that intersected the hall, and that was just out of her sight.

"Carefully—lift her feet a little—take care round this corner—so," she heard the sentence jerked out in the doctor's voice, and from her post of observation, she presently saw him emerge slowly into the hall, walking backwards, and holding an inanimate woman's head and shoulders in his arms. Holding her feet, bearing half the burden of her unconscious form, was a tall woman of the servant class, upon whose face the rays of the hall lamps fell fully, and Christina could see all the shrewd kindness of the plain features.

"Gently—wait a moment to rest. There—that's right—now then. Ah! the lantern," he exclaimed; "we must have the lantern across that dark garden."

"I will bring the lantern," Christina called out, rather tremulously, but running down the stairs without delay. "I was sent to lock the gate after you; I can light you across the garden."

She picked up the lantern from the hall table upon which Fergusson had placed it; and, with one shuddering glance at the flushed, heavily-breathing woman, who was being carried from the house, she put herself at the head of the strange little procession, lighting their footsteps as well as she was able. It was no easy task to lift the unfortunate creature, first through the green door, and then into the car, but Fergusson being an athletic man, with muscles in excellent order, and the tall servant being strong and well-built, their joint efforts succeeded in laying their burden along the cushions.

Christina stood at the door for a moment, watching the car turn up the lane, but when its brilliant lights were engulfed by the darkness, she turned back with a shiver into the garden, locking and bolting the door with trembling fingers, and running up the dark path as though all the powers of evil were at her heels. The front door of the house she secured as firmly as the other, then, more than half-ashamed of the nameless terror that shook her, she sat down for a moment on an oak chest by the fire.

"You silly coward," she said to herself; "you know you and a sick woman are alone in the house, and what are you afraid of?" But for all her attempt at courage, as she flew up the stairs again, she repeatedly looked over her shoulder, with a nervous dread of she knew not what.

"Have they gone—safely gone? And is the door locked?" The words greeted her ears directly she entered the bedroom upstairs, and the dark eyes of the woman in the bed looked at her, with

agonised questioning and dread.

"Yes; they have driven away, and everything is locked up, and now I want to make you comfortable, and poke up the fire, and we shall be quite cosy in this nice warm room." Christina spoke cheerfully, all trace of her own nervous fears had vanished; she was intent on calming the troubled woman, whose feverish excitement was still only too apparent.

"Nice and cosy?" the woman laughed drearily. "I can't rest quietly until I know:—he—— Can I trust you?" She pulled herself bolt upright in the bed, and looked fixedly at Christina; "will you be silent about everything you see, everything you hear?"

"Why, of course. But, you will try and go to sleep now, won't you?" Christina said soothingly, with a startled certainty that her beautiful charge must be delirious.

"Go to sleep?" The dreary laugh came again. "How could I sleep? I must lie here; there is no help for that. Marion has done her work well, though, poor soul! she did not mean to harm me. But I can't lie here whilst he—you will promise to keep silence?"

"I promise," Christina said hastily, intent only on quieting her at any cost; "is there something you want me to do?"

The other nodded.

"Go along the passage that leads off this landing," she said, "knock at the third door on the left; and ask—my—the person who is there if there is anything he needs. He may need—food—we could do nothing for him whilst Marion—and the doctor——"

She dropped back upon the pillow with closed eyes, and so exhausted a look, that Christina bent over her, too anxious about her well-being to think of her own surprise at the order just given her.

"Never mind me," the dark eyes opened, the brows drew together in a frown; "only go to him—and do what he needs. I shall be all right; it is only he who matters."

Unfeignedly puzzled, and with all her nervous tremors trooping back upon her, Christina went across the landing, and turned along the passage as directed. Who and what was she going to find in that third room on the left? And why was there a necessity for all this secrecy? Her heart beat very fast, so fast that it nearly suffocated her, as she passed on and paused at the third door, wondering again with a sinking dread, what new mystery was to be revealed to her? To her soft knock, a man's voice responded:

"Come in," and she entered a warm and luxuriously-furnished apartment, which appeared to be sitting-room and bedroom combined. Closely wrapped in a thick dressing-gown, and seated in an armchair by the fire, was a man whose cadaverous face and sunken eyes seemed to show recent recovery from some severe illness; and his efforts to rise, when he saw a stranger at the door, only resulted in his sinking back with a groan.

"Who are you?" he asked; "why have you come? Where is Madge?"

Christina fancied she detected a faint foreign accent in his words, though he spoke fluent English.

"I was sent by—by the lady of the house," Christina answered. "I—don't know her name, but she is—very tired." She substituted that word for "ill," when she saw how the sick man started and flushed. "She asked me to come and see if there is anything you need."

"Madge tired?" he said in a slow, dreamy voice; "it is so difficult to think that Madge can be tired. She used to be such a tower of strength, always such a tower of strength."

His sunken eyes glanced wistfully at Christina; she felt compelled to utter some words of comfort.

"Perhaps she is only tired—just for the time," she answered, though in uttering the words a remorseful remembrance smote her of the fragile white face of the woman she had left. "She will feel stronger again soon."

"Do you think so? Do you really think so." He leant forward, and Christina saw how his hands were trembling; "you see, I feel—I can't help feeling—that it is my fault—all my fault. First, the old trouble; and then, my coming back to burden—— But you are a stranger to us," he exclaimed, breaking off and looking at her with a new alertness; "why did Madge send a stranger? Where is Elizabeth?"

Christina, jumping to the conclusion that Elizabeth must be the kindly-faced servant, and anxious to check the sick man's rising excitement, said gently:

"She is busy just now, and they sent me because I am a friend; and you may be quite sure that I shall never speak a word to anyone of what I see or hear in this house."

"Then you don't know——" he began, breaking off again, and looking at her almost furtively.

"I know nothing," was the grave response. "I came here just for to-night, to help—because—because Elizabeth is busy. That is all."

To her great relief, he accepted her explanation without further questioning, the truth being that his brain, exhausted by illness, refused to work with any rapidity, being ready enough to accept whatever was put before it; and, with a weary sigh, he turned away from the girl, and held out his thin hands to the fire.

"Now, can I fetch you anything, or do anything for you?" Christina asked brightly; "try to look upon me as—as Elizabeth, and let me do for you what she would do if she were here."

His eyes turned to her again; he smiled.

"You are not very like Elizabeth," he said, his glance taking in the slight figure in its neat green gown—the girlish face, the eager eyes; "a very fertile imagination would be needed to see Elizabeth in you."

"I am afraid I am not half so capable as Elizabeth," she said, ignoring the subtle compliment, "but I will do my best."

"Will you give me your arm to the bed then? I am too much of a cripple to walk there alone, but I can get myself into it when I am there. And if you would further be good enough to bring me from next door some milk, and whatever other eatables Elizabeth has prepared for me, I shall be very grateful. Though I cannot imagine why Elizabeth is leaving me to a stranger to-night," he went on, with the petulance of a sick child.

Christina thought it best to ignore the latter half of this sentence, and having fetched from the dressing-room next door, a tray of appetising viands, which she deposited on a table by the bed, she came to the sick man's side to give him the help he needed. It was with great difficulty that he dragged himself from his chair, and the girl's strength was taxed to the utmost to support his weight, when he leant heavily upon her shoulder. He was considerably taller than he had looked when sitting in the chair; and he was so weak, and apparently so crippled, that his progress across the room was a slow and painful one. Short though the transit was from chair to bed, his breath came fast as he sank down upon the pillow, and for several seconds he looked so worn and exhausted, that Christina did not dare to leave him. Into the milk put ready for him, she poured some brandy from a flask on the tray, and, holding the glass to his lips, was thankful to see that he could drink its contents, and that having done so, the colour gradually returned to his face.

"Better now," he said slowly, opening his sunken eyes and looking at Christina with a smile that gave his face a pathetic wistfulness. "I shall be all right soon."

"Can't I do anything more for you?" Christina asked, still troubled by his exhausted looks.

"No, nothing more. Come back in half an hour to see if I am all right—just to console Madge," he answered, smiling again, as she softly stole away.

"Did he ask many questions? Had he heard anything of what happened? He was not frightened or upset?" The questions poured out in a torrent from the lips of the white-faced woman in the other room, when Christina re-entered it. She was sitting up in the bed, her hands clasped in front of her, her eyes dark with anxiety.

"He asked very little," Christina answered, "and I think he could not have been upset by hearing anything that happened. I am sure he could have heard nothing," she added earnestly; "he is going to bed now, and I am to go back presently to see that he is all right. He said it would comfort Madge."

A smile flickered over the white face.

"My poor Max," she whispered under her breath. "I could not bear it if anything else happened to hurt him; I could *not* bear it." The passion in her voice brought a lump into Christina's throat. "He has had so much to bear. Ah! my God! give him peace at the last!"

The vehement voice died into silence, and Christina, feeling very young and forlorn, and quite unable to cope with a grief and passion so intense, could only stand silently by the bed, her hand just touching the restless hand, on which a thick wedding ring was the only ornament.

"You don't know what it means to care like that for a man," the passionate voice spoke again; "you are so young—just a slip of a girl"; the woman's dark eyes rested tenderly, almost sadly, on Christina's face. "You don't know what it means, to care so much for a man that—no matter what he is, or does, he is your world, your whole world. Do you?" she asked, leaning forward and seizing the girl's hands in her own hot ones.

"No—o," Christina faltered, whilst, unbidden, there flashed into her mind the vision of a rugged face, and two grey eyes full of hidden pain, "but—I think I can understand," she ended

shyly.

"You dear little girl," the two hot hands drew her down, and Christina felt a gentle kiss on her cheek; "some day you will know, if I judge your eyes aright. Nature did not give you those eyes, and that face for nothing. I wonder—" the woman's glance suddenly concentrated itself upon the girl. "I wonder why something in your face seems to me familiar. Can I ever have seen you before?"

"No, I could not ever forget you if I had seen you," Christina answered quickly; and the other, though she smiled, still looked into the girl's face with a puzzled expression.

Half an hour later, Christina, upon whom her responsibilities weighed with double heaviness, now that she had realised the presence of the sick man in the house, went to visit the room along the passage. The patient there was now in bed, and the girl observed that the look of intense exhaustion had left his face, and that he was breathing normally and quietly.

"Tell Madge I am quite all right," he said, his voice sounding stronger than before; "don't let her worry about me. She must rest herself if she is tired. Tell her I shall sleep like a top!"

To Christina the night that followed was one of her most curious experiences. In a strange house, with people of whose very names she was ignorant, and about whom hung a mystery, the nature of which was unknown to her, she felt as though she had become part of a story, or of a puzzling dream, from which she should presently awake in her own bed at Graystone, with Baba's cot beside her.

Wrapped in her thick dressing-gown she sat by the fire in the room of the woman, who in her own mind she called "the beautiful lady," sometimes turning the leaves of a book she had found on the table, sometimes looking dreamily at the flickering flames. In accordance with the doctor's orders, she occasionally fed her patient, who, though very wide-awake, spoke but little during the long night hours. Christina, by the light of the softly-shaded lamp, could see how seldom her companion's eyes were closed, how almost continually they were fixed, either upon her, or upon the firelit walls.

Once or twice she uttered some brief remark, but no word was said that made clear to the watching girl any of the strange happenings in this strange house. But when the grey light of dawn was beginning to steal through the window curtains, the woman in the bed said gently:

"It was wonderfully good of you to come here and take care of me like this. I wonder whether you are thinking you have come into a place of mad people?"

"No, I did not think that."

"You have taken a great deal on trust, and though it is very much to ask of a stranger, I am going to ask you still—to take me—on trust. I have not done—anything wrong; if it is folly—well, I shall have to pay the price."

To this enigmatical sentence Christina could think of no reply, but she went to the bedside, and gently touched the shapely hand on which rested that plain gold ring.

"Your eyes tell me you are a faithful soul," the low voice continued; "you belong to the race of people who make good friends. I have another—good friend in the world, but he—will you still take me on trust?" she ended abruptly, her fingers closing round Christina's hand.

"I couldn't do anything else," the girl answered quickly; "you need not tell me you have done nothing wrong; I know it. Nobody who looked into your face could ever distrust you," she added, in a burst of girlish enthusiasm.

"Some day—if we meet again, and if you care to hear it—you shall hear all the story, but not now—not now. And you—you will keep silence—about—everything here?" The dark eyes searched her face anxiously. "Remember, even the doctor knows nothing."

"I will keep silence about everything," Christina answered solemnly, stooping for the second time to touch the beautiful face with her lips.

CHAPTER XI.

"YOU CAN TRUST DR. FERGUSSON."

When at about seven o'clock in the morning, Dr. Fergusson, and the servant Elizabeth, once more reached the house amongst the woods, Christina was dressed and ready to admit them by the little green gate in the wall. She had made herself ready for the day at a very early hour,

stealing out of her beautiful charge's room whilst the latter was sleeping peacefully, and Fergusson smiled approvingly when he caught sight of the girl's trim figure and smiling face. He alighted quickly from the car, and helped Elizabeth to descend; and, whilst the servant hurried into the house, he put a quick question or two to Christina.

"Yes, she has had a quiet night on the whole," the girl answered; "she has not slept much at a time, but she has dozed now and then, and she has been wonderfully calm. She is asleep now, but she told me most particularly that she wished to be awakened when you came. I think," the girl hesitated as she glanced into the doctor's face, "I think she has something special to say to you."

"I am sorry to have to wake her," Fergusson answered, "but I am afraid there is no help for it, if she wishes to speak to me. I can't wait till she wakes naturally; I have a very busy day before me, besides which I ought to take you back to the small girl." Whilst he spoke he was walking up the flagged path to the house by Christina's side, glancing with pardonable curiosity at the white building, against its background of dark woods.

"Curious," he said reflectively. "I do not want to be unduly prying, but it is impossible to help wondering what that exceptionally beautiful woman is doing in this remote place, with apparently only an old servant and a homicidal maniac for company."

Christina's eyes met his, and she flushed. In the face of the promise of secrecy she had given to the lady of the house, she could not mention to Fergusson the existence of the sick man, whose presence she shrewdly suspected was in some way the reason for the beautiful lady's residence in this desolate corner of the world; and, in answer to his words, she only said quietly:

"I think there must be some very good reason why she does not wish people to know she is here; but of course I don't know what the reason is," and, saying this, she entered the hall door, and preceded the doctor to the room where her charge of the night still lay sleeping, a little smile on her beautiful face. Elizabeth stood beside her, and Christina saw that the good woman's eyes were full of tears.

"It does me good to see her sleeping like that," she whispered to the two who stood just within the doorway; "it's seldom she gets such restful sleep."

"You are sure she really wants to speak to me?" Fergusson asked the girl, speaking in low tones. "I cannot bear to disturb her, and yet I must do it if she really wants me. I have one or two urgent cases that should be seen early, and I cannot stay here."

"I am afraid we must disturb her," Christina whispered back. "Before she went to sleep, she told me I was on no account to let you go without speaking to her. I am sure she has something important she wishes to say."

"Then I'll be going to make some tea for you all," Elizabeth said gently; "you haven't slept much yourself, miss, I can see," she added, looking kindly into Christina's face, which bore traces of her wakeful vigil.

"I have lighted the kitchen fire," the girl said gaily, ignoring the remarks about her own night, "and I think tea will be just the loveliest thing in the world," and as Elizabeth went downstairs, she crept softly to the bedside, and laid her hand upon the white hand on the coverlet, the hand whose only ornament was its thick wedding ring.

"Dr. Fergusson has come back," she said very gently, when at her touch the dark eyes opened. "I am so sorry to wake you, but you wanted to speak to him." In that moment of waking, the smile that had lain on the sleeping face faded from it, and a long sigh escaped her.

"I was dreaming that Max and I," she began, and then, as recollection returned to her, she broke off her sentence, saying abruptly, "Yes, I must speak to the doctor. I must take the risk—all the risk," she added under her breath, and Christina saw that a look of fear stole into her eyes.

"Is there something I can do for you?" Fergusson approached the bed, and his voice was as gentle as Christina's had been. Something in the fragile appearance of the woman before them, something in the anguish of the deep eyes, gave both to the man and to the girl beside him, a feeling of almost reverential awe. Instinctively, they realised the presence of some great human tragedy; instinctively, they felt that in its presence, all voices must be hushed, and that no rough things of every day, should be allowed to intrude into the place of grief. The woman in the bed raised herself on her pillow, and looked full into Fergusson's face.

"I can trust you," she said. "I believe you will keep your own counsel about—whatever you see or hear in this house."

"Certainly I shall," he replied. "When Miss Moore came to me yesterday, I promised her that I would respect your confidence absolutely. I have entered the patient I have just taken to the asylum, as resident at the London address you gave me. I hope that was right? I have a rooted objection to telling deliberate lies," he added a little grimly.

"What I told you was quite true," she answered, smiling faintly. "Poor Marion was only here temporarily, her home is in London. Will you tell me about her before I ask you anything more? Is

there any hope of her recovery? It all seemed so dreadfully sudden."

"She must have had a tendency to homicidal mania for years, probably all her life, and I should think her recovery is extremely doubtful. In any case, she will have to be under restraint for a long time, a very long time, and at present she is quite off her head."

"Poor Marion," his listener said sadly. "Poor, poor Marion. There need be no difficulty about her expenses. She must have every care, everything that is necessary, and if anything is ever wanted for her, will the asylum authorities write to Mrs. Stanforth, c/o Mrs. Milton, 180, Gower Street."

The doctor jotted down the address in his notebook, then looked again into the white, troubled face on the pillow, and said slowly:—

"There was something else you wanted me to do, was there not? Will you tell me now what it is?"

A faint colour tinged the whiteness of her face, for a second her glance wavered before his, and he saw that her hand moved restlessly.

"I know he will be angry with me," she said at last, "but—I must ask you to see him. I am so afraid he is worse than he thinks, than we all think. And you have promised secrecy? You have promised it?" she said vehemently, putting out her hands towards him. Fergusson looked, as he felt, profoundly puzzled.

"I have already promised to mention nothing of what I see or hear in this house to a living soul," he said, a trace of irritation creeping into his quiet voice. "I shall keep my promise. I cannot say more than that. Is there someone you wish me to see?" The woman's dark eyes turned to Christina, who stood at the foot of the bed, a silent and interested spectator of the strange little scene.

"I want the doctor to see my—the sick man you helped," she said in faltering accents. "Will you take him to the room you went to last night? Will you explain that I—that Madge begs him to tell the doctor all about his illness? He—he may be angry," she looked into Fergusson's eyes again, "but I think—you will understand—I think you will soothe him."

"Is he——" Fergusson was beginning, when one of those restlessly moving hands touched his.

"Please—don't ask me to tell you—who he is," she said earnestly; "he has been very ill; he has only come here—since he was convalescent," again her eyes fell before the doctor's glance, "but before he came here he was very ill, and in great trouble. Ah! be good to him," she exclaimed, her enforced calm of manner suddenly giving way; "let him have peace now; he has had such a troubled life." The tortured look in her eyes touched Fergusson deeply, his hand closed over her trembling one with a strong, reassuring grasp.

"I will do my best for him," he said cheerily; "and I will ask no unnecessary questions. You need not be afraid that I shall try to find out anything beyond his physical symptoms. Trust me." And with another kindly glance from those eminently trustworthy eyes of his, he bade Christina lead the way to his new patient. In silence they traversed the passage by which Christina had passed along on the previous night, but as she knocked on the door of the sick man's apartment, the doctor stooped towards her and whispered:—

"I don't know whether I ought to let you be mixed up in what may turn out an unpleasant mystery. Would you rather go away at once? I can explain my own presence to this man."

Christina shook her head, and her mouth took on a little determined look, which Fergusson learnt to recognise later on as one of her most marked characteristics.

"No—I will do what she asked me to do," she said. "I am not afraid of mysteries, and I must help my beautiful lady as much as ever I can." So saying, she turned the handle of the door, in response to an impatient "Come in!" and she and Fergusson entered together. The sick man lay propped up with pillows, his eyes turned towards the door, a fretful expression on his face, an expression which turned to one of acute fear, when he saw the doctor's form behind Christina.

"Who are you?" he exclaimed, shrinking back and trembling violently. "Why have you come here? I tell you I am all right in this place; you can't do me any harm now; I am safe—safe—why —"

"I have not come to do you any harm," the doctor answered soothingly, hiding the surprise he undoubtedly felt. "I am only a doctor who wants to make you well. You have been ill, haven't you?"

"Well, what of that?" the other answered sullenly, his eyes furtively watching Fergusson's face, his weak mouth quivering. "I don't want a doctor, even if I have been ill. I can do very well without a doctor. Why did you come?"

Christina stepped softly to the bedside, and her voice was very gently. "You remember me?"

she said. "I came to help you last night; and I was told to tell you now as a special message, that Madge sent the doctor, that she begs you to tell him all about your illness. You can trust Dr. Fergusson," the girl went on earnestly. "He will not tell anybody that he has seen you. You can safely trust him."

"We are trusting too many people," came the querulous retort. "First Elizabeth was busy, and you came to me last night, and you are a total stranger. Though you were so kind to me, it is no use to pretend you are not a stranger. Yet I had to trust you, and now I have to trust the doctor. There are too many people in it now."

"This young lady, Miss Moore, and I, know absolutely nothing about you, or about the lady of this house," Fergusson said firmly, but soothingly. "We do not even know your relationship to one another. Your secrets are quite safe with us, because we have no idea what those secrets are. Therefore, you can safely trust us. And, in any case, I can answer for Miss Moore, as for myself—in any case, we shall keep silence about everything we have seen in this house." The sick man muttered one or two more feeble remonstrances, after which, with the sudden abandonment of his position, so characteristic of a weak nature, he said resignedly:

"Well, well, it is no use talking—it is never of any use for me to talk—and if Madge wishes me to be overhauled, so be it. I will put myself into your hands, but, understand, I do it under protest."

Denis Fergusson only nodded and smiled in response, saying to Christina—

"Now, if you will go and have that cup of tea, I will do my best for the patient here, and come to fetch you in a few minutes"; and the girl, taking the hint, left the two men together, and returned to the other room, where she found the beautiful lady lying with eyes wistfully turned towards the door, whilst Elizabeth vainly implored her to drink the tea she had made.

"I couldn't think of tea, or of anything else till you came back," the beautiful woman exclaimed, stretching out her hands to the girl, with feverish eagerness. "Was he vexed—my poor Max—was he dreadfully vexed when you took the doctor to his room?" Christina was conscious of a sudden wonder. Why, she speculated, did this woman's voice drop into accents of such divine tenderness when she spoke of the sick man? What attraction could that weak, querulous invalid possess for this stately, beautiful creature, who, to the girl's admiring eyes, seemed as far above him as a star is far from the earth. Why did she love him, as she most obviously did, with that intense, overmastering love which in a woman of this calibre almost approaches to the divine?

"Just at first he was rather vexed," she answered, "but Dr. Fergusson is very tactful; he inspires confidence. I think it will be all right now. And I have come back here to have some tea with you," she added brightly, seeing and understanding the old servant's anxious glances. "I am going to confess that I have been awake a great deal of the night, and tea will be very refreshing." She added these words, because she saw that the other woman would be more likely to drink her own tea, if she felt that Christina was really in need of the refreshment, and her surmise was right.

"Oh! but you must have your tea at once," the woman in the bed exclaimed. "I can't bear to think I have been keeping you awake; indeed, it is dreadful to think that you have all unwittingly come into my shadowed life," she added under her breath, whilst the girl seated herself beside the bed; and Elizabeth served them both.

"I am glad I have been able to help you," Christina said impulsively, when the servant softly left the room; "you don't know how glad I should be if I could do anything—to—make things easier for you," she ended rather lamely, but the admiration in her eyes was unmistakable, and the shapely white hand with its one ring, was laid on Christina's.

"You have helped me to-night more than you suppose," she said; "there is something very restful about your personality, little girl, do you know that? All night you have given me a feeling of rest and peace."

"I am glad," Christina answered, a light flashing into her eyes; "I believe I would rather be restful to people than anything else in the world."

"A rest-bringer," was the soft answer; "you will always be that, if you go on as you have begun. And, it is work worth doing—to bring rest to tired souls, to those who go through the vale of misery, who know—what pain means. Be a rest-bringer, little girl; you could not be anything better or sweeter."

Christina flushed vividly, partly at the words of praise, partly because, as they were spoken, a face rose before her mental vision, a man's face, lined and rugged, with marks of pain carved upon it, with a haunting look of pain in its grey eyes. And with that remembrance, came also a sudden impetuous wish that it might be given to her to bring rest to the man who was Lady Cicely's cousin, the man whose very name she did not know. She was startled out of the strange train of thought, by her companion's voice.

"I cannot imagine," she was saying, "why it is that your face and voice are in some odd way familiar to me, and yet you assure me we have never met before?"

"We have never met," Christina answered decidedly. "I could not have forgotten you if I had ever seen you—and oh!" she went on with an eager girlish gesture, "please mayn't I have some name to remember you by—not any name that—that you would rather I did not know," she added quickly, seeing an anxious look in the other's eyes; "only just something to keep in my thoughts of you."

"Call me—just—Margaret in your thoughts," was the answer; "that is one of my names; call me that."

"But it seems"—Christina hesitated—"it seems like impertinence, to call you by a Christian name. You—"

"Yes, I know. I am old enough to be your mother,"—the dark eyes looked wistfully into the eager young face—"and the life I have lived makes me feel more as if I was a thousand, instead of only thirty-eight. But still, there is a young corner in my heart—quite a young corner, where I can feel like a girl again; and it would please me if you called me Margaret."

"Margaret," Christina repeated softly; "I am glad you have such a beautiful name. It seems to belong to your beautiful face." She spoke dreamily, scarcely aware of what she said, but as the sound of her own words fell on her ears, she flushed deeply, and a deprecating look came into her eyes.

"Oh! I beg your pardon," she exclaimed; "I was speaking my thoughts aloud, and it was rude of me. But, do you know, ever since I first saw you, I have called you in my mind 'the beautiful lady.' You see, I had no name by which to call you."

"It was very pretty of you," Margaret smiled, her fingers touching the girl's dusky hair. "Once upon a time, long ago, when I was as young as you, I was beautiful; it is not vanity to say that now. I was a beautiful girl. But life, and all that life has brought—have—"

"They have made you more beautiful," the girl interrupted eagerly; "they have put sadness into your face, but they have not taken away its beauty; they have only added to it." Margaret smiled again, and an answering smile flashed over the girl's face, making the older woman lean towards her, and exclaim, with a puzzled stare—

"It certainly is most extraordinary how, when you smile, I find something so familiar in your face. The quick way you smile, reminds me of another face I have seen, but—I cannot remember where I saw it, or whose it is. And your voice reminds me of just such another clear voice, with restful cadences in it. Could I ever have known anyone belonging to your family?"

Christina shook her head, recognising dimly that the woman before her, belonged to a circle of life very different from that in which her father and mother had moved.

"I don't think it is at all likely you ever saw any relation of mine," she answered. "My name is Moore, and we were always very poor, and lived in an out-of-the-way Devonshire village. I never knew any of my relations, and I don't even know my mother's maiden name. I think her people had treated her very badly; she never mentioned them."

"Ah, well, it must be some chance likeness, but it will worry me, until I can remember who the person is of whom you remind me. Is that the doctor?" she broke off to say, her lighter tone changing to one of acute anxiety. "What is he coming to tell me?" The animation that for a few moments had lighted her features, and lessened some of the tragedy, in her eyes died away, and the face that was turned towards Dr. Fergusson, as he once more entered the room, had nothing upon it but an agonised question.

"He has allowed you to examine him thoroughly?" she asked.

"Yes, quite thoroughly." Fergusson's voice was gentle, but very grave, and as he came and stood beside the bed, Christina instinctively realised that he hesitated to speak further, because what he had to say was of a painful nature.

"Tell—me." Margaret spoke a little breathlessly; her eyes never left the kind, shrewd face looking down at her; the anguish in their depths hurt Denis's tender heart. To give pain to any woman, above all to a woman so fragile, so physically unfit to bear it as this woman seemed to be, was almost intolerable to him. Yet his honesty and strength of nature never allowed him to evade the truth, when truth had to be told, and he did not evade it now.

"I am afraid I have not good news to bring you," he said. "The patient I have just examined, is only momentarily convalescent. I—think it is only fair to be quite honest with you: there is no real hope of his ultimate recovery." The woman in the bed uttered a little low sound, which seemed to Christina the most pitiful she had ever heard, but when she spoke, her voice was unnaturally quiet.

"You mean he has some incurable disease? Tell me the exact truth."

"Yes, quite incurable—and—very far advanced. I can give him a certain amount of alleviation, but—it would not be right to let you build any hopes on the possibility of a cure. There is no such

possibility."

When the doctor's voice ceased, there was a strange, tense silence in the room for many minutes; and Christina, standing by the fireplace, felt as if she could almost see and hear the woman in the bed, gathering up her forces to meet this blow. Once the girl glanced at the white face and deep eyes, but she turned away her glance again, feeling it was not right that any other human being should gaze upon the tortured soul, that looked out of those eyes. Margaret herself first broke the silence.

"Will—it—be—long?" she asked.

"I think not," Fergusson answered gravely, "but in a case like this everything depends upon the temperament of the patient, his surroundings, his mental attitude. Anxiety, worry, any mental strain would accelerate matters."

The white hands that all this time had been so still on the coverlet, clasped themselves together, and there was a new note of passion in Margaret's voice, as she said—

"And—the mental strain is exactly what I cannot help, cannot prevent, cannot save him from."

"You must remember I am only giving you one man's opinion—only my own," Fergusson replied gently. "Would you like me to bring a London colleague to—"

"No—oh no!"—the look of fear he had before noticed in her eyes, leapt into them once more—"nobody else must come here, nobody else must see him. As it is, the risks"—she stopped suddenly, and ended her sentence in less agitated tones—"I am quite satisfied with your opinion, Dr. Fergusson," she said. "I would rather not have another doctor, and—you will respect my wish for silence about everything that has passed in this house?"

"Certainly I will respect it; you can trust me. In the patient's own interest, I think I ought to see him again, perhaps in two or three days; but nobody excepting Miss Moore and myself will know anything about the affairs of your house."

Having given her a few technical instructions as to the treatment of the sick man, the doctor was ready to take his departure, and he and Christina left the house together, after the girl had for a moment been drawn into Margaret's arms, and gently kissed.

"Thank you for all you have done," the beautiful woman whispered. "I don't think I can ever be grateful enough to you. Perhaps, we shall not ever meet again—but—think sometimes of me—pray sometimes for me—little rest-bringer."

* * * * *

"That poor soul! that poor soul!" They were Fergusson's first words after he had turned the car out of the rough lane, into the main road. "I daresay it was fanciful, but the words in the Litany haunted me when I watched her this morning: 'In all time of our tribulation—Good Lord, deliver us.' She looks as if she had been through such an infinity of tribulation."

Christina's eyes were still dim with the tears brought there by Margaret's parting words, and her voice was not quite steady, as she answered—

"Yes; the word seems to belong to her, but she gives me the feeling that she is so strong, so tender, in spite of, or perhaps because of, all that she has suffered. I—wish I could do something more for her."

"Perhaps the opportunity may yet be given you," Fergusson answered. "I never believe people come into one's life purposelessly: we meet them for some reason, and we get chances of helping them—even if sometimes they seem only like 'ships that pass in the night,' greeting us as they sail by."

CHAPTER XII.

"YOU ARE JUST 'ZACKLY LIKE THE PRINCE."

"The gentleman said he would be back in half an hour; he is staying a night at the inn, and he just wanted to see you and Miss Baba." Mrs. Nairne delivered this long message to Christina, when she and her small charge came in from their afternoon walk a few days later, and at her words, Christina's heart gave a sudden leap.

Was it possible that the grey-eyed man of the rugged face, the man who had called himself Lady Cicely's cousin, could be driving that way again? And was he coming to see the child? She

was secretly pleased to observe that the landlady had provided a tea of superlative excellence, and that the worthy Mrs. Nairne thought, as *she* also thought, that Lady Cicely's cousin might perhaps partake of that meal with Baba and her nurse.

There was a happy smile on her lips, and her eyes shone brightly, as she moved to and fro about their little sitting-room, putting it tidy, and arranging in two of Mrs. Nairne's fearsome vases (cherished possessions of that good lady, be it known) a tangle of brown leaves and crimson berries, that she and Baba had brought in from the hedges. The child's clear voice drifted in to her from the kitchen, where the small girl was proudly conscious of extreme usefulness, whilst she pattered to and fro behind Mrs. Nairne, and helped to arrange the tea-tray.

"We've got the best tea-set to-day," she announced to Christina in triumph, when she and the landlady entered the sitting-room together, "and I think the cakes is *beautiful*," she added, with a little sigh of bliss, as her eyes rested on the table, at which Christina had also glanced approvingly.

"I thought the gentleman might like a cup of tea," Mrs. Nairne said apologetically, "and I can't bear for there not to be enough to eat."

"I am sure there will be plenty for us all," Christina answered gravely, though her eyes twinkled; "and it is good of you to have taken so much trouble. I can assure you, Baba and I will appreciate all the good things you have given us, and we are as hungry as hunters."

The sight that greeted Rupert Mernside's eyes, when, a few minutes later, he came into the firelit room, made a picture that lingered in his mind for the rest of his life. There were two candles on the round table, at which the child and girl sat, but the room was really lighted by the ruddy glow of the fire, whose flames leapt about the great log of wood on the top of the coals, and shed a delicious radiance all over the low, old-fashioned apartment. Some dead and departed mistress of Mrs. Nairne, had given her the oak furniture, of which the landlady herself spoke deprecatingly, as "queer old stuff," and the firelight was reflected a hundred times in the highly-polished black of the oak, and the bright brass of handles and knobs. The chintz that covered the furniture, had also come from a defunct mistress, whose taste had led her to love just those soft, dim colours, and the old-world patterns that best suited the oak of the furniture—and the whole result was supremely pleasing to an æsthetic taste. Flowers sent from Bramwell Castle, made a delicious fragrance in the air, and to the man, coming in out of the cold of a damp and foggy December afternoon, there was a peace in the atmosphere, that gave him a pleasing sense of home and restfulness.

The firelight shone full on Baba's delicately-tinted face, and golden curls; shone, too, on the dusky softness of her companion's hair, bringing out in it unexpected gleams of brightness, illuminating the girl's clear white colouring, and her sweet eyes, showing to the man who entered, the tenderness of the look that was bent on the little child beside her.

"Cousin Rupert!" Baba shrieked joyfully, scrambling from her seat, and flinging herself upon him, whilst Christina pushed back her chair more deliberately, and rose to greet their visitor. "We've cakes with sugar on them to-day, 'cos Mrs. Nairne thought you'd come to tea."

"Oh! she thought I should come to tea, did she?" Rupert answered, smiling, as he held out his hand to Christina, looking at her over Baba's curly head. The child was already in his arms, her soft face pressed against his, and his chin resting on her rippling curls, whilst he shook hands with her nurse, and said in his deep pleasant voice—

"I am glad I have just caught you both at tea, Miss Moore. Now you will let me have some tea, and then I shall hear how you both are, and be able to carry news of you to my cousin, at first hand."

Christina was far too guileless and simple of soul to read into Rupert's descent upon them, what was the actual truth—namely, that he felt impelled, as Baba's guardian, to keep a watchful eye upon the new importation Cicely had so impulsively introduced into her household; felt it indeed to be nothing more than his bare duty, to see that Baba's new nurse was all that Cicely enthusiastically believed her to be.

"Dear little Cicely's swans have before now turned out to be geese," Rupert had said to Wilfred Staynes, Cicely's brother, when he and that smart young soldier were returning from their motor trip across Sussex. "She insisted on engaging this lady nurse for the child, and practically took her without references. The references she gave us, were, to all intents and purposes, so much waste paper. The writers of them were all dead, or in the colonies."

"Cicely was always like that," Cicely's brother made reply. "She had the rattiest collection of sick and sorry animals in her youth, and of sick and sorry friends as she grew older. She has a way of stepping down into the highways and hedges, and compelling their inhabitants to enjoy her hospitality. It makes one feel one could always turn to Cicely if one went wrong, you know," he added thoughtfully; "she's always 'for the under dog,' as somebody once put it."

"Cicely is the dearest soul in the world," Rupert said quickly. "We all love her for her loving heart—but at the same time, I can't risk letting Baba fall into the hands of a stray adventuress, because Cicely's heart has been touched."

"If it's a question of adventuresses, I'll come and see the kid too," Wilfred answered laughingly. "I like the type; it amuses me. Bronze hair, green eyes, seductive manner. Oh! Rupert, my friend, if you think Baba is in the care of an adventuress, take, oh take me to call on her too!"

"What an ass you are, Wilfred," Rupert answered, with a lazy laugh. "Is it likely that even our dear and impulsive Cicely, would hand Baba over to the care of your adventuress type of woman? No; the only time I saw her, the girl seemed a most harmless, quiet little individual."

"You've seen her?"

"Yes; I saw her in the nursery at Eaton Square, making friends with Baba, but she made no impression upon me; she was just quite an ordinary-looking girl."

"Oh! la, la! then you may go alone to call on her at Graystone, and see that she is performing the whole duty of the nurse. The ordinary-looking girl makes no appeal to me."

His own, and Wilfred's idle words, flashed back into Rupert's mind now, as, across Baba's tangle of golden curls, his eyes looked down into the eyes uplifted to his—eyes to which the dancing firelight gave an oddly elusive effect. What colour were they? he wondered—grey, hazel, or green—deep soft green with great black pupils, and sweeping dark lashes, that curled upwards in a deliciously fascinating way. There was something child-like and appealing about those sweet eyes, something of the eternal child indeed, about her whole face, from the unclouded brow on which the dusky hair fell in soft tendrils and curls, to the half-parted lips, on which the smile over Baba's latest sally of wit, still lingered. There was nothing of the adventuress type about this girl, that was very certain, was his first thought; his second, that the uplifted face was in some way familiar to him, that quite lately he had seen it uplifted in precisely this way; and thirdly, he remembered how and when they had met.

"Why," he exclaimed, "how oblivious you must have thought me the other day! Surely you *are* the young lady to whom my cousin and I gave a lift in the car?"

A vivid blush flooded Christina's face with colour, her eyes wavered under his glance.

"Yes, it was I who stopped your car, and I thought afterwards how dreadfully audacious and impatient I must have seemed. But I was anxious to get quickly to the doctor, that——"

"Not for this young person, was it?" Rupert interrupted, looking down at the child in his arms "she doesn't wear an invalid appearance."

"Oh! no, no, not for her." Christina spoke hurriedly, remembering the secrecy that had been enjoined upon her by the lady of the lonely house, and anxious to lead the conversation away as soon as possible from her visit to the doctor. But Rupert, having deposited Baba in her chair, seated himself beside her, and helped himself to a slice of Mrs. Nairne's hot buttered toast, continuing to talk placidly of the very subject the girl most desired to avoid.

"I am afraid somebody was really ill?" he said, and Christina noticed again what a musical voice his was. "You seemed to be desperately anxious to get the doctor as soon as possible."

"Yes," Christina, answered, trying to speak in matter-of-fact tones; "someone had asked me to fetch the doctor for them, and I didn't want to lose any time."

"I hope you found the doctor a satisfactory sort of person? Sometimes the medical men in these out-of-the-way places, are very impossible."

"I found a very unusual man," Christina said thoughtfully; "he is a Dr. Fergusson, doing *locum tenens* work here. He has a remarkable personality; he made one feel he was meant to be a leader of men."

"I hope he will do the patient good."

"I hope he will," Christina said hurriedly; "he—was in a great difficulty that night, and—I hope I did not do wrong in giving him some help he asked for?" she added, looking deprecatingly into the grey eyes fixed on her face, feeling that it was her obvious duty to tell this man, who was Lady Cicely's representative, of the night during which she had left Baba.

"I don't think you can have done anything very wrong," Rupert answered with a smile, and speaking almost caressingly, as he might have spoken to a child. His smile, and the tone of his words, set the girl's pulses beating, although she vaguely realised he was treating her with the same kindness, he might have bestowed upon Baba.

"Dr. Fergusson was in a great difficulty," she went on, trying again to speak in matter-of-fact tones. "The lady of the house to which he went, was—was very lonely, and he asked me to take care of her for the night. In fact"—Christina smiled at the recollection—"he was very masterful—he really made me go. But I should not have gone, if I had not known that Baba was absolutely safe with Mrs. Nairne. And"—she paused—"I think I was able to help somebody in great trouble." Rupert's eyes still rested kindly on her face.

"I don't know that I should recommend you to make a practice of leaving Baba, and sitting up

with people at night," he said, his smile taking away any possible sting from his words; "but I am sure in this instance, you only did what seemed most right. You and Baba are happy here?" he went on, anxious to spare her any unnecessary embarrassment.

"Baba likes this nice place," the child struck in, "and Christina tell about the prince. Baba thinks the prince is just 'zackly like you," she ended, with a wise nod of her curly head. Rupert found himself speculating why, at the child's speech, Baba's nurse flushed with such extreme vividness, and why she evinced so sudden a desire to change the subject.

"Oh! Baba—we don't want to talk about fairy stories now," she interposed. "Tell—tell all about the pony-cart, and our nice drives. Do you know," she added, looking at him with a shy glance, which seemed to him infinitely attractive, "I have never heard your name, so I don't know what to call you."

"Call him the prince," Baba's clear little voice remarked; "he's my Cousin Rupert, but he's 'zackly like the prince—and you're just 'zackly like the princess," she added, to Christina's no small discomfiture, pointing a dimpled forefinger in the girl's direction, "and some day the prince will marry the princess, and so they'll live happy ever after." Again a flood of colour rushed over Christina's face, and though Rupert saw it in the swift glance he cast at her, he was merciful enough to turn his eyes upon the child, and say gaily—

"You must find a much better prince than I am for your princess, little maid. Cousin Rupert is a battered old gentleman, with no prince-like qualities. Princes are always young and handsome, with blue eyes and golden hair, and silver armour, and lots of other jolly things like that, aren't they, Miss Moore?"

"Yes, certainly," she answered, rallying to his mood, and laughing brightly; "they always dress in silver armour, and the princesses never wear anything but white gowns."

"Sometimes—green gowns do quite as well for princesses," he answered, glancing at the girl's well-made green gown, with eyes of commendation. "Green belongs to fairyland," he added, when again the colour flushed into her cheeks. "I believe that you and Baba have only quite lately come from that enchanted country—both the two of you, as my old nurse used to say."

"We like fairyland—Baba and I," the girl said gently, "and we both hope, some day, to see the fairies inside the flowers, or dancing round one of their lovely rings. We have found ever so many fairy rings in the fields round here." She spoke with something of a child's eagerness, all her momentary embarrassment gone, and Rupert looked at her, with an increasing sense of approval. Cicely had not acted altogether unwisely, in deciding to give her small daughter this unknown, unvouched-for girl as a nurse. She was obviously a lady, and a cultured lady, and she possessed that nameless quality which never failed to appeal to Rupert's fastidious taste—the restful charm of the true gentlewoman. He liked this Miss Moore, he told himself, he distinctly liked her, and he inwardly commended Cicely's choice, whilst he said to Christina—

"And all this time I have most rudely left your question unanswered. You asked my name: it is Mernside—Rupert Mernside."

"Oh!" was the only word that jerked itself out of Christina's lips, whilst her eyes gazed at him with an expression of such unmistakable dismay, that he looked at her in surprise.

"Have you any unpleasant associations with my name?" he asked. "Has anybody called Mernside ever annoyed you?"

"Oh, no!" she answered quickly. "Only—once I heard the name before—just R. Mernside—and I was surprised when—when it turned out to be your name too." The words were so incoherent, the sentence so oddly turned, that Rupert only looked as he felt, more puzzled than before.

"I had not ever seen you, had I, until I saw you in Baba's nursery?" he questioned.

"No—never." She looked increasingly disconcerted, beneath his puzzled stare. "It was only—that I had heard—had come across the name before, and it—surprised me to hear—it again."

Not wishing to add to her almost painful embarrassment, Rupert tactfully changed the subject, but being an unusually observant man, he noticed that she was not really at her ease during the whole course of his visit. He rose to go, therefore, earlier than he would otherwise have done, seeing how singularly peaceful he found the home-like atmosphere. The girl, with her sweet eyes and restful manner, the baby with her flower-like face, and her loving ways; the old-world firelit room, the pervading sense of what was child-like, simple, serene—all these soothed the man, racked with suspense and misery. It was with reluctance that he closed the door upon it all, Baba's parting words echoing in his ears, as he ran downstairs, and out into the fog of the December evening—

"I think you are just 'zackly like the prince—my pretty lady's prince—and she's the princess!"

Walking briskly up the village street in the direction of the inn, he smiled, as the words spoken in the clear little voice recurred to him again, and the picture of the child and the girl stayed in his mind during the remainder of the evening, whilst he sat in the uncompromisingly

dull sitting-room with Wilfred, listening with very fluctuating attention to that young man's chatter, about motoring, sport, and the possibilities of a Frontier campaign.

"And what about Baba and her nurse?" the young man ended by saying. "As Baba's uncle, I believe it was really my stern duty to go and look her up."

"Ah, well, I happen to be her guardian," Rupert answered drily; "and you were very much occupied with that American and his Daimler, when I went out——"

"And has the nurse the bronze hair of the typical adventuress, only tell me that," Staynes answered, stretching out his long legs to the fire. "If she has, I shall feel it imperative to call on Baba to-morrow, before——"

"Don't talk rot, my good fellow." Rupert's tones had in them a note of irritation, which his astute cousin was not slow to observe. "Didn't I explain to you that Cicely, with all her tenderness of heart, has too much common sense to give over Baba to the care of any doubtful sort of person? The child's nurse is—just a nice, quiet girl, who looks after her well and keeps her happy."

"Great Scott! *A nice, quiet girl!* I think I can safely take her on trust, if you are satisfied that she is—nice—and quiet. The adventuress appealed to me, but nice quiet girls—no, thank you, Rupert! Now if only she had been like that delightful young person with green eyes, who stopped the car the other day—I—should have felt twinges of conscience about my duty as an uncle."

"What an utter rotter you are!" In spite of himself Mernside laughed, knowing from a long and intimate acquaintance with Wilfred, that the young man's surface nonsense went no deeper than the surface, and that Staynes was in no sense of the word a Lothario. A slight, a very slight, twinge afflicted his own conscience, when he remembered the identity of the girl he had left that afternoon, in the home-like, firelit room, with the girl to whom his cousin had just alluded.

"There is no necessity to tell him that the two girls are one and the same," Rupert argued with himself. "Some day, presumably, he will meet Miss Moore, and he may then recognise her again. But the probability is that by that time, the motor incident will have gone out of his head." Meanwhile, throughout the bantering conversation he carried on with Wilfred, he found himself constantly wondering why the sound of his name, had caused Baba's nurse such surprise and embarrassment. She had seemed so friendly, so natural, so simple, until the moment when his name had been mentioned, and then she had changed into hesitating self-consciousness, her eyes afraid to meet his, her manner uneasy and shy.

The real reason for the change in her never, of course, occurred to him. It was only very occasionally that he even remembered the annoying episode of the matrimonial advertisement, and then merely with a passing feeling of regret, that he had failed to help the girl who had been his fellow-victim in Jack Layton's hoax. The girl's initials had faded from his memory, in the more personal and acute trouble of Margaret Stanforth's continued absence and silence, and he never for a moment connected the writer of the wistful little note signed "C.M.," with Baba's newest and most devoted slave. If his thoughts that evening ran with curious persistency on Christina, her thoughts turned with no less persistency to him and his visit, and above all, to the dismaying discovery that he was the R. Mernside to whom she had audaciously written, who in return had written to her so kindly. After Baba had been safely tucked up in her cot, sleepily asseverating that she meant to go for a ride in Cousin Rupert's car, and that he was "her Christina's prince," Christina herself returned back to the sitting-room, and, seated before the fire, went over in her own mind all the conversation of the afternoon, with its final climax.

"And I don't know whether I ought to tell him who I really am, or not," the girl reflected, looking deep into the heart of the glowing coals. "He was so kind to-day, but I don't believe he would go on feeling kind to a girl who could answer an advertisement like that—even though he would still be kind, because he is a gentleman. I wonder if I ought to tell him? And yet—it would be horrible—horrible to have to say it. I should be so ashamed—so dreadfully ashamed. Only—I think, perhaps—he would understand how poor I was, how desperate I felt, that day when I wrote to him. He has such an understanding face, and his eyes look as if they had seen so much sorrow, so that he would know what other people's sorrows mean. I wish—I—could be a rest-bringer to him." From that thought, she drifted away to the lonely house in the valley, to the beautiful woman whose troubled face and deep, anguished eyes haunted the girl like an obsession, and to the sick man, whose death, so Dr. Fergusson had said, was only perhaps a matter of a few short weeks. What strange tragedy was hidden by the four walls of that lonely house? What did it all mean—the secrecy, the isolation, and above all the trouble that had been written so plainly on that beautiful woman's face?

"I don't suppose I shall ever see her again," was Christina's final and regretful thought, as she rose to go to bed. "I wish people didn't have to be like 'ships that pass in the night'—only passing—not staying together for a little while."

CHAPTER XIII.

"YOU HAVE BEEN A FRIEND TO ME TO-DAY."

Rupert would have found it difficult to explain why, on the following afternoon, his steps again turned towards Mrs. Nairne's house, and why he assured himself, that it would be kind to Cicely to go to see Baba again, and take the latest tidings of the child back to her mother. He only knew that he had a great desire to sit quietly in that firelit room again, to feel the sense of peace and home-like tranquillity that seemed to hover about it; he only felt that in some inexplicable fashion Baba's new nurse—the girl with the sweet eyes and gentle voice—rested him, that her simplicity, and some child-like quality in her, soothed the pain that tore at his heart. Women had played no part in his life, until one woman had played an overmastering one; and all that his passionate adoration of Margaret Stanforth had cost, and was costing, him, gave an added charm to a nature devoid of all subtlety, simple and serene. Across the stretch of years between them, he regarded Christina as little more than a child, but it is often from a child's hands that the passion-tossed, world-weary soul can find most comfort; and as Mernside for the second time sat in the old-fashioned sitting-room, and had tea with Christina and her small charge, he felt that in some indefinable fashion, the girl's hands were unconsciously smoothing away some of the misery that chafed his soul. She showed no traces of her embarrassment of the previous day. Night had brought its own counsels, and she had determined not to disclose her identity to Mernside.

"After all," she reflected philosophically, "I didn't do anything wrong—only something silly—and it is all over now. Probably he has forgotten all about the stupid girl who wrote him that letter, and anyhow, he doesn't think about me at all, excepting as Baba's nurse, so it would be foolish to make a fuss."

Having come to this determination, Christina, with characteristic good sense, put away from her all thoughts of self-consciousness and embarrassment, and allowed herself to enjoy Mernside's visit, with much the same childish delight as was evinced by Baba. And if the two showed their pleasure in different ways, it was none the less patent to their visitor, that the little nurse, with her big green eyes and dusky cloud of hair, took as much pleasure in his coming as did the golden-haired baby; and it gave him an odd glow of satisfaction to see her eyes brighten as he talked, and to watch the swift soft flushes of colour that came and went in her cheeks. Rupert, when he chose, could talk well and interestingly; he had travelled over the greater part of the world, and in the course of his travels had used eyes and ears to good purpose. And to Christina, the little travelled—to Christina, the whole sum of whose existence had been divided between a Devonshire village, the Donaldsons' suburban house, and a London lodging—all that Rupert told of distant countries, and strange, uncouth peoples was breathlessly interesting and entrancing. Sitting there in the firelight, Baba nestled closely in his arms, Christina seated opposite to him, her chin propped on her hands, her eager eyes following his every word—Rupert found himself talking as he had not talked for a long time with an eager boyish interest that surprised himself. It was only when some chance word of his led Christina to ask him a question about Biskra, that the flow of his eloquence suddenly ceased. It was there, in that garden of the desert, that he had first met Margaret. The girl's gently-asked question, for some inexplicable reason, brought back to him, as though it were only yesterday, the afternoon when the woman who ever since had dominated his whole existence, had first come into his life. Overhead, the deep pure depths of the bluest sky he had ever seen, against its blue stately palms that waved their fan-like leaves with the soft rustling sounds that only belong to the palm-trees; and there in the sunlight, stately as one of the great trees, her white gown falling about her, Margaret had stood, her dark eyes turned towards the all-surrounding desert. How or why they had begun to speak, he could not now recall, but from that first speech of fellow-countrymen in a far-off land, they had passed into acquaintanceship, and from that by easy stages to the friendship which he had implored her to give him, in default of that which she had told him could never be his. Well! at least in the years that followed, he had been able to serve her, to help her, to ease some of the burden of her life, that burden of which he himself knew so little. And to have served her was something for which to be thankful. If only—there was the bitterness—if only she had not gone away out of his ken now, in this strange mysterious fashion, leaving him ignorant of her whereabouts, and of all that concerned her.

If only she had trusted him more! If only— With a start he roused himself, to realise that Christina's eyes were watching him with a certain shy wonder, and remembering that he had broken off his conversation almost in the middle of a sentence, he looked at her with a smile of apology.

"Do please forgive me," he said. "Your mention of Biskra brought back so many pictures of the past, and—I was looking at them instead of going on with my story."

"Baba likes pictures," the child murmured drowsily.

"Perhaps Baba would like the picture I saw," her cousin answered, feeling an odd compulsion to speak of what was in his thoughts: "a picture of palm-trees, and a princess in a white gown, who walked amongst them, and—"

"Was the princess like Christina?" Baba all at once pulled herself into an upright position on

his knee, and looked earnestly into his face. "Tell Baba if that princess was like mine own pretty lady."

The eyes of the two elders met, and Christina laughed confusedly.

"Baba sees the people she loves through very rosy spectacles," she said, and Rupert smiled, whilst Baba's insistent voice repeated—

"Tell if the princess in the white frock was like Christina."

"No, no—not at all like her," Rupert began, his eyes glancing at the bent dark head opposite to him, at the clear whiteness of the cheeks, into which the colour was flushing so becomingly; at the deep green of her eyes, the red line of her lips; "no, the princess was—at least," he broke off suddenly, and looked more narrowly at the girl. "How absurd!" he exclaimed, "and what an extraordinary hallucination. It shows what a power of imagination the least imaginative of us may possess; but at that moment, your princess and mine, little Baba, had a queer fantastic likeness to one another."

Christina looked up at him sharply, surprise the predominating expression on her face. But before she could speak, Baba's clear tones again made themselves heard.

"Just tell Baba 'zackly—'*zackly* what the princess in the white frock was like; Baba wants to know."

Again Rupert felt impelled to speak, almost against his own inclination, and his words came with a readiness, which, if he had considered the matter, would greatly have surprised him.

"She was tall," he answered; "very tall and very stately, as stately as one of the palm-trees under which she stood; and her face was white like her gown, only, it was not white as sick people are white, but like the whiteness of a rose, very clear and pure. And her hair was black—black as a raven's wing"—his voice grew dreamy, he seemed to have forgotten his listeners, and merely to be thinking aloud, whilst he watched the leaping flames of the fire—"and her eyes were deep and dark, fathomless wells of colour, and very sad." Christina drew in her breath quickly, and leant forward, an eager look on her face. "I—never saw any eyes like those," the man's voice continued; "they held so much—they had seen so much, they were so beautiful—and so sad. The princess"—he started, and tried to resume a lighter tone—"was the most beautiful lady in the world, little Baba."

"She is just like——" Christina began impetuously, then stopped short, remembering the secrecy enjoined upon her, by the woman whom she knew only as "Margaret,"—the woman of the lonely valley house.

"Just like—who?" Rupert turned to her with the sharp question, a sudden gleam in his eyes. "Do you know anybody answering to the description I have just given? Have you ever seen someone like—like my princess?" The eagerness of his tones, the gleam in his eyes, showed Christina the necessity for caution, and she answered quietly—

"I think the lady you describe, is something like a lady I once saw; at least, she was beautiful, with dark eyes and hair," the girl ended confusedly.

"It could not be the same person," Rupert said with decision. "The princess I am describing—was unique. You would not speak of her in those terms of lukewarm praise. Her beauty was something beyond and above anything ordinary or everyday."

"So," Christina was on the point of saying almost indignantly, "so was the beauty of my lovely lady," but she checked her words just in time; prudence demanded that she should say nothing, rather than that by saying a word too much, she should betray another woman's trust.

"I should like—to have seen her under the palm-tree," she said, wondering in her girlish heart, whether it was the beautiful princess in the white gown, who had brought the lines of pain about this man's face, and into his grey eyes; wishing, too, with girlish innocent fervour, that it might be given to her to take away some of his pain.

"I wish you could have seen her," he answered her speech. "I think you and she would understand one another, but"—again the words seemed forced from him—"at this moment, I don't even know where she is." The concentrated bitterness of the tone, the haggard misery of the look that accompanied the words, stabbed at Christina's tender heart.

"Oh! I am sorry," she exclaimed. "I wish—I could help you," she spoke with a child's impulsive eagerness, but it was the tender pity of a womanly woman, that looked out of her eyes, and the look gave Rupert a sense of having been touched with some healing balm.

Baba was no longer taking any conscious part in the conversation; the warmth of the fire, combined with the consumption of a plentiful supply of Mrs. Nairne's toast and cake, had induced profound drowsiness, and the sounds of her elders' voices having acted as a final soporific, the little maid now slept peacefully, her dimpled hand against Rupert's neck, her golden curls upon his shoulder. The man and girl were, to all intents and purposes, alone, and Rupert looked across

at Christina, with the smile that gave such extraordinary charm to his face.

"No wonder this small girl looks at you with rosy spectacles," he said; "you are one of the born helpers of this world. What makes you say you would like to help me? Do you think I need help?"

"I am sure you do," came the prompt reply; "your eyes—" she broke off, startled by her own audacity, her glance wavering from his face to the fire.

"Your eyes——" he repeated after her. "What do you find in my eyes that makes you think I want help?" He spoke with the same caressing kindness he might have bestowed on a child; he felt an odd desire to confide in her, as a grown-up person does sometimes feel oddly constrained to confide in a little child, whose sympathy, whilst lacking comprehension, is still full of comfort.

"Your eyes are so sad," she answered frankly, when he paused for her reply; "you seem as if you were looking always for something you have lost, something which is very precious to you."

"So I am," he replied, pillowing Baba more closely in his arms, and leaning nearer to Christina. "I don't know by what wonderful gift you discovered all that in my eyes—but it is true. I am looking for something I have lost, or perhaps—something I have never had," he added bitterly, under his breath.

"Some day—surely—you will find it?" she said gently, her heart aching, because of the sudden hardening of his mouth and eyes.

"Find what I have never had?" he laughed, and his laugh hurt the girl who listened. "I may find the—person who has gone out of my ken; that is possible. I never forget to look for what I have lost, wherever I go, and I go to many places in my car. But, even if I found the human being I have lost, will everything be less elusive, less hopeless than before?"

"Of course you know you are talking in riddles," Christina answered gravely, her brows drawn together in a frown; "you don't want to let me understand what you really mean, and that is very natural," she added with a practical common sense that sat quaintly upon her; "but I should have liked to help you."

"You do help me," he said quickly; "it sounds absurd to say so, even to myself it seems absurd, because it is not my way to take anybody into my confidence. But—I can trust you."

The simply spoken words set Christina's heart beating with innocent pride; her eyes looked at him gratefully.

"Thank you for saying that," she answered. "I think it is true. You can trust me, and I am glad, so very glad, if there is anything I can do to help you. If—if I might understand a little better?" she added falteringly.

"The story I told Baba just now was a true one," he answered abruptly; "the beautiful lady really walked under the palm-trees, and I—well—these stories all have the same plot. I wanted her for my princess. But she—had a prince of her own already." The half-bitter, half-jesting way in which he spoke, sent all the child in the girl into the background, brought all the woman in her into prominence; she put out her hand with a little pitiful gesture.

"Oh!" she whispered softly; "oh! but that was hard."

"It seemed hard to me," his tone was grim; "it seemed an irony of fate beyond my poor powers of comprehension, more especially when I found—no, not found—I don't know for certain even now. I know nothing, less than nothing"—again came that bitterness that hurt his listener—"but when I guessed that the prince was not worthy of her, that it was my lot to stand aside and be a friend only, whilst someone not worthy to touch the hem of her gown, had the place of honour, then I knew what sorry tricks Fate can play!"

"And the poor princess?" Christina asked gently. A light flashed over Rupert's face.

"There is the wonder of it all, the wonder of womanhood," he exclaimed; "mind, I don't know any facts for certain. I only guess that the—rightful prince is not worthy to tie the strings of her shoes, and yet—he is all the world to her. The rest of us are nothing. No, that isn't true either," he corrected himself hurriedly. "I have her friendship. I have the unspeakable honour of being her friend, but the best of her is given to someone who is not worthy. Not that the best man among us is worthy to touch her hand," he added, with an impetuosity that made him seem all at once oddly young and boyish.

"And she—your friend—is it she you have lost now?" Christina questioned softly, when he paused. He nodded.

"Yes, she left town suddenly, giving me no reason for going. I have been able to do many things for her; things a friend could do. She is very fragile; she has been very ill, and now—I do not even know where she is. I can only surmise that the man, who is not worthy—needed her help—and she has done his bidding. Worthy or unworthy, her soul is wrapped up in him. Woman's

love is a wonderful thing—almost incomprehensible to men!"

Unbidden, before Christina's mind, there rose a half-darkened room, a bed piled high with pillows, and lying back amongst the pillows, a woman with a beautiful, stricken face, and deep eyes of haunting sadness. Unbidden there came to her memory words spoken in a low passionate voice:

"You don't know what it means to care so much for a man, that, no matter what he is, or does, he is your world, your whole world."

And with the memory, came an illuminating flash of thought. Could it be possible—that the beautiful lady of the lonely valley, and the princess in the white gown, of whom this man spoke, were one and the same person? Her preoccupation with this thought made her silent for so long after Rupert's last speech, that presently he said quietly:

"I don't know why I am inflicting all this upon you, or why I have been egotistical enough to think my confidence could be in the smallest degree interesting, to somebody who is almost a stranger."

"A stranger?" Christina echoed the words blankly, then laughed a little tremulously.

"I had—forgotten—we had only met so seldom," she said; "it—doesn't feel as if you were a stranger; and I am so glad, so proud, that you have trusted me. Some people from the very beginning don't seem like strangers, do they?" she asked, with a smile.

"That's quite true," he answered. "I am not a subtle person, I don't profess to be able to explain these things, but some people do seem to jump directly into one's friendship, whilst other people jog along beside us all our lives, and we get no nearer to them at last, than we were at first. You have been a friend to me to-day."

"Have I? I am glad," the colour rushed into her face, "and I wish I could help more." He smiled at her again. He still had the feeling that he was talking to a charming child, one of rarely sympathetic and understanding nature; and yet, through all the mist of masculine density in which he was wrapped, he was conscious of the womanly tenderness that had looked out of Christina's eyes, and spoken in her voice. That maternal instinct which is innately part of every good woman's nature, was largely developed in Christina, and, involuntarily, Rupert had made an appeal to that instinct. He would have laughed to scorn the bare idea that he, a strong and self-reliant man of the world, could ever lean, or need to lean, upon a slip of a girl, whose youthfulness was written in every line of her face, and of her slight form. And yet, unwittingly he had put out his hands to her for help, much as a little child puts out hands to its mother, for comfort and guidance.

Children all, these men-folk of the world! Children all, they have been from days immemorial, and presumably will be still the same in the days to come. And their womenkind love them, and comfort them, guide them and tend them, learning, with the sure instinct of womanhood, that they are just little boys, to be taken care of, and watched over, and "mothered" all the time. Christina knew this truth instinctively, if she could not have put it into definite words; Christina knew it; each daughter of Eve knows it by experience bitter or sweet—it is the truth that "every woman knows"!

CHAPTER XIV.

"I AM QUITE SURE YOU NEED NOT BE AFRAID."

"You are sure I need not be alarmed? You are quite, quite sure? She is all my world." Denis Fergusson looked down at the small trembling creature, his eyes full of grave kindness.

"Indeed, you need not be alarmed, Lady Cicely," he said. "I advised Miss Moore to send for you, because with a child, everything is so rapid that one never quite knows at the beginning of an illness how things may go. But little Miss Baba is doing exactly as she ought to do in every way. You need not have the slightest anxiety."

The little mother, with her lovely, troubled face, stood in the window of that same low, old-fashioned room, which Rupert, a fortnight earlier, had found such a restful place, and the doctor stood by her side. The winter sunshine fell upon her delicately cut features, lighting the pale gold of her hair into a halo; and the blue eyes she turned to her companion, seemed to him scarcely less innocent and sweet, than the eyes which had looked into his from Baba's cot.

"Such a *little* woman to have the responsibilities of womanhood," was his thought; "such a little woman, who looks as if she ought to be wrapped round with care and tenderness."

Perhaps some of the chivalrous tenderness of his thought showed itself in his glance; perhaps Cicely could read in his face the trustworthy nature of the man, for she said quickly:

"You see, Baba and I have only each other in the world, and that makes her very extra precious. Sometimes—I am afraid, because I love her so much."

"Afraid?" The doctor's glance was puzzled.

"Yes, afraid lest God should take her away from me. He might think I was making an idol of her, and that it was better I should do without her. That thought makes me afraid." To no living soul before, had Cicely told of the fear that often stirred within her, but Denis Fergusson's brown eyes and sympathetic manner, invited confidence, and in some unaccountable fashion he made her think of John, the loving husband who had always understood.

"Isn't yours rather a pagan way of looking at things?" Fergusson said gently. "Surely our God is not a jealous God, Who takes away what we love, because we love it? I don't believe it is possible to love a person too much, if one only loves them rightly. And I could never believe that the God Whose name is Father, could be angry with a mother's love."

"I am glad you have said that to me," Cicely answered. "Baba is so much to me, so very, very much, but I don't want to make an idol of her, dear little sweetheart."

"She is a very adorable person," Fergusson said brightly. "I shall miss my daily visits to her; she and I have made great friends."

"She is the friendliest soul. We have always wrapped her round with love; I wanted her to be loving and happy."

"I think you have succeeded. She is the delight of the village, and of the whole neighbourhood. She and her very capable nurse are known for miles round. There will be great lamentations when they go."

"They must come back," Cicely smiled, well-pleased at the praise of her darling. "I am taking them both to Bramwell for Christmas, but later on in the spring or summer, they will come here again."

"But I, alas! shall be gone."

"Ah! I forgot you are only doing temporary work here. You know you are not quite 'in the picture' here," she said with a smile.

"Why?" The one word, though abruptly uttered, was accompanied by the smile that made Fergusson's poorer patients say, it warmed their hearts when he smiled at them; and Cicely had the same sensation of warmth.

"Because you are not in the least like any country doctor I ever came across; and I am sure you would never bear being buried in rural depths. You belong to cities, and people."

"I hoped I had managed to hide my proclivity for gutters," he answered laughing. "I am afraid you are right. A big city draws me like a magnet. I can say with the poet, 'The need of a world of men for me.' The finest scenery in the world does not make up to me, for the lack of human beings."

"Then you are a town person?"

"Very much a town person. My home and work lie in a rather sordid, very poor—to me, enthrallingly interesting—corner of South London. I am only here for a time, doing his work for an old acquaintance, and incidentally getting a change I rather needed."

"You knocked yourself up with work in South London?"

"Not quite that. I got a little played out, and the air of this place has more than set me up. I shall go back like a giant refreshed."

"They are chiefly poor people, your patients?" she questioned.

"Almost entirely poor. It is always interesting work, sometimes heartrending work, often humiliating. The poor are so wonderful in their attitude to one another, and to all their difficulties and troubles. But if I once begin to talk about my South London folk, I shall never stop. Some day you will perhaps let me tell you of their hard fight with life, and of their splendid courage."

"You must let me help you, and them," she answered impulsively; "and thank you again ten thousand times, for all you have done for my little Baba."

The short, sharp illness which had brought Cicely flying down from town at a moment's notice, had safely run its course, and Baba was now enjoying a convalescence, in which she was petted and spoilt to her heart's content, petted to an extent that might have done harm to a less sweet and wholesome character. But the love that had wrapped the child round from her first

hours of life, had only made her sunny sweetness of nature more sweet and sunny, and she was a very captivating patient. Mrs. Nairne vied with Cicely and Christina in, as she phrased it, "cosseting" up the precious little dear, and the village folk who had learnt to love the small girl in her red cloak, with her dainty face and gracious manners, showered gifts and enquiries upon the invalid. Very quaint presents found their way to Baba's bedside. A plump young chicken from good Mrs. Smithers, whose poultry yard had caused the child the keenest delight; eggs from Widow Jones, who cherished a few rakish fowls in her strip of back garden; girdle cakes, most fearsome for digestive purposes, from Mrs. Madden, the blacksmith's wife, whilst the blacksmith himself brought a horse shoe, polished to the brightness of a silver mirror, for the little lady who had loved to stand beside the flaming forge, watching the sparks fly up, as his huge hammer struck the anvil. Children came shyly with bunches of the berries and coloured leaves that still hung in the hedges, and a very ancient dame whose garden boasted of two equally ancient apple-trees, proudly toddled up to Mrs. Nairne's door with the largest and rosiest of her apples, for the "pretty little lady."

"Baba seems to have made them all love her," Cicely said to Christina, tears standing in her blue eyes, when she returned from interviewing the old lady of the apples; "everybody who comes, speaks of her as if she were an old and valued friend."

"She has made friends with every living soul," Christina answered; "she is the most loving little child, and so tender-hearted over everything that is hurt or unhappy. I don't wonder everyone here adores her."

"Dr. Fergusson seems to think she will soon be quite well, and we must move her home for a few days, and then to Bramwell."

"Yes, he says she will soon be quite well," Christina repeated; "but I think I ought to remind you, that my month of probation ended last week; and—and I don't know whether you would care to let me still be Baba's nurse." Nobody knew what it cost the girl to say those apparently simple words, nor how hard it had been to resist the temptation to leave them unsaid. Lady Cicely had obviously forgotten that her new nurse had come on a month's trial only; she was taking it for granted that Christina was a permanent part of her household, and the girl shrank indescribably from any possibility of a change. And yet, conscience urged her to remind her employer of their compact for a month's probation. She instinctively felt that to drift on into being Baba's permanent nurse, would not be fair to Baba's kindly, impulsive little mother.

"You don't know whether I should care to keep you on!" Cicely exclaimed, when Christina had finished her halting speech; "what absurdity! Why, the doctor told me your careful nursing helped to get my darling safely out of her nasty wood. As if I should dream of letting you go, unless you want to leave us?" she questioned hastily.

"Want to leave you?" Christina's eyes dilated with the intensity of her emotion; "why—I am so happy with Baba and with you, that I couldn't bear even the very thought of going away from you. Only—I thought it was right to remind you about our agreement."

"It was rather a stupid agreement," Cicely answered lightly. "I had the fear of Rupert before my eyes. I knew he was thinking me a sort of impetuous infant, for insisting on asking you to come to Baba, just because you and she got on so well together. Rupert has a very well-balanced mind. He likes things done decently and in order. I am not built on the same lines."

Christina laughed.

"Still, you do like decency and order," she answered.

"Ah! yes," Cicely shrugged her shoulders; "but Rupert, the dear soul, is more conventional. Men always are. He likes beaten tracks, and the ways in which all our dear ancestors potted along for countless generations. I like to make nice little new paths with my own feet, and do little new things that my great-grandmother never dreamt of doing, even in her wildest dreams."

"Is Mr. Mernside so very conventional?" Christina asked, and Cicely responded quickly—

"He's a perfect dear, but he would not for the world go out of the orthodox track. He believes in formal introductions, and long acquaintance as a prelude to friendship, and he would rather die than give his confidence to anyone, unless he had known them for years, and knew everything about them." A faint, a very faint, smile hovered over Christina's lips. Did Mr. Mernside really think long acquaintance a necessary prelude to friendship? Did he only give his confidence to those he had known longest? Seated in the firelight in this very room, only a fortnight ago, he had told her many things, which surely he would only have told to a friend—a faithful and loyal friend? And yet she had known him for so short a time, if time was to be measured merely by days and weeks.

"You saw Rupert the other day?" Lady Cicely went on, no thought of what was in the girl's mind crossing her own; "he wrote and told me how well and happy Baba looked."

"He was so kind." Christina's voice was quite non-committal. "He came twice to have tea with Baba—I think he enjoyed nursery tea," she added demurely.

"He loves children, and they love him. He is a most disappointing person, never to have married. I always tell him so. But he is not the least a woman's man; I really don't believe there has ever been a woman in Rupert's life at all."

The words echoed oddly in Christina's ears, when memory was still bringing back to her the vivid recollection of Rupert's princess in the white gown, of Rupert's own lined and haggard face, when he had told her the story of the beautiful lady who dominated his life. Discretion led her to reply more or less evasively to Cicely's words, and to her great relief the subject dropped, and her small ladyship returned to the discussion of Christina's own affairs.

"As to any question of your leaving us," she said; "there is no such question. Neither Baba nor I can do without you now. And I have not yet discovered that you are any of the dreadful things one seems to expect people to be. We always ask if nurses are sober and honest; and I don't believe you drink or steal."

Christina laughed gaily.

"No, I'm not a thief or a drunkard, I can truly say. But all the same you might not have found that I knew enough about children to give you satisfaction, and there are so many ways in which you might say I am inefficient."

"I find you just what I want," Cicely answered emphatically, "and so does Baba. Why, if you left her now, it would break her dear little heart. No, you have got to stay with us for ever and ever, amen; we will take Baba to town as soon as that nice Dr. Fergusson says she may move, and then we will go to Bramwell for Christmas."

The thought of "that nice Dr. Fergusson" recurred to the little lady more than once that evening, when she sat writing in the sitting-room, whilst Christina performed Baba's evening toilette.

"He makes me think of John," so Cicely's thoughts ran; "he has the same kind understanding eyes—brown, like John's—and the same gentle way with him that John had. I think he knew how lonely it feels for me sometimes, and what a big responsibility life is, for one little scrap of a woman like me."

And, indeed, strangely enough, thoughts not at all unlike these, were passing through Denis Fergusson's mind, as he drove rapidly back to Pinewood Lodge; and, whilst he ate his solitary meal that evening, in Dr. Stokes's trim dining-room, furnished in precisely the way Fergusson himself would not have furnished it, he found Cicely's delicately fair face, and soft blue eyes constantly rising before his mental vision; he found himself wondering what manner of man her husband had been, and whether those blue eyes had been lighted with love for that dead man's sake.

"She looked like some lovely, pathetic child when she talked to me to-day," so his reflections ran "she and that fascinating Baba of hers, are just a pair of babies together, and yet—all the woman and the mother are in her, too," and, glancing round the formal room, Fergusson sighed, and made a great effort to turn his thoughts away from sudden alluring dreams of a home of his own, a home that would be really a home, not merely a place in which to live, where the centre of all its peace and happiness would be—his wife.

His wife? He laughed aloud, a little short laugh that rang discordantly in his ears. It was quite improbable that he would ever be able to afford to ask any woman to marry him, much less a dainty, delicately nurtured woman who—who—

Back into his mind flashed the picture which he had been resolutely thrusting from him, the picture of a lovely face, like some exquisite flower rising above a cloud of filmy lace and soft dark furs, the big feathers in her hat drooping against the gold of her hair. It was on Mrs. Nairne's doorstep that he had first met Cicely, and the picture of her as he saw her then in the pale wintry sunlight, seemed to haunt him all the more persistently, because side by side with it, he saw another, and strangely different picture. His own house in a South London road, its sordid surroundings, its unsavoury neighbourhood, all these made Cicely and her daintiness, seem like some princess belonging to another world.

"Pshaw, you poor fool!" Fergusson ejaculated aloud, when, his dinner ended, he retired to smoke in a small den, dignified by the name of smoking-room; "the sooner Dr. Stokes comes back and you clear out from here and return to the sober realities of life in Southwark, the better for you. Dreaming dreams and seeing visions is no part of your vocation."

He had reached this stage of his meditations, and had drawn up a chair to the writing-table, with a grim determination to finish an article for a medical journal, when the parlourmaid entering, handed him an exceedingly grubby note. It was briefly worded—

"Please come at once. He is dying."

There was no address, and the only signature was the one letter "M," but Fergusson at once understood what the message portended. The car, hurriedly ordered, was soon waiting for him at the front door; and, telling the man he would drive himself, the doctor glided quickly away in the

direction of the lonely house in the valley.

"Shall I discover anything of the mystery belonging to the house?" he wondered, as he sped along the dark country roads, his own powerful lamps throwing a stream of light upon the road ahead; "or will the secret, whatever it is, die with that unfortunate man? Whatever he has done or been—and he has either done or been something out of the common, and something not very commendable—I am prepared to swear his crimes were crimes of weakness, not of wickedness. The man is weak through and through, and why that wonderful woman has poured out such a wealth of love upon him, is one of the problems of—womanhood."

He smiled as his meditations reached this point, and once again his thoughts flew back to that picture which had haunted them earlier in the evening, the picture of Baba's mother—fair, sweet, and dainty.

"Would she—be ready to love through good and ill—as that other woman had done?" he reflected; "would she be ready to act as a prop? or must she find someone to look up to, and depend upon?" and thinking these things, he drew up before the high wall and the green door, before which a lantern flung a feeble light upon the surrounding blackness. Elizabeth admitted him; her face looked very worn, her eyes were heavy with want of sleep.

"He took a bad turn two hours ago," she said, in answer to the doctor's question; "he's going fast, and I can't get her to leave him, though it is killing her, too."

"It would only make her worse to try and take her away from him now," Fergusson said gently, knowing the good woman's devotion to her mistress, hearing the little shake in her voice as she spoke of Margaret; "if—the end has come, it will not be long; he has no strength to fight a long fight."

"*Strength?*" the servant muttered, a curious contempt in her accents; "you couldn't name him and the word strength in the same breath. There! I've no business to talk like that of one who's dying, but—give me a strong man, give them me strong all the time—I can't do with them *weak*."

Fergusson made no reply. He saw that the woman, overwrought with long watching and anxiety, was temporarily deprived of her normal reticence and taciturnity, and he recognised that her outburst owed its origin to her great love for her mistress, and to that natural antagonism which a strong character is apt to feel towards the weak. Handing her his coat, he passed rapidly along the corridor to the room, with which he was now familiar; and, going in softly, saw at a glance that the sick man in the bed was drawing very near to the Valley of the Shadow.

He lay propped up with pillows, and the beautiful woman known to Fergusson as Mrs. Stanforth, stood beside him, his head drawn close to her breast. Her arm was about him, and he had turned his face against her, as a child lays its face against its mother, his dim eyes fixed upon her with a look of almost passionate adoration. With her free hand she stroked back the damp hair from his forehead, now and again wiping away the drops of sweat with a filmy handkerchief she held, and her eyes watched him with a hungry, loving look, that brought a lump into Fergusson's throat.

"To know that a woman will look into one's dying face with such a look as that, is worth everything," the thought flashed unbidden into his mind, as he stepped softly up to the bed, and laid a hand upon the patient's wrist. The dying man looked at him with a faint smile of welcome, but the woman did not move or glance at him. Her whole soul was wrapped up in the man she loved, the man who was passing so fast away from her, into the silent land.

"Nearly—done—doctor," the man in the bed panted out, the smile still lingering on his face. "I—thought—I should have been afraid—but—now—the time has come—there—is—no fear."

His eyes left Fergusson, and lifted themselves to the face bending over him.

"You—rest—me—sweetheart," he said. "I—am never afraid—when you are—with me." As his eyes met hers, his smile acquired a strange radiance, and Fergusson all at once recognised the charm of the man—that magnetic something—which had won and held the love of such a woman as Margaret. Until this moment the reason for the weak man's hold over this woman had baffled, almost annoyed, Denis. Now, in a flash of illumination, it seemed to him he understood it.

He had seen at once that the dying man was already beyond all human aid; he gave him an injection of strychnine, but there was nothing else he could do, to ward off that dread visitor, whose feet had already crossed the threshold. Yet he felt that his presence in the house, if not in the room, would be a help to the woman so soon to be left desolate; and, having spoken a word or two of comfort and cheer, in that strong voice of his which carried comfort in its very tones, he moved away to the adjoining room.

"Call me if there is the slightest change," he whispered to Margaret; "you and he would rather be alone just now." She bent her head, and for the fraction of a second, her eyes met his. The misery in those deep eyes tore at his heart strings; his powerlessness to help this fellow-creature who was in such dire sorrow, hurt him, as if he had received some physical blow. Alone, in the next room, he seated himself by the fire, and tried to read a book he picked up from the table, but his thoughts refused to take in a single word of the printed page; he was conscious of

nothing but the low murmur of voices from the bed he could just see through the open door. The words spoken by the two whom death was parting, he could not hear, but his heart ached intolerably for them both, for the man who was drifting into the Great Silence, for the woman who was being left behind.

"One long—failure—one long chapter of infamy—and wrong," the man's whisper barely reached the woman's ears, as she bent over him.

"But—you are sorry for it all now, my darling," she whispered back; "only think that you are sorry for the wrong; only think that—now."

"If you—forgive—surely—God forgives?" The dim eyes looked wistfully up at hers, and she stooped with an infinitely tender gesture, to kiss his ashen face.

"Surely, most surely, God forgives," she answered solemnly, the strength of her voice carrying conviction with it; "where there is a great love, there is great forgiveness, and——"

"Like—yours," he interrupted dreamily; "great love—such a great love—and a great—forgiveness. I—have heaped your life with misery and shame—and still—you forgive—still you love."

"Still I love," she whispered, a passion of tenderness in the low-spoken words. "Max, love—real love—can't wear out or die, whatever happens. It has always been you—only you—you entirely, my man, my whole world."

At the last words, she drew his head more closely against her breast, and, bending over him, kissed him with a long lingering kiss.

"Only—me—in spite—of everything?"

"Only—you—sweetheart," she murmured; "only you—always."

"And—that other—who has been your friend—of whom you told me?" His voice was growing fainter.

"He has been—he is—my good and loyal friend," she answered; "he is nothing more to me than that. He could not ever be anything more."

"Perhaps—afterwards—when—I have gone—you and he——"

But she would not let him finish his halting, breathless sentence.

"He and I will never be more than friends," she said, very clearly, very firmly. "I could not love another man. There is not room in my heart for anyone but you."

A silence followed, a silence only broken by the dying man's difficult long-drawn breaths, by the occasional dropping of a coal into the grate, or the creaking of the heavy old furniture. And all the time Margaret stood immovable in her place, her arms about the dying man, his head close pillowed against her. All at once he spoke again, hurriedly, fearfully.

"You—are—sure—forgiveness," he gasped out. "God—will—forgive?"

"I am sure," she answered, and there was no quaver in her voice, only a great certainty; "there are no bounds to God's love. He will forgive. He loves you, my dear. I am quite sure you need not be afraid."

She spoke as gently, in as simple language as though he had been a little child, and the fear slowly died out of his face. His eyes looked once again into hers, with a look of adoring love and reverence; then, with a tired sigh, the sigh of an over-weary child, his head sank back more heavily against her, and the gasping breath was still.

CHAPTER XV.

"I DO TRUST, CICELY, YOU KEEP HER IN HER PLACE."

"Your being in town for Christmas is quite an unusual occurrence, isn't it, Cousin Arthur?"

"Quite unusual; I may almost say, unprecedented. Dear Ellen and I, as you know, have the greatest horror of any prolonged stay in this Babylon, but, at the present moment, it is impossible to avoid it."

"And Cousin Ellen is bearing up pretty well?" Cicely could not keep the twinkle out of her

eyes, although her voice was perfectly grave; but Sir Arthur, being, as has been said, totally devoid of humour, only observed the becoming gravity of tone, and not the twinkle.

"As well as can be expected," he responded, with a gloomy shake of the head, "but she dislikes hotels at all times, and at Christmas she doubly dislikes having to live a hotel life. We have our little festivities at home, quite small, unpretentious festivities, for the servants and the men on the estate, and we shall feel not taking part in them."

"And surely the servants will miss you?" Cicely said with her pretty gracious manner, whilst, it must be confessed, she inwardly wondered whether the Congreves' household staff would regret or be relieved, by the absence of their master and mistress at this festive season.

"We hope so, we hope so," Sir Arthur answered pompously; "dear Ellen and I always try to infuse a wholesome spirit into all the little gaieties, and we feel keenly being absent this Christmas. But we must be in London just now. Our own beloved border is too remote." Cicely thought with a shudder of that wild Welsh border on which the Congreve mansion stood, and instinctively she drew her costly furs more closely round her dainty person, as if the very memory of the remote region gave her a sensation of chill.

"You are in town on business, of course," she went on, more for the sake of saying something, than because she felt the slightest grain of interest in the affairs of her husband's elderly cousin. "I must bring Baba to see Cousin Ellen before we go to Bramwell. Baba is the duckiest wee thing in the world—in my prejudiced opinion—and I believe Cousin Ellen will like her."

Sir Arthur disliked all modern terms of endearment. He looked frigidly at Cicely; and wondered, not for the first time, what his sensible and sober-minded cousin, John Redesdale, could possibly have seen to admire, in this frivolous creature who was now his widow.

"I am not surprised poor John died," Sir Arthur reflected; "such flightiness, such flippancy, must have grated on him terribly." It was not given to Sir Arthur to understand his fellow-men, much less his fellow-women; and it is doubtful whether he would have believed John Redesdale himself, if that dear and noble man had risen from the dead, to assure his cousin of his passionate and unswerving devotion to Cicely, his much-loved wife.

"Dear Ellen will be very pleased to see your little girl," Sir Arthur said stiffly, after that swift moment of thought. "You know we always call her Veronica. We disapprove of pet names, and Veronica is a valued name in our family." The vexed question of Baba's style and title, being one that recurred on every occasion when Cicely and Sir Arthur met, the little lady made a hasty change of subject, saying brightly:

"I will bring her one day. You know she was ill at Graystone. She gave me a terrible fright, but she is quite well again, and I think we owe a great deal to Christina, Baba's delightful nurse—a lady, a most dear and charming girl, who is as much of a companion for me, as for her own special charge."

"A lady? A lady nurse? I hope you are wise in this, my dear Cicely; it is rather an innovation, a departure from the good old ways. Now, I have a theory that a middle-aged nurse of the very respectable, old-fashioned type, is the best sort of person to be about a child."

"If only one could dig her out of anywhere," Cicely answered with her bright smile; "but she is so scarce nowadays, as to be practically prehistoric. I have had every variety of nurse, and they seemed to me to oscillate between minxes and humbugs, until I found Christina."

"And with this young woman you no doubt had excellent references?" said Sir Arthur, fixing a piercing glance upon his companion; "too much care could not be exercised about the person who has charge of your little girl."

Cicely gave what she afterwards explained to herself as a mental gasp, but she was mistress of the situation. She looked into Sir Arthur's severe face, with a smile upon her own, and said smoothly—

"I do agree so entirely with you about being very careful who one engages as a nurse for a little child. I often feel that Baba's whole future depends on the hands that mould her now, when her dear little character is so much clay, to be made into what shape the hands choose."

Sir Arthur, let loose on another of his favourite hobby-horses, the education of the young, forgot to notice that his cousin's pretty widow had omitted to answer the question he had put to her, and cantering away on the above horse, did not realise that he was as ignorant as before, about Christina's references. He was still descanting forcibly on the most absolutely perfect, and, in fact, the only way of training a child in the way it should go, when the door of the hotel sitting-room opened, and Lady Congreve entered. She was a depressed-looking little woman, with the meek mouth and deprecating eyes of a wife whose lord's word is law—and more than law—and her first glance was not for their guest, but for the masterful gentleman standing with legs firmly apart on the hearth-rug, giving his opinion, in the full certainty that Cicely's interested attention, signified complete acquiescence in all his views.

"Ah! my dear, there you are," he broke off to say, with a gracious wave of his hand to his wife.

"Cicely and I have been talking about education, and I am glad to think she sees matters quite as I see them."

The tiniest smile dimpled about Cicely's mouth. Sir Arthur's interpretation of her total silence during his harangue, pleased her sense of humour, but, being of a peace-loving disposition, and averse to argument, especially with such an obstinately one-sided arguer as Sir Arthur, she allowed his statement to pass without contradiction, and greeted Lady Congreve with the charming cordiality, that gave her so delightful a personality.

"I am so sorry you have to be in town at this time of the year, just when you must want to be at home," she said sympathetically. Lady Congreve cast another fleeting glance at her husband, then looked with a sigh round the stiffly-furnished sitting-room, with its suite of brightly upholstered furniture, and its particularly unhomelike air.

"It is a great disappointment to us both," she answered, in her soft, deprecating voice, that to Cicely always seemed to be apologising for daring to make itself heard at all. "I dislike this terribly noisy, wicked city as much as dear Arthur does; and we had looked forward to our usual pleasant Christmas gathering. To me, Christmas is scarcely Christmas if it is not spent in a home—a real home."

In the flash of a second, Cicely, with her wonted kindly impulsiveness, made up her mind to do what in the bottom of her soul, she knew she loathed doing, and what she knew would rob her own Christmas of all its joyousness. She looked from one to the other of the two Congreves—Sir Arthur still upright on the hearth-rug; his wife a small, dejected heap in an armchair—and said in her most gracious manner—

"I do wonder if you will do what I am going to ask you to do? I know you are here on business, but just at Christmas time itself, just for Christmas Day and Boxing Day, you can't do any business at all, so will you come and spend at least those days with us at Bramwell? We go tomorrow; could you come three days hence—on Christmas Eve, or earlier, if you will. I quite see that your own home is too far away, but our home is so near, only an hour by train, and we mean to try and have a home-like Christmas. Do come."

Lady Congreve's pathetic little face brightened, a gleam of pleasure shot into her wistful eyes. Somewhere in that small, crushed soul of hers—the soul that for nearly forty years her husband had manipulated with ruthless hands—she had a profound longing for all the colour and glory of life, and in some nebulous and inexplicable way, Cicely had always seemed to her the embodiment of both.

"Oh, Arthur!" she faltered. "Could we? It would be delightful; such a relief after this great wilderness of an hotel. Could we go, dear?"

Sir Arthur drew his brows together in a judicial way peculiar to him, and bearing no relation to the importance of the matter in hand.

"Very kind of you to think of such an arrangement, my dear Cicely," he began; "very kind, indeed. And it is true, as you say, that ordinary business cannot be transacted at Christmas-time. But—we are not here on quite ordinary business. I think I told you when I last saw you, that my unfortunate brother-in-law is giving us great uneasiness."

"Yes, you did mention it," Cicely answered, again racking her brain in vain to remember what constituted the misfortunes of the brother-in-law, "but I did not know—"

"Quite so, quite so," Sir Arthur interrupted, waving her words aside; "we do not discuss the subject frequently, because, as you are aware, it is one which is most repugnant to us. But, for my poor sister's sake, I feel bound to come forward now, greatly as I dislike being mixed up with such an affair. I belong to those who believe that the touch of pitch defiles."

Cicely wondered more and more who and what the recalcitrant brother-in-law could be, that the mention of him drew such strong expressions from Sir Arthur's lips, brought so stern a look to his face; but he did not allow her time to ask any questions, or make any comment on his speech, resuming with scarcely a pause—

"I am using what influence I possess, to have the whole matter hushed up, as far as is compatible with right and justice. The poor man himself is not likely to live long enough to be punished; and if scandal can be averted from our family, which for so many generations has been *sans reproche*, I shall feel rewarded for all my trouble."

Cicely reflected that it was quite useless to try and disentangle the meaning of Sir Arthur's mysterious and incomprehensible words; and, being by nature the least inquisitive of beings, she asked no further questions.

"But if all that you have to do leaves you free for two or three days at Christmas, please come to us," she said; "we shall be only a very small party. My brother Wilfred can't come, and I am afraid Rupert Mernside, my cousin, may not be with us this year; but my dear old governess, Miss Doubleday, always comes to us for Christmas, and Baba, Christina, and I are the gay and youthful elements. I like to make Christmas a very happy time for my girlie," she added, almost

apologetically when she saw how, at her words, Sir Arthur's lips closed tightly. "You think it rather wrong to be young and gay, don't you?" she went on, a touch of defiance in her pretty voice; "but, you see, I am—anyhow—not at all old—and I want to keep myself as young as ever I can for Baba."

"I have no objection to youth, as such," Sir Arthur answered, with a lofty condescension that gave Cicely an overpowering wish to giggle feebly; "but I should have thought you, a widow, with so many cares, so many responsibilities, and above all with an immortal soul entrusted to your care, that you would have put childish things behind you, and taken up life with greater seriousness."

"Do you know," Cicely answered very softly, though her eyes shone, "John, my dear husband, told me he hoped I should always keep my young heart, and I hope I shall. I want to be young—as he liked me to be—when I meet him again. And I want to keep Baba always with her child soul, too," she went on, a sudden dreaminess in her glance. "John used to say that the Kingdom of Heaven was for the child-like, and the children. But I mustn't waste your time and Cousin Ellen's in argument," she exclaimed, with a brisk change of tone; "only promise to come to Bramwell for Christmas, and we will try to make you happy. And I am sure you will like my dear little Christina."

"You are not allowing her to presume on her being a lady, I do trust, Cicely?" Sir Arthur said gravely. "You keep her in her place? If she has undertaken to be a children's nurse, she should learn to occupy the position usually occupied by children's nurses, and only that."

Cicely lifted lovely pleading eyes to his censorious blue ones.

"I am afraid you will think me all sorts of dreadful things, but I could not keep Christina exclusively in the nursery. When you see her, you will understand what I mean. She and Baba are a good deal with me, and at Bramwell they will probably be with me still more." There was a gentle dignity about her manner, which made even the outrageous autocrat before her, understand that he had touched the limit of interference. Cicely might appear to be sweet and yielding; and, indeed, she was almost invariably more inclined to yield her own will, than to struggle to attain it, but there was no lack of character in her small person, and when she had once determined that a course of action was expedient or right, nothing had power to turn her from that course.

"Your cousin Ellen and I will enjoy spending Christmas with you very much," Sir Arthur said, beating his retreat with dignity. "I have no doubt I can manage to be out of London for three days, and I should like to see Bramwell again. John and I had many talks about the alterations and improvements he carried out there."

Cicely had a vivid recollection of her husband's whimsical description of Sir Arthur's well-meant, but annoying, suggestions about those same alterations, and she was conscious again of a giggle choked on its way to birth, but she contrived to make a suitable reply, adding hastily—

"And when you were in town in November, you told me you had some business with Scotland Yard about a pendant. I do hope the police have found the jewel for you."

"Alas! no. It is altogether a most singular thing about that pendant. I told you it was a family heirloom, a magnificent emerald with three letters A.V.C. twisted together above it."

"Yes?"

"The police had a very strange clue the other day, a clue that, so far, has come to nothing. A pawnbroker in a back street in Chelsea, came forward, and stated that a pendant, answering in every particular to the stolen one, had been offered to him for sale, a few weeks ago."

"Then why didn't he send for the police, and give the person offering it for sale into custody?" Cicely asked.

"Because the police had not then notified the pawnbrokers of London of the loss. In fact, as far as I can make out, the attempted sale must have taken place at almost identically the same time when I came to London to make enquiries about the pendant. The pawnbroker himself, it seems, did not see the pendant. Two of his assistants were in charge of the shop, when a young woman came in, and asked them what they would give her for it. They seem to have suspected her from the first, for she was obviously very poor, and not at all the sort of person likely to be possessed of such a magnificent ornament. They made her an offer, and apparently she took flight, and left the shop in a violent hurry. She evidently saw and understood their suspicions of her, but unfortunately they lost sight of her in the fog, and all trace of her is completely gone."

"I think I remember you suspected a young woman of the theft? Does the description of the young person who went to the pawnbroker, answer to the woman who was alone in the railway carriage with Cousin Ellen's dressing-bag?"

"The pawnbroker's assistants can only give a confused account of a shabbily-dressed girl, who seemed badly in need of money. Their descriptions are far from explicit. According to our maid, the young woman in the railway carriage, was neatly dressed and very respectable in

appearance, but the two people might very easily be identical."

"Very easily," Cicely answered; "but it is unfortunate that the pawnbroker's assistants let the girl go. By now, I suppose, the pendant may be broken up, and the stones untraceable."

"Only too likely," Sir Arthur answered; "and yet I cannot help still hoping to recover the thing intact. I cannot bear to think that a jewel my mother so greatly valued, one which indeed has become an heirloom, should be irretrievably lost."

"Not irretrievably, I hope," Cicely answered, as she rose to go. "Perhaps, when you come to us at Bramwell, you will be able to bring us good news of the missing jewel, and—" she added with some hesitation, "and about your brother-in-law, too." Again she wished that she could in the least recollect what the scandal had been. Possibly, she might never even have heard it, for John, her chivalrous and tender husband, had kept from her ears everything that could vex or soil them, and if she had ever heard the story, it had long since been buried in oblivion. At her words, Sir Arthur's face clouded.

"All! there will never be any good news about that wretched man. The best news about him, the only news I can honestly say I wish to hear, would be that he was safely in his grave. My sister, poor silly woman, is infatuated about him still, I believe. She was always a fool where he was concerned, always a fool." Sir Arthur's tones were irascible; "you never saw her, of course?"

"I never saw either of your sisters," Cicely answered gently; "they—I think they had been married and had gone right away, long before I knew any of you. You see it is only six years since I married John."

"Only six years. And it is more than twenty years since both my sisters left the old home. Both left it under a cloud; both insisted on marrying men of whom my father and mother did not approve. Ah! it was a sad business altogether, a sad business. They both belonged to the order of women who go on caring for a man, whatever follies or sins he may commit. I confess I cannot understand the attitude of mind of such women."

"No, I daresay not," Cicely answered, her eyes thoughtfully fixed on his severe face. "I expect you feel that love and respect must always go hand in hand, and that when a man has once lost a woman's respect, he ought to lose her love as well."

"Certainly, I think so. When respect goes, everything had better go. I have no patience with the sentimental clinging to a man who has forfeited all right to affection."

"I suppose"—Cicely paused, into her eyes there came a queer little gleam, which neither of her companions could understand. "I suppose when a woman takes a man for better or worse, the worse may mean evil doing, and perhaps it is possible for her to hate the sin, and yet to love—the sinner?"

Sir Arthur looked a trifle taken aback, but he disliked being worsted in an argument, and he would not ever own that he could be worsted by a woman. Hence, he begged the question.

"Well, well," he said airily; "there is often a great deal of sentimental nonsense talked about love, and I can answer for it, my dear Cicely, that my poor sisters paid very dearly for their sentimentality. One vanished completely from our ken; went down into the depths of poverty and obscurity, and we could never hear of her again. The other, I have seen and remonstrated with times without number, but all in vain; and now—she has got that miserable husband of hers in hiding somewhere, and I am bent on finding them both, and preventing worse scandals—if I can."

"I hope you will do as you wish." Cicely was shaking hands now with little Lady Congreve, who had taken no part in the conversation, beyond giving occasional utterance to a faint ejaculation, or a timid laugh. "I hope we shall all have a very happy Christmas together at Bramwell. I will let you know, about trains. Till then, *au revoir*."

CHAPTER XVI.

"MY MOTHER GAVE IT TO ME."

"Baba would like her doctor man to come to her Christmas-tree; Baba does love her doctor man." At the sound of the pleading voice, the sight of the appealing blue eyes, Cicely put down her pen with a laugh, and caught the child in her arms.

"You most absurd and beguiling infant, why do you want your doctor man, as you call him?"

"Cos Baba does. She loves him awful, drefful much," and to give her mother some glimmering idea of the depth of her affection, Baba clasped her hands round her own small

person, and looked into Cicely's face, with another appealing glance.

"Christina, do you imagine Dr. Fergusson could be induced to come over here for Christmas?" Cicely questioned, as Baba's nurse came into the cosy boudoir at Bramwell Castle; "this picanniny of mine wants him invited to her Christmas-tree."

"I should think it would depend on how busy he is just now. The practice seemed to be a big one. But perhaps at this time people will be considerate enough not to fall ill, and will give the doctor a little rest. Surely, Dr. Fergusson could motor over? It can't be very far from here to Graystone."

"Quite within a motor drive; and he was so very good to Baba, I should like to ask him to come if he will. Rupert writes, that, as he feared, he cannot be with us. He has had to start off post haste to Naples. That tiresome boy, Jack Layton, a mutual cousin of Rupert's and mine, has gone and got typhoid there, and of course Rupert, being a sort of unattached, universal fairy godfather, has been sent for to look after him."

"Is Mr. Mernside a fairy godfather?" Christina smiled at the quaint nomenclature.

"I always think so. He is ready to do any thing for any of his aggravating relations, at any moment, and as Jack has selected this particular moment to get typhoid, Rupert will be away for Christmas. I wonder whether Dr. Fergusson would think it very odd and unconventional, if I invited him here, on our rather short acquaintance?"

Cicely looked thoughtfully across her pretty room at Christina, and the girl laughed, and shook her head.

"He is not so silly," she answered. "Dr. Fergusson is just one of those simple, straightforward men who take things as they are meant, and don't hunt round for ulterior motives. He won't even begin to think whether your invitation is conventional or unconventional, he will only think how good it is of you to ask him at all."

"How wise you are," Lady Cicely exclaimed; "where does that little dark head of yours get all its wisdom?"

Christina laughed again. In those days of her happy life with Baba and Baba's mother, her bright young laugh rang out very often—the laugh that seemed such a true index to her young, bright soul. She had put behind her all the misery and hardship of the past, and, with the wholesome philosophy natural to her, lived in the full enjoyment of her present content; and the few weeks of happiness, good food, and freedom from anxiety, had changed the white-faced, hollow-eyed girl who had perforce tried to pawn her mother's jewel, into a charming, and very pretty semblance of her former self.

"I am not wise," she said; "only I have had a good many rough times, and I have learnt to do what one of my landladies called, 'sizing up men and women.' I have had to size people up, and try to get a just estimate of them."

"And you have 'sized up' Dr. Fergusson?"

"I have found out that he is the very soul of simplicity and straightforwardness, and that he is so kind that there is nothing he would not do for his fellow creatures," she answered eagerly; "and as for worrying about the conventional, I am sure it never enters his head to do such a thing."

It flashed across Cicely's mind to wonder whether Christina's praise of the doctor rose from any warmer feeling than that of friendly gratitude, but the girl's eyes met hers so frankly, her manner was so simple, and the very outspokenness of her enthusiasm, seemed to point to such a heart-whole condition, that the brief thought was dismissed.

"I wish I could accept your most tempting invitation," Fergusson wrote, in reply to Cicely's letter; "but, alas! Christmas does not promise much diminution of the work here. If, however, you will allow me to come to you for Miss Baba's tree, on the afternoon of the twenty-fourth, I could manage to do that in my car. It will give me great pleasure to see my small patient again."

As she folded up the letter, Cicely felt that it would also give her pleasure to see the kindly-faced doctor, whose personality during Baba's illness, had impressed her as being so helpful, who, in some dim and unexplained way, made her think of the husband, for whose loss her heart had never ceased to ache.

"I am afraid I am very glad Cousin Arthur and Cousin Ellen cannot arrive before eight o'clock dinner on Christmas Eve," she said to Christina, after receiving Fergusson's letter; "they mean so well, poor dears, but they are such sadly wet blankets. Cousin Arthur would certainly send our spirits down to zero, by telling us that the more we enjoyed ourselves the more wrath to come was being stored up for us! You know he says he never sees any beautiful scenery without remembering that it will all be burnt some day!"

"How delicious! I am afraid I am looking forward to seeing Sir Arthur; he is at least original."

"He won't approve of you, or Baba, or of anything any of us do," Cicely answered; "his attitude of mind is disapproving. He has got the kind of mind that always gets out of bed on the wrong side."

Perhaps, at the back of her own mind, her little ladyship was not sorry that Sir Arthur and Fergusson should have no opportunity of meeting; for, as her natural astuteness told her, if Sir Arthur looked with disapproving eyes upon Rupert, with how much more disapproval would he regard a stranger, who was also a doctor. Sir Arthur belonged to the old school of county magnates, who looked upon men of medicine as on a level very little higher than a butcher or baker, and entirely refused to entertain the notion that doctor and gentleman could ever be synonymous terms. And Cicely was well aware that the old gentleman's disapproval might conceivably find voice, and that she would be reproached for receiving such guests in "poor dear John's" house.

Fortunately for everyone's peace of mind, the Congreves, being unable to leave London until late on Christmas Eve, were also unable to play the part of kill-joys at Baba's Christmas-tree, and the little party which assembled in the big hall of the Castle, was composed of congenial and friendly folk, who were ready to become little children again, to play with a little child.

The hall, oak-panelled, and hung with suits of armour, and weapons handed down from war-like Redesdale ancestors, had long since been converted into a luxurious lounge, where, if comfortably upholstered chairs, big palms, masses of flowers, and tables strewn with the latest books, were incongruities, the incongruity at least made the hall a most pleasant and sociable sitting-room. And so Fergusson thought it, when from the sharpness of the grey winter day, he passed through an outer vestibule, into the well-warmed, well-lighted place. Only he himself knew with what an unaccountable sinking of the heart he had driven up the beech avenue leading to the Castle, and realised what an imposing place it was, to which he had been bidden. Involuntarily, and in sharp contrast, the thought of his own modest house rose before his mental vision, and the usually cheery doctor, for perhaps the first time in his disciplined and philosophical existence, felt disposed to curse the Fates, for dividing rich and poor by gulfs of such appalling dimensions. But that sinking of the heart, and all the other unwonted sentiments stirred in him by the sight of the great pile of Bramwell, its stately park and lordly surroundings, were swept away by the cordial greeting bestowed upon him, by the little lady of the house, and by Baba's enthusiastic welcome.

"Baba's doctor man," the child cried, with a small shriek of delight when he appeared, and Baba monopolised her doctor man during the whole two hours he was able to spend with them. But if to the larger number of the party assembled in the hall, Fergusson seemed to have neither eyes nor ears for anyone but the child-queen of the occasion, Christina's observant eyes told her that his glance often rested upon Cicely's fair head, and that whenever it did so, a great tenderness crept into that glance. As she had told Lady Cicely, the rough school in which her life had lately been spent, had taught her to study and understand her fellow beings, and the doctor's secret, unknown to himself, was shared by Christina, on that happy Christmas Eve. She was a very safe and discreet guardian of secrets, this girl with the sweet eyes, but she gave a quick little sigh when she understood the meaning of Fergusson's glance, for to her, as to himself, there seemed an unbridgeable gulf, between the hard-working doctor, and the dainty *châtelaine* of Bramwell Castle. Before he left, Fergusson contrived to make his way to Christina's side, and to say in an undertone:—

"I think you will be sorry to know that your beautiful lady of the lonely valley is in great trouble."

"Oh!" Christina exclaimed softly, her eyes darkening; "has the end come for him?"

"Yes, five days ago. She is wonderful, but the heart-break in her eyes is pitiful to see. I sometimes doubt whether her strength will hold out; she is very fragile, and all the strain has told on her more than I like."

"Was he buried at——" Christina was beginning, when Fergusson finished the sentence quickly.

"No, not at Graystone. I don't know where she took him, but it was away from that part of the country altogether. She and her faithful Elizabeth went with him, and now she is back in that lonely house again. I have tried to persuade her to leave it—to go to London—to go anywhere away—but she answers me she is happier there, and I cannot oppose her. But it is all a tragedy, an inexplicable tragedy."

He could say no more, but what he had told Christina, filled the girl's heart with sadness; her beautiful lady had made a profound impression upon her, and the thought of the sorrowful woman in that lonely house in the valley, hurt the girl's tender soul.

"I am glad we asked Dr. Fergusson," Cicely said to her, when later on in the evening the two were alone together in Baba's day nursery; "there is something so cheering about him, something," she added, with a wistful look into Christina's face, "that makes me think of my husband."

"Is he like Mr. Redesdale?" Christina asked sympathetically.

"No, not in the least—it is not that. At least, his eyes are brown, and my husband had brown eyes, but it is not exactly a likeness that can be defined feature for feature. It is something subtly indefinable, but when I see Dr. Fergusson, and when he talks to me, it makes me think of John. It makes me almost feel as if John were here again."

* * * * *

"You are to come down to dinner to-night, and you are to wear the new frock," Lady Cicely's tones were very decided, her blue eyes shone, her face was dimpling with smiles.

"Oh! but—indeed—I don't think I ought; how can I? It—it wouldn't be suitable, would it, for Baba's nurse to dine downstairs?"

"Will you let Baba's mother decide what is best for the nurse to do?" Cicely answered, laughing, and patting Christina on the shoulder; "you are just to do what I tell you, and I tell you you must come down to dinner to-night, and wear the new frock."

"I don't know how to thank you for that," Christina said, with girlish eagerness. "I haven't ever had a frock like it in all my life. You see, when my father and mother were alive, we never went to parties, so I didn't have evening gowns. And since I have been working for myself, of course I haven't needed any, but this one you have given me is much, much too lovely."

"Perhaps I am the best judge of that, too! I want you to look suitably dressed when you come downstairs, and you must look your very best to-night, to disarm Cousin Arthur."

"I am afraid already he doesn't approve of me," Christina said ruefully; "he looked at me with such severe eyes after church this morning, and began at once to ask me about my theories of education. And—I haven't got any." A ripple of laughter broke from her. "I had to say so, and he seemed so shocked."

"But he is very easily shocked; take heart of grace and remember that. And dear old Miss Doubleday thinks you are managing Baba splendidly. She is a competent judge because she had the managing of me!"

"Then I don't think there was anything wrong with her system of education," Christina said quickly, with a glance of shy admiration at her employer, who had sunk into the nursery rocking-chair, and was swinging her daintily-shod feet up and down before the fire; "if Baba grows up like her mother, she need not wish for anything better. I like kind old Miss Doubleday, she is so friendly to me."

Miss Doubleday, Cicely's old governess, was spending Christmas at Bramwell, and had shown appreciation of Christina and her ways.

"You nice little enthusiast!" Cicely looked affectionately up at the girl, who stood on the hearth beside her; "you idealise everybody, don't you, Christina?"

"I don't know about idealising," Christina spoke thoughtfully, "but, when I care about people, I do see all the best in them—"

"And are blind to all the worst? Yes, I understand," Cicely laughed, "if you liked Cousin Arthur, you would even see him through rose-coloured spectacles?"

"He is a very good man," Christina answered sturdily; "there is something about that uncompromising puritan spirit that appeals to me. His views may be narrow—"

"They certainly are," Cicely murmured *sotto voce*, "but they are all on the side of loftiness and right."

"I wish I could make out why there is something familiar to me about his face and manner. I am sure I have never seen him before, and yet I seem to have associations of some sort with him. He looks so sad and worried, too; and that very look on his face is vaguely familiar." Christina spoke thoughtfully, her brows drawn together.

"There has been some trouble about a brother-in-law," Cicely answered. "I know I ought to have the story at my fingers' ends, but I can't remember one single detail of it, and I don't like to tell Cousin Arthur so. Nor do I like to ask any questions. He and Cousin Ellen both look so much gloomier and more upset than they were in town. I have been wondering whether any fresh developments have occurred. However, it isn't any real business of mine, and we will try to give the poor dears a happy time here. I must go and dress, and you are to do as I told you; put on your new frock, and come down to the drawing-room. Janet is quite able to manage Baba for one evening."

Christina's fingers shook with eagerness, as she drew from its tissue wrappings Lady Cicely's Christmas present to her—the simple, yet charming gown, which to her girlish eyes seemed the acme of all that was most lovely. Poor little girl, she had never seen herself in a dress cut low at the neck before, and though this gown was only cut in the most modest of squares, her own

reflection in the glass told her that the rounded lines of her throat and neck were enhanced by the delicate lace that trimmed the soft silk of the gown, and that the dress itself, in its severely simple lines, suited admirably the slimness of her graceful young form. Her eyes shone like stars, there was a colour in her cheeks, and she had piled her dusky hair into a loose and becoming knot, on the top of her small, well-shaped head.

"I do really believe I look very nearly pretty," she said naïvely, nodding to herself in the mirror.

"I wish——" but she did not put her wish into words, only, as the colour deepened on her face, and she turned away from the sight of her own confusion, she found herself thinking that it was a pity Mr. Jack Layton had chosen this inopportune moment to fall ill with typhoid, and that Mr. Mernside had not been able to make one of the house party this evening. At sight of Christina, Baba, who was being prepared for bed by Janet, danced about the nursery in her pink dressing-gown, clapping her hands and chanting in a shrill monotone—

"Oh! Baba's pretty lady, Baba's pretty lady, oh!" until her nurse caught the small, soft creature in her arms, cuddling her closely and covering her laughing, rosy face with kisses.

"But you *is* Baba's pretty lady to-night," the child said solemnly, stroking Christina's neck and face with her dimpled hands. "I like you in a white frock, and when the pink colour runs up your cheeks. Put something round your neck," she went on imperiously. "Mummy's got lots of sparkle things to put round her neck, and you must have something sparkle on your pretty white neck."

"Something sparkle on your pretty white neck." Why should she not, just for this once, wear the only piece of jewellery she possessed? As it was Christmas Day, and everything was more than usually festive, surely she might put on the lovely pendant her mother had given her? Christina stood still in the middle of the nursery, cogitating upon the momentous question, whilst Baba danced round her, holding the pink dressing-gown well above her pink slippered feet, and shaking her golden curls whilst she chanted again—

"Oh! Baba's pretty lady; Baba's pretty lady, oh!"

"Even though I am a nurse, I am a lady, too," Christina reflected; "and Lady Cicely has given me this beautiful frock, so that I may look my best downstairs, and, my pendant would be right with the white gown. I think it wouldn't be wrong to wear it."

Her thought was quickly translated into action. Going back to the night nursery, she extracted from the bottom of her modest trunk, the box in which she kept her treasure, and drawing out the pendant on its slender chain, held it up to catch the rays of light from the hanging lamp over the chest of drawers. The great emerald shone brightly like some vividly green star, Christina thought, and the brilliants with which it was set, sparkled and scintillated in the light.

"It does look nice," the girl whispered complacently, as she clasped the chain, and saw the exquisite jewel resting against the whiteness of her neck, "and I wonder what those twisted letters A.V.C. mean? Mother's first name was Mary, her second name was Helen, and not anything beginning with A or V, and of course I don't know what was her surname. I wonder why the initials are A.V.C."

But her speculations were of short duration, and soon forgotten in the excitement of going downstairs to join the rest of the party in the hall, after receiving Baba's bear-like good-night hug, and parting words of admiration.

"I am going to have such a very happy evening," Christina said to herself, as she went along the corridor, and stood for a moment at the top of the wide staircase, looking down into the hall below. "I didn't think I was ever in my life going to have such a happy time, as Lady Cicely lets me have, and to-night will be lovely, just lovely. And how beautiful the hall looks." Her face was bright with eagerness, her eyes shining with excitement, as she ran down the stairs, quite unaware of what a charming picture she made against the background of dark oak, in her simple white gown, with her crown of dusky hair, and the shining happiness of her eyes. She was right in designating the hall as beautiful. Lighted by myriads of candles, the old walls reflected the bright armour, and the leaping flames of the huge fire that burnt on the hearth; the carpets and rugs were all of rich soft hues, that harmonised with the black oak and the shining armour, and pots of bright azaleas, of roses, and of tall lilies, filled the place with colour and fragrance. Christina drew a long breath of delight, and the momentary shyness that had swept over her, when the little group by the fireplace turned to watch her descend the stairs, was dissipated when Lady Cicely put out a hand, and said kindly:

"Come close to the blaze, dear, and enjoy it. Is that monkey of mine safely in bed?"

"She is on her way there, but I left her dancing round the nursery, singing improvised songs about my clothes, and——"

Her sentence was cut short by a sharp exclamation from Sir Arthur, who, as she came near the fire at Cicely's invitation, cast a keenly enquiring glance at her, taking in each detail of her person, from the crown of her hair to the tip of the shoe just showing beneath her white gown.

And when that inquisitorial glance fell upon the jewel resting on her neck, that sharp exclamation broke from him.

"How did you come by that pendant?" he questioned, the words jerked out with an abruptness totally lacking in courtesy. "Did it not strike you as rather rash to flaunt it here, in my very face?"



"How did you come by that pendant?" he questioned.

"To—flaunt—it here?" Christina said shakily, her hand going instinctively to her treasure. "I—don't understand."

"Come, come, my dear young lady," Sir Arthur answered curtly, waving Cicely aside, when she made an attempt to intervene. "You cannot—you really cannot, pretend to misunderstand my very simple question. I asked you—where did you get that pendant?"

Christina's eyes, wide with fright, and bewildered with the shock of being questioned so brusquely and severely, looked from Sir Arthur to Lady Cicely, as though appealing for help, and Cicely said quietly—

"Cousin Arthur—what does all this mean?"

"It means," he said grimly, "that your child's nurse—her *lady* nurse—is wearing the pendant for which the police and I have been searching in vain. It means——"

"No, oh, no!" Cicely broke in. "I can't believe what you are implying. It couldn't be true. Christina tell Sir Arthur he is making a mistake. Tell him where your pendant comes from."

"From my mother," the girl faltered, still too taken aback by the unexpected onslaught, to be able to think clearly. "This pendant belonged to her; she gave it to me, and I——"

"Tut, tut!" Sir Arthur interrupted irritably; "it is futile to try and throw dust in our eyes in this way. That pendant is unmistakable—quite unmistakable—no one who had once seen it, could be under any delusion about it. It is unique—an heirloom in our family. The very letters above the emerald, are initials of an ancestress of mine."

Christina stood there silently whilst the above words were hurled at her, but her face grew paler and paler, fear deepened in her eyes.

"My mother—gave it to me," she said again, when as Sir Arthur ended, there was an expectant pause, as though some explanation was demanded from her; "she gave it to me when

she died—it was hers."

"Then you can, of course, tell us for what names the letters stand?" Sir Arthur said slowly, a tinge of contempt in his voice; and because of that note of contempt, Cicely moved nearer to the shrinking girl, whose frightened, bewildered expression moved the little lady's heart to pity for her, and indignation against the angry old man.

"Cousin Arthur," she said impulsively, "it is not fair to judge Christina, before she has explained about the pendant. Everybody in this land is innocent until he is proved guilty—that is surely only the bare law," and Cicely laughed a little nervously, looking round for support to Miss Doubleday, her kindly old governess, who, also moved by pity for the accused girl, had drawn nearer to Christina.

"I wish to do nothing unfair," was Sir Arthur's chilly rejoinder; "if, as Miss Moore tells us, that pendant belonged to her mother, she will be able to tell us, too, what the initials signify."

"I—don't—know," Christina faltered. "I—have often wondered—I—"

"Perhaps one of them is the initial of your mother's maiden name?" Miss Doubleday said gently, anxious to do everything in her power to help the now trembling girl.

"I—don't know my mother's maiden name——" Christina was beginning, when a short laugh broke from Sir Arthur.

"You do not know your mother's maiden name?" he said slowly; "come, come, surely you cannot expect us to believe that."

"I don't know whether you will believe it or not," Christina answered, with a sudden flash of defiance, "it is true. And I don't know what the initials are, but—my mother gave me the pendant. I am telling you the simple truth. I cannot say more."

"Perhaps you will tell us you never tried to—sell—or pawn that piece of jewellery, at a pawnbroker's shop in Chelsea a few weeks ago?" Sir Arthur asked next, his glance taking in the look of consternation that flashed over her face, the new, shrinking terror in her eyes. "Ah! you cannot deny that fact?"

"No, oh! no," Christina put out her hands as if to ward off an actual blow. "I did try to pawn it. I was so dreadfully poor, but—the man frightened me. I came away from the shop, then——"

"Exactly; they frightened you, because they showed you plainly that they suspected you of having come by the pendant dishonestly. You ran away from the shop."

The dreadful truth of every word spoken, the dreadful difficulty—nay, so it seemed to Christina, the impossibility of refuting the accusation levelled against her, made her feel helpless, tongue-tied, like some creature caught in a trap, from which there was no way of escape. She had no means, none at all, of proving her own story. Her mother, who had given her the jewel, was dead. She had never shown it to anyone; she had never had occasion to show it to anybody; as far as she knew, there was not a living soul in the world, who could come forward to declare that the pendant was hers. Even Mrs. Donaldson, her late employer, could not have vouched for her truth and honesty in this respect, for Mrs. Donaldson had not known that she possessed the beautiful thing; she had only been her mother's acquaintance, not even an intimate friend.

"But surely," the practical Miss Doubleday here intervened, "surely, if Miss Moore were guilty of stealing the pendant, she would not wear it here, under your very eyes, Sir Arthur. It is not likely——"

"I understood Miss Moore to say she was ignorant of the meaning of the initials above the pendant," the old gentleman answered coldly; "presumably, therefore, she is not aware that C stands for Congreve. There is no reason to suppose that she knew from whose bag she was taking the pendant, when she took it."

"But I did not take it," Christina cried; "indeed, indeed, I did not. It is my own, my very own; all I have told you is true." Sir Arthur ignored her words, turning gravely to his cousin.

"My dear Cicely, I am very sorry to be unintentionally the cause of so much unpleasantness for you, but I am afraid that, in the interests of justice, I shall be obliged to make this the subject of police investigation."

CHAPTER XVII.

"WHO DO YOU MEAN BY SIR ARTHUR?"

Boxing Day had dawned bright and sunny, but before the afternoon, rain began to fall, and a rising wind was sweeping over the moor, when, between three and four o'clock, Denis Fergusson drove along the upland road. A case of pneumonia in a desolate hamlet had suddenly taken a grave turn, and as he sped across the open stretch of country, his thoughts were concentrated on his patient, and on the gravity of her condition. Having threshed out in his mind all the possibilities with regard to this anxious charge, he allowed his thoughts to drift back to his afternoon at Bramwell Castle two days before, to Baba's winsome ways, to the sweetness of Baba's mother, to his own dream idyll, the dreaming of which had, he was convinced, been such an absurdity, and yet—and yet, the dream had seemed so wonderful.

"People may scoff at the bare idea of love at first sight," he mused, as the car passed on its rapid way in the gathering twilight, "but—sometimes it happens—even to the most prosaic of us." And out of the grey mists that crept over the brown expanse of heather and bracken, he seemed to see Cicely's face, smiling that fascinating smile of hers, which was so childlike, so appealing, so sweet.

"And her eyes are like the speedwell in the June hedges," his thoughts ran on; "such a heavenly blue, and when she looks up into your face, and her eyes look at you, with the wistfulness of a lovely child's eyes, you want to take her in your arms, and kiss her—and kiss her —"

"By Jove, my good fellow, you are a fool," he broke in upon his own inward colloquy, "an abject fool. The little lady of the speedwell eyes, is as far above you as the stars in heaven, and you know it. A struggling South London doctor might quite as well aspire to the planet Venus, as to the lady of Bramwell Castle. The less such ideas are encouraged, the better."

Resolutely thrusting from him the thoughts that had obtruded themselves unbidden, he drove rapidly on, whilst the grey mists deepened upon the country side; the rain that had begun in a fine drizzle, began to come down in torrents, and the wind rose gradually to the fury of a hurricane. Across the open stretch of heathland, the gale broke with terrific force, the rain lashed Fergusson's face and ran in swift streams down his mackintoshed shoulders and arms; and it was with a little sigh of relief that he turned out of the main road, and into the lane at whose bottom stood the lonely house. Here there was a certain amount of shelter from the high hedges and overshadowing trees, though the great gusts of wind shook the trees until they creaked, and groaned, and bent beneath the blast; and even in the depths of the desolate valley itself, Fergusson found himself nearly lifted from his feet by the hurricane, when he alighted at the green gate in the wall. Elizabeth appeared quickly in answer to his ring, and her grave face made him say sharply—

"She is not worse?"

"She seems less like herself to-night," the servant answered, a little catch in her voice; "she doesn't always know where she is, or who is talking to her. I think—she has got to the end. She can bear no more." The expression used, struck the doctor strangely.

"I think she has got to the end." The same feeling had been in his own mind when last he had visited the beautiful, lonely lady; it had seemed to him, too, as though she had come to the end of her powers of endurance—as though, having borne lash after lash from fortune, she could bear no more.

When he entered her room, he found her lying very still, her face scarcely less white than the pillow against which it rested, her great eyes fixed on the leaping flames of the fire, her hands folded on the sheet, in a way which he had noticed was peculiar to her, the fingers of her right hand close clasped about the plain gold ring, that rested on the third finger of her left.

"Whatever the poor chap who has gone to his account was or did, this woman loved him with an amazing love," Fergusson thought, as he had thought a hundred times before, whilst he spoke gently to his patient, seating himself beside her, and observing her closely, though he talked of everything and anything excepting her health.

"Do you know," she said presently, her voice very low and dreamy. "I think I have come to the end." This repetition of Elizabeth's words, and of his own thoughts, startled Fergusson, but he did not betray his surprise, only answering gently—

"You are worn out now. You have had a long strain, and you were not quite fit to stand it." She smiled up at him, an infinitely pathetic smile.

"It is not only that. I don't want to be morbid. I don't mean to be morbid. But something—seems to have snapped inside me—some vitality, some power has gone, and—I have come to the end."

"You feel that now, because of the shock and strain, and because, at the best of times, you are not strong. By and by——"

"Ah! but I don't think there will be any by and by," she interrupted quietly, "and I am not sorry. Life has brought so much more pain than joy—that—I am not either sorry or afraid. Only I wish I could have done more for my world, before I went out of it," she added half whimsically,

half sadly, a little smile breaking over her face.

"Perhaps what you have been, has had even more influence over your world than what you have done," Fergusson said quietly; "it is not always the most apparently active people, who have the greatest effect on their fellows."

She smiled at him again, but she did not continue the conversation, allowing it to drift away to other topics, until Fergusson, having given her his orders, and promised to send her a new medicine on the morrow, took his departure.

"What a baffling mystery the woman is," he reflected, as he walked across the garden to the door in the wall. "I am not more curious than the average man, but I confess she has aroused my curiosity. What has her life been? And why has she——" At this point in his meditations he opened the door, and was on the point of passing out into the road, when he became aware of a figure, leaning against the wall close to the door itself. The last remnants of daylight had almost died away, the rain was falling in pitiless torrents, and Fergusson, peering through the twilight gloom, recognised with horror the face of Christina Moore, looking terribly white and exhausted in the dimness. Her crouching position seemed to indicate that she was tired out, and when Fergusson went quickly to her side, and put a hand on her shoulder, she shrank back and shivered from head to foot, lifting such frightened eyes to his, that he peered this way and that, thinking she must be fleeing from some dastardly pursuer. But, excepting for the moaning of the wind in the trees, and the swishing of the rain, no sound broke the silence, and save the girl herself, there was no sign of any other human being in the lane.

"What has happened?" he asked, speaking very quietly, to calm her overmastering excitement; "come into the house out of the rain, and tell me what is the matter. Why, you are wet through," he added sharply, as he put his hand through the girl's arm, and drew her up the flagged path to the front door.

"Yes, I'm wet through," she answered in slow, mechanical tones. "I—I believe it has rained ever since I left the station."

"The station? Have you walked from the station?" They were standing in the hall now, and by the light of a hanging lamp in its centre, Fergusson could see that the wet was running from Christina's garments, and dropping in small pools on the floor, and that the look of exhaustion was deepening on her face.

"Yes, I walked," she said. "I hadn't much money. I was afraid I shouldn't have enough for the cab. They might have called me a thief again—and—I am not a thief—indeed, indeed, I am not." Her eyes met his once more, with so strange and dazed a look, that he began to wonder whether some great shock had unhinged her brain, but he only said, more quietly than before:—

"I am quite sure you are not a thief. I will call Elizabeth, and she will take care of you. Does Mrs. Stanforth expect you?"

"Oh! no, no," Christina spoke breathlessly; "only I was so frightened, I didn't know what to do, when they said I was a thief, for I can't prove that I am not. I can't prove anything. I have only my bare word. Everybody who could help me is dead."

Feeling more and more mystified by every word she spoke, Fergusson rang the bell, and when Elizabeth promptly answered his summons, and stared in mute surprise at the dripping figure standing under the lamp, he said tersely:—

"Miss Moore has arrived unexpectedly, and she is very wet. Will you put her to bed with hot bottles, and give her something hot to drink? Don't let her talk to-night. I will come round and see her in the morning."

Perhaps Elizabeth, in the long years of her service with Margaret, had learnt to accustom herself to surprises, and she expressed no astonishment now; but a look of compassion for the drenched and exhausted girl crossed her kindly face; and, with a comprehending nod to the doctor, she took Christina's hand and led her upstairs, the girl going with her, as unresistingly as a little child might have done.

"Worn out, utterly worn out, and frightened to death," Fergusson commented inwardly; "now what can have happened to bring her here in this condition, and to make her say such extraordinary things about not being a thief. I must tell Mrs. Stanforth what liberties I have taken with her house, and come back as early as I can to-morrow." He ran lightly upstairs again to his patient's room, and told her of Christina's unlooked-for arrival, finding, to his relief, that she was in no wise startled or upset by what she heard.

"Poor little girl," was her soft comment; "we will take great care of her. Elizabeth loves having a young thing to mother; we will do our best for her, and perhaps in the morning she will be able to explain herself. It is difficult to imagine what can have happened; she seemed to be so happy in her work."

"It is impossible to suppose that Lady Cicely can have been unkind to her," Fergusson answered thoughtfully; "she could not be unkind to a living soul. However, speculation is a

fruitless task; we must wait till Miss Moore can tell us her own story. I did not dare question her to-night, she was already completely overwrought."

And it was still a very wan and white Christina, who was taken the next morning into Margaret's room by Elizabeth; and Margaret's observant eyes saw at once that all the girl's nerves were on the stretch, that she was in a condition of acute tension. The wish to help this young thing in her hour of need, the sudden necessity for stretching out a succouring hand to another human being, acted as a trumpet call to Margaret's own strong character, and she looked more herself this morning, than she had done for many weeks.

"You poor child," she said to Christina, a motherly tenderness in her accents; "have you slept properly; and are you rested?"

"I woke rather often," the girl answered with a nervous glance about her. "I kept on starting up, and fancying they had come with the police."

"Why should anyone come with the police?" Margaret asked gently; "tell me what has happened—why are you afraid? Surely Lady Cicely cannot have treated you unfairly or unkindly?"

"No—o," Christina faltered. "I think she believed in me, but—Sir Arthur——"

"Sir Arthur," Margaret interrupted, a sudden sharp note in her voice; "who—do you mean by Sir Arthur?"

"Sir Arthur Congreve. He is Lady Cicely's cousin—her husband's cousin." Margaret's white face flushed brightly, but she did not speak. "It was he who accused me of—being a thief; and I was so frightened, so dreadfully frightened, that I ran away."

"Ran away? Oh! my dear; try to collect yourself, and tell me quietly all about everything. Why did Sir Arthur make such an accusation against you?"

"He saw—a piece of jewellery I was wearing, and he—said it had belonged to his wife—that—Lady Congreve had been robbed, and that I had robbed her. He was sure of it, quite, quite sure, and I had nothing but my bare word to give him; I could prove nothing."

"But—I can't understand. Why should Sir Arthur imagine you would wish to steal El—— I mean his wife's jewel. Had she lost it at Bramwell Castle?"

"No; she lost it some weeks ago in a train. A young woman took it from her bag; and they are sure I was the young woman. You see, when I came to Lady Cicely, I only had references from people who were dead, or much too far off to be got at, like the solicitor who is I don't know where in Africa. She took me on trust, and—there isn't anybody here who can say I am honest, not anybody." Christina's words ended in a little wail; she put her head down upon the coverlet, and Margaret's hands softly caressed her dusky hair.

"But why did you run away?" she asked. "Surely it would have been better to face the difficulty? They may think your running away is a sign of guilt."

"I know," the girl answered, lifting her head, and looking into Margaret's face with despairing eyes. "I thought of that so often as I was coming along in the train, but I was afraid to go back. I am afraid to try to face it out, because you see I can prove nothing."

"When did Sir Arthur make this accusation?"

"Yesterday; I think it was yesterday," Christina frowned with the effort of memory. "It was on Christmas evening—yes, that was yesterday. And when Sir Arthur said he would send for the police, I ran out of the hall, and up to my room. I think I was almost mad. I tore off my frock—my pretty frock that Lady Cicely had given me, and when there came a knock at the door, and I heard Lady Cicely's voice, I would not let her in at first. And then I opened the door, and she came in, and begged me to tell just the whole truth. And I said I had told the truth—I couldn't make it any different. And she was so sad—her eyes looked all hurt, and she said she couldn't doubt me, and yet Sir Arthur was determined to send for the police. And—then she said she would send up my dinner to the nursery. It was Christmas Day, you know," the girl went on, a wistful look in her eyes; "and I had been looking forward so very much to Christmas, in a happy homely home like Bramwell Castle; and my new frock was so sweet; and then—to think of having to eat my Christmas dinner alone in the nursery, accused of being a thief," a little sob caught her breath. "But I didn't eat the dinner at all," she went on hurriedly. "After Lady Cicely had gone down again, I thought and thought about the police coming, until I couldn't bear it any more. So I just put on my serge frock, and my thick coat and hat; and whilst dinner was going on in the dining-room, I slipped away, and out of the house. I felt like a wild thing, mad with terror, my only wish was to get right away as fast as I could—I was afraid, I was so afraid. And I did not know where to go, or what to do; and, when the thought of you came into my head, I knew I must come straight to you."

"But, my dear," Margaret's gentle voice broke in, "you say all this happened last night. Where did you sleep? How could you get away from Bramwell Castle, on Christmas night?"

"I walked to one of the nearest stations; not the one they generally use, but another—Hansley—where no one knew me by sight, and there was no train till early in the morning. So I just stayed in the waiting-room all night. They let me—though it wasn't really allowed—but they let me do it, because there was nowhere else for me to stay; and in the morning I came away again, and because it was Boxing Day, the trains were very bad and very slow, and I did not get to Merlands Station till ever so late; and then I walked here."

"Walked here? From Merlands? But, my dear, it must be seven miles."

"It seemed like a hundred," Christina answered wearily. "I didn't know how to get myself along at last; and it blew and rained, and I thought I should die on the road. Only I wanted to get to you."

Margaret's caressing hand again stroked the girl's dark hair.

"You poor little thing," she said. "I am glad you came to me, but I am sorry you came away at all. It will make things so much worse for you."

"But you will keep me here?" Christina pleaded, a look of panic terror in her eyes. "You won't make me go back to Bramwell? You won't let me be given up to the police?"

"We must talk it all over with Dr. Fergusson," was the gentle rejoinder. "I don't feel that I am quite strong enough to decide what is best for you to do, but Dr. Fergusson will know. He has such a sound judgment, and he judges rightly, as well as soundly."

"It was cowardly of me to run away," the girl exclaimed, clasping her hands together with a curiously childish gesture; "but—I felt so alone—so frightened—and I had no proof that what I said was true. I have no proofs now. I can't even make it clear to you, that I am not telling a pack of lies."

"Can't you?" Margaret smiled. "I don't think I want proofs of your truthfulness; you carry truth in your face. All the same, for your own sake, and for the sake of justice, I am sorry you can produce no proofs of your statement."

"I can't do anything but give my word," the girl said despairingly. "Mother gave me the jewel just before she died. It was a great treasure of hers; she valued it immensely. I think she meant to tell me something more when she gave it me, only—the sentence she began was never finished. The two last words she spoke, the very last, were, 'Tell Arthur'—and then—she died."

"Tell—Arthur?" The same startled look which the mention of that name had before brought into Margaret's eyes, flashed into them again. "Who was—Arthur?"

"I—don't know. I never knew anything about my mother's people. I do not even know her maiden name. And that sounds so improbable, that it made my story about the jewel seem more than ever ridiculous, when I told it at Bramwell Castle."

"What a strange complication," Margaret's dark eyes fixed themselves thoughtfully on Christina's face. "I wonder why your mother kept you in ignorance of her maiden name, and of her family? Have you any idea what made her so reticent?"

"No; until lately it never struck me how odd and unusual it is that I should not know these things. I never mixed with other girls. We lived a very isolated life, my father and mother and I, and I accepted everything in it without question. But now I realise that it was not ordinary and normal. And I often wonder about it. But—I shall never know what it all meant. They are dead—my father and mother, and the clergyman who knew us in Devonshire is dead; and, as I told you, the solicitor went to Africa; and I don't know where he is."

"But these people with whom you lived—the Donaldsons. Surely they must know something of your history?"

"Oh! no, they would know nothing. I only knew Mrs. Donaldson at all, because she was staying in the village near our home, and mother was kind to her children, when they were ill. She was in no way an intimate friend of ours. And the people—the very few people we knew in the village, were only acquaintances. There is nobody in the whole world who could vouch for my innocence."

"It is a curious predicament. We can only ask Dr. Fergusson's advice, and act upon it. I wish I could understand why there is something so oddly familiar about your face and voice." Her own low voice was puzzled. "I believe I have asked you this before; but are you sure, quite sure, we never met until you saw me here?"

"Quite sure," Christina answered emphatically. "I couldn't have forgotten you. But I think I must be very like somebody, for last night"—she shivered—"just as I crossed the hall of the Castle, I saw Lady Congreve give a big start, and she said to Lady Cicely quite loud, I couldn't help hearing her—'My dear Cicely, who is she like?' I think I must have a double somewhere."

"I think you must," Margaret replied slowly. "It is very curious. But, to go back to the more

vital matter of the moment. Did you bring away the jewel which has caused all this trouble?"

"Why, yes," Christina answered simply. "It was on my neck when Sir Arthur saw it, and I never took it off. I can show it to you now." Slipping her hand inside her frock, the girl unfastened the slender gold chain, drew out the pendant, and handed it to the woman in the bed.

"You see," she said, "it is very beautiful and very unique; that wonderful emerald, with the twisted letters above it; the letters——"

"Yes—I see," Margaret's voice was low and hoarse, and Christina, roused from her absorption in her own thoughts of the jewel, and of all that had happened, started when she saw the expression on the other's face. "I see," Margaret repeated; "the emerald—with brilliants round it, and above it the twisted letters—A.V.C. But how comes it that your mother possessed this pendant with the letters A.V.C.? What does it mean? My dear child, what *does* it mean?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

"YOU ARE MY OWN SISTER'S CHILD."

"She has totally disappeared, and, of course, her disappearance makes Cousin Arthur more sure than ever that she is guilty; and oh! Rupert, it is just a horrid tangle, and I wish you had come home sooner."

"So do I." Rupert, standing by the fireplace in Cicely's boudoir in Bramwell Castle, looked kindly down at his cousin; "but it is really a piece of good luck that I am here now. I expected to have to spend some weeks in Naples, but it turned out that young Jack had given us all a causeless scare. He hadn't got typhoid, only rather a good spurious imitation of it, and he is doing perfectly well. So, having wiped off an old score with him, I came away."

"Wiped off an old score?" Cicely looked mystified.

"Yes; young ass! He played a low-down practical joke upon me a few weeks ago; and I am glad to say he was convalescent enough to be able to receive the piece of my mind which I offered him before I left Naples." Rupert laughed rather grimly; then said quickly: "However, Layton and his practical joke are immaterial now. Tell me about Miss Moore. You say Sir Arthur accuses her of stealing? It sounds a preposterous notion."

"My dear Rupert, Cousin Arthur is nothing if not preposterous, and the worst of it is, that this time he has some sort of method in his madness. It seems perfectly obvious, that Christina was wearing a pendant that had belonged to Cousin Ellen; and they accuse her of having stolen it." Cicely next proceeded to tell in full the story of the accusation and its results, and Rupert listened in silence, until she had finished. Then he said slowly—

"But no girl in her senses would flaunt a stolen thing in the faces of the people from whom she stole it. Common sense might have told Sir Arthur that elementary fact."

"He doesn't know the meaning of common sense," Cicely exclaimed. "He made up his mind Christina was the young woman who was in the train, and stole the pendant from Cousin Ellen's bag, and you might as well try to shake Mont Blanc down, as alter Cousin Arthur's fixed convictions. He frightened Christina out of her wits with threats of the police, and she ran away."

"Pity she did that," Rupert said tersely. "She would have been wiser to face it out; and I can't believe she can be guilty. It is impossible to connect guilt with her." As he spoke, he saw a mental picture of a low, fire-lit room, a girlish face uplifted to his in the dancing light of the flames, sweet eyes full of sympathy, a mouth just curved into a smile, that made him think vaguely of the way his mother had smiled at him, though the girl herself was such a bit of a thing, and so young. "I can't think of her as guilty," he repeated.

"Of course you can't," Cicely said impatiently. "I should as soon believe I was a thief myself, as believe Christina to be one. Don't imagine I doubt her. I never doubted her for a moment. Only—I wish she hadn't gone away; and I wish I knew where she had gone."

Rupert's face grew grave.

"Has she any friends or relations to whom she would be likely to go?"

"I am afraid not. You know she was rather a waif and stray, when I first engaged her as Baba's nurse. You were doubtful then about my wisdom in taking her with practically no references. But she has been invaluable with Baba; and I have learnt to care for her, too. She is such a dear soul!"

"A restful soul," Rupert said dreamily; and, as Cicely stared at him in surprise, a little look of embarrassment crossed his face. "I saw her at Graystone, when I went to call upon Baba," he said, trying to speak lightly, because of the surprise in Cicely's glance; "she seemed to be just the sort of restful, cheery nurse you would want for a child."

"Yes," Cicely answered, wondering why Rupert's first dreamy words "a restful soul," seemed to have no connection with the latter part of his sentence.

"She suits Baba admirably. The poor baby is utterly woebegone without her. Baba calls Christina her pretty lady; and she has been crying her small heart out over her loss."

"Miss Moore went away on Christmas night, you say?"

"Yes; two nights ago. She took nothing with her in the way of luggage. She must have walked to the station. She went to Hansley. We have discovered that much, and she sat all night in the waiting-room, because there was no train till the early morning."

"Then you know to what place she booked?" Rupert questioned.

"She booked to Torne Junction; beyond there we cannot trace her. Cousin Arthur ramped all yesterday, and talked a great deal of bombastic nonsense. To-day, to my great relief, he and Cousin Ellen departed. But he still threatens the police. I am only hoping he may let the police question lapse for a day or two; he is very busy hunting down a derelict brother-in-law."

"My dear Cicely, what do you mean—a derelict brother-in-law?"

"I know nothing about the poor thing," Cicely spread out her hands, and laughed. "Cousin Arthur takes it for granted that I have his family history at my finger ends, and I can't remember that John ever told me whether Cousin Arthur ever had a brother-in-law. But the dear old man throws out mysterious hints about the derelict, who has evidently done something terrible, and he sighs and groans over his poor sister, the derelict's wife, but I don't know what has happened to either the sister or her husband. Meanwhile——"

"Meanwhile, we have no right to let a young girl like Miss Moore lose herself or get into difficulties, if we can possibly prevent it," Rupert said. "Her running away was an undoubted blunder, but it is our business to find her, and try to set things straight. The difficulty is to know where to begin to look for her. Scotland Yard suggests itself as the place to which in common sense one should apply for help."

"I don't want publicity and fuss if it can be avoided," Cicely said doubtfully. "Cousin Arthur's rigid sense of justice, makes him declare with unwavering obstinacy that it is a case for the police, the whole police, and nothing but the police. But being an ordinary silly, fluffy, little woman, I have the ordinary woman's horror of the law."

"You are so entirely typical of the silly, fluffy woman," Rupert said drily, but looking at his cousin with affectionate, laughing eyes. "However, without bringing the majesty of the law to bear upon the theft, or rather supposed theft—for I don't myself believe in it—there is no reason why Scotland Yard should not help us to find Miss Moore. Perhaps I can induce Sir Arthur to hold his hand for the present about the accusation against her. He must be amenable to——"

The sentence was broken off short, as the door opened, and a footman entered and handed a telegram to his mistress.

"For Cousin Arthur," she said, glancing from the orange-coloured envelope to Rupert. "I wonder whether I had better just open it, or have it re-telegraphed straight on to him?"

"Open it, I should think," Rupert answered carelessly; "it may be some trivial matter which you can answer," and acting upon his words, Cicely drew out the pink paper from its orange cover, and read the lines written upon it; read them slowly, and with a puzzled frown, that changed suddenly to an expression of delight.

"What an extraordinary coincidence. You need not wait, James. I will send the answer down to the telegraph boy in a few minutes. Look at this, Rupert," she went on, as the footman left the room. "Isn't it extraordinary that this telegram should have come in the very middle of our conversation?"

Rupert took the flimsy paper from her hand, and as he read the words, his cousin saw an extraordinary change flash over his face—a dusky colour mounted to his forehead, a strange brightness leapt to his eyes; and, having read the words to himself, he read them aloud—

"Come here at once. Wire to post office, Graystone; and any train shall be met. Christina Moore with me. Have made important discovery.—MARGARET STANFORTH."

"At last," he murmured under his breath, as with curious deliberation he folded up the

telegram, and handed it back to Cicely. "At last I have found her."

The low-spoken words reached Cicely's ears, and she stared at her cousin's transformed face, saying almost involuntarily—

"But—Rupert—I can't understand. Are you really so pleased to have found Christina?"

Rupert looked at her with a sudden confusion in his glance.

"Did I speak my thoughts aloud?" he said; "look here, Cicely, I am afraid I was not thinking of Miss Moore at that moment, though I am glad, very glad, to hear she is safe. And she is in such good hands, too," he added softly, the light in his eyes making Cicely realise all at once that there was a Rupert she had never known, besides the Rupert who had always been so steadfast a rock upon which to lean.

"It isn't fair to have said so much, and not to say more," he added quickly. "This lady who telegraphs—Margaret Stanforth—is—a friend of mine, a most noble and dear friend. I—had lost sight of her, and—I am glad to know where she is." Although the words were bald to the point of coldness, Cicely saw that the usually self-controlled man was deeply stirred by an emotion that almost overmastered him, and she tactfully refrained from directly answering his words, saying only—

"I am very glad Christina is in such good hands. I must telegraph this message on to Cousin Arthur at once. It is evidently most important."

"Evidently," Rupert replied absently, but he roused himself to re-write the telegram for Cicely; and, only when it had been despatched, did he turn to her and say—

"I wonder whether it would be wrong of me to take advantage of the information this telegram has given me; whether I might go to Graystone, too?"

"But, you see, there is no actual address on the message," Cicely answered, her quicker woman's wit having discovered the omission. "Graystone post office is mentioned, but it is obvious that for some reason the lady's own address has been left out. I—don't feel that I can give any advice when I know none of the circumstances, but—it seems like taking an unfair advantage to—to act on this telegram, which you are not supposed to have seen at all."

"And some fools in this world declare a woman has no sense of honour," Rupert exclaimed with a short laugh. "You can give me points about honour, that's certain. Of course, you are right," he laughed again, a rueful, rather bitter little laugh. "I can't go and hunt her out on the strength of a telegram I was never meant to see. But, my God! it is hard to keep away." He turned from Cicely, and, putting his arms upon the mantelpiece, leant his head upon them for a moment—only for a moment—then he straightened himself, and said quietly—

"After all, I have got to forget this telegram, ignore it, and make myself feel that things are 'as they were.'"

"I am so sorry, Rupert," Cicely said gently, answering the look on his face rather than his actual speech. "Is there nothing anybody can do for you?"

"You dear and kind little person," he answered. "No, there is nothing. Mrs. Stanforth is my friend, the best friend man ever had, and if, just now, she finds it best that there should be silence between us, I am ready to accept her decision. Only silence is—the very devil," he ended, with again a rueful laugh.

* * * * *

That telegram to Sir Arthur Congreve would have been despatched on the previous day, but for Margaret's sudden and startling collapse during her conversation with Christina. The girl's mention of the pendant which she asserted had been given her by her mother; and, the sight of the pendant itself, had produced in the elder woman a terrible excitement, which had ended in her sinking back amongst her pillows in a dead faint. The words she had spoken before she became unconscious, had seemed to Christina like the incoherent ramblings of a delirious person, and in the alarm caused by Margaret's unconsciousness, she had set them aside, and to all intents and purposes forgotten them. Indeed, so little importance had she attached to them, that when Dr. Fergusson came to see his patient, Christina only accounted for Margaret's sudden collapse, by the long and interesting conversation in which they had been engaged, and she added in accents of self-reproach—

"I think I ought not to have come here at all, and certainly I ought not to have shown her how upset and frightened I was."

"Your coming, and even the telling of your story, ought not to be enough to account for Mrs. Stanforth's collapsing in this way," the doctor answered, a puzzled look in his eyes. "She is such a singularly sane, well-balanced woman, that one feels there must have been something quite unusual to account for her fainting so suddenly. As far as you know, she had no shock?"

"No; none," Christina replied. "I mean, I know of no shock. I was just sitting by her bed, telling her about Sir Arthur and his accusation, and she was very much interested, and asked if I had the pendant with me. And directly she saw it, she got quite white, and she said something I could not understand, about the initials over the emerald; and then, all at once, she dropped back and was unconscious in a few seconds."

Fergusson looked keenly at the speaker.

"Mrs. Stanforth had never seen this pendant before?"

"No; never," it was Christina's turn to look puzzled. "I had never seen her until the day she came out to the gate to ask me to fetch a doctor. To all intents and purposes she and I are strangers."

"It seems rather incomprehensible, like a good many things connected with this house," Fergusson said, under his breath. He and Christina stood in what was evidently the drawing-room of the house—a long low room, furnished with the rather heavy and uninteresting furniture of the early Victorian period, the light-coloured chintzes on the chairs and sofas, and the pale grey of the walls, giving the only relief to the dinginess of the apartment.

"I am not more inquisitive than the rest of mankind," Fergusson went on, his eyes glancing round the room into which he had never before penetrated, "but I confess this establishment and its mistress do arouse my curiosity. However, her affairs are no affair of ours," he wound up briskly, "and my business now is to make her——" he broke off abruptly, and looked keenly at Christina, a great sadness in his eyes. "No, I can't say 'make her well'; there is no hope of that; but I've got to make her better."

"Do you mean," Christina asked; "do you mean—that she—can't—get really well?"

Fergusson shook his head. "She is worn out; something has worn her out; whether a long strain, or a great sorrow, I cannot say. But she has no more resisting power; she has come to the end of it all. And she is too ill now to be able to right herself again."

"It seems so dreadful," Christina whispered.

"So much in life seems so dreadful," he answered kindly; "but when some day we learn the reason for all that made things so impossible to understand, we shall know that the pattern has been worked out exactly right, by Hands far more skilful than ours. We can see only such a little bit of the pattern now. By and by we shall see the whole."

"Mrs. Stanforth is asking for the young lady," Elizabeth's voice sounded from the door. "She seems more like herself now; and she wants the young lady to come to her at once."

The doctor and Christina moved quickly away together to the bedroom, where Margaret lay with her face towards the door, her dark eyes full of wistful eagerness. Christina thought she had never seen anyone who looked so fragile, so ethereal; it seemed to the girl as though a breath might have power to blow her away. Yet her voice was curiously strong, and the eagerness in her eyes was apparent, too, in her voice.

"It was stupid of me to faint," she said, putting out her hands to the girl. "I expect I am not very strong, and all that suddenly flashed upon me when you showed me the pendant, came as a great shock."

"When I showed you the pendant?" Christina repeated, and there was unfeigned surprise in her glance. "But did you know; had you seen——"

"Yes—I think—I know all about the pendant," came the slow reply; "though I am not sure that I have actually seen it before—I think I know all about it. I believe I can clear up the mystery that has puzzled Arthur—Sir Arthur—and I hope I can prove to him that you are not a thief."

"But—how strange," Christina faltered, whilst Dr. Fergusson, standing at the end of the bed, looked intently at his patient, wondering whether by any possibility she could be wandering, and deciding that her eyes and manner were too sane and quiet, to allow such a possibility to be considered.

"Not really strange"; a smile illuminated the beautiful face in the bed; "in real life these coincidences happen oftener than people think, and I only wonder I was so foolish as not to see the truth before."

"What truth?" Christina asked, feeling more than ever puzzled.

"Why—my dear—that you and I have a real tie to one another. I think—no, I am almost sure—that you are my own sister's child."

"Oh!" It was the only word that Christina could utter for a long, long moment; then she exclaimed under her breath, "But—how could such a wonderful thing be true? Why do you think it is possible? Could I really, really belong to you? *Oh!*" She spoke breathlessly, her colour coming and going, her eyes bright, and Margaret smiled again.

"I believe you could really belong to me," she said, "and it was that beautiful pendant of yours which gave me the clue, which made me realise why I had so constantly felt as if I must have known you before. I am sure your mother was my dear elder sister; and there is so much in you like her—little ways of looking and speaking, little gestures—oh! I don't know why I did not see long ago that you must be Helen's daughter."

"Mother's name was Helen," the girl said, "and she often talked to me about her lovely sister, but she always spoke of her as Peg."

"That name makes me remember myself as very young indeed," Margaret answered tremulously, her eyes suddenly misty with tears. "When I was just a wild girl with my hair all down my back, Helen called me Peg. And Arthur always thought a nickname rather *infra dig*."

"Arthur?" Christina said quickly.

"Yes, Arthur, my brother Arthur. Ah! I forgot. You do not understand the wheels within wheels of all this strange discovery. Sir Arthur Congreve is my brother, and——"

"Your brother?" Christina's tone rang with amazement, and the doctor started.

"My brother; and if my surmises are correct, which I am sure they are, he is your uncle."

"How funny," Christina said, a little twinkle in her eyes; "and he very nearly handed his own niece over to the police—if it is all really true. Only it seems like some sort of wonderful fairy tale, that couldn't possibly be true."

"How do you account for the pendant which, according to Sir Arthur, belongs to his wife, Lady Congreve, being in Miss Moore's possession," Fergusson here put in. "I do not doubt Miss Moore for an instant—not for a single instant—but why was Sir Arthur so sure she was wearing his wife's jewel?"

"Because the pendant Miss Moore wears, is an exact replica of the one belonging to Lady Congreve," Margaret answered composedly; "but I do not suppose either Arthur or his wife have the least idea that the pendant was ever copied."

"Copied?" Christina echoed.

"Yes. The pendant belonging to Arthur's wife, is an heirloom in our family, passing always to the wife of the eldest son. But Helen, your mother, dear—I am quite sure she was your mother—was the eldest of we three. Helen first, next Arthur, and then me. I was the baby. And because Helen was her firstborn and, I think, her favourite child, our mother had the family pendant copied for her after she went away. The initials are the initials of an ancestor of ours to whom the pendant belonged. A.V.C.—Amabel Veronica Congreve."

"But my mother never saw her own mother, or any of her people, after she first left them," Christina said. "They were angry with her for marrying my father. She never saw them again."

"No, she never saw them again. Both she and I—married against their wishes, and after I—left my old home, I never went back to it any more. But I think our mother's heart must have yearned over Helen, for she had that pendant copied, just as I said, and she sent it to Helen. She told me so herself. I did not leave home till three years later than Helen."

"Then your mother and Mrs. Moore corresponded?" Dr. Fergusson asked.

"No, not quite that. My father was terribly angry at Helen's marriage, as he was afterwards about mine. But Helen wrote to my mother when her baby was born, and it was then that the pendant was copied and sent. No one but I knew that my mother had had it done; my father was a very stern man. He would have been terribly angry with my mother if he had known of this, and she told no one but me. Arthur never knew."

"The whole thing seems to be growing clearer and clearer," Fergusson said slowly, "and you will be able to make it plain to Sir Arthur."

A shiver ran through Margaret's frame.

"It means—that I must see—Arthur," she said; and for the first time since she had begun speaking, her voice shook. "I must see him, and tell him all the story of the pendant—all—the real necessity for hiding is over," she added under her breath; "it is only cowardice to avoid Arthur now."

"There is one thing that puzzles me,"; the doctor left his post at the foot of the bed, and, coming to his patient's side, laid a finger on her wrist. "I do not want you to worry yourself now, with any more thoughts and questionings. Only answer me this one thing. If you knew your sister's married name, why did you never connect Miss Moore with her?"

"I did not know her real name," was the reply; "she married a singer. She met him in town. I was a young girl at home in the country, and I never saw him. In the singing world he was known as Signor Donaldo; and we only knew of him by that name."

"My father's name was Donald," Christina exclaimed. "And I knew that once he had sung, but before I can remember anything he had lost his voice; he played the organ in the village church, and he taught music, too, and singing as well. But he was never called anything but Moore. I never knew him by any other name. Mother has often told me he could not bear to remember the time when he had a beautiful voice; and I think he must have dropped his singing name, when he lost his voice."

"And he and Helen—were happy?" The words seemed to break involuntarily from Margaret's lips.

"I think father and mother never stopped being lovers," Christina answered simply. "They were just the whole world to one another, just the whole whole world."

CHAPTER XIX.

"PER INCERTAS, CERTA AMOR."

Sir Arthur glanced round the bleak little wayside station with disapproval. The December day was grey and raw; the December wind blustered along the exposed platform, in chilling tempestuous gusts; and the upland country that stretched to right and left of the line, wore a highly uninviting aspect.

"Now, what is Margaret doing in this desolate part of the world?" he reflected irritably; "and why does she send me such a ridiculously mysterious telegram? Women have no sense of proportion; they must always indulge in subtleties and mysteries." These irascible meditations brought him to the station exit, before which stood a closed brougham, the only conveyance of any sort within sight. Beyond the tiny station, a white road wound away over the moors, but, excepting for two cottages on the brow of the first hill, there was no sign to be seen of any human habitation.

"Has that carriage been sent to meet Sir Arthur Congreve?" the old gentleman enquired of the one porter lounging by the gate, and the man nodded before replying with bucolic slowness:—

"That carriage be come from t' 'White Horse' up to Graystone, to fetch Sir Arthur Congreve. Driver he told me so hisself."

"Very well, very well," Sir Arthur said impatiently, making his way to the carriage door, and opening it, before the porter, now engaged in thoughtfully scratching his head, had collected his wits sufficiently to perform this act of courtesy for the traveller. "I conclude you know where I am to be driven," he added, speaking to the man on the box.

"Yes, sir; to the house in the valley; the house where the gentleman——"

"That will do, as long as you know where you are to go," Sir Arthur said, cutting short the coachman's volubility, and entering the brougham, glad to sit back amongst the cushions, and shut the window against the sweeping blast.

The uplands looked their very greyest and worst on that December day. A low grey sky stooped to meet the hill-sides, on which brown heather and brown bracken made a depressing tone of colour, to mingle with the greyness of the clouds, and of the mists that crept up from the valleys. The bareness of the wide stretch of moor was broken here and there by a clump of fir-trees, which showed dark and sombre against the grey background, and the fogginess of the atmosphere obscured the great view, which was usually the chief charm of the uplands. Sir Arthur was at no time an admirer of scenery, and to-day he turned his gaze shudderingly from the barren landscape; and, drawing a paper from his pocket, proceeded to bury himself in its contents, and to thrust the outer world as far as possible away from his consciousness. By nature an unimaginative man, he had ruthlessly stamped out any germ of imagination or poetry, which might have been latent within him, setting himself with grim resolution to thrust away the beautiful as a snare, and to regard everything about him as merely temporal and destructible. He forgot, or perhaps he deliberately chose not to recognise, that the eternal is set around the temporal, not as a thing apart, but encompassing it, permeating it, so that temporal and eternal are one. He had sternly set his face against all the softer aspects of life, doing his duty grimly, and with stiff back, disinclined at any time to any relaxation in discipline either for himself or his fellow-sinners—more ready to rule by fear than by love, a man who would have made an equally excellent Ironside or Grand Inquisitor, according to the peculiar turn of his religious convictions.

As he drove now along the lonely white road, his thoughts chiefly centred themselves upon Margaret, his beautiful sister Margaret, who, in spite of her sins and follies, as he considered them to be, had always held a place in her brother's heart. He gave her the place grudgingly; he

would have gone to the stake rather than confess that her beauty made, or ever had made, any appeal to him. And yet, as he was driven quickly onwards under the lowering skies, it was his sister's beautiful face that rose persistently before him, her face, as he had last seen it, when she was a radiant girl, in the glory of her happy girlhood. It was odd; it was even annoying to him that just this particular vision out of the past should fill his mind now, but for once in his grim and well-disciplined life, he was unable to drive away the haunting vision.

The garden of the old house made the setting of the picture—the garden that was now his own, and the sunk lawn, with the sun-dial amongst the rose-trees, that had been his father's pride. Margaret had stood beside the sun-dial, on that far-off June day, her fingers lightly tracing the motto that ran round the dial's face, her laughing eyes lifted to her brother.

"Ah! but you don't believe in the motto, you see." The words came echoing back to him across the years, until he almost felt as though he could actually hear the low voice again, and Margaret's voice had always had such unspeakable charm.

"You think a motto like this just silly and sentimental, don't you, Arthur?" And once more her fingers had traced the faint lettering, whilst she slowly read the words aloud.

"Per incertas, certa amor." (Through uncertainty, certain is love.)

"I mean that to be my motto, as well as the motto of the sun-dial"; just a tiny ring of defiance seemed to creep into her voice with the last words; Sir Arthur remembered it even now, and he had answered her gravely, out of the depths of his convictions. He had spoken with solemnity, of duty, as higher than love; and she had laughed again, her deep soft laugh, though the look in her eyes had belied her laughter.

"Love is the greatest thing in the world," she had said, very slowly, very quietly, but the words rang with the sureness of a great certainty. "Love is the only thing that matters in all the world, because to love properly is to be perfect. Duty, right, goodness, they all follow upon love—real love. Love is the greatest thing in the world. Through all uncertainty—love is—sure."

Well, she had acted up to her creed. She had loved and suffered for a man who was not worthy to touch the hem of her garment, in his, Sir Arthur's, opinion;—but women, as he had before reflected, women had no sense of proportion; they were incomprehensible; Margaret no less incomprehensible than all the rest of her sex. He had reached this point in his reflections when he observed that the carriage was no longer bowling along the smooth high road, but had turned into a steep, and rather rough lane, which wound downwards between high hedges, that presently merged themselves into dense woods, ending abruptly at last in a small clearing, upon which stood a house surrounded by a wall. Before the green gate in this wall, the carriage stopped. Sir Arthur's keen eyes noted with approval, the quietly respectful manner of the old servant who admitted him; he had been more than half expecting to find himself in some kind of dread and unwonted Bohemia, the very thought of which sickened his soul; and Elizabeth, with that air of the old-fashioned maid, who has only lived in the right sort of house, impressed him favourably.

"My mistress wished me to take you straight to her room, sir," she said; "and the doctor asked me to say, that any great agitation would be very bad for her."

"Is she ill, then?" The question came with sharpness.

"Yes, sir, very ill. The doctor is anxious to keep her as quiet as possible; but he thought it best she should see you, her heart is so set upon it."

Those words made Sir Arthur's own heart contract a little, and before his mental vision there flashed again the beautiful radiant face of the girl in the white gown, the girl who had stood beside the sun-dial, saying in her deep sweet voice—

"Love is the greatest thing in the world."

The words still rang in his brain as Elizabeth ushered him into a big bedroom, and his eyes fell upon the woman propped up with pillows, her face turned towards the door.

The radiant face of the girl beside the sun-dial seemed to fade slowly from his mind, whilst he stood silently looking at the woman in the bed, the woman who put out her hand to him with a faint smile, and said softly—

"It was good of you to come, Arthur. You will let us meet now as friends after all these years?"

The words were a question rather than an assertion, but he did not answer the question. He stood as though rooted to the floor, staring at her, in an astonishment too great at first for words. Then he said slowly—

"But I shouldn't have known you—I shouldn't have known you, Margaret. I can't believe—"

He broke off abruptly, a tremor in his voice, and Margaret said gently—

"I daresay I am very much changed since you last saw me. In those days I was only a girl;

now I am a woman, who has known so much of life—so very much of life. It seems as though my irresponsible girlhood belongs to another existence, and life has set its marks upon my face."

"Yes," he answered vaguely, still staring at her. "I am afraid—your life——"

"There has been very much sorrow—and very much joy," she interrupted, as gently as she had spoken before; "and now—I am within sight of the end, and—I am glad."

He came close to her, and for the first time touched her hand.

"Why do you say that?" he asked, his usually grim voice curiously softened. "You are ill now, but I hope with care—in time——"

She interrupted him again, a smile on her face.

"No, it is not a question of care, or time. I am glad it is not. It is only a question of how long my strength will hold out. You know—Max—is—dead?" She said the words as simply as though she were merely saying that somebody had gone into the next room, and her brother started.

"Dead?" he exclaimed. "No; I did not know. I heard he was in England, heard it vaguely and undecidedly, and I have been trying to find you both. I wanted to prevent any—any talk—any scandal."

"There need never be any talk now. He came to England—only a few weeks before he died. He—had been—wandering about Europe—and then he came—to England—to die." She spoke quietly, but the pauses in her sentence, seemed to show what a mental strain she was enduring. "Marion helped him to get here. I was too ill to do it, and—I did not dare to do too much, lest through me any clue to his whereabouts should be given. I do not think he was ever safe—not safe for a single instant. But—he is out of their reach now—safe at last."

Sir Arthur's mouth set tightly, there was a gleam of indignation in his eyes, but he remembered the doctor's orders, and refrained from uttering the biting speech upon his lips.

"Marion—who is Marion?" he said.

"She was English maid to Max's mother—a faithful soul, such a faithful soul. All our letters to one another passed through her hands. She took this house; she brought Max here; she sent for me; and then—the long strain told. She had borne so much; she could bear no more. It—was all very dreadful; she lost her reason; she went suddenly mad; and the doctors do not think she can ever be well again. She is quite happy now, quite peaceful, they tell me, like a little child, but her mind has gone."

"And you, Margaret, surely now you must regret," Sir Arthur began impetuously, the natural man asserting itself, in spite of all the doctor's warnings. But again his sister's low voice broke the thread of his speech.

"Regret?" she said. "Oh! no. It hurts me to think that I hurt our father and mother, but for myself—I cannot be sorry. I love him so, and for all our lives together, I had his love—he was always mine."

"But"—do what he would, Sir Arthur felt impelled to give voice to the flood of thought within him—"he was not worthy of you, Margaret. You can't pretend that he was worthy of your love?" A great rush of colour poured over her white face, her thin hands trembled.

"Worthiness or unworthiness do not seem to come into it at all," she answered, her voice all shaken and low. "When one loves, one loves in spite of everything—in spite of everything."

Something in her tone, and in the strange illumination of her eyes, momentarily silenced Sir Arthur; he dimly felt himself to be in the presence of a force infinitely greater than anything that had ever come into his own experience. He would not have owned that he had limitations—to a man of his type, the difficulty of owning to limitations is almost insuperable—but far down in the depths of his mind, he vaguely realised that Margaret had reached a height to which he had never attained.

"And—after all, Arthur—whatever you may feel," Margaret went on, more quietly, the colour ebbing from her face, "doesn't it still seem fairer to say—*De mortuis*——"

Sir Arthur bent his head; and before his mind rose the half-defaced letters of that other Latin proverb, which Margaret had traced with her finger on the sun-dial, out amongst the roses in the sunshine of June.

"*Per incertas, certa amor.*"

And she was still certain of her love—in spite of—everything! Silence fell between them after those last words of hers; and it was she who presently broke it, speaking with an effort, and in more ordinary and matter-of-fact tones.

"But I did not telegraph to you to come here, in order to worry you with any of my own

affairs. I thought I ought to ask you to come, because a strange thing has happened—a most curious coincidence. Bring that chair nearer to the bed, and sit down. You look so judicial standing over me."

Sir Arthur meekly obeyed, feeling within himself a faint wonder, at his own unquestioning obedience, yet compelled to do what that low voice commanded. There was a certain queenliness about this woman, a dignified aloofness, which had a curiously compelling effect upon those about her. The man who so obediently drew up a chair, and seated himself, felt it hard to realise that this was his own sister, his younger sister Margaret, whom in the days of their unregenerate youth, some people had called "Peg." It had been almost impossible to see in her changed face, the features of the beautiful girl who had laughed amongst the roses by the sun-dial, and yet, in spite of the change wrought by sorrow, and suffering, and the ploughshares of life, she was regally beautiful, even more beautiful than in the days of her girlhood.

"I understood from your telegram that you wanted to see me about Ellen's pendant, though I cannot conceive why you should know anything about its whereabouts."

"I am afraid I don't know anything about *Ellen's* pendant," was the answer. "But I do know something about the pendant you mistook for Ellen's, on Christmas Day. The ornament Christina Moore was wearing, was not Ellen's, but her own."

"Nonsense, my dear Margaret," Sir Arthur answered testily. "The jewel is unique, and I know every detail of it. I hope you have not brought me here to try to persuade me not to prosecute that wretched nurse of Cicely's. Cicely herself is also trying to make me act against my better judgment, and refrain from calling in the police."

"I think you won't want to prosecute, when you hear why I sent for you," was the gentle rejoinder. "It was a very weighty reason that made me ask you to come, Arthur."

"Why did you telegraph to me?" he asked. "Tell me those weighty reasons——"

"A very strange coincidence has happened, one of those coincidences which are more common in real life, than people think. I—have discovered—beyond all possibilities of doubt, that Christina Moore—is our own niece. She is Helen's daughter."

For a long moment Sir Arthur said no single word; he only looked at his sister blankly, with a stare of incredulous astonishment. Then he said slowly:—

"Our—our—niece? Helen's daughter? Impossible—quite, quite impossible. My dear Margaret—you have been taken in by an impostor. Such an idea is incredible. And—what proofs have you?"

"There is no question of being deceived. The discovery was not forced upon my attention; I made it for myself. Christina had no idea that there was any relationship between us. She was taken completely by surprise, when I told her she was my sister's child."

"You have let your imagination run away with you, Margaret. How can you be sure of what you say? Where are your proofs? I don't believe for a moment, that Miss Moore had any connection with Helen. I don't believe it at all."

And as Sir Arthur's lips went into a determined line, Margaret smiled faintly, remembering the days of their youth, when her brother had set his mouth in just such obstinate curves, if he were in disagreement with any of his family.

Very quietly, but very firmly, Margaret made herself heard, dominating the man by that strength of personality, of which he had already become strangely aware; forcing him, against his own inclinations, to hear her story, from beginning to end.

"At present I have, as you say, no proofs," she said. "No legal proofs. But those should be the least difficult to find. We must get Helen's marriage certificate, and Christina's birth and baptismal certificates. I have been thinking it all out, when I lay awake at night. And we must make all necessary enquiries at Staveley—the village where Christina lived with her father and mother. Unfortunately, the clergyman she knew there, is dead; and the solicitor, who seems to have done Helen's business for her, is in Africa, and Christina does not know his address. But—the pendant, the emerald pendant, was certainly sent to Helen by our mother; and before Helen died, she tried to send you a message. She sank into unconsciousness with your name on her lips—"Tell Arthur"—those were the very last words she spoke."

Sir Arthur's severe face softened; some of the hardness in his eyes died away; it was in a shaken and softened voice that he said:

"It is difficult even now to believe that all this can be true; and yet—there is a certain ring of truth about it. I should like to see this Miss Moore. I cannot understand why, if she was innocent of theft, she ran away from Bramwell."

"She is very young; she was very frightened. She knew she could produce no proof of her innocence. And you must remember, Arthur, that I am the only person living, who knows there

was a replica of Ellen's pendant. Christina's coming to me was providential. I—think she was sent into my care."

Sir Arthur was silent; indeed, he spoke no more until Christina, summoned by Margaret's bell, came into the room, her face flushing and paling by turns, when she saw the upright figure seated beside the bed.

"I wished to see you," Sir Arthur said, in the magisterial tones which were wont to strike terror into the hearts of guilty offenders. "My sister tells me a very remarkable story; and although, pending much more absolute proof, I suspend judgment, I should like to hear your own view of this strange thing."

"I don't know what to think about it all," the girl answered, a little shrinking fear in her eyes, as they met those piercing blue ones. "I have told—everything I know—to—to—her," she faltered, glancing at Margaret. "I can only say it all over again to you. It is all true. I have never in all my life said anything that wasn't true," she added proudly.

"Your mother never mentioned any of her relations to you, by name? Never spoke of her old home?"

"She spoke of her home, and always as if she had loved it dearly, as if it had broken her heart to leave it. But she never told me where it was; she never said any name, until the day she died; until she gave me the—and said 'Tell Arthur'—I think perhaps she could not bear to speak of her people, because she loved them all so much, that it hurt her to talk about them."

"The whole matter must be carefully investigated. I can accept nothing without proof, but, naturally, if it can be proved that you are our sister's child, suitable care will be taken of you. And for the present," he still spoke in the judicial tones, to which the Bench was accustomed, "for the present I shall waive the matter of the pendant. Meanwhile——"

"Meanwhile, my own strong feeling is that Christina should go back to Bramwell," Margaret put in; "it is not fair to put Lady Cicely to inconvenience, and Christina feels, with me, that she had no right to run away, and leave such a kind and considerate employer in the lurch. If Lady Cicely would like to have her back, Christina is sure she ought to go."

"Yes, indeed," Christina said eagerly, a little shamed look in her eyes. "I know I ought never to have come away, but I was so frightened, so dreadfully frightened," and she clasped her hands together, with an unconsciously childlike gesture, that stirred the latent humanity in Sir Arthur. Beneath his crust of frigidity, there was a certain kindness of heart, and Christina's appealing eyes, and suddenly clasped hands, moved him to say, not ungently—

"Well, well, there is no occasion to be frightened now. I will look into the whole of this strange business, and nothing more shall be said about the pendant, until I have found out whatever there is to be found."

"I shall leave the pendant here," Christina said quickly, her eyes meeting those of the old man with a flash of pride, that seemed to give man and girl a sudden curious likeness to one another. "I will fetch it now and give it to her, and then you will know that I am honest—that I shall not run away with it. I will fetch it directly, and give it—to—Aunt Margaret!"

CHAPTER XX.

"SHE HAS A SWEET, STRONG SOUL."

"There was never another man in my world but Max. There never could have been another. Some women are made that way. They can only give their best once."

"But—I would take—the second best. I would be thankful even for the crumbs from the rich man's table. Only let me have the right to take care of you, to give you——"

"To give me everything, and to receive nothing in return? No, Rupert, I could not let you do that, even if——"

"Even if?" he repeated after her, his eyes fastened hungrily on her face, his voice deep and appealing. "Can't you understand that I don't want to worry you for anything in return. I only want to be near you, to do all that man can do for you."

"And I am grateful, more grateful than I can ever express in words. Sometimes I am sorry you ever chanced to meet me, on that oasis in the desert. I think I have been a hindrance in your life, not the help I should like to have been. No—wait—don't contradict me for a minute," and Margaret held up her hand with a smile, as the man on the low chair beside her couch, bent

forward in eager disclaimer. "Because of me, you have never married, when you ought to have had a wife, and a home, and children of your own."

"Do you think I could look at another woman, after I had once seen you?" he exclaimed vehemently, and she answered gently—

"Some day, I hope you will have a woman in your life, a woman who will bring you all the happiness you have missed, who——"

"I want no woman but you," he cried, a note of sullen passion in his voice. "Margaret—you say—he—was the only man in your world. Can't I make you understand that you are—what you have been ever since I first saw you—the only woman in mine?"

She put out her hand to him, the transparent hand, whose only ornament was its heavy wedding ring, and he stooped down and kissed it, with a curiously reverent gesture that made her eyes misty.

"You have been such a good friend," she said; "but believe me, there cannot ever be anything but friendship between us two and—there is such a little time now left for anything."

"What do you mean?" he asked, with a sudden catch in his breath, his eyes fixed on her thin face, which seemed all at once to have become so ethereal in its whiteness; "why do you speak as if——"

"As if—an end were coming? Because—the end is very near." His eyes did not leave her face, but a look of pain leapt into them, a look of such intolerable pain, that Margaret exclaimed quickly—

"I cannot bear to hurt you, but it is better to tell you just the plain truth, even if it hurts you. The end is going to be very soon. Dr. Fergusson thinks it can't be far off now, and I am glad, Rupert. I don't think I can tell you how glad."

He made some inarticulate sound, dropping his head into his hands, and her soft voice went on, with soothing monotony—

"There was a great deal of hardship and trouble in my early married life, and I never managed to get over it all. I have been ill almost ever since you knew me, and—in the last few months—I have come to the end of my tether. When Max—went away,"—her voice broke—"all that was left of my life and vitality seemed to go, too. I have tried to live, and I wanted to live, but the disease has got the better of me, and—I am glad the end is in sight."

"Did you send for me because"—he lifted his head and looked at her.

"I sent for you because I wanted to make everything clear to you, and because I did not want to go right away for ever, without seeing my friend again. And—I wanted to help you—about your own future, if I could."

"My own future," Rupert laughed drearily. "Do you think my own future, and anything about me, matters two straws, when you—when you"—his voice trailed away into silence. He sat very still, his face turned towards the window, through which the trees in the wood beyond the house, were already showing a veil of delicate green.

"My friendship will have been a very poor thing if it spoils your life," Margaret said gently, her gaze following his to the April trees, and the dappled April sky.

"A poor thing?" He turned back to her, a great light in his eyes. "Do you think I regret loving you? Do you think I regret for a single second, having known and loved you? When I first met you, I had the sort of contemptuous tolerance for women, which I had found in other men. It was you who taught me what a good woman can be to a man. Even now, I am not fit to touch the hem of your gown, but since I knew you, I have at least lived straight. I can look you in the face, and say that my hands and heart are clean."

"I am glad," she said simply, her deep eyes shining. "You don't know how glad I am, if I have helped you ever so little. And, some day—I am speaking very plainly because I am a dying woman, and dying people can speak the direct truth—some day I want you to give a woman your heart; I want you to take her hands in your hands; I want you to find the happiness, which, for my sake, you have missed in all these years."

"Impossible," he said passionately. "You are asking too much. How could I ever think of another woman, when I have been your friend?"

"Some day," she answered, her wonderful smile flashing over her face; "and—I am developing into a matchmaker, Rupert," she added lightly. "I have even chosen the woman. You did not credit me with gifts as a matchmaker, did you?"

"Don't talk of such things in such a way," he exclaimed almost roughly. "How can you laugh and talk lightly, when——"

"When I ought to be thinking only of 'graves and epitaphs'?" she quoted whimsically. "No, don't look so hurt and sorry. Let me still be whimsical, even if I am going to die. Leave me my sense of humour to the end. And—let me match-make for you. It pleases me to picture you—happy—with—a wife I have chosen for you."

"Don't," he said, actual anger in his voice, but once again her hand touched his hand, and the touch quieted him.

"You must not be hurt or angry with me," she said. "I asked you to come to see me, because I wanted to thank you for your loyal friendship and a sort of instinct made me long to tell you—of someone—who some day I think will comfort you."

"Comfort me?" he exclaimed bitterly.

"Yes, comfort you," eyes and voice were very steady. "Rupert, you know—of course you know—all about my little niece, my dear little niece Christina? You know by what a strange coincidence I discovered who she was, and you know how Arthur found all the proofs of identity, and showed beyond the possibility of doubt, that she is the daughter of my own sister Helen? You know all that?"

"Yes, I know all that. I have often seen Miss Moore; she is a very charming girl, and I liked her for insisting on staying with Baba for the present, so that Cicely should not be left stranded. It seemed to show grit, and a fine character."

"She has grit, and a fine character. She has more; she has a most lovable character; and, Rupert, she would make a man who cared for her, a most tender and loving wife."

"A man who cared for her," Rupert repeated with emphasis; "not a man whose whole heart was given to another woman."

"Some day—when the other woman—has gone—right away—remember what I said. That is all. It is not a thing to be discussed, even between two friends. Only—remember that my little Christina is worthy to be loved. She has a sweet and a strong soul."

More than once on that April afternoon, Rupert tried to take Margaret's conversation back to his own deep love for her; but, just as her brother Arthur had found, four months earlier, so he found now, that some dominating force in her personality kept him at bay—mastered him, in spite of himself. It was she who finally gave him a gentle word of dismissal, so gentle, that he could not be hurt, even though the parting from her seemed to him to tear his heart in two.

"I may come again?" he said, his speech sounding terse and abrupt, because of his very excess of feeling; and she smiled into his face, a strange smile, which he could not understand.

"Yes," she answered; "you may—come again; and, Rupert, forgive me if by being your friend I have only hurt you. I have done nothing for you, excepting give you pain. I think——"—she paused, and her eyes turned to the soft sky behind the delicate April leaves—"I think I have done so little, so terribly little with my life."

"But you have *been* so much," he answered, his hand holding hers closely, in a long warm clasp; "and it is what you are that matters, and that influences your fellow beings—what you are, so much more than what you do. And what you are lives for ever," he added, in a burst of inspiration very rare in the man, who so seldom gave expression to his thoughts. "There is no end to a good influence; it never dies; it could not ever die. What you are has helped everyone who knows—and loves you."

"But this is not good-bye," he said a moment later, before he left the room. "You say I may come again; this is only *au revoir*."

"*Au revoir*, then," she answered, that inexplicable smile breaking over her face again. "But," she whispered under her breath, as the door closed behind him, "it will be *au revoir* in a land where there will not be any more heart-breaks or good-byes—the land—that is not—very far off—but—near—so very near."

She had known the truth when she told Rupert he might come again, knowing that her days were actually numbered, that the end of which she had told him, was very close at hand.

And so it was, that when Rupert Mernside next journeyed down to the lonely house in the valley, where the touch of spring lay on woodland and copse, where primroses lifted starry eyes under the hazels, and wind flowers swung in the April breeze, he came to follow Margaret to the quiet churchyard on the hill-side.

Christina had chosen the place where her grave should be—Christina, who had been with her at the end, who had seen the amazing radiance of her face, when the end came. All night she had lain in a state of profound unconsciousness, from which they had not thought she would ever rally. But as morning broke, as the sunlight shone in through the uncurtained window, Margaret's eyes opened, and that amazing radiance flashed into them, the smile on her face making the girl who watched her, draw a swift breath of wonder. It was evident that the dying

woman knew nothing of what passed in the room about her; her eyes looked, not at surrounding objects, but at something beyond, and away from them all—something that was coming towards her, or towards which she was going.

"Max," she said, her voice grown suddenly strong. "Ah! Max—I knew—you would wait for me. I—knew—you would be there," and with that wonderful radiance in her eyes, that wonderful smile upon her face, she had passed out into the Rest, that lies about our restless world.

"I think she would like to lie just here," Christina said, when, walking round the churchyard with Sir Arthur and Dr. Fergusson, they came to a halt under a low wall, from which the ground sloped abruptly away, in a series of terraces. In that sunny corner, violets nestled against the grey stones, their fragrance drifting out upon the April breeze, and on the wall itself, a robin sat and sang, of spring-time, of resurrection, of life.

"She would like this place," the girl repeated softly. "It is so still and sunny, and the great view is so beautiful—like herself, so beautiful and restful," she added under her breath, so that only Fergusson heard the words.

Sir Arthur, a more quiet and subdued Sir Arthur, looked across the sloping churchyard to the great sweep of country, whose horizon was bounded by far blue hills, and perhaps some faint perception of Christina's meaning filtered into his narrow soul, although he only said:—

"I wonder why she wished to be buried here. I should have thought she would have liked to be near her husband."

"I don't think she felt she was ever far away from him," Christina answered, carried out of herself for the moment, and forgetting her usual awe of her grim uncle. "She knew that wherever their bodies might be, she and he would be together. She knew they could not ever be really apart—he and she."

Sir Arthur looked at her without replying. His silence was a strange testimony to Margaret's power, for he was kept silent by the unaccustomed feeling (a feeling experienced for the first time in his self-sufficient existence)—that in his sister, and in the new niece who looked at him with such certainty in her eyes, he had come face to face with forces of which he was ignorant. Perhaps he could not, or would not, have put this feeling into words, nevertheless, it was there, far down in his heart, a new factor to be reckoned with, if ever he chose to reckon with it. The day of Margaret's funeral was one of those perfect spring days, which come to us sometimes as a foretaste of summer. Beyond the little churchyard, the wide expanse of moorland lay flooded with sunshine, spikes of young bracken showing vividly green amongst the brown of the heather, clumps of gorse shining golden in the sunlight, a soft mist of green upon the hazel copses at the moorland's foot. Larks sprang singing to the April sky, and upon the stone wall close against the open grave, a robin sat once more, and sang his song, of resurrection, of life, of love.

The group that gathered in that sunny corner, fragrant with the sweetness of violets, was a very small one. Sir Arthur and Christina, Rupert Mernside, Lady Cicely, Dr. Fergusson, and Elizabeth—these were the six mourners who followed Margaret to her last resting-place, and as Christina's eyes wandered round the little group, she felt that she knew upon which of the six the beautiful woman's death had fallen as the most heavy blow.

Her heart contracted when her fleeting glance rested for a second on Rupert's stricken face; and she glanced away again quickly, feeling that to look into his face, meant also to look into his stricken soul, and that she had no right to read so much of the inmost being of another human creature. Cicely had insisted upon coming to Graystone for the funeral.

"Although I never knew your sister," she said to Sir Arthur, "I want to do this one small thing, to show how much I revered her. Christina has told me of her, and I know how beautiful she was, body and soul."

Thus it came about that Cicely sat next to Denis Fergusson in the tiny village church, where the first part of the funeral service was said, stood next to Fergusson beside the grave by the sunny wall, and, when all was over, moved away down the steep churchyard path, by Fergusson's side.

He looked down at her tiny form with a delicious sense of having a right at least, in this moment, to protect and watch over her, and, as they went out of the lych-gate, she turned to him with a grateful look in her eyes.

"Thank you for taking care of me," she said, with that pretty impulsiveness that constituted one of her greatest charms. "I am glad I came to-day—even though—it has made me remember ——" she hesitated, and Fergusson saw that her eyes swam with tears.

They were walking slowly along the upland road, in the wake of the rest of the party, and Fergusson slackened his pace a little, to give her time to recover her composure, whilst he said gently:—

"I understand. I quite understand."

"I think you are a very understanding person," she answered, the falter in her voice making his heart contract with an almost unbearable longing to comfort her. "I—have not heard—that service we have just heard, since it was said—over—John—my husband. It has made me remember—that day—and all it meant to me."

Fergusson looked away from her sweet face, aquiver with emotion, out across the wide moorland, where the larks sang in the sunshine, to the far line of blue hills, then he said slowly—

"The words hold wonderful comfort. The triumphant sense of a sure and certain hope, always seems to me to be the keynote of the whole."

"Those were the words that stayed in my mind, penetrating through everything else," she said softly, "and though—John had gone away into what seemed unbreakable silence, I knew—that—he had not really gone. I had the sure and certain hope—oh! and more than hope—that he was—very safe, and very near me all the time."

The naïve expression, the simplicity of the words, spoken from the depths of a simple and sincere heart, flooded Fergusson's heart again with a sense of reverent love, that almost amounted to adoration; but no opportunity to answer her was given him, for Sir Arthur turned back to join Cicely, and a few minutes' further walk brought them to the inn at Graystone, where they were to lunch, before their drive to the railway station. Rupert parted from the rest at the door of the inn. Perhaps Christina was the only member of the party, who realised that he had come to the end of his tether, that an imperative necessity for solitude was upon him, that his power of endurance was nearly at an end. She was standing behind Sir Arthur, when Rupert bade them all good-bye; it was with her that he shook hands last of all, and as she looked up into his face, her eyes held some strange comfort for him. He did not put it into words; he could not have explained even to himself, had he tried to do so, why it was that the glance of those sweet eyes sent a little restful feeling into his troubled heart; but as he went away, some of the tension of misery seemed to relax, the numbness of his pain grew less; in some dim way his hurt had been salved.

"Your cousin seems to have been a most devoted friend to my poor sister," Sir Arthur said, after lunch, when he and the two ladies and Fergusson were seated in the small sitting-room of the inn awaiting their carriage. "I cannot conceive why, in the world she could not have married a man like that, instead of the poor miserable fellow who made her life and his own, a burden to them both."

"She loved her husband very much," Christina put in gently.

"Oh! she loved him—she loved him far too much," Sir Arthur answered testily. "I cannot understand, I never shall be able to understand, how a woman can throw away all her heart and life, on a man who is totally unworthy of her."

Back into Christina's mind flashed the remembrance of words Margaret had spoken long before: "You don't know what it is to care so much for a man, that no matter what he is or does, he is your world, your whole world," but it was Cicely, not she who answered sagely—

"I don't believe a man can ever really understand the way a woman loves. A woman's love is made up of so many ingredients, she herself can hardly analyse it, and no man could ever begin to get near its true analysis."

Sir Arthur looked at her with the kindly smile of one who listens to the prattling of a child, then resumed his own train of thought and words, as if she had not spoken at all.

"My brother-in-law was a perpetual source of anxiety to me," he said; "not that I knew him. I only saw him once, and I was not favourably impressed on that occasion; but I can honestly say that until I heard he was in his grave, I had no really quiet moments."

"I know nothing of the story," Cicely said; "I have only heard you speak of your brother-in-law, as if the subject was a painful one. I do not even know his name."

"He was a Russian by birth—no, don't go, there need be no secret about the matter, certainly not from you, who were so good to my poor sister," Sir Arthur said, as Fergusson showed signs of leaving the room. "Max Petrovitch was his real name, and my sister originally met him at the house of friends in town. He was then closely connected with the Young Russia movement—or rather, to call things by their true names, he was a red-hot Nihilist. Margaret—went with him to Siberia, you know."

Cicely uttered an exclamation, but Sir Arthur went on without pause.

"Yes, she went to Siberia with him. I don't know on what precise count he was exiled, but he was always on the side of revolutionary methods, as against those of law and order, and although I believe—I do firmly believe—that he never had a hand in any scheme of assassination, still, he was tarred with the pitch-black brush of anarchy. There is no doubt that the time in Siberia sowed the seeds of Margaret's ill-health; it sapped her strength and vitality; it was—the beginning of the end. Her maid Elizabeth has told me the truth about it all." He was silent for a few seconds before resuming.

"Then Max—escaped, and for a long time, I understand, Margaret knew nothing of his whereabouts; but she herself, by his wish, left Siberia, and went to Paris, and there—after what vicissitudes God only knows—he joined her, for a time. But—here the inherent weakness of the man appeared. God forbid that I should be unfair to the dead—but, he was a coward; and because he was afraid, because he was afraid of being recaptured, and sent back to Siberia, he gave up the party to which he belonged—he sold himself to the Secret Police. And from the moment that was known, he must have led a life of horror. His footsteps were dogged; he was tracked down from place to place; he was a doomed man, and he knew it. Certainly he was guarded to an extent by the Secret Police, but, those who wanted his life cared very little for that. I believe he wandered over Europe, seeking a place of safety in vain, and at last—ill, worn-out, and despairing—he came to England, to die in that lonely house in the valley, where Margaret has also died. Her illness sent her back to her own land; she could not travel about with him, but when they got him there, they sent for her, and she was with him to the last."

"Poor soul! oh, poor soul!" Cicely said softly. "And she loved him through it all?"

"She loved him with a most amazing love," Fergusson put in, speaking for the first time. "I was there during his last illness, and at his death; and, as I said before, I say it again: 'God grant to every man when death comes, to have such a woman, and such a woman's love, with him at the last!'"

He spoke gravely, and as his words ended, he looked at Cicely, and their eyes met in a long involuntary glance, which, as Christina caught it, seemed to her full of some strange meaning, that set her own heart athrob.

CHAPTER XXI.

"IF YOU GO ACROSS THE SEA!"

"Such money as Margaret had she has left to you, Christina, and in telling you this, I should like to make a final protest against your remaining in Lady Cicely's household, in a subordinate and dependent position."

"How dear of Aunt Margaret—how very, very dear of her, to give me her money," Christina said; "and with that money I shouldn't be dependent any more, should I?" and she looked into Sir Arthur's grim face, with a smile whose inner meaning that worthy did not feel quite able to fathom. Was it merely the smile of guileless simplicity, or was she, in a mild way, presuming to chaff him?

"In the stricter sense of the word, no, you would not be dependent. But that is a mere shuffling of words. You would still be in a subordinate position here, and the position is a false one."

Christina, standing by the window in Cicely's great London drawing-room, devoutly wished that somebody would come in, or that something would happen, to end this interview with her uncle, who never failed to have one of two disastrous effects upon her: either he made her feel angry—really viciously angry, as she expressed it—or he made her hopelessly inclined to giggle.

"And to-day I want to giggle," she said to herself, "and if I do, he will never forgive me or forget."

Aloud she said, with a gravity she was far from feeling—

"I don't want to be rude and contradict you, Uncle Arthur, but I cannot feel I am in a false position here. Cicely really needs me, for herself, as well as for Baba; this is a very happy home for me, and, because I still take care of Baba just as I did before, I don't feel I am doing anything beneath my dignity, or—subordinate."

"I wish I could make you understand the fitness of things," Sir Arthur answered, with a grieved air, which never failed to amuse his niece. "Your Aunt Ellen and I would gladly offer you a home, but—I fear that, at the bottom of your heart, this Babylon, this Vanity Fair, makes an appeal to you."

"I do like London," was the frank response, "and though it is very good of you to ask me to come to your house, I think I am really wanted here. Cicely would miss me, Baba would miss me, and—I like doing all I can for them. Cicely has been so good to me all through."

"Wilful woman," Sir Arthur said, with a shrug of the shoulders; "you often remind me of your poor Aunt Margaret. You have her set obstinacy of character. She was never able to see any other point of view but her own, and you are very like her."

"I—should like to be like Aunt Margaret," the girl answered; "and if she did like her own points of view, I think they were always very beautiful views. I have never met anybody like her."

"She was a good woman," Sir Arthur said, smitten with sudden compunction. "I had no business to say a word against her; she was a good woman, but the thought of her wasted life hurts me."

"Not wasted," Christina said; "I don't think her life was wasted. Her influence can't die away, even now. It was such a wonderful influence—like herself, so beautiful."

"Yes," he repeated, "poor Margaret. She was a good woman, and it hurts me to think of all the trouble of her life. You are like her in many ways. God grant that your life may not hold the sorrows her life held."

Uncle and niece were silent for a few moments after those solemnly-uttered words, and Christina stood looking out across the square, where the trees waved delicate green leaves against a background of May sky, her thoughts full of the beautiful woman who had entered so strangely into her life, through whose instrumentality so vast a change had come to her.

From first to last, Margaret's personality had made a great appeal to Christina, and looking out now into the May sunshine, across the fragrant window-boxes of geranium and mignonette, a vivid recollection came to her of that December afternoon, when Margaret had stood in the lane, pleading with her to fetch a doctor. What apparent inconsequence had led her to drive past that lonely house in the lane, and how strange had been the outcome of that inconsequent drive.

What big results had rested upon such a seemingly small event! Her relationship to Sir Arthur and his sister Margaret, would probably never have been discovered, but for that meeting in the lane; and no one but Margaret would ever have been able to elucidate the mystery about the emerald pendant. It was strange, so strange as to be like some story-book happening, instead of an event in real, everyday life!

Sir Arthur's voice brought her back from her thoughts of the past.

"I am sorry, my dear Christina, that you have made up your mind to stay here, in the very anomalous position you now occupy. But, I quite see that it is useless to argue further with you. If, however, you should, at some future date, see things differently, your Aunt Ellen and I will still be willing to offer you a home under our roof."

Christina's thanks were none the less warm, because, in her heart of hearts, she decided that no power on earth would ever induce her to make a home with her uncle and aunt.

"But I couldn't live with them, could I?" she said to Cicely an hour later, when the two sat together in the rose-coloured boudoir, which, at Christina's first visit to the house, had aroused her deep admiration. "Uncle Arthur is so—so very kind, but—"

"But, he moves along like a horse in blinkers, and he cannot see anything on either side of him, and not much in front."

"He says I am like Aunt Margaret, and that she only saw one point of view," Christina answered demurely.

"Then, my dear, it is evidently a family failing," Cicely retorted; "but never mind what Cousin Arthur says. You are to stay with me, and be as happy as you can, and because you are sweet enough still to look after Baba, that does not lower you in anyone's eyes."

"One argument Uncle Arthur used to try and induce me not to stay here, was, that you might marry again, and then, he said, I should be stranded."

The colour flew into Cicely's face, but she answered collectedly—

"Why should Cousin Arthur think absurdities of that kind? I—"

"He said you were very young, and—very attractive"—Christina laughed, a low, mischievous laugh, as the colour deepened on the other's face—"and he would have it, too, that people would want to marry you for your money and position."

"I have no intention of marrying again," Cicely said firmly, "and, if I did, I hope I should have sense enough to know whether I was wanted for my stupid position, or for myself."

"There are some people," Christina said, the words coming from her lips almost involuntarily "who would be afraid to ask you to marry them, just because of your money and position."

"I don't see why a man's silly pride should stand in the way of his love," Cicely retorted; but Christina shook her head sagely.

"Ah! but men do let their pride spoil their love," she said, "and they let their pride spoil other people's lives too," she added, with a wisdom beyond her years. "A man might easily think it would be dishonourable to ask you to marry him—a man who was not rich, or distinguished." She

spoke very slowly; in some odd way it seemed, even to herself, as though the words were put into her mouth to speak, and as she uttered them she was looking so intently out of the window, that she did not observe the varying expressions of emotions that flitted over Cicely's face.

"One would not know how to beat down the sort of pride you describe," she answered, after a pause, during which Christina's eyes fixed themselves upon a flock of pigeons, wheeling about the plane-trees in the square. "A woman is so tied, so handicapped; she can only possess her soul in patience, and wait."

"I don't believe I should wait," again it seemed to Christina, as though the words were being forced from her. "If I knew that only pride, silly, ridiculous pride, was holding a man back, a man who loved me and I him—well, I don't believe I would wait. I think—there's a limit to possessing one's soul in patience."

"But Christina—surely!"—Cicely's blue eyes opened wide, she looked into the girl's animated face, with wondering incredulity.

"Surely—yes," Christina answered with an audacious little laugh. "If the man cared for me, and I knew it, I—would not let his pride spoil his life and mine. If he was too proud to ask me—why, then, I should ask him—that is all." With the laughing words, she turned and left the room, murmuring that it was time she attended to Baba's tea; but after she had gone, Cicely sat very still, her mind haunted by the words the other had just spoken.

"I would not let his pride spoil his life and mine. If he was too proud to ask me—why, then, I should ask him, that is all."

"But such a big 'all,'" Cicely reflected, her eyes, like Christina's, following the wheeling flight of the wood-pigeons about the plane-trees' tops; "it is such an impossible thing even to contemplate doing, and yet—"

And yet! Sitting there alone, she reviewed the past happy years, when John had been her safeguard, her protector, the shadow of a great rock in her life, shielding her from everything that could hurt or vex her. And after those years of full content had come the lean years of sorrow—the blank desolation of her widowhood, the loneliness, the overpowering loneliness, which no kindly friends nor kindred could really lessen or assuage. And now, new possibilities of happiness seemed to be opening before her, if—but again it was such a big "if." How could she put out her hand to snatch at what had not been offered to her, what might never be offered to her, but which, nevertheless, she knew with a woman's sure knowledge was hers?

"I don't think it is being unfaithful to John," she thought; "it does not make me love John less, because I know—that other—could bring me a measure of joy again."

For a few moments she gave free rein to her thoughts, letting them range over the past few months, allowing her memory to bring back Denis Fergusson's kindly, shrewd face, with the brown eyes that held so much both of tenderness and humour, and the mouth that could smile so cheerily, and set itself into lines of such strength and steadfastness. During those anxious days of Baba's illness at Graystone, she had of necessity seen Fergusson constantly, and perhaps it had been borne in upon her then, that he, too, was of the nature of a great rock, strong to lean upon, and very steadfast; and perhaps she had been drawn to him, in that mysterious drawing together of one particular man to one particular woman, which must always be a wonder of the universe.

Whenever she and Fergusson had met, she had been conscious of her own power over him, conscious also that something was holding him back. And now, as it seemed to her, Christina had given her the clue, to what had often sorely puzzled her. Her own outlook upon life was an eminently simple one, and she had never dreamed that her rank or wealth could make a bar to the friendship, and the something deeper than friendship, of such a man as Denis Fergusson. Christina's words had given her food for thought, and they had also brought her face to face with the knowledge of herself, and of all that Denis was beginning to mean to her. He possessed that same steadfast quality which had been one of her husband's noblest characteristics, and the one perhaps that had made the chief appeal to her more yielding nature. And Fergusson's cheery strength and unfailing optimism, had gone far also towards drawing her to him. But instinctively she had been aware of a barrier between them, of something which he was rearing up against her, and though the instinctive knowledge of the barrier had wounded and puzzled her, it was only now, with Christina's words ringing in her ears, that she understood the meaning of all the puzzle. The doctor was a poor man, or at any rate comparatively poor, whilst she had more than enough and to spare of this world's goods, and a title into the bargain; and because the man was proud as well as poor, he had erected that barrier, of which she had been confusedly conscious.

Well! Christina—straightforward Christina, with her almost boyish love for all that was most natural, most frank and simple—had said, "I would not let his pride spoil his life, and mine. If he was too proud to ask me, then I should ask him!"

"But"—Cicely rose from her chair, and crossed the room to the window—"but, of course, any such step as that was out of the question for her—impossible and out of the question. She could never overcome her pride, to such an extent as that—never!"

"Dr. Fergusson has called, my lady, and desired me to say that if you were disengaged, he

would be very glad if he could see you for a few minutes." James, the footman, stood in the doorway, and even upon James's slow intelligence, it dawned that his mistress looked unusually lovely, and unusually young. But his dense mind did not especially connect the youth or loveliness with anything or anybody; he only dimly saw and wondered, whilst for the fraction of a second Cicely hesitated. Should she order James to bring the doctor up to the boudoir—to this dainty room in which she made a point of only receiving those who were her most intimate friends? Or should she go down to the drawing-room, and receive him as she received acquaintances? The two questions revolved in her mind, and they were quickly answered.

"I will come down to the drawing-room," she said, scarcely knowing herself why she came to this decision; coming to it more by instinct, than by any power of reasoning. She paused yet another moment to collect her forces, then went slowly down the great staircase, and opened the drawing-room door, without lingering on the threshold, as she was more than half inclined to do.

Fergusson came forward quickly to greet her, and she saw that, though he smiled, and spoke in his customary, cheery manner, his eyes held a troubled look, and there was a worn expression on his face, which she had never seen there before. His manner, too, had a nervousness very foreign to it, and he talked rapidly, as though he were afraid of silence, and must continue speaking at all costs.

"I must apologise for troubling you," he said, and Cicely noted the formality of his speech, "but I felt I should like to come and ask about my little friend Baba, before I go away."

"Go away?" Cicely could frame no other words than those two bare ones, because for a second her heart seemed to stop beating, then raced on again at headlong speed.

"Yes"—Fergusson still spoke fast and nervously,—"I have come to rather a sudden decision, but I feel it is a wise one. I have made up my mind to go abroad, to begin life in a new country. The old one is over-crowded—we are all finding that fact out more and more, and I am proposing to go to the Far West. It has always appealed to me—that free life in a big, new country."

"But your poor people—your people in South London," Cicely interrupted, a sick pain gnawing at her heart; "surely they want you?"

He shrugged his shoulders a little, and smiled.

"I am not indispensable to them, or to anyone"—the last words he spoke under his breath—"and I believe there is plenty of work waiting for me, on the other side of the world. I have not made up my mind to this hurriedly, but it seems the best and wisest thing to do."

"I wonder why?" Cicely began slowly, her blue eyes looking full into those troubled brown ones. "It seems"—she broke off, leaving her sentence unfinished, her eyes dropping suddenly, because of what she read in those other eyes.

"Does it seem to you a mad idea?—an act of impulse?" he asked, his glance travelling hungrily over her down-bent face. "I have not come to the decision impulsively. It is the best—the only thing to do." The last part of the speech dropped hurriedly from his lips, he drew in his breath sharply, almost as if he were being tried to the limits of his strength. "I—could not—go away without coming to say good-bye to you—and Miss Moore—and Baba," he added jerkily.

"We should have been very angry with you if you had done such a horrid thing," Cicely answered lightly, so lightly, that a hurt look crept into the brown eyes watching her. He had not dared to hope she could by any remote possibility care for him, so he said to himself. He had never dreamt such wildly improbable dreams, but he had thought she would be a little sorry to lose a friend for ever; and when he left England, he intended to leave it for ever, to cut adrift from all old friendships, all old ties. And yet she looked up at him with laughter in her eyes, and talked brightly of being angry with him, if he had gone without a farewell! He felt oddly hurt and ruffled, and Cicely, as keenly aware of the hurt, as she had been a moment before of the significant look in his eyes, only knew that her own heart was beating with an excess of joy that frightened her—only realised that the game lay in her own small hands, if only—she could play the game as it should be played.

"You—have not given up your house and practice—yet?" she questioned, and her tone was still brisk, almost business-like, and there was a hurt note in his voice as he answered—

"My house is in an agent's hands for letting, and I am only going on with the work, until I can find someone to take it over; as soon as everything is settled here, I shall be off. To tell you the honest truth, I shall be glad to go." Cicely's heart leapt in an insane way, because of the sudden ring of bitterness in his accents, she moved a step nearer to him (they had both remained standing since her entrance), she had even uttered the words, "I wish"—when the door was flung wide open, and James announced, "Mrs. Deane."

Cicely was not quite sure whether she most wished to laugh or cry, when this very ordinary little acquaintance, a walking mass of platitudes, propriety, and dullness, walked into the room. Too well she knew that Mrs. Deane, once established in her drawing-room, would not be quickly dislodged, and, with an inward sigh, she resigned herself to her fate, whilst Fergusson held out his hand in farewell.

"I must be getting on my way," he said; "perhaps I might just go up to the nursery, to say good-bye to Miss Moore and Miss Baba?"

"Of course," Cicely answered with her pretty smile. "Baba would bitterly resent it, if her dear doctor went across the sea, without saying good-bye to her."

"If—you go across the sea," she mentally ejaculated, as the door closed behind his tall form, and she settled herself down to listen to Mrs. Deane's totally uninteresting conversation. "If—you—go—across—the sea!"

CHAPTER XXII.

"I CAME TO-DAY, TO TELL YOU SO."

If Fergusson had left the great house in the square with his spirits at zero, they had travelled many degrees below that point on the following morning. He sat alone in the room he used as study and general sitting-room, and, spread on the table before him were two letters, one from a house-agent informing him that a possible client was in treaty for his house; the other from a medical practitioner in the north of England, who expressed a desire to come in person, and learn all particulars about the practice.

"Burning my boats with a vengeance," Fergusson muttered, looking round the room which he had learnt to love, and smiling a troubled smile that had no joy behind it. That glance round the room, brought back to his remembrance, in an odd flash of memory, Christina's first visit to him, when he was occupying Dr. Stokes's house in the country. There was real humour in his smile when he recalled the girl's look of surprise, and her naïve acknowledgment of the discrepancy she saw between his appearance, and that of the house in which he was. Looking round the study of his South London abode, he wondered whether Christina would consider his present surroundings more in keeping with his personality, than those in which she had first seen him. Certainly there was nothing here of the smug respectability which had characterised Dr. Stokes's well-kept establishment. No two chairs matched one another, but they were all comfortable and restful, the walls were distempered a soft rich yellow that gave an effect of sunlight even on the greyest days, and the few pictures hanging against the sunny background, were excellent photographs framed in oak, and representing some of the best Old Masters of the Italian School. Bookcases covered a considerable amount of the wall space, books covered the tables, and were even piled upon a corner of the rather faded Turkey carpet. The box outside the open window was filled with wallflowers, and their penetrating fragrance made the room sweet. The view was not a wholly uninspiring one, for a narrow strip of garden lay behind the house, and glimpses of waving boughs were visible against the blue sky of May. The roar of traffic from the main road a few paces away, the distant hum of humanity, these were sounds dear to the ears of the doctor, to whom human beings made so deep an appeal; he even had a weakness for the raucous street cries, audible now and again above the persistent roar, that was like the noise of Atlantic breakers on a rock-bound coast.

He was sorry to be leaving the teeming London world, in which he had spent so much of his busy life—more sorry than anyone else could realise, he reflected grimly. Possibly, to the rest of mankind, a practice in South London might not appear the acme of bliss—a practice that dealt almost exclusively with the sordid, the poor, even the criminal; but—he loved his work, he loved his people; it was intolerably hard to tear himself away from them all, and yet—the tearing was inevitable.

"I can't stay here within measurable reach—of her—and of temptation, and—play the man," his reflections ran on, "so—so I must run away." He laughed shortly, as he picked up the two letters from his table, and re-read them, feeling absurdly disinclined to reply to either. He knew he must go. With the unwavering directness of an upright man, when making a decision, he had seen what he conceived to be the right path clearly marked for him; and, having seen it, he had no thought of drawing back from following it. But, with all his strength and decision of character, he nevertheless felt, at this juncture, a deep repugnance to writing those letters, which would, as he expressed it to himself, have the effect of burning his boats behind him. He knew that good work awaited him in that far western land, where he had determined to begin a new life; he knew, too, that to remain in England within call, as it were, of a temptation which his sense of what was right and honourable, bade him resist, was merely dallying with that sense of right; and yet, the human man within him, cried out against the necessity which he had faced, and acknowledged to be inevitable. Although he already actually knew the contents of those two letters by heart, he read both through again, then deliberately folded, and set them aside, with another short laugh.

"If they are answered by to-night's post, it is time enough," he exclaimed. "They shall be answered to-night; these few hours of delay will make no difference." He was half-amused, half-

ashamed of his own cowardice, as he called it, in postponing the inevitable, but a weight seemed to be lifted off his heart when those letters were set aside unanswered, when he turned away from the writing table, to go to his downstairs surgery, feeling that the conflagration of those boats of his had not yet begun.

The busy morning of attending to the motley collection of fellow creatures who thronged to his surgery door, was only half over; and he was waiting in his tiny consulting-room, for the next patient, when a tap on the door was followed by the entrance of Thompson, his caretaker, and general factotum. Indeed, Thompson and his wife constituted the entire staff of Fergusson's household, being the doctor's devoted admirers, as well as his faithful servants; and when he had broached to them his proposed change of life, they had simultaneously announced their intention of going with him to the West, and sharing his fortunes in the new land and new labours.

Upon Thompson's face now, as he entered his master's little consulting-room, there was an expression of mingled bewilderment and pleasure, which made Fergusson look at him sharply.

"Yes, Thompson, what is it?" he asked, for it was seldom indeed that any call from the house was allowed to interfere with the surgery work.

"There's a lady called to see you, sir," the man answered. "When she heard you was busy, she wanted to call again, but I didn't feel it would be right to let a lady like her go away, and call again." Fergusson smiled. Thompson was the worthiest soul on earth, but his powers of discrimination were not great, and a "lady like her" was in all probability a suburban "Miss," hoping to obtain a consultation at surgery rates.

"Where is the lady?" he asked.

"In your study, sir," Thompson answered, mild amazement in his voice. "I couldn't show a lady like her nowhere else, could I, sir?"

Again Fergusson smiled. He knew them so well—those ladies who made such an appeal to Thompson's æsthetic soul, the ladies of rather abnormally sized hats, garments they called "stylish," with lace blouses, out of which rose an unnecessary length of neck, encircled by artificial pearls. Oh! he knew precisely what sort of a lady he would find in his study, and the knowledge did not make him hasten his steps, as he went up the staircase to the sitting-room. Long before opening the door, he had decided to make short shrift of the lady—he knew precisely how he should frame his terse speech—and there was a distinctly grim look upon his usually kindly face, when he entered the room. But when he saw who it was that stood in the May sunlight, close to the open window, the grim expression died away, unbounded astonishment took its place, and he caught his breath suddenly, standing stock still on the threshold, and staring at his visitor, as if she was an apparition from another world.

"You?" he said; and it seemed as though that single word were the only one that he could bring himself to utter. "You?" he repeated, as he moved slowly across the room, his eyes riveted upon Lady Cicely's face. She stood very still, just where she had been when he first entered, the sunlight falling upon the pure gold of her hair, and on the exceeding fairness of her face; her eyes very blue, and very deep, looking up at Fergusson with a strange mixture of embarrassment and sweetness, which set his heart beating fast.

In all the time of his acquaintance with her, she had never looked younger or fairer than on this May morning. Her gown of some pale grey material, exactly suited the pale pure tints of her hair and complexion, and the great pink rose fastened against the soft feathers of her grey boa, harmonised with the delicate colour that had risen to her cheeks, as Fergusson entered.

"I—promised I would come some day to see your house, and your surgery," she said, hesitating a little between the words, but speaking firmly nevertheless, "and—I thought I would come to-day."

"What made you come to-day?" he asked, an odd abruptness that almost amounted to roughness, in his voice. "Why to-day, of all days?"

"I—don't know," she answered. "I believe I acted—on impulse. It just came into my head that I must come this morning, and—you know I am rather a creature of impulse—and I came—straight away."

"It is so curious you should have come to-day," he persisted, still with that odd abruptness of voice and manner. "You have come in time to see my boats burnt."

"Your—boats—burnt?" her voice was puzzled; she looked into his face with less of embarrassment, because in some indefinite way she felt that he was more embarrassed than she, and it gave her courage. "Why are you burning boats?"

"Because, as I told you when I came to see you, I am giving up the life here, giving it up altogether, irrevocably, for always. There is to be no turning back."

"No turning back," she repeated softly, her eyes watching the changing expressions on his face. "Why no turning back?"

"Why? Because I have made up my mind to begin a new life, in a new world, and—when I make up my mind a thing must be done, I generally carry it through."

"Ah!" she said. "You generally carry it through?"

"Yes," he spoke almost harshly. "The boats will be burnt to-day—finally burnt."

She stood very still in the sunlight, her pretty head bent down, her hands slowly moving over the knob of the dainty sunshade she carried, a little smile lurking about the corners of her mouth; her eyes fixed on the faded colours of the Turkey carpet.

"I think—I should like—to be here for the burning of the boats," she said. "It sounds so—subversive—so final."

"It is subversive—it is final," was the short reply, and a flame of anger against her shot up within him. "Why did she come here to torture him? What had possessed her to come and stand here in his room, in the sunlight, stand here amongst all his most cherished belongings, just as in some of his mad dreams, he had pictured she might stand—looking so fair, so young, so sweet? Why had she done it? It was cruel, not just to a man who was trying to follow his code of honour, to its bitterest consequences." So his thoughts ran, whilst Cicely still stood there, moving her hands over the knob of her sunshade, the little smile still hovering upon her lips.

"I wonder," she said slowly, after a moment's silence—and Fergusson, watching her intently, saw that a deeper colour crept into her face—"I wonder—whether—the burning—is—really necessary?"

"Quite necessary." His tone was abrupt to the point of rudeness. "I have made up my mind."

"And—you—never—change—your mind?" She shot one swift glance at him from her pretty eyes, lowering them again instantly, whilst her hands moved more nervously, and her voice shook.

"Not when I am sure I am acting rightly," he answered. "And in this case I have no doubts."

She was silent again, for what seemed to the man who watched her many, many minutes, though only a few seconds had ticked by, before she said gently—

"I wonder—why you—are so very sure?"

"Because there is no room for doubt," was the terse response, and again there was silence, until Cicely said softly—

"I—think you are wrong. I—believe there is great room for doubt."

"Why do you say that?" he exclaimed, that almost rough note in his voice again. "How can you tell, how can you know, what I——" He broke off with significant abruptness, and Cicely moved a few steps nearer to him.

"Dr. Fergusson," she said, her voice very low, her words hurried. "I don't know—how to explain—what makes me say—that I am sure you are wrong to—to burn your boats. I—came this morning—on purpose to tell you—"

"To tell me what?" he questioned, his own voice more gentle, because of the nervousness in hers.

"To tell you—you are—wrong to give up your work here, and go away."

"Wrong? Why?" For the life of him, Fergusson could not utter another syllable; he could only stand and stare and stare at the bent golden head, wishing desperately that she would go away, before he was conquered by his overmastering desire to seize her hands in his, and draw her close against his breast.

"Quite, quite wrong," she answered firmly, lifting her eyes again, and looking into his face; "you mustn't go away. I came this morning—to tell you—that you mustn't go away. Baba and I—can't spare you." The last words were spoken so softly as to be almost inaudible; but they reached Fergusson's ears, and he looked at the speaker, as though he could hardly believe the evidence of his senses.

"Baba—and—you?" he repeated.

"Baba—and—I," she whispered. "Oh! perhaps I ought not to have come, but there seemed no other way to show you—what a dreadful mistake you were going to make, and—Rupert says I am always a creature of impulse," she ended with a little laugh. "I came—on—impulse, because—because I had to come." She came closer to his side, and laid one of her hands upon his coat sleeve, her blue eyes looking into his, with the wistful, appealing eagerness of a child's eyes. "I—don't know what Cousin Arthur would say—if he knew," she ended inconsequently.

"But—I can't quite understand even now," Fergusson said, with a not very successful effort to

speak quietly. "I—do not think I can be of any use to—you—and little Baba. There are plenty of other doctors who—"

"Plenty of other *doctors*," she answered, a quiver in her voice; "but only one you—and—and are all men always so dense? Please understand, Baba—and I—ask you—to stay. We—are very bold—and brazen—Baba and I!"

She did not look up at him now. She did not see the look of radiant joy that swept across his face, she only felt his arms go suddenly round her, she only realised what a relief it was to hide her burning cheeks against his rough coat, whilst he bent his head to hers, and murmured passionate inarticulate little words, that would not frame themselves into sentences, and yet seemed to flood her world with happiness.

"I can't understand it," he said presently, putting his hand softly under her chin and lifting her face, so that he could look deep into her eyes; "you can't mean—that you—would stoop—to me?"

"I didn't know how to make you understand without telling you in plain English that I—that you——" She broke off again, her eyes dropping before the look in his, the colour deepening in her cheeks.

"That you—and Baba—want me?" he quoted softly.

"Yes; we don't think we can do without you, Baba and I. We can't let you go to the Far West, or—anywhere very far away from us. Only——"

"Only?" he whispered, his lips close to hers.

"Only—I didn't think I could ever be so—horribly brazen—as to ask a man to——"

"You haven't asked me anything," he answered whimsically, a smile on his lips, a humorous twinkle in the eyes that looked so tenderly at her rosy face. "You haven't asked me anything yet!"

"Don't make me more ashamed," she whispered. "It is dreadful to have come—to have said—to——"

"To have played the part of a gracious and lovely queen, whose Prince Consort dares not speak, until she gives him the right?" His voice was a caressing whisper, his arm held her more closely. "And even now, I do not know whether I have any business to accept the right you give me? You and I are such poles asunder."

"Are we?" she answered softly, her hand touching his. "Are we really 'poles asunder,' just because I happen to have a little more money than you have? Aren't we just a man and woman, who——"

"Who?" he echoed gently, as she paused, and his face was bent very near to hers, to hear her answer.

"Who—care for each other," she whispered confusedly. "I don't think—you ought to make me say all the—difficult things."

"Is it so difficult to say you care for me," he answered, with a low laugh of triumphant gladness. "I have got dozens of patients waiting downstairs for me, but I don't want to do anything except go on telling you how much I care for you, so much that I could not stay in England, and not tell you the truth."

"And why didn't you tell me?" she said reproachfully, lifting her head to look again into his radiant face.

"Because—your rank, and money, and surroundings—oh! everything about you, put you far out of my reach," he answered, with a sudden return to his old abruptness. "Even now I have not the smallest right to take advantage of the wonderful thing you have done to-day. What will your people say? What will the world say? What——"

"Need you and I mind what the rest of mankind thinks, or says?" she answered, a little flash of defiance in her eyes. "Perhaps in coming here to-day I have been unwomanly and horrible; and yet, I had to come, because I knew that happiness is too big a thing to be sacrificed to pride, or to other people's opinions."

"And—this is your happiness?" His voice was strangely softened. "Do you really mean me to know that you could be happy with me, with a rough sort of fellow like me?"

"With a rough sort of fellow like you," she answered, laughing, a tender mockery in her words. "I can't be happy without you, and—I came to-day, to tell you so!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"THE KING OF MY KINGDOM."

The afternoon was very still. Overhead, the sky of October was mistily blue, the autumn sunshine flooded upland and valley with a golden glory; in the air was that quietness, that sense of waiting and brooding, which marks an autumn day. From the cottages in the valley, thin trails of blue smoke mounted straight into the veiled softness of the sky. The touch of autumn's hand was already visible upon the trees. In the copse over the brow of the hill, the hazels were yellowing; the beech-trees showed orange and gold amongst their leaves; the hawthorns wore a brave array of crimson and yellow leaves, and bright red berries. Long ago the heather had faded, a soft dun colour had taken the place of the royal purple, which earlier in the year had carpeted the uplands, and the bracken blazed golden and brown upon the moorland slopes. From the place where Christina sat, she could see the white road that wound away across the heather to Graystone, and to those far blue hills, about which the afternoon sun was weaving a veil of light. In the valley to her right, the trunks of the pine-trees were turning crimson in the sun's level beams, the birches' delicate branches outlined against the blue of the sky, the soft amber of the larches contrasting with the sombre green of the pines, and beneath the trees, the carpet of bright bracken touched to gold by the sunshine. From far away across the moor, came the sound of chiming bells, from the copse across the road a robin sang his wonderful song of spring, that will follow winter, of life that will come after death; and from somewhere amongst the trees of the valley, a thrush was fluting the first notes of his next year's song, that he had yet to learn. The world was a very peaceful world on that October afternoon; and Christina, sitting on a hummock of dry heather, rested her chin on her hands, and looked over the wide landscape, with a great sense of its abiding restfulness. The chiming bells, the robin's song, the occasional soft murmur of the little breeze in the pines, harmonised with the brooding peace of autumn, that seemed to be over all the land, and the girl smiled, as she let the sense of restful peace sink deep into her soul. She and Baba were spending a week with Mrs. Nairne at Graystone, and on this Sunday afternoon, leaving the child in Mrs. Nairne's charge, she had walked over the hill to the little churchyard, to visit Margaret's grave.

In that sunny corner of the churchyard, close to the old grey wall, she had found violets in bloom, filling the air with their sweetness just as they had filled it on the April day, when Margaret had been laid to rest; and Christina held some of the purple, fragrant blossoms in her hand, whilst she sat looking out over the great sweep of country, to the golden sky behind the hills. Her thoughts were very full of the beautiful woman whose life had so strangely crossed her own, and from her thoughts of Margaret, by a natural transition, her mind wandered on to the remembrance of the man who had stood by her side, at Margaret's funeral. She recalled the look of heartbreak in Rupert Mernside's eyes, when they had met hers; she remembered that glimpse she had had into the man's tortured soul. How many times since that day, had Cicely speculated about Rupert's friendship with Margaret, wondering whether he had cared for her more deeply than as a friend, discussing the why and wherefore of his disappearance from the midst of his own circle, whilst all the time Christina knew in her heart, that she could if she would, have answered all these questions. She knew that Rupert's feeling for Margaret was not merely that of friendship, never had been friendship only; and she knew, intuitively, that his usual round of life had become intolerable to him, after Margaret's death. She felt an odd sense of triumph in her knowledge of him; of triumph, and of awe as well. For to Christina's simple and straightforward nature, there was something awe-inspiring, in this strange, intimate understanding of another human being's soul.

Seated there upon the heather, she was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she did not observe a figure moving slowly across the valley; and not until the figure had detached itself from amongst the trees, and was walking along the high-road in her direction, did she see that the object of her thoughts was coming towards her. That he should have come at that particular moment, struck her first as so extraordinary a coincidence, that she could hardly believe the evidence of her own eyes. But as the figure came a few paces nearer, she knew that she had made no mistake; it was Rupert's face into which she looked, as she sprang to her feet, Rupert's grey eyes that met hers with a smile, despite their expression of haunting sadness.

"I never dreamt of seeing you here," were his first unconventional words of greeting; "and yet it seems natural to find you."

Perhaps he was hardly aware himself why he spoke the last half of his sentence, and although Christina's heart leapt as she heard it, something within her seemed to respond to the spirit of his words. To her, too, it seemed "natural," that they should meet out here on the heather, in the sunlight, close to Margaret's grave. For the little churchyard lay only just over the brow of the hill, and Rupert's explanation of his presence on the moorland, was not needed by the girl, who knew without any words of his that he had come to visit that corner by the sunny wall, where the violets scented the air with their fragrance. After that brief greeting, he made Christina sit down again upon the heather, and flung himself beside her, his face turned, like hers, to the western horizon. "I am glad they put those words on the stone," he said abruptly; "whose thought were they?"

"I think I thought of them first," Christina answered; "they seemed the fittest and most beautiful words for her."

"Love—never faileth," he quoted slowly, his thoughts going back to the white cross, upon which the words were engraved, "Love never faileth; yes, you could not have chosen a better epitaph for her. Her soul was built up of love, and her love never failed, never for a single moment. It is a wonderful thing—the love of such a woman. Perhaps, in all the world, there is nothing more wonderful than a woman's love." He seemed to be speaking his thoughts aloud, rather than addressing her directly, and she did not answer his speech, only sat very still, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes looking out towards the golden west, a little smile on her lips.

"You know—I have been wandering over the earth—since—that day," Rupert went on, speaking with singular abruptness. "I felt like that man who went out, seeking rest—and finding none. I have found none."

The ring of bitterness in his voice hurt the girl. She turned a little, and looked down into his face.

"I am sorry," she said; "so very sorry."

"Are you?" he answered. "It is not worth while being sorry for a man who has made a mess of things, as I have done."

"Why do you say that," she said quickly. "You made the most of a beautiful friendship; you did Aunt Margaret no wrong in loving her. You were always her helpful friend. And now—"

"Now?" he echoed when she paused.

"Perhaps you will think me impertinent for saying what I was going to say," she answered, the colour creeping into her face; "but I was going to say, now you will not waste your life, in regretting what is past and over. You are not the sort of person to waste life in regrets. I should think you would take all the best of the love and friendship, and work them into your life, to make it better."

The words were as simply spoken, as they were simple in themselves. Their very simplicity made an appeal to the man who heard them, for, like all the best men, Rupert, man of the world though he was, had a very simple nature.

"Weave the past into the future," he answered thoughtfully. "Not sweep it away and try to forget it, but let it be woven into my life? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, that is what I mean, only you have put it into better words. I never think it is quite right to try and sweep away a past, even if it has hurt us. It always seems as if it must be so much better to use all that was good in the past, and let it help to make the future better. I don't think I believe in stamping things out, and burying them, and being ruthless over them. Isn't it better to take the good from them, and bury the rest?"

Rupert's eyes were fixed on the girl's face, which had grown eager and intent over the thoughts she was trying to express, and as he watched her a smile broke up the ruggedness of his own features. She was quite unconscious of his gaze, but a soft colour had come into her cheeks as she spoke, her eyes were very deep and bright, and the man who looked at her realised that hers was more than mere girlish prettiness. She had taken off her hat, and the sunlight fell upon the dusky masses of her hair, showing golden gleams in its dark threads. Her eyes, green and deep and very soft, made Rupert think of a stream in Switzerland, beside which he had stood only a few weeks back, a stream whose waters shone in the sunbeams, showing dark and green and soft in the shade. The colour that had crept into the pure whiteness of her cheeks, tinted them as a white rose is sometimes tinted; and for the first time Rupert was aware of a faint, yet definite likeness, between the girl at his side and the woman he had loved. Perhaps it was in her expression more than in any actual resemblance between the two women's faces, that the likeness lay, for something of Margaret's nobility and serenity, seemed to be reflected on the younger countenance, and with that flashing thought, there flashed into his mind, too, the words Margaret had spoken to him, before she died. He had never remembered those words again until now, and they recurred to him with extraordinary force.

"She would make a man who cared for her, a most tender and loving wife. She has a sweet, strong soul."

"A sweet, strong soul." Those words rang in his brain with odd persistence, whilst his eyes watched Christina's profile, as she sat silently looking out again across the moorlands.

A—sweet—strong soul. And there was such a strange restfulness, too, about the personality of the girl, young though she was; he remembered how conscious he had been of that restfulness on the day when he had sat and talked to her, in Mrs. Nairne's parlour. That same restfulness stole over him now, and some of the haunting misery within him died away.

"So you don't believe in a ruthless chopping away of the past?" he asked, going back to her last words.

"Oh! no," she exclaimed vehemently. "I am sure we are meant to use the past as a foundation stone for the future. Each thing in turn comes into our lives—joy, sorrow, pain, difficulty; and they all have to help together to build it up into perfection. But—I have no business to be sitting here preaching sermons," she added lightly. "I must go home, and relieve Mrs. Nairne of Baba, and write to Cicely, and——"

"No; wait here a little longer," he interrupted imperiously, laying a hand on her arm, as she attempted to rise. "I am a returned traveller, and you are to tell me all the news before you go back to Baba, who, I am morally convinced, is supremely happy with Mrs. Nairne."

"Supremely," Christina laughed. "She was going to help warm the scones for tea; perhaps you will come and help us eat them," she added shyly. "Baba would be so pleased if you came to have tea with us again."

"And you? Would you be pleased?"

"Of course," but she looked away from him as she spoke, and the soft rose tints on her face deepened ever so slightly, "Baba and I were very proud of giving you tea in the little parlour, last December."

"I liked that parlour. I have pleasant recollections of it," he answered. "I liked the low ceiling, and the oak panelled walls, and the queer old-fashioned furniture. Yes, I will come and have tea with you and Baba to-day, but first tell me all about everybody."

"You know Cicely has married Dr. Fergusson?"

"I saw it in a chance paper. I have heard no details. I have simply drifted over Europe, where my fancy, or the demon of unrest led me, and I let nobody know where I was. I know practically nothing. Why did Cicely marry the doctor? He is a thorough good fellow, but——"

"There isn't any 'but,'" Christina answered firmly. "Denis Fergusson is one of the very best men in the world, and Cicely has been radiant ever since—they were engaged. They were only married three weeks ago, and I wish you could have seen her face, when she walked down the church. You would not have said 'but' then!"

"Were her people annoyed?"

"A little, but only a little, and only at first. I think they recognised how completely the marriage was for Cicely's happiness. After all, Denis is a gentleman, an absolute and perfect gentleman, and a good man; and those two things are all that matter."

"Yes, those things are all that matter. It is only sheer worldliness that demands more. And if Cicely is happy, why—let worldliness go hang. Poor little Cicely certainly needed a man to take care of her, and Baba, and that big property; but—is Fergusson willing to give up his work?"

"Cicely won't hear of his giving it up. The surgery in South London is to go on as usual, and Cicely has insisted on having an assistant there, to do the work when Denis cannot go himself, so that, as she expresses it, she is not depriving a poor man of his living, in allowing a rich man to profit by the surgery and its practice."

"I confess to being a little surprised that Fergusson ever got himself up to the scratch of asking a rich woman to marry him," Rupert said, with some hesitation. "It doesn't seem—quite like the man."

"It wasn't in the least like the man," Christina answered demurely. "And—I'm afraid—I—made myself into a kind of—of matchmaker—or god in the machine, or something of that sort."

Rupert laughed outright.

"It was all your doing, was it?" he questioned, looking at her with smiling kindness. "Did you ___"

"I don't think I can exactly tell you how I—I—worked the trick," she laughed a little confusedly. "But Cicely says it wouldn't ever have happened but for me. And I am glad."

"So am I—very glad. Fergusson is a lucky man. A man who gets a woman like Cicely to take care of him, may consider a part of every day well spent, if he spends it in singing a *Te Deum* of his own. And Sir Arthur's lost pendant—was it ever found?"

"Yes; eventually the police traced the woman who had been in the railway carriage with Lady Congreve's bag, and she confessed to having stolen the jewel."

After these words, silence again fell between them, until Christina once more made an attempt to rise.

"I ought to go back," she said, when Rupert's detaining hand again fell on her arm. "Baba ___"

"Why should you go back when I want you here," was the audacious response. "I want you much more than Baba does."

The hand he had laid on her arm lingered there; over the latter half of his sentence, his voice had sunk almost to a whisper, and the rose tints on Christina's cheeks brightened. "I believe I have been wanting you for quite a long time," he went on, deliberately, his eyes watching how the colour came and went on her face, his hand still resting on her arm. "Would you like to know how often, when I was wandering about the byways of Europe, I thought of that evening in Mrs. Nairne's oak-panelled parlour, when I told you so many things about myself? Would you like to know how often you came into my mind?"

Christina's dark head was a little bent, her eyes were fastened on a clump of bracken, blazing golden in the level sun-rays, her voice was very low and a little shaky.

"I—shouldn't have thought you would remember me at all," she said, the touch of his hand upon her arm filling her with a sensation of strange gladness.

"On that afternoon I told you, I am sure I told you, how restful you were," Rupert continued, speaking with an eagerness that gave him an oddly boyish manner; "something in your personality rested me then, and I have never forgotten it. You rest me now," he added suddenly, his hand slipping from her arm, and folding itself over her hand. "I came here to-day, feeling as if the world were a sorry enough place, and I a poor fool who had messed up my life, and was at the end of my tether. But when I saw you, sitting here in the sunshine, I felt as if—some day—the sunlight might come back to my life."

"Could I—bring it back?" Her voice still shook, but she lifted her eyes bravely to look into his face, and he bent nearer to her, and gathered both her hands into his.

"Little Christina," he said. "I don't know whether it is fair, even to think of asking you to spend your fresh young life in bringing sunshine back to mine, but—because I am a selfish brute—because—I—want you—I am going to ask you what I believe I have no right to ask you. And yet—it was Margaret's thought, too—Margaret's wish," he added, under his breath.

"Aunt Margaret's wish!" the girl exclaimed. "That I—that you—!" She broke off confusedly, trying instinctively to draw her hands from his, but feeling his clasp tighten over them.

"Shall I tell you what she said to me about you the very last time I saw her?" he asked. "I think she knew I was going to be very lonely, and she spoke of you. I have not forgotten the actual words she used; they came back to me just now, as I sat here beside you; she said: 'She would make a man who cared for her, a most tender and loving wife. She has a sweet, strong soul.'"

More and more vividly the colour deepened on Christina's face, and she did not answer, because speech at that moment was a physical impossibility. Only her hands lay passive in his grasp, she no longer tried to draw them away.

"I think Margaret knew—how I should learn to need you," Rupert went on, his voice vibrating along the girl's nerves, and sending little thrills of happiness through her whole being. "She understood how much you could help me, if you would."

"*If I would?*" she echoed, a tremulous gladness in her voice. "But—I—am so young, so ignorant, not a bit worthy of—of all you say," she ended incoherently.

"Could you some day learn to care for me, if I tried to make you care?" was his answer. "Could you—some day—care for an old fellow like me, who hasn't even the best of his life and love to offer you? Could you do that, little girl?"

"I don't call you an old fellow," she said indignantly; "and—I—don't think—I have got to learn to care. I—think—I have—learnt—already."

Very gently, with a sort of tender reverence, he drew her into his arms and kissed her, then put her away from him again, and said quietly—

"Is it fair to you, I wonder; is it fair to you to take all your best, and give you only the second best in return?"

"But if I would rather have your second best, than the best from any other man in the world?" she said quickly. "What then? If it is a greater joy to me to think of being your rest and sunshine, than to be anything else in the world; what then?"

She put her hands upon his shoulders, pushing him a little further from her, that she might look fully into his eyes. "I don't believe any man really ever understands a woman," she added, inconsequently, with a laugh.

"Where have you learnt your knowledge of mankind?" he questioned; "and what makes you say we don't understand the other half of the world?"

"Because, if you did, you would know that when a woman cares for a man, she would rather

just be a servant in his house than go altogether out of his life. Perhaps we all prefer the best, but a woman who cares, would rather have the second best, than nothing at all."

"And are you a woman—who cares?" he whispered, drawing her back into his arms, with a sudden sense of her sweetness, her desirableness; "would you rather be——"

"You haven't asked me yet to be anything," she answered, with a touch of audacity, that sat charmingly upon her—"at least, you only mentioned rest, and sunshine, and—and intangible things of that sort."

"And if I asked you to be my wife?" His lips were very near to hers, his voice in itself was a caress, and Christina's heart beats nearly choked her. "If—I want you for my wife, little girl?"

Her answer was quite inarticulate, if indeed she answered him at all, but she allowed him to kiss her lips, and Rupert knew that her answer was given him with that kiss.

"You would not let any man kiss your lips, unless you loved him well enough to marry him," he said, after a moment's pause, and Christina looked at him with happy, laughing eyes.

"I would not let any man kiss me at all, unless I—wanted to marry him," she answered; "and ____"

"You want to marry me?" Rupert interrupted with a boyishly spontaneous laugh, such as she had never heard from him before.

"Yes, I want to marry you," she said demurely, drawing herself away from him again, and looking mischievously into his face; "and, do you know, this— isn't the first time I—I have thought of marrying you?"

"What do you mean?" Rupert's mystified expression brought a dimpling smile out upon her face.

"Do you remember the girl who answered your advertisement in the matrimonial column of a certain Sunday paper? That girl——"

"Was it you?" he exclaimed. "Were you the girl to whom I wrote? The girl I appointed to meet at Margaret's house? Could any coincidence be more strange?"

"I was C.M. who answered that advertisement, because she was at the very end of her resources, her hope," Christina answered gravely. "I felt horrible when I did it. I felt you would think the very worst of me for writing to you at all, but I was nearly in despair that day; there seemed just a loophole of escape for me, if I found—you were—kind and good."

"Poor little girl, my poor little girl." His arm drew her close. "You wrote the dearest, most simple little letter. I never thought the worse of you. I never thought badly of you at all. I made up my mind to help you get work; and I recommended you to Cicely; at least, I went so far as to tell Cicely I knew of someone who might do for Baba."

"But she didn't take me on your recommendation?"

"No, she said references were necessary, and——"

"And in the end she took me practically with no references at all, and—the story has just worked itself out to this wonderful ending."

"Is it such a wonderful ending?" He helped her to her feet, and they stood watching the golden sun drop slowly towards the golden hills. "Is it—the ending you would have chosen for yourself?"

"When I told Baba fairy stories, the prince used to have a curious family resemblance to you," she answered. "I—liked to make my fairy prince like you—because——"

"Because?"

"Because—I think I knew you were the best prince in all the world," she whispered, "the king—of my kingdom."

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