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THE WRONG MR. RIGHT

NOVELS BY BERTA RUCK

His Official Fiancée
The Wooing of Rosamond Fayre
The Boy with Wings
In Another Girl's Shoes
The Girls at His Billet
Miss Million's Maid
The Three of Hearts
The Years for Rachel
A Land-Girl's Love Story
The Disturbing Charm
Sweethearts Unmet
The Bridge of Kisses
Sweet Stranger
The Arrant Rover
The Wrong Mr. Right



I DECIDED TO BURST FORTH INTO COLOURS, AND, FOR MY GAY EVENING, TO CHOOSE A GAY DRESS

THE WRONG MR. RIGHT

A NOVEL

BY
BERTA RUCK

FRONTISPIECE BY
E. C. CASWELL



NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY

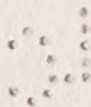
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PUBLISHED IN THE U. S. A. 1922
By DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY, INC.

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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A. BY
The Quinn & Boden Company
BOOK MANUFACTURERS
RAHWAY NEW JERSEY

M. V. G. M. 31-22.
as m J 28 Jan. 27

DEDICATION

“Cheer up, Girls! He is getting
on his boots!”

(E. V. Lucas's song “Mr. Right” in
“Over Bemerton's”)

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THE WRONG MR. RIGHT

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CHAPTER I

A "BEFORE-THE-WAR" BOGY

"**Y**OU wait until Mr. Right comes along——"

Oh, that pre-War phrase! How it exasperated me when I was twenty-one!

"Wait"—yes, that was the fascinating occupation offered to all unmarried girls who, like me, did not actually *have* to work.

And for "*Mr. Right!*"—I imagine that when the name was first invented (no doubt on some extra wet evening in the Ark, when the Shems got tired of playing Animal Grab with the Hams and began telling fairy-tales instead) it summed up the ideal lover of All-Romance. But since then it has been taken too often in vain. It has been spoilt for lovers; ruined by

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match-makers and the matter-of-fact. It has come to mean—a boggy and a bore.

To me, Morwenna Beaugard, it came to mean Georgie Settle, the son of the Rector in the next village from the one in which I had been brought up. In that quiet country rectory my great-uncle and guardian arranged to put me—as a paying guest—when my aunt, with whom I'd lived, died.

She had left me two hundred a year of my own, which was a good deal—in those days! Quite enough for me to be very comfortable on, said my guardian, until I married.

I told him I didn't mean to marry. I didn't like men. At that time I had met very few; my brother Jim—who was of the type that can only be described as “The Sultan of the Hearth-rug” and this Georgie Settle, who laid down the law as only a pre-War Oxford undergraduate could do. No; men were too domineering, and I didn't want to marry any. Then out it had come, the time-honoured dictum.

“You wait until Mr. Right asks you!” And

A "BEFORE-THE-WAR" BOGY

my guardian had made some arch, old-gentlemanly joke about "'Settle'—ing down."

It was the last straw!

It made up my mind for *me*. . . .

I won't go into the long and exhausting arguments that preceded my coming up to earn my living in town. They sound too antediluvian now, in the days when every girl treats as a matter of course what was to me a revolution!

I took my business training at Mrs. Herrick-Henderson's, in the City, determined to get it over, obtain a post, and be well in the way of my independent life in London before my brother came home on leave from the East.

Please realise, I was not naturally an "independent" young woman, nor severe, nor practical! It was a grief to me that I looked, at twenty-two, as if I were seventeen. But I could buckle to. I did. I got through my course in a way that Mrs. Herrick-Henderson said was "highly creditable" when she told me she considered me sufficiently advanced and proficient to send out to work as a clerk.

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It was she who gave me the address at which I had to apply; I looked upon it as a passport to my own independence and self-respect, and—to my escape from “Mr. Right!”

The passport read:

MR. ALLEN,
MINING AND ENGINEERING ENCYCLOPÆDIA.
FRITH CHAMBERS,
PALACE ROAD,
WESTMINSTER.

(Apply between 2 and 4.)

The Palace Road was a distinct change from Leadenhall Street and the business college.

After that pandemonium of the City, with its crowds of bare-headed Stock Exchange clerks, and its tangle of motor-'buses, it felt as quiet as a country rectory itself, being an old-fashioned street standing back from the Embankment.

Frith Chambers was the first floor of an old-fashioned Georgian house, without any lift, but just a quaint wooden staircase, with wonderfully carved banisters, and shallow stairs, that

A "BEFORE-THE-WAR" BOGY

must have been trodden by powdered ladies and gentlemen with cherry-coloured satin knee-breeches. At the top of the first flight there was a beautifully moulded door, with a little brass plate, "Mr. Allen," under the circular brass knocker.

Feeling that the whole of my future depended on Mr. Allen's reception of me, I knocked.

"Come in!" called a masculine voice.

I found myself in a long, low, white-panelled room, corniced and beautifully moulded like the door, and only furnished with book-shelves, two arm-chairs, one revolving chair, and a big roll-top desk.

A man, seeming small and very dark against the bright light from the window, was sitting at the desk, his head bent over some slips of paper.

He crumpled one up, and tossed it into a roomy waste-paper basket as he looked up.

Then he threw the end of a cigar after the crumpled paper, and stood up and looked at me.

As the light fell upon him, I saw that he was

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a little old gentleman, with hair as white as Great-uncle Joseph's, my guardian's.

There was rather less of a self-satisfied expression on his shrewd, wrinkled old face as he looked at me in a surprised sort of way. I rather liked his look, and the kindly voice in which he said:

“What can I do for you?”

“I have been sent to you,” I explained, putting on as experienced and business-like a voice as I possibly could, “by Mrs. Herrick-Henderson, of Leadenhall Street.”

Looking hard at me, he repeated, “Mrs. Herrick-Henderson?” as if he had never heard of such a person.

Rather abashed, I explained:

“I think you applied to her for some one to work for you?”

Light seemed to dawn on him.

“Oh—ah—another clerk!” Then he added, half as if he were talking to himself: “Ah, yes—but I didn't mean—I am afraid this won't do at all. No, no, not at all!”

I looked at him, horrified.

A "BEFORE-THE-WAR" BOGY

What was there about me that should make him make up his mind at the first glance like this?

I had taken *ages* to dress and to do my hair! I know I looked very neat—"a neat appearance" was always being rubbed into us at the business college, particularly into those girls who were fond of blossoming into imitation aigrettes in their hats, and pearl necklaces, and coral drop-earrings, and much-too-low necks.

There were none of those things about me. My very "good" black costume (mourning for Aunt Susan) fitted me perfectly. My black velvet hat was small, and "lady-like," and becoming.

The only drawback was that all-black does make me look rather absurdly pink-and-white, like a baby; perhaps the old gentleman thought I was quite young—too young?

Yes, that would seem to be it, from the question that he put next.

"I don't suppose you have ever been out to business before, have you? No, quite so! I thought not. You know, Miss——"

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He paused here for my name, which I gave him.

“You know, Miss Beaugard,” he went on, “that business life is very different from what most of you young ladies imagine it to be. And though you may think that coming here would not be like going to an office in the City, I assure you that it is just as important that the young ladies who work for me should be business-like. It is of no use, for instance, my saying that the hours are from half-past nine to five, and then having you turn up at a quarter to ten. A quarter to ten is not good enough!”

He spoke as if I had contradicted him, and said it was!

“Not good enough!” he repeated. “Nor is it good enough,” he went on, “to have my telephone number engaged at frequent intervals during the day, and other calls held up because the line is blocked by friends of one of my clerks, who ring her up at all hours of the day. I can’t have that kind of thing.”

“Of course not,” I murmured, wondering why he should find it necessary to impress this

A "BEFORE-THE-WAR" BOGY

upon me. "I shouldn't allow any one to ring me up on the telephone in business hours—I shouldn't dream of it!"

"Another thing," added the old gentleman, looking at me—"afternoons off! Now, the only afternoon off which I give them here is on Saturdays. No use coming to me at other times and saying you want to go to a *matinée*, or an afternoon concert, or out shopping with an aunt. I disapprove of 'aunts' in business hours. Aunts, or whatever you choose to call them, are like *matinées*, for Saturdays only."

"Of course," I murmured.

"So you see, Miss Beaugard," he went on conclusively, "I am afraid this post would not be at all the kind of thing for a young lady like you."

Why not? I gazed at him in startled despair. Why should he think I wanted a post where they didn't require people to be business-like?

"I have a very good recommendation," I faltered. "Won't you at least look at it?" And

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I handed him the testimonial which I had brought with me.

He took it, and glanced at it, while I felt my heart beating furiously.

This was my first application for a situation. I knew some girls applied half a dozen times before they were taken on; but I had a queer, agonised feeling that if I did not get this post I should get nothing! I should have to say good-bye to my chances of independence in London!

In spite of my "own money," I should be so discouraged that I should find myself giving way, inch by inch, to Great-uncle Joseph and to Jim—especially Jim—when he came home and found that I hadn't been able to "pull off" the career which I had proudly mapped out for myself.

I found myself murmuring, almost aloud:

"The rectory—one of themselves—paying guest—delighted to have you—occupation—sewing for a bazaar—waiting for Mr. Right——"

Must I—must I go back to that?

A "BEFORE-THE-WAR" BOGY

"Oh, won't you give me a trial?" I almost gasped, as the old gentleman folded up the testimonial and handed it to me again.

I clutched it wildly, as I repeated:

"Couldn't you give me a trial for a week or so to see how I get on? I promise you that I will not be unbusiness-like. Mrs. Herrick-Henderson once said I was the most reliable pupil in the class. Please give me, at least, a chance!"

And I felt as if my heart would stop beating until the old gentleman should take his searching glance off my agitated face and should answer my appeal. . . . I felt so desperately sure that it was this or nothing! It was his job—or "Mr. Right."

CHAPTER II

ABOUT STOCKINGS—AND A YOUNG MAN

I DIDN'T really feel that my heart went on beating normally until after I had left Frith Chambers again, walked along the Embankment, and skipped on to the front seat of the motor-'bus that was to take me half the way back to my club.

But then my heart was hammering riotously, not with anxiety but with delight! For Mr. Allen had at last, though not very enthusiastically, said that he would take me on for a week's trial at the work, beginning on Monday.

Oh, how I should work, I decided! How business-like I should be! How I'd show Mr. Allen that matinées and extra telephone calls and shopping aunts and unpunctuality were things absolutely foreign to my nature. I should make him confess that of all the lady clerks he had

STOCKINGS AND A YOUNG MAN

ever had, I was the one with whom he had least fault to find.

I would scarcely even ever talk to the other girls, whoever they might be, I determined!

As a matter of fact, this last would not be very difficult if I were no more popular there than I was the last part of the time among the girls at Mrs. Herrick-Henderson's.

You see, I put my foot into it badly there, once. Badly. . . . I don't want that ever to happen again.

It was about a little Scots girl nicknamed (of course!) "Mac."

She was the only one in my class who was really so hard-up that she scarcely knew how to pay her fees.

And one Saturday morning I and another girl found her in the dressing-room with her foot up on a chair and a fountain-pen in her hand, inking the heels which showed only too pinkly through the holes in her black Lisle-thread stockings.

When the other girl good-naturedly told her

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that she "ought to be ashamed of herself for not spending an evening darning herself up a couple of pairs of stockings," she laughed, and explained to us how she did "spend the evening!"

Such a terribly depressing little story it was of the married sister with whom she lived being ill, and the five-months old baby who took such ages to "get down," for of course he was teething; about the washing-up, and her brother-in-law's dinner.

"So don't blame me," she'd said, "if I have never a pair of whole stockings to my name!"

She might treat it as a joke, but I thought it was terrible.

No stockings?

Now even in those days, nice stockings were my own pet vanity. I did think they were most frightfully important. Georgie Settle once told me he had fallen in love with me almost entirely because mine were the first silk 'tockies he'd seen worn in that part of the country. I had always had dozens of pairs, of all sorts and all colours.

STOCKINGS AND A YOUNG MAN

And here was "Mac," without an unholey pair to her name! No time to mend the horrid holey ones she had!! Inking her feet!!! Oh, I couldn't *bear* it. . . .

I'd just cashed a cheque to pay my Club bill, and what was the use of having an income of my own if it couldn't buy me a luxury now and again? Giving presents was one of the nicest luxuries I knew.

No; that's not unselfishness, far from it. It's self-indulgence, really. Some people take their pleasure in one way, some in another. *Giving* has always been a pure delight to me. Finding out what people will like, and then choosing it carefully and sending it off—oh, there's no enjoyment like it to people who have the Give-passion!

I fell to it then. On my way home I turned into my favourite shop and chose a dozen pairs of specially nice stockings, black and grey—for "Mac" wears a grey tweed skirt—and I had them sent off to her address in Shepherd's Bush, which I had looked up on the college register; and I spent almost the whole Sunday

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buoyed up by thoughts of her putting on an immaculate pair for Sunday, and of how delighted she would be.

I don't think I have ever had such a cruel shock as on the Monday morning, when I found that packet of stockings on my desk, and a Mac with a face as white as paper and her lips just a thin line across it, waiting to tell me what she thought of me for having had "the cheek" to send her parcels of "clothes"!

Oh, it was a dreadful little scene. . . . And it was no use trying to explain that I'd never meant to hurt her. . . .

"Did you think I'd no pr-r-r-r-ride?" asked Mac, "because I'd no pr-r-r-r-ivate mins?"

I tried to babble something about being sure she would love giving things herself—

"That's very different!"

"But why?" I asked. "People who give ought to be ready to accept! *I* should! I shouldn't mind taking the things myself——"

"Probably not!" said the little Scotswoman contemptuously; and then she added what was

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evidently the bitterest taunt she could think of: “You see, you are from the South!”

It was this that the other girls had got hold of when they sent me to Coventry, and made half-audible remarks before me in the dressing-room about “Miss Rothschild.” A horrid time I had!

That should never happen at this new place. I should give up my whole time to establishing myself in the business career which Uncle Joseph said it was such nonsense for me to think of.

As I walked the other stretch of the way home through the park, where the trees were just touched with the first tints of autumn and where wine-coloured dahlias and Japanese anemones still blazed in the borders, I was in racing high spirits about the success I had just had. Really, I felt it was the pleasantest day of my life!

And when I got to the Club, something else pleasant awaited me.

A girl whom I had got to know there, called Mildred Perkins, and who has twice taken me

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out to tea with her very nice cousins in Kensington, ran up to me, saying she had just been rung up by these same cousins, who wanted to know whether Miss Beaugard would help them by stepping into the breach at a dinner-party they were giving that very night?

“A girl has disappointed them at the eleventh hour, and it would be so sweet of you,” said Mildred Perkins. “Should you mind very much?”

“I should love it,” I said. “I haven’t been to a dinner-party for a year; I haven’t worn a proper evening-dress since I came to London.” (For I had been going to evening classes half the week, and studying in my bedroom the other half, ever since attending the college.)

The frock I wore was black, as usual, but as I was no longer in mourning, I fastened a big pink velvet rose at my waist, and another at the loop of drapery at my knee. (Yes; it was a “draped” year.) The roses just matched my necklace; poor old Aunt Susan’s pink amethysts.

“Morwenna Beaugard, you look ripping,”

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pronounced Mildred when she came into my room. "That black against your shoulders is like a fall of soot on a fall of snow, you pretty creature you!"

I thought her so wonderful and Spanish; she wore orange; and glancing at our reflections together in the glass, I did not think I looked anything, beside her.

"Any man would!" she declared cheerfully. "Or almost any!" (She'd got a young man of her own in California.) "So I do hope the young man who was going to take in the girl who disappointed Cousin Laura will be sensible enough to appreciate his luck, and attractive enough to deserve it!"

Looking back at that party of a million years ago . . . it was all delightful. Including the young man who took me in instead of that girl who hadn't been able to come.

I think she missed something! For this Mr. Paul Lancaster who was introduced to me was quite as "attractive" as Mildred could have wished for me.

Perhaps you who read this might not have

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found him so. Nothing is more extraordinary than the different eyes with which different human beings will look at the same person. To one he may seem a barber's block; to another he will be all the Romeos, all the Dick Heldars, all the Imlays of Romance. . . .

This young man was the big, fair, quiet, steady sort; with rather a *slab* of a face. It looked as if it couldn't smile—until it did. And then—ah, *didn't* it! It lighted up to show a row of even white teeth, a bright grey twinkle in the eyes, and a deep, deep dimple like a little boy's in one cheek. It was the kind of smile that makes one wish it wouldn't be perfectly idiotic to beg, "Oh, do please go on looking like that always!"

This Mr. Paul Lancaster certainly did smile at me a good deal during dinner! Several times he seemed frightfully amused at me; not a bit in a horrid, patronising way, like Great-uncle Joseph, nor in a way that made me want to box his ears, like Georgie Settle, who was the last person who took me in to dinner, at a boring party at that "quiet country rectory,"

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where—thank goodness, and Mr. Allen, I shall never have to settle down again.

We—that is, Mr. Lancaster and I—talked about everything—tennis, which he plays, and the theatre, and dancing, and dogs, and books—and fancy, he hasn't ever read any of Miss Austen! I told him that he ought to be ashamed of himself.

“Ah, but you see, Miss Beaugard, I have some excuse. I haven't had the time that hangs so heavily on your hands,” he said, looking down at my own hands with that ripping smile. “You see, I'm a hard-working engineer; not a young lady of leisure!”

“Oh, but I'm not a young lady of leisure,” I said proudly.

He laughed, and said, “What then?”

“I am a business-girl,” I announced, very dignifiedly.

He looked at me as if he thought I were making fun of him.

“Indeed!” he said, and laughed again. “And do you really honour some office by turning up

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every morning regularly three-quarters of an hour late?"

"As it happens, I'm a most punctual person," I told him seriously. "I don't see why you should imagine I am ever even a minute late. You're quite as bad as the funny old gentleman I interviewed to-day. He uttered awful warnings about how I mustn't expect to spend half my time being rung up by my friends on the office telephone, or have my afternoons off for going to matinées. Even when he engaged me, he didn't really seem to want to have me there at all."

"I am not surprised," said Mr. Paul Lancaster dryly, but with twinkling eyes. "I think that if I were head of an office I shouldn't be too keen on having you working there!"

"Why not?" I demanded quite angrily. But I couldn't get him to say why not, or to do anything but smile, rather exasperatingly.

So I said stiffly, "I think you are rather rude. Also, that you haven't much eye for character." And then I turned and spent the rest of dinner

STOCKINGS AND A YOUNG MAN

—this was at dessert—talking to my other neighbour.

But afterwards, in the drawing-room, Mr. Paul Lancaster came up to the piano, where they had made me sit down and sing them some of the old Somersetshire songs, and he turned over for me, and told me that he rather wondered I didn't go in for singing instead of office life.

He actually said it would "seem more like me."

"I don't think so at all," I persisted. "I intend to get on very well in office life."

"Well, I hope you will, Miss Beaugard," he said, quite nicely and gravely, though the smile which I liked so much didn't seem very far away. "I hope you will be able to tell me all about it next time we meet."

I wondered if there would be a next time. . . .

But I don't think I bothered very much about whether there would or not.

Most of the next week I gave all my thoughts to the coming "job."

CHAPTER III

BUSINESS GIRLS

ON that fateful Monday morning which saw me going to business for the first time in my life I climbed up those wide Georgian stairs, came to the door, and found that the brass plate which I had seen there before had been taken away.

Now, instead of the name "Mr. Allen," I saw two names:

MR. ALLEN.

MR. PAUL LANCASTER.

Even then I only realised vaguely that I had seen or heard that name somewhere else quite recently. I hadn't time to "place" it before obeying the "Come in" in answer to my knock. I entered the white-panelled room again, and found myself face to face with—not the white-haired old gentleman who had made all those

BUSINESS GIRLS

ridiculously unnecessary stipulations about the telephone and the afternoons off—but with the tall figure and blonde face of the young engineer with whom I had got on so awfully well at the dinner party last week!

This was indeed a delightful surprise—to think that I should actually be coming to business every day, and meeting somebody with whom I should not have to be on dry-as-dust, formal, business terms, but on quite jolly social ones!

I gave a little gasp of amazement, and I felt myself turning quite pink, which was rather silly, and I wished I hadn't; but you can't help it if you have a very fair skin, and, besides, I was fearfully taken by surprise. Nobody could have helped being.

He was surprised, too, for I heard him say "Hallo!" in such a boyish voice as he jumped up and took the hand which I held out to him.

"I never thought you were here!" I said gaily. "Isn't it extraordinary, after the other night? Fancy! I shall be one of your clerks!"

THE WRONG MR. RIGHT

Are you going to be the head of affairs, instead of Mr. Allen? That will be jolly!"

But, before I got to the end of this sentence, I saw the most curious and unexpected change come over the face of the young man to whom I was speaking.

That nice smile faded quite away from out of his eyes and round his mouth. The little boy's dimple disappeared. His face was once more a slab, and much older looking. And his voice! *Oh!* how "grown up" and distant it had suddenly become as he said to me, "No; I am seconding Mr. Allen. He has a great deal of the research part of the work to do at this moment: in consequence I am taking over this side of it." Then, quite brusquely, "I will take you into the clerks' room where you have to work."

Through yet another door I heard the sound of a clear, girlish voice singing, in imitation of a Cockney music-hall serio, the words:

"Don't send my boy to prison!
It's the first crime he has done!"

and then all in one breath:

BUSINESS GIRLS

“Very well,” said the magistrate, “I’ll forgive him! Take back thy erring son!”

This ditty stopped abruptly as Mr. Lancaster opened the door and we went in.

The room was very much like his own office, but a little larger. There were three tables, with a girl at each. A tall, fair girl, a short, dark one, with mischievous eyes and a turned-up nose, who had, I guessed, been singing, and an older one with a sweet, rather sad face, and a good many grey threads in her hair.

“Miss Rickards,” said Mr. Lancaster, to the one with the grey hair, “this is the new clerk, who has been sent on from the City.”

“The new clerk!” As if he scarcely knew my name! As if he’d never seen me before! As if he hadn’t been quite, quite different and jolly, only a few evenings ago!

Oh, how changeable and unreliable men are! It made me quite furious. That is, it might have made me furious. Only there’s no reason why I should mind, even if Mr. Paul Lancaster does choose to be one sort of person on Satur-

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day night and quite another on Monday morning.

Then, apparently losing sight of my very existence, he disappeared back into his own room.

The little dark-eyed clerk was the one who spoke to me first.

“What a comfort to see a fresh face!” she began pleasantly. “We have got so sick of one another, seeing one another every day and all day from ten till five in this place. It is really quite as bad as being on a sea voyage with only three people on board. You cannot think how our features have begun to rankle in each other’s minds. I do my best to keep the other girls alive, but it is a deadening life, indexing—positively deadening! And you look ‘so young to die,’ as it says in the melodrama. What is your name?”

I told them.

“Beaugard! I’m glad it isn’t Robinson!” said the fair-haired girl unexpectedly.

And when I asked her why, she replied:

“Because then, don’t you see, you would have spoiled our only joke calling ourselves ‘the

BUSINESS GIRLS

three R's'—Miss Rickards, Miss Royds, and myself. Rodney, my name is. I hope you'll like being here with us."

I felt, then, that I should.

Already I'd taken a fancy to the place—the rooms with their view over wharves, barges, and tall chimneys beyond the Thames—already I liked these people . . . except Mr. Lancaster.

He, the Chief, didn't give anybody there a chance to like or dislike him. While in those rooms, Miss Royds declared, he never says a word except on business.

The business, by the way, was a long and exhaustive Report, drawn up by Mr. Allen on the various mines that had been inspected by him and Mr. Lancaster. It was to come out in the form of an Encyclopædia on Mining Engineering, of which the indexing and the proof-reading and even some of the arrangement was to be done by our four selves.

For my share I was to get twenty-five shillings a week. I thought that enormous—imagine that, you present-day war-working girl-clerks!—it paid for my room and board at

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the Club, but I had my own money to do as I liked with.

By the way, I kept that extra four pounds a week a dead secret from my three colleagues. Oh, yes! I had learnt my lesson at the business college. I was not going to let these three nice friendly girls know that I had what "Mac" called "pr-r-rivet mins." No more sneers for me, thank you, about "Miss Rothschild"; no more being sent to Coventry, and being treated as if I were different from the others.

Let them think I was entirely dependent on that twenty-five shillings!

Otherwise, I feared, they mightn't like me any more. . . .

As it was, they liked me well enough to nickname me "Baby Beaugard" and to pretend they thought I came to business in a pram; and I felt, as the days went on, that I'd come to a place where I could be absolutely happy and jolly.

There were only two drawbacks to it, I felt.

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One was Mr. Paul Lancaster. Stiff, horrid, unfriendly creature!

He had absolutely ignored my existence from the first day, except once to ask Miss Rickards how Miss Beaugard seemed to get on. And when Miss Rickards informed him that I got on very quickly and did very well, he never said a word.

He, who was so "human" and jolly at that dinner-party! I felt that he must be an atrocious snob; ready enough to talk and amuse a "young lady of leisure" he met on social terms, but not ready to consider "a business girl" who worked for her living (as he thought) as a fellow-being at all!

Now he didn't *look* that kind of man. . . . Never mind, I thought. Let him go on being oblivious of everything in the world but his "patent fans" and "mechanical ventilators."

I didn't care!

The other thing I did care about.

The other thing had to do with the three *nice* people in the office; the three R's.

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I very soon found out that they were not only obliged to work for their own livings whether they wanted to or not, but that in some ways they were just as pathetically hard-up as that little Scots "Mac" whom I offended so irretrievably at Mrs. Henderson's.

It was not a case with them of inking their heels because they have not any decent stockings, or of lunching off bread-and-butter.

But Miss Rodney lived with a sister who was frightfully ill in the summer, and she spent her one fortnight's holiday, which came in the very hottest weather, in staying and nursing her, doing night and day duty, so that she need not have a trained nurse. I heard her telling this, quite cheerfully, to Miss Rickards.

Miss Rickards, the head of our department, had a widowed mother entirely dependent on what she—Miss Rickards—could earn. I supposed it was more than the rest of us—but, anyhow, it was not enough to allow of poor Miss Rickards getting married.

She had been sort of engaged—that is, she had the unsatisfactory sort of affair they call

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“an understanding”—with some young man—I suppose he is not even young now—who teaches music in Dublin.

He could not drop his post and come over to London, and she couldn't chuck up hers and join him and leave her mother to starve! All this was told me by little Miss Royds.

Miss Royds had her trouble, too. She was one of a family of girls who were all very “gifted”—except her. But their “gifts” took up *such* a lot of money! Two of them were at art schools, with fees to be paid there, besides what they cost at home. One of them was studying the violin in Leipsic. So that “my” Miss Royds simply had to do something for herself.

There was not enough money to train her for the stage, which she would simply adore. If she has a “gift” it's for imitations. . . . It made me quite furious that she couldn't get her chance too!

Often I longed to say frankly, “Look here! I've four pounds a week of my own, just to play about with after I've paid my keep. Do, do

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take as much of it as you want to pay your fees with Benson or Tree——”

Oh, it was a temptation!

But “Mac” and her friends had taught me my lesson. In this absurd world one is not allowed to play “Lady Bountiful” in that wholesale and perfectly natural manner.

Still, I thought, weren’t there other, and “little” ways in which my bothering money might be made to help these three girls?

I tried one “little way.”

I tried bringing in some extra nice cakes from a little French *pâtisserie* near my Club, and handing them round at teatime.

We four made tea in the office in the afternoon, taking it in turn to provide, but until now the girls had only brought in farthing buns to eat with it. So I thought they would be rather pleased when I produced these jolly little round tartlets with syrupy cherries sitting in the midst of them.

But Miss Royds only quoted: “I say, young Copperfield, you have been going it,” and looked rather anxious.

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It was her turn to provide tea the next time. She brought in lemon cheesecakes; but the day after that Miss Rickards, whose turn it was, said resignedly:

“Girls, I can’t keep the pace. I am very sorry, but I have only got farthing buns, and you will have to wait until next week before I can produce any ‘delicacies of the season,’ ” which made me feel perfectly awful.

After that there was nothing but farthing buns, until Miss Royds triumphantly produced a brown jar of real clotted cream. Everybody stared at it.

“Where on earth did you get this? Was it from the shop in Oxford Street where they sell Devonshire cream? Because, if so, what frightful extrav——”

“My dear girls, don’t alarm yourselves,” said Miss Royds, laughing; “it was sent up to me by my aunt in Devonshire.”

This seemed to make everything all right. The cream had been “sent”—not “bought”—out of scanty earnings, whose every penny was bespoke for necessities, not luxuries.

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And it gave me an idea. A plan; a glorious plan! *I* would have "things sent." I would begin with fruit, which gentle Miss Rickards said was such a temptation of hers.

I bought a round, open basket of William pears, and I was fearfully pleased with myself for remembering to take them out of the basket and put them into plain paper before I brought them round to the office in Westminster, and said they were "from the country." (So they were, I expect, originally!)

Everybody enjoyed them. Then I hit upon a better idea still. On the Friday I drew Miss Royds aside and said: "Look what I have had sent to me!" displaying two tickets for the Saturday matinée of a play which I had heard her say she particularly wanted to see.

"My dear, how lovely!" cried Miss Royds, looking at the tickets as if she could eat them with her eyes.

"The person who sent them can't take me," I went on, which was quite true, as I don't suppose the man at the box office to which I wrote for them would have been able to even if I'd

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asked him, "so if you would care to take the other stall——? It would be lovely for me."

"Oh, you angel! You little gem of a Gainsborough cherub!" cried Miss Royds, and hugged me in her gratitude. "Girls, girls! do you hear this? It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good! I did so want a chance of seeing this. Isn't it perfectly lovely (for me) that Miss Beaugard's friend was prevented from coming?"

Then came the question that began all the trouble in this story of mine.

"By the way, Miss Beaugard," said Miss Rodney mischievously, "would it be indiscreet to ask WHO was the person who was prevented from coming?"

I blushed guiltily, merely at the thought of the fibs I was allowing to be understood, but the girls interpreted my red cheeks very differently.

"Don't tease the child," said Miss Rickards, smiling. "A baby could see that the tickets were sent by an admirer of this other Baby's, so we'll ask no more questions."

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For which I was grateful.

An "admirer," indeed!

What an idea.

Still, I thought, what a splendid loophole for showering upon these hard-up friends of mine as many little "extras" as my income could afford!

Yes; I just thought of it as a loophole. . . .
If I'd only known what it would turn out to be!

CHAPTER IV

“WHEN FIRST WE PRACTISE TO DECEIVE”

IN the course of the next week that “loop-hole” of fictional “admirer” of mine provided concert tickets at Queen’s Hall for Miss Rickards, and a big box of chocolates (such as few of us nowadays have ever tasted since Nineteen Fifteen!) to brighten up the tea and farthing buns.

Then came one little hitch in this delightful arrangement.

“This adorer of yours keeps himself very darkly and mysteriously in the background, Baby,” said Miss Rodney, munching away at a particularly luscious coffee cream. “I would bless his name for these sweets and things, only, unfortunately, I do not know what name to bless. Couldn’t you tell me, even his Christian name!”

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“I don’t know who you are talking about,” I hedged.

“Well, this mysterious admirer of yours who keeps sending these lovely things, and yet doesn’t allow us so much as a glimpse of his face. Why doesn’t he ever call for you and take you home?”

“How do you know,” I said, “that he doesn’t live too far away, and get back from business too late himself?”

I had to make up some excuse, but the effort turned me crimson, and the three R’s all fixed their eyes on that incriminating blush until it turned at least four shades darker.

“Has his business too far away, has he?” repeated Miss Royds with emphasis. “Oh, so that’s it! You’ll forgive my saying I think that is a little bit thin.”

“What do you mean?” I cried anxiously. Could it be that the girls by some means or another were beginning to suspect what I was doing? “Why d’you say that?”

“I will say nothing more,” said Miss Royds, good-naturedly. “I think it’s a shame to rag

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girls about that sort of thing. But”—she laughed mischievously again—“we all have our suspicions, Miss Beaugard, so don't imaginé that we have not. The three R's have got six eyes, remember!”

I went back to the Club with these words echoing in my ears.

“Suspicious——!”

How could they have their suspicions? What in the world could have put the idea into their heads that these concert and theatre tickets, those sweets and that nice fruit are luxuries which I could afford for myself?

Why should they take Miss Royds' “Devonshire aunt” for granted and yet begin putting two and two together—odious trick!—about my “mysterious admirer”?

Perhaps the fact was that they had met the aunt, and knew her by name, whereas nobody had seen my admirer, and Miss Royds actually complained of not being allowed to know his name?

What was I to do?

I did want to be able to go on cheering up the

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daily round and common task for all of us by little presents and little outings, but I knew that if I did go on, and the three R's did become perfectly sure that there was no "sending" and no "mysterious admirer" in question, they would begin saying things about not standing the pace set by expensive fruit and chocolates.

They would begin making excuses for not coming with me to those theatres and concerts, and I should be made perfectly miserable. I should mind it more than anything. Far worse than I minded Mr. Lancaster never seeming to see that he has got a fourth clerk now instead of only three.

Not that I really mind that at all. Why should I?

I felt I must think of a plan to "back up" my tale of a mysterious and generous admirer somehow. The question was—how?

I had got just as far as this in my meditations when something happened. . . .

It didn't seem to me, then, that this something was as important and as fatal to me as that

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meeting with the Witches was to Macbeth. How could I foresee——?

Well, this was what it was.

I had been walking a good deal of the way home through the Park, my eyes fixed on the path, with its thick carpet of autumn leaves through which I was shuffling, in the habit of my childhood, enjoying the pleasant country noise.

Suddenly, among the russet-brown leaves, I caught sight of something that spat out sparks of fire in the last rays of the sun. I stooped to see whether it was a bit of broken glass or somebody's diamond brooch.

It was neither. I picked it up, and stood for a while looking at it as I held it in my hand.

It was a gentleman's card-case in rather shabby soft leather, with silver corners and a silver shield in the middle engraved with the initials “P. W. 1858.” I opened it. There were about a dozen gentleman's visiting-cards with the inscription: “Mr. Paul Wright, 178A Well Walk, Hampstead, N.W.”

“Paul”—the same name as Mr. Lancaster.

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I always thought Paul made rather a nice Christian name for a man.

Of course, the right thing would have been to find the nearest park keeper or guardian, and give him the card-case, with an account of how I found it. Simpler still, as I had his address, would it have been to forward it, with a slip of paper "Picked up in the Park," to this Mr. Paul Wright, whoever he is.

(He must be quite an elderly man; "1858" was a long time ago, and he could not have been less than twenty-one when he first started visiting-cards.)

Then a thought struck me that made me want to clap my hands and cry "Hooray" like a child. . . .

Oh, I *was* a child! I was a Baby, for my age: else how could I have thought of such a thing? I can scarcely believe it of myself now—yet, it seemed perfectly natural to me then. I saw nothing against it!

I remember how I thought about it.

Here was this card-case, not a valuable thing, very shabby, and probably not wanted by the

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owner any more. Anyhow, he could not need it as badly as I did for the plan I had.

For the plan was to use his name to the girls for that of my mysterious admirer.

What was the harm? The old gentleman himself would never know. I should never see him or meet him. It would save the situation all round. Nobody would be a halfpenny the wiser, and four girls would be very much happier.

That, if you please, was what I thought.

Next morning, on my way to Westminster, I stopped at the nicest-looking flower shop I could see, and recklessly bought a whole sovereign's worth of flowers—a great sheaf of white chrysanthemums with ragged, spice-smelling blooms as big as cauliflowers, and another sheaf of sprays of blood-red lobelia.

These were for show. There was an empty jar or so on the mantelpiece in the room where we worked, and the living scarlet and white against those faded old panels would simply “make” the room.

Then, for scent, I took a generous handful of red hothouse roses and four huge bunches of

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lilies of the valley. These I planned to divide among the lot of us.

As they were supposed to come from "Miss Beaugard's mysterious admirer," I knew I need not be afraid of the girls stiffly refusing them. And I really did feel proud of my scheming powers as I paid for this floral tribute, and left directions with the pretty girl in black who had served me about where they were to be sent.

At a quarter past four that afternoon, the hour of the preparation for tea, there appeared at Frith Chambers an immense paper-shaded bouquet, the flowers almost hiding the small messenger-boy who had brought them up for "Miss Beaugard." Of course, he went to the wrong room first, and took them in to Mr. Lancaster, but I did not mind that. The thought flashed through me (though I also felt it was rather silly) that, anyhow, Mr. Lancaster would see that somebody did "notice" his fourth and youngest clerk, even if he did not!

And when the redirected messenger brought the bouquet through to our room, the outburst of delighted "Ohs!" "What heavenly flowers!"

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and “Do let me have just one sniff at those lilies,” satisfied my highest expectations.

“The ‘mysterious admirer’ again, Miss Beaugard?” laughed Miss Royds. And I said, as casually as I could: “Yes, I suppose so. Do you mind handing me that piece of paper? There might be a note on it.”

There was not a note, as I knew very well, but I knew what I meant was stuck into the very bunch which I had handed Miss Royds for the special purpose of her finding it out herself.

She did. She picked out the gentleman’s visiting-card from among the waxen, fragrant bells of the lilies.

“I say, girls, here’s a card. Oh, I’m much too honourable to look without permission. If only Miss Beaugard would be the little cherub she looks like”—coaxingly—“and allow me one peep!”

“You may certainly look if you like,” I said graciously, and at this permission (quite unexpected, I am sure) a fair head, a dark head, and a head of brown hair streaked with grey,

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craned eagerly to read the name of the giver of the flowers.

It was Miss Royds, who so longs to be trained for the stage, who read aloud, dramatically: "Mr. Paul Wright!"

"Mr. Paul *Wright!*" echoed the two others, as if they scarcely believed their ears and eyes.

And Miss Rodney added:

"Well, that does surprise me!"

"Surprise you! Why? Have you met him?" I cried, in a fright. This would indeed be the last straw!

"Met him? No, of course not. The only thing was that we really thought we knew——"

She broke off.

"Thought you knew what?"

"Why, that we already knew who your 'mysterious admirer' must be."

"Oh!" I gave a deep sigh of relief. Was she going to confess now to what she thought her "suspicions" had been? Was she going to tell me that she suspected me of sending little presents to the office from myself?

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“I thought——” began Miss Rodney. “We all thought——”

Miss Rickards interrupted:

“Oh, perhaps it is not quite fair to say any more about that now.”

“Yes, yes, you must tell me! Who did you suspect sent me those tickets and that fruit and those lilies and things? Did you imagine——”

“We imagined,” confessed Miss Rodney, “that we knew the young man as well as you did.”

“The young man?” I repeated, staring from one of the three girls to the other.

I was completely taken aback by what they’d said, because I don’t really “know” any young men in London—for I simply refuse to count that boring Georgie Settle.

I caught Miss Rickards by her arm, and cried:

“Do tell me who you thought ‘the young man’ was?”

“Oh, no, no! It was our mistake. We were all wrong, that’s all. Least said soonest mended!”

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“But it won’t be soonest mended,” I persisted, burning with curiosity. “I shall be dreadfully hurt—I shall be huffy and offended and upset for the rest of the afternoon—I shall, indeed!—unless you tell me at once who you thought the ‘mysterious admirer’ was who sent me flowers, and met me after business, and all that?”

“Well, if you must know, my dear,” blurted out little Miss Royds, with a “neck-or-nothing” look on her mischievous face, “we all imagined, talking it over, that it must be—our Mr. Lancaster!”

This was, with a vengeance, the very last name I should have expected to hear.

“Mr. Lancaster?” I almost shrieked. “This Mr. Lancaster here?”

“Well, of course!”

“But he’s never looked at me!” I cried.

“Oh, hasn’t he?” retorted Miss Royds. “We’ve noticed—haven’t we, girls?—that our respected employer never comes into this room to bring more notes, or to see how things are getting along, without contriving to get one

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good hard stare at Baby Beaugard, just as he is going out of the door. Of course, he pretends he isn't doing anything of the kind. But—well, *are* men any good at ‘pretending’ things of that sort? We’ve all caught him at it!”

“Yes; and he always has some excuse to stand by your table, Miss Beaugard, much longer than by any of ours,” declared Miss Rodney. “And the other day, when you turned up with your hair parted at the side instead of in the middle, I saw him noticing that, and thinking that it didn’t suit you quite so well as the other way. I saw it in his eye!”

“Not in Mr. Lancaster’s,” I persisted emphatically. “He never gives me a thought. You’re all mistaken.”

“I,” said Miss Rickards with a look that comes into her eyes when she is thinking of her music teacher in Dublin, “am not often mistaken on that subject.”

“You are this time,” said I. “I happen to *know* that when Mr. Lancaster does remember my existence, it’s merely to dislike me. He said, the only time I met him outside the office,

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and before he knew I was engaged here, that he wouldn't care to have me working for him. So you see!"

"Yes," said Miss Rickards. And I think she added, "Poor fellow!" I don't know what she meant.

"Otherwise he hasn't spoken a word to me that you haven't all heard. And now," I concluded, picking up the man's visiting-card that had saved the situation, "you've all seen for yourselves where flowers and tickets and things I get come from!"

"Do you mind my asking, Miss Beaugard," said gentle Miss Rickards, in her kindest, most motherly tone, "if it's a definite engagement—yet?"

"Oh, no! Most probably it never will be!" I hastened to add. (A good thing to get that idea firmly into their heads.) "It's just friendliness!"

Miss Rickards demurely said she knew those "friendly interests."

"Yes, and we prefer to hope that it's a case of 'Mr. Right coming along'—if you'll excuse

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the aged jest and pun!” laughed Miss Royds. “So glad, dear. Not with an entirely unselfish joy, either. These lilies will be the very thing for my sister, who’s going to a dance to-night; and as for that matinée last Saturday, I don’t know when I’ve laughed so much. I really think it would be only fitting to drink Mr. Paul Wright’s health!”

She raised her three-halfpenny white kitchen teacup from the saucer with the farthing bun in it, and flourished it excitedly above her dark head.

“Ladies!” she declaimed. “I ask you to raise your glasses and drink to the very good health of Mr. Paul Wright, of Well Walk, Hampstead. Here’s success to him in every enterprise, and a very happy finale to his courtship!” And she put the empty cup down with a bang.

Why, why has Miss Royds got that clear, “carrying” sort of voice?

It might be a very good thing for the dramatic classes which she so longs to attend, but it has been an extremely bad thing for our room!

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Several times Mr. Lancaster has had to look in with a glance of protest against some of the recitations and songs with which she will enliven us when she thinks that he has gone out.

I suppose she thought that he had gone out at this moment. At all events, her toast had been declaimed with such gusto that neither she nor any of us—we all had our backs to the door—had heard it open to admit Mr. Lancaster.

“Miss Rickards!” he said, raising his voice a little.

Miss Rickards turned with a little jump. There stood our employer, tall and fair, grey-eyed, and looking as imperturbable as ever, while all the rest of us, particularly Miss Royds, tried hard to look as if we did not exist.

He leaned over Miss Rickards' table, and handed her a sheaf of fresh notes for re-arrangement. Then he gave her a few more orders in a low voice which I did not catch. Then he went out again, closing the door quietly behind him. Miss Rickards came over to me with a rather “sorry” expression on her face.

“Miss Beaugard, my child, I'm afraid you

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are in for it. I recopied that page of notes on shaft-sinking that you made a mess of this morning, but I'm afraid it's no good, and that the governor saw I had had to do your work over again. He wants you to go into his room and speak to him for a few minutes as soon as you have finished your tea.”

Nervously I finished my tea; nervously I hurried into Mr. Lancaster's room and stood opposite to his desk, my back to the window.

Oh, what did this mean? Could it be that he was going to give me notice for carelessness?

Or was it just a “talking-to”—as I called it?—how curious to think that in those days we had never heard of such a thing as a “strafing,” as it would now be termed.

I did hope I was not to be sent away from Westminster and those nice girls!

“Sit down, Miss Beaugard, please,” said Mr. Lancaster quietly, and I took a chair.

He took up an ivory paper knife from his desk, and fixed his grey eyes on that—not on me! as he began to speak.

“I want to say a few words to you, Miss

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Beaugard. I hope you won't think them impertinent—they are not meant to be so—on the subject of—of”—he hesitated, cleared his throat, and went on—“those flowers that you received here this afternoon.”

“Oh, yes; I am so sorry!” I broke in, anxious to excuse myself, and to escape “the sack,” if I possibly could. “I know it was a rule at Mrs. Henderson's that flowers and letters and things were not to be sent up to the girls during business hours, but I thought that it would not matter here where there are so few of us, and where it doesn't seem the same as an office, exactly. But it shan't occur again: I won't have anything sent. I will arrange differently. I am so sorry about the flowers.”

“It was not the flowers to which I was taking exception,” said Mr. Lancaster, rather in a hesitating manner, as if he did not quite know how to put what he was going to say next. What he did say was a thunderclap, the third that afternoon!

“Frankly, Miss Beaugard, it's the person who sent them to you.”

CHAPTER V

AN UNEXPECTED PROTEST

I COULD only stare at him.
He did not look at me.

I know, now, that no man on earth ever felt more uncomfortable than did Mr. Paul Lancaster, over the protest which he felt himself in duty bound to make to me.

He was far more nervous than I was! though I did not guess it as he went on hurriedly: "You see, I—I could not help overhearing what Miss Royds said just now. I heard that—that those flowers that were sent in for you this afternoon came from Mr. Paul Wright, who lives in Hampstead. That was so, wasn't it?"

What could I say but "Yes"?

I felt myself turning crimson over the fib. This made me so angry that I could have taken up his heavy, square glass paper-weight from

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his desk and thrown it at Mr. Paul Lancaster's head.

"I also could not help gathering," he went on, almost apologetically, "that there had been other offerings on other occasions from the same quarter."

There was a pause while I wondered what all this meant, and what on earth I ought to say.

I simply couldn't think of anything!

Then I heard coming out of my own lips a voice like that of a very defiant and rather undignified little schoolgirl, saying, "Well?"

And then Mr. Lancaster's voice, stiff and cold because—oh, I know it now! because he was so miserably uncomfortable at having to speak about this thing at all. An older woman might have known that his tone was appealing as he said, "Well, I—I ought to tell you that you ought not to take flowers or—or anything, really, from *him*."

The obvious reply was simple. "Why?" I asked, still in that schoolgirl voice.

I don't know what I expect Mr. Lancaster to say to this. Certainly not what he did say.

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“You see, I know Mr. Wright.”

I felt myself turning icy-cold with fright. He knew this unknown Mr. Wright? Horrors! Mr. Lancaster *knew* the man whom I'd set up as “a mysterious admirer” of my own! Could anything have been more fatal? He knew him!

“I know him very well,” said Mr. Lancaster. “Better than you do.”

(This was so easy!)

He went on: “I—You must let me tell you that I know him well enough to say that he isn't at all the kind of man who ought to be allowed to send flowers and theatre-tickets and to pay attentions to a girl like—to a girl who—to *any* girl,” concluded Mr. Lancaster, clearing his throat and looking at his paper-knife with an odd expression in his grey eyes.

I know now what the expression was; it was the rueful despair of a very young man who knows that he has not said what he meant to say, that he has put everything in the wrong way, and that he doesn't know how on earth to make matters better.

He went on in a louder and firmer tone: “If

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you were my sister, you see, I should feel I ought to warn you against him. And I—er—should forbid——”

“Forbid”—I echoed, so angry at the word that for the moment I forgot the appalling fix that I was in.

Forbid! That word, from a man to a woman, reminded me of Great-uncle Joseph and my brother Jim, and Georgie Settle, and “Mr. Right,” and everything I didn’t want in my life.

Why should this young man think he had the slightest right to dictate to me? Besides—if he only knew—If he only knew that I had never seen the man he was warning me against!

Could I tell him——

A thousand times no!

But if he knew this Mr. Wright—if he spoke to him about me?

There would be a fresh complication! I heard myself ask, in a shakier little voice: “Have you—have you seen Mr. Wright about this?”

“I don’t see him, now,” said Mr. Lancaster,

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gloomily. I felt relieved. Here was a kind of respite at all events.

Mr. Lancaster, evidently going back to the topic of family forbiddance, asked, "Have you a brother?" (apparently of the ivory paper knife).

"Yes; one—in Ceylon," I said, again in the tone of "Thank goodness he isn't here."

"I am pretty certain that he would not approve if——"

"It would make no difference to me what he approved or disapproved of," I said. "He didn't 'approve' of my coming to work in London."

"Ah——!"

"Yet here I am," I said. "You see, I am well over twenty-one, and independent. Surely I'm old enough and sensible enough to know how to take care of myself!"

Why Mr. Paul Lancaster should seem tempted to smile at this I did not know. It was the first time, since the first day, that I had caught sight of the flash of his even white teeth

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and the boyish dimple in his cheek that comes with the smile I'd found so attractive.

But I didn't find it attractive now. I could have slain him for it. I got up from my chair and stood with my hands clenched on the back of it, facing him. I was simply boiling over with indignation; petulant infant that I was!

Then I put on what I hoped was a mask of dignified calm. I said, "As you are NOT any brother of mine, I fail to see what right you have to interfere in—in *any*—er—friendship of mine."

Friendship! A friendship that didn't exist! But the principle existed, I told myself inwardly. It was the *principle* of this thing that stiffened my backbone and lent me the pluck to stand up in his office to my business employer. . . .

(Poor lad!)

His smile had gone abruptly. He too put on a dignity; and a sudden chill fell upon me at the sight. I thought, swiftly, "Suppose he sends me away, now?"

AN UNEXPECTED PROTEST

Then I thought, still more swiftly, "Well! I'll get it in first, anyhow."

So, I said, "I suppose you will give me notice, at this."

"Notice? To go?" said Mr. Lancaster.

"Yes," I said with angry tears not very far away. "You have a perfect right to *sack* me, of course, even if you haven't the right to——"

Mr. Lancaster put up his hand and pushed back his thick, ash-blonde hair. In a voice that was puzzled and distressed, I know now, as well as irritable, he exclaimed, "Good Lord, I don't want to sack you!"

"I—may stay on, then?"

"Of course," he said, knitting the brows over those honest boy's eyes of his. "All I wanted to tell you was—well! I've told you, more or less."

A sudden feeling came over me that in spite of the way I'd been "cornered," I had the best of it now.

I turned to the door, then turned back with the proverbial last word.

"Then," I said, "let *me* tell *you*—that I don't

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think I can allow you to dictate to me out of business hours. As—as your *clerk* I will take your orders, Mr. Lancaster. Otherwise I intend to please myself—and my friends.”

There! . . . It certainly sounded appallingly rude, once it was said. Still, it was out now.

I marched to the door.

Mr. Lancaster was going to open it for me. . . .

I was glad, in my temper, that he was too late!

I felt that never in my life had I resented any one as I resented that young man.

As for the added risk of his knowing “Mr. Wright” and speaking to him about me, I didn’t care! I’d just take the risk!

CHAPTER VI

A VISITOR—AND AN ERRAND

NATURALLY I wondered, as the days went on, why Mr. Lancaster disapproved so much of this man that he knew—and that I didn't.

Mr. Paul Wright! I was sure he was a most harmless person. How can an old gentleman of that age help being harmless? I imagined him pottering quietly about his Hampstead home, or taking little strolls on the Heath, or feeding the swans on Highgate Ponds, or even being wheeled in a bath-chair up and down the Spaniard's Road.

Why, *why*, should Mr. Lancaster suggest that he was "*undesirable*"?

I could only put it down to what I had already summed up as "the snobbishness" of the young engineer. It was the same snobbishness

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that made his manner to a girl at a dinner-party so different from his manner when he discovered that she was only a business-girl.

Probably (I decided to myself) he considered that Mr. Wright "wasn't quite a gentleman," or something of that sort. Perhaps that was why he (Mr. Lancaster) told me that he "didn't see him now." . . .

He said nothing further, as the days went on, though I must say that I gave him cause.

Again and again I continued to receive attentions from that Mr. Wright whose name I had been taking in vain.

Several times flowers, once a new book from Mudie's, which I heard Miss Rickards say she wanted to read, and once a couple of tickets for the Court Theatre, which I gave to Miss Royds and Miss Rodney, saying I had "made other arrangements."

From their pleased and sympathetic smiles I saw at once that they thought the "arrangement" was for me and "*my*" Mr. Wright to go off somewhere together.

Poor dear unsuspecting old gentleman, I

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thought, and I had the grace to feel my conscience prick me on his behalf.

Then I told myself that, even if it were wrong to use a real man's name as a peg on which to hang convenient fictions, the end justified the means.

Why, besides the flowers and theatre tickets and things that brighten the daily hard-working lives of my friends, the three R's, the very mystery and the unexplained love-affair about the place seemed to brighten every one up enormously.

The girls were always fishing with questions, spoken and unspoken, for more information about my mysterious admirer, for whom they invented all kinds of names of their own—"Prince Fondant," the "Rosenkavalier," and the "Earl of Tickets." But, as they all say, "It is very difficult to get Miss Beaugard to give away anything but his offerings!"

Little did they dream that was all I had to "give away," except an ancient leather-and-silver case, and a dozen or so of visiting-cards

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of an old gentleman on whom I had never set eyes!

On the day that I had sent in a great sheaf of pink and fragrant carnations, another fresh excitement happened at Frith Chambers.

A visitor called to see Mr. Lancaster in his room, and apparently had a regular, vulgar "row" with him about something.

Through the walls we heard a man's voice being loudly raised; we caught some of the words:

"What d'you mean? . . . What the" (— something) "has it got to do with you? . . . What business. . . . Dashed cheek! . . . Dashed if I let myself be dictated to by *you!*"

(I felt that whoever Mr. Lancaster's caller was, I rather sympathised with his sentiments.)

Then came a word or so in our employer's lower tone, then the loudly angry voice again.

"You know nothing about me, never have, and you can go to——"

Here a door banged.

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Steps ran quickly and lightly down the wooden staircase.

“Now what on earth was all that about?” murmured little Miss Royds over her work.

A minute or two later our own door opened, and there came in, with rather a scared face, Miss Rickards who had been out to get some stationery of which we had unexpectedly run short.

“My dears,” she exclaimed, “who was the young madman or something who’s just been in here?”

“Oh, you *saw* him!” exclaimed Miss Rodney, looking up. “We didn’t—we only heard him having a row royal with our respected employer. You met him?”

“I should think so,” said Miss Rickards. “He nearly ran me down on the stairs. He was tearing down them as if he had a wild bull at his heels.”

“What was he like?” asked inquisitive little Miss Rodney.

“Oh, young, long-legged, smooth fair hair—

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curiously enough, now I think of it, he wasn't unlike——”

Here Mr. Lancaster came into the room with a stack of fresh copy to be indexed. He also brought a commission which he explained to the head-clerk in our room.

Some books of Mr. Allen's, which he scarcely trusted out of his own hands, had to be examined by another expert for verification, and returned that same afternoon.

“I shall have to ask one of you ladies to take them for me,” he said, as he came into our room. “Not you, Miss Rickards, as I shall have to be out myself this afternoon, and I want you to interview that man from the printer's. Miss Rodney, I think you have your hands full with those articles which I want ready by this evening. I shall have to ask you to go, Miss Royds.”

Miss Royds, who simply loves “out,” brightened up at once.

Then, like the good-natured little soul that she is, she said:

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“Do you mind my asking if Miss Beaugard may go this time instead of me?”

“Why?” asked Mr. Lancaster directly, and he turned round and looked at me for the first time for days.

I looked away, of course; I did hate men who stared at me.

“Miss Beaugard came in with a headache this morning,” explained Miss Royds, “and I thought perhaps, if it was the same to you, that it would be a good thing if she could take an hour or so off from work in the fresh air, since one of us has to go.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Lancaster, quietly. Which was nice of him. But he added: “You had better both go. Those books are a little heavy to carry.”

However, by the time we had got our hats on, and had presented ourselves for the two packets of books and the note to Mr. Lancaster’s friend, I thought I saw in a flash why it was that he had sent two of his typists on an errand for which one would have done perfectly well.

The reason was in the address to which these

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things had to be taken. It was in Hampstead.

Mr. Wright's neighbourhood. . . .

Probably he thought——

Well, the thought of what Mr. Lancaster thought made me so angry again that I resolved to do—what he did think!

By the time we had finished with Mr. Lancaster's friend, a white-haired old professor, who lived at the very top of a block of tall, red-brick buildings looking towards Highgate, it was time for lunch, which we had in the High Street teashop, and after this I told Miss Royds that I wanted to go a little way round "to look at a house."

Miss Royds, of course, immediately suspected me of house-hunting, for some nice place in which to settle down with my Mr. Wright!

I smiled; I did not say anything about this being Mr. Wright's own house. In a few minutes we turned into Well Walk, a straight avenue of lime trees, with the houses on one side standing back by the raised pavement.

"The" house was on this side. It was a

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large place—tall, with nice big windows and grey walls overgrown with Virginia creeper, now wearing its crimson autumn tints.

Yes, it was just the place one would expect to be inhabited by a kind-hearted, prosperous, elderly gentleman who was fond of giving presents.

The very *place*? What about the *person*? What a pity the green door was shut, and that I did not catch a glimpse of anybody at the curtained windows!

Just as I was thinking this, the green door suddenly opened.

CHAPTER VII

A COMPLIMENT—AND A CATASTROPHE

YES; the door opened.

But it was not an old gentleman who came out.

It was a hospital nurse, young and very smart-looking, in a long purple cloak and a little bonnet with a purple velvet bow.

She was supporting what looked like a bundle of black chiffon motor-veils and black moire silk, but the veils parted in the breeze, and showed me the face of an old lady. She was leaning partly on the nurse's arm, and partly on a silver-topped ebony stick.

"This, of course," I thought to myself, "is my Mr. Wright's wife—Mrs. Paul Wright." And I slightly slackened my pace, and glanced covertly at the old lady as she came slowly down the wide steps, and on to the road.

She wore a wide black mushroom hat, fram-

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ing white hair, and a face that reminded me of
Gainsborough's Duchess of Devonshire, grown
old.

What a handsome, aristocrat-of-the-Revolution old face! Imperious, too . . . showing in every line that its owner could be a tyrant and a tartar if she liked. But imperiousness in an old lady did not exasperate me as it did—in a young man.

As she was fastening the gate behind her the nurse dropped a big rug that she was carrying on her other arm.

With surprising quickness, the old lady turned upon her, and cried, in a clear tone as imperious as her eyes:

“Ah, Orpheus, clumsy cat! You're always dropping everything! You'd drop your head if it was not fastened on!”

The rug had fallen at my feet. I hastily picked it up, and returned it to the pretty nurse, who was smiling, unmoved, at the old lady.

“Thank you, my dear,” said the old lady to me very graciously. “It is a relief to find good manners among young people of the present

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day. I often think the young women are getting as bad as the young men, though perhaps nothing could be that. What is your name, child?" she added, while the blue eyes seemed to be taking in every detail of my appearance.

"Beaugard—Morwenna Beaugard," I stammered, rather taken aback.

"Morwenna! Yes, that means 'white as the sea,'" took up the old lady quite unexpectedly, for I don't often find people who know the meaning of the name I inherited from my Welsh grandmother. "A pretty name for a pretty girl."

She looked at me for another second, and then said in a musing, gentle, stately way, "I like to think that there will be some pretty girls left walking about on the earth when I, who was so pretty myself once, am lying underneath it. Heaven be kind to you, little Miss Morwenna, and give you the sweetheart you want, and teach you how to keep him when you have got him, my dear, which is a far more difficult thing—and important. Good afternoon, young ladies!"

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Then she and the nurse passed on slowly towards a seat under the elms on the Heath while Miss Royds and I hastened Tubewards for Charing Cross and Westminster.

“Well, there was an unsolicited testimonial for you, Baby Beaugard,” said little Miss Royds. “What an extraordinary old lady! Quite a character, wasn’t she? Do you think she was a little mad, or only eccentric?”

“There was something very odd about her,” I agreed. “I wonder why she called her nurse ‘Orpheus’?”

A more important question than this—and to do with the same old lady, was to be forced upon me upon the very next day—*Oh*, what a day that was.

Well, let me go back to the beginning of it and to the appearance of Mr. Paul Lancaster, looking pale and upset for once, in our room.

“Miss Beaugard,” he said quietly, “d’you mind coming into my room for a few moments?” He held open the door for me. “I want to speak to you.”

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I followed him in, wondering why. . . .

Was it going to be a real "row" this time on the subject of my mysterious admirer? Was it only now that he had heard of another lot of flowers, and some more concert tickets from Mr. Paul Wright?

I pulled myself together, determined that I would not be ordered about in this way by this young man, who gave himself the airs of an elder brother without being any relation at all.

"Sit down, please, Miss Beaugard," he said, in quite a conciliatory tone of voice.

I supposed he saw, after all, that I was not the milk-and-water sort of young woman who can be ordered about, and thought he was going to try and "get round me" by coaxing or cajolery instead.

Well, I determined that he should find that that did not answer either, as I sat down in the chair he put for me and faced him.

I lifted my eyes as determinedly as possible to his face, and then I nearly gasped at the change I found there. He had turned as white as the sheet of paper on his desk. His firm

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mouth was set into quite an unfamiliar line, and his clear grey-blue eyes looked fearfully troubled and startled and shocked.

His voice, too, when he spoke, sounded quite different from the business-like tone which I was accustomed to hear, also from the pleasant tone he had talked in at that dinner-party such ages ago.

“Miss Beaugard, I am very sorry. I had better tell you at once. I have bad news for you.”

“Bad news?” Could he be making all this fuss over telling me he thought I was not quite up to the work, as his clerk, and that I need not come to Frith Chambers any more after next week? that being his way of taking it out of me for defying his warning about Mr. Paul Wright.

No, it wasn't that, for in a minute he cleared his throat rather harshly, and went on:

“I am very sorry to say there has been an accident”—he cleared his throat again—“to some one——”

I sat up straight, and gave a little gasp.

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When one has hardly anybody in the world belonging to one one's mind flies instantly to the names of those few who are left.

In a flash I recognised that misfortune must have swooped down on my only "some one," to whom I have often behaved badly, whom I have often defied and grumbled at, and yet of whom I have been so awfully fond. I never dreamed that it would be anything so horrible as something happening to him, darling old fellow! And I not to know of it!

The white-panelled walls of my employer's old-fashioned room seemed to whirl round me as I gasped out:

"An accident to my brother—to Jim!"

All seemed dark for a minute. Then, through the darkness, I heard a very kind voice saying:

"No, no, there is nothing the matter with Jim, nothing at all. Poor little mite, drink this!"

The half of a silver flask clinked against my teeth. Some perfectly horrible-tasting stuff burned my mouth, and then I found myself sitting up against Mr. Lancaster's shoulder, al-

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'most as if he had been Jim himself, while he repeated again:

“I say, it's not your brother.”

“Oh, then, that's all right!” I heard myself sigh, as I sat erect again. And, mingled with my relief, was the oddest feeling of delight that Mr. Lancaster had spoken so charmingly, and held me so gently.

I felt perfectly horrid, too, for not caring a bit, comparatively, what had happened to poor, dear old Great-uncle Joseph. He is my only other relative, but then I had only known him during the fortnight he had spent down in Essex, when he came to see about the Grange and arrange about Aunt Susan's furniture.

And I really could not be expected to get very fond of him in that time, even if we had not spent most of it in wrangling about his plans for me and about my coming up to earn my own living in London.

So I said gravely but steadily:

“I suppose it's my great-uncle, old Mr. Beau-gard, who has died?”

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Mr. Lancaster was staring at me as though I had been saying the most unexpected things.

“I haven’t heard anything about your great-uncle!” he said, rather hoarsely. “Can’t you think of some other man?—I—I always say the wrong thing! It was somebody who went off on a long train journey early this morning.”

Still, of course, I didn’t know.

“I suppose he didn’t tell you he was going,” said Mr. Lancaster, unsteadily now. “You see, he was travelling North in the express which has met with a bad accident. I thought I had better tell you this before you see the papers. Twenty or thirty passengers were killed when she went off the rails, and among the names of those who lost their lives was that of Mr. Paul Wright.”

“Mr. Paul Wright?” I echoed stupidly.

This was indeed the most unexpected yet.

It left me with absolutely nothing to say. And, when I did speak, my voice seemed to come mechanically from me in a question that was quite involuntary:

“People sometimes make mistakes about who

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has been killed in these accidents. Is it perfectly certain?"

"I'm afraid it is only too certain." Mr. Lancaster's voice shook. He was not looking at me, but at the ivory paper knife which he had taken up and was playing with, as he had done once before when he had called me in for an interview.

"There is no room for doubt, Miss Beaugard, I'm sorry to say. A card-case, untouched, with his name on the cards, was found in an inner pocket of his coat. And he must have been killed instantaneously."

It seemed as if he could say no more, and I sat there, stupidly, wondering about a trifle.

For it seems to me that when one is faced with something much larger than usual in everyday life one catches at something trifling, something comprehensible, to help one to regain one's balance.

The trifle that occupied me was wondering how soon Mr. Paul Wright would have bought that new card-case after losing the one that I had picked up that afternoon in the Park.

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“I don’t know what to say to you,” went on Mr. Lancaster’s boyish voice, quite miserably. “I never was any hand at saying things——”

(This was entirely true! He never was, bless his heart!)

“Only,” he said, “this has been an awful shock and I—I am most fearfully sorry—for—for *you!*”

What could I say to this?

This was such a horribly awkward moment to have to confess to him that—sorry as I was about that railway accident, the name of Mr. Paul Wright meant nothing more to me than the names of the other passengers who were killed, except that I had used it, unscrupulously, to fit the personality of a make-believe admirer of whom I knew nothing. . . .

Still, since Mr. Lancaster knew him, I could not allow this complication (begun light-heartedly and ignorantly!) to go on for another second. Yes! This was the moment I must end it, tell the whole humiliating and absurd story.

“Mr. Lancaster,” I began, a little out of breath, “I must tell you——”

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Here the telephone-bell went off sharply and peremptorily at his elbow.

“One moment, Miss Beaugard.” He took up the receiver.

“Yes, this is Mr. Paul Lancaster speaking now.”

His voice altered suddenly.

“Yes, nurse, what is it?” A pause, and then hurriedly: “I will come up at once. I will ring up a taxi now, and be with her immediately.”

Then he rang up the stand and gave his address to a driver.

“May I go now, Mr. Lancaster?”

“Yes, child, yes,” said Mr. Lancaster, evidently not knowing in the least what he was saying, or what he was calling me. “You see, I have been called up to Hampstead. I shall have to go up to—to his grandmother, at once.”

“His grandmother!” Whose? He talked as if I knew all about it.

“And you had better go home, at once if you like. There’s my taxi at the door now.” He snatched up his hat. “Perhaps you had better ring up another cab for yourself; sorry I can’t.”

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But I did not see why I should not take myself back, bewildered and stupefied as I was, to the society of the other girls in the typists' room.

When I came in I saw three heads bent together over an early afternoon edition of the newspaper. A buzz of talk was going on; it stopped at once as I entered, and I thought Miss Rickards gave a quick, searching glance at me, but presently all three of them were looking intently somewhere else.

“Have you got those notes for me to go on with?” I said, rather wonderingly, to Miss Rickards.

“I shouldn't bother about them, dear,” said Miss Rickards, in the kindest tone I had ever heard in even her kind voice. “There is time enough for those to-morrow, and it will be tea-time in a few minutes.”

“I would rather do the notes, really I would,” I proceeded. Then, as if she felt that she had made some mistake, Miss Rickards handed me the notes, and talked to me about

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them in quite an unnaturally business-like sort of way.

I know now that she thought I was “stunned.”

All of them had read the account of the catastrophe to that northward-bound express. They'd seen the name.

In the pause for tea I looked round for the evening edition of the *Star*, containing an account of the catastrophe. It was not to be found. Later on I discovered that Miss Royds had carefully taken it and drawn the fire up with it, and, at the risk of a fine from the L.C.C., had sent it blazing up the chimney.

How kind they all were! How desperately sorry for me! How hard they all tried to save me further pain! And . . . if they only knew!

What troubled me, and made me absent-minded and jumpy, was not my sorrow over the accident to Mr. Paul Wright—poor old gentleman!—but the thought of how in the world I was going to break the truth to Mr. Paul Lancaster on his return to-morrow.

All the way home, as I walked back to the

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Club through the Park where I had found that fatal card-case, I was rehearsing the best way to put it to Mr. Lancaster.

“Yes, I know it was desperately silly of me to use cards belonging to some one I knew nothing about, I know it was dishonest, and acting a lie; but I will tell you why it seemed the only thing to be done——”

This was how I thought I would begin.

How I dreaded it! An “awful time” was ahead of me, I knew.

But I never dreamt what sort of awfulness it would turn out to be.

Dinner is early at the Club for those who wish it, and after dinner I went out on to the balcony of one of the sitting-rooms.

One of the Club-maids came to me.

“If you please, miss, a gentleman to see you.”

“To see me?” It was the first time this had happened since I had been staying at the Club. I had a wild thought of my brother Jim unexpectedly landing from Ceylon.

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But it was not Jim. It was Mr. Lancaster!

He stood in the hall, dressed as he had left Frith Chambers that afternoon, looking even more flurried and agitated.

“I am sorry to trouble you,” he said in that disturbed voice, “but I had to come. It is a matter of life and death for the old lady. She is very ill. She is not to be contradicted or crossed in any wish that she expresses, and she wishes to see you!”

“Who wishes?” I cried, gazing up at him.

“His grandmother,” said my employer, almost impatiently, “old Mrs. Wright. I have a taxi waiting outside. Will you get on your things and come with me at once, please?”

CHAPTER VIII

FRESH COMPLICATIONS

WHAT else could I do?

If I had been a little older, or even a little more sensible, I should have begun my explanation then and there, as we drove along in that taxi. But, while I was trying to collect my thoughts, it was Mr. Lancaster who spoke, hurriedly, apologetically, all about "the pain which he was causing me," not knowing that pain was scarcely the right word for the appalling embarrassment which the whole position had brought upon me. Why—why did I ever "let myself in" for it?

"You know that old Mrs. Wright has been extremely delicate for a long time," said Mr. Lancaster, quite taking it for granted that I knew all about "old Mrs. Wright" as well as about other members of the family. I sup-

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posed she must be the white-haired lady I had seen once—Mr. Wright's wife. But I thought I would let Mr. Lancaster finish what he had to say before I told my own story, which simply must be done, I felt, now as we whizzed along in the taxi, and before we reached Hampstead.

“This last shock has given her a relapse that makes her doctor particularly anxious, it seems. You know”—he cleared his throat—“you know she hadn't got on with him lately——”

“With her doctor?” I said, bewildered.

“No, no; with—with my cousin, poor chap!”

I felt myself opening my eyes.

What—who was this fresh character in this extraordinary drama?

“Your cousin, Mr. Lancaster?” I faltered, looking up into his harassed face.

He stared down at me.

“You didn't know that Paul Wright was my cousin?”

“No!” I gasped. “I never dreamt of such a thing.”

“Really! You weren't told—you didn't even

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guess, the other afternoon, when he called upon me at the office?"

"Called at the office?" I echoed. "When was that?"

"Only yesterday."

"Yesterday? Then——"

The amazing fact that was just beginning to dawn on me made me speechless for a minute.

This Mr. Paul Wright was one and the same visitor whom we had heard through the door, positively shouting at Mr. Lancaster in his room, and telling him that he refused to stand any of this—our employer's—"interference"!

This was the "young madman" who had nearly run down Miss Rickards on the stairs. No wonder she had noticed he was "something like the Governor to look at"!

I had taken for my "mysterious admirer" Mr. Lancaster's own cousin, who—here was the unexpected complication!—who had been not an old gentleman at all, but a good-looking young man!

And I—according to Mr. Lancaster's view of

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it—was this dead cousin's grief-stricken sweetheart!

I was dumb with horror over what this would mean.

How could I begin to explain matters now?

I suppose the added dread of it must have shown in my face. For I saw on Mr. Lancaster's own boyish face a look of pitying kindness that he might have turned on some child who had been badly hurt.

"Oh, Lord," he muttered unhappily, "I wish I knew what to say to you. . . . I never was any hand at talking to girls, never. I am a clumsy fool, I was before, and you must hate me for what I said about——"

I interrupted him. "Oh, Mr. Lancaster, about that: I must tell you——"

"Forgive me; I've got to tell you something first," he said quickly. "I've got to sort of prepare you. . . . It's about the reason his grandmother wants to see you. You see, he *told* her about you."

"What?" I gasped, frozen with surprise

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where I sat. "Told her? About *me*? How could he, *when there was nothing to tell?*"

There! I thought I had got it out, now. But the young man beside me did not seem to understand.

Hurriedly he took up: "I know! That's it! Apparently Paul told her there was nothing. She had been telling him off, you know, about women—— Now I've done it again. Now I've said the wrong thing——"

"Oh, no!" I protested. "Say what you like. Why should I mind?"

He looked at me sideways as the cab whizzed along. Then he said, "Well, it appears that Paul told her that, whatever he'd done, there was one girl in his life who—who—— Well, he said he was nothing to her but a friend; that he had given her flowers and left her alone, and that he looked upon her, this one girl, as an angel from Heaven; that he wouldn't harm a hair of her head or a feather of her wings. You know the way he talked! One woman, he said, whom he'd rather die than treat badly. And now he's dead," Mr. Lancaster went on very

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hurriedly, "now, you see, she, the old lady, remembers. She said—it sounds an extraordinary thing for a woman to say of her own grandson—she said it was the only time she'd ever heard of Paul holding his hand where a girl was concerned, or of his ever being kind. She says she spoilt him, sent him to his ruin, but that she'd feel it a link between him and her, if she could see this one girl."

He stopped at last, looking appealingly at me.

I said blankly, "What girl?"

"Don't you understand?" said Mr. Lancaster very gently. "She can only mean—*you*."

Me! Horror on horror's head! *Me*—

"Oh, this is worse than ever!" I cried desperately, feeling as if I had got into a maze like the one at Hampton Court, only one that there was no way out of.

"I cannot see her! Oh, I cannot face her, Mr. Lancaster! Please stop the taxi and let me get out. I want to go back—I cannot go on like this!"

I almost felt as if I could jump straight out

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of the taxi window. But Mr. Lancaster's firm grip on my arm seemed to call me back to myself.

"Come!" he said authoritatively.

I had never been thankful before to hear a man speak with authority.

"Come, you must not give way like this. I say, Jim Beaugard's sister must not be a coward." Fancy his having caught my brother's name! "Think! There is a poor old woman's life depending upon whether this one wish of hers is to be fulfilled at this crucial moment, or not. Be kind to her."

He cleared his throat again.

"Remember, she was very fond of him really," he said. "That's why you're going to be . . . sweet about it——"

"Mr. Lancaster," I gasped, "I cannot possibly speak to her—of him!"

"You need not," said Mr. Lancaster, again with that comforting authority in his voice. "I think she will scarcely wish to mention his name to you. You have probably heard"—here was another of his taking-for-granted—“that Mrs.

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Wright is a thoroughly unconventional old lady, very eccentric in fact. She will not speak to you in the least as you think. You may even be a little shocked at the way she takes it, lots of people are shocked at her! but, at all events, I can promise you she won't want to distress you by talking of him or wishing to enter into any details of that sort. She wants to see—to see that girl of his——”

I said desperately, “I'm not his girl.”

“You're the one he meant. There was no one else, I know,” said Mr. Lancaster, simply and convinced. “I'm too thankful I've got hold of you for her. She wants it so! And you can't refuse her—you wouldn't want to—you're too kind. You can't do a poor old woman down.”

No, I felt that I could not. I could only sit there and watch the streets fly past as though in a dream, bewildered beyond words at the turn events were taking. To find myself in the position of “the only creature” to whom this dead young man had been “kind”! I, who had never, never set eyes on him or dreamed of

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doing so! And I to be on my way, at this moment, to comfort this stranger's own grandmother!

“Surely,” I felt, “I must be going to wake up as soon as the taxi stops!”

But the taxi stopped before that flight of white steps and that green door which I had seen once before, and I did not wake up. It was no dream.

Ungessed-at realities were before me!

CHAPTER IX

A FALSE POSITION

MR. LANCASTER jumped out, gave me his hand to help me, and then put his hand firmly under my arm, as if he thought I might trip on that flight of whitened steps to the green front door out of which Miss Royds and I had watched the white-haired old Duchess-of-Devonshire lady descending with the nurse.

The same nurse opened the door even before Mr. Lancaster had rung.

“Ah, Mr. Lancaster! You have brought the young lady. That’s good!” said the nurse, in quiet, professional tones, with a lightning-quick, keen glance at me.

“Why——!” she began, a look of recognition coming into her eyes. She seemed just going to make some remark about having seen me before. Then evidently she thought better

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of it. She turned quickly towards the hall and said:

“Will you please come upstairs?”

We both followed her upstairs to a door on a landing. The nurse tapped quickly, and, after she had closed the door behind her, we heard a murmur inside. Then she opened the door and beckoned.

I turned to the young man beside me, feeling that I simply could not leave the support of his presence. But he shook his head, hesitating. “She—she doesn’t want *me*, Nurse Egerton, of course?”

“No. The young lady alone, please.”

With one backward glance at my employer, which made me feel as if I were leaving behind my last contact with real life in the middle of a nightmare, I followed the nurse’s mauve and white clad figure into the room.

It was darkened, and, through the one faint glimmer of a shrouded light that remained, I could only make out a huge mirror that gleamed uncannily, and the towering shape of a big, old-fashioned four-poster bed, with white cur-

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tains, that reminded me of a tomb. From the bed came the sound of the imperious old voice which I had already listened to once calling:

“Turn up the light, Orpheus! Do you think I’m a bat or an owl, that you expect me to see in this darkness made visible? Turn on all the lights, and let me have a good look at the girl now she is here!”

There was a click, then another and another, and the big bedroom was flooded with light, softly pink from the shades arranged about the globes.

The change made me blink for a moment, then I turned towards the bed, and made out the face and figure that lay back against the large, frilled pillows.

The old lady, with her clean-cut features and piercing grey-blue eyes and almost waxen complexion, was more striking than she was even as I had seen her the other morning.

Over the aureole of silver hair that framed her face there was thrown an exquisite black Spanish lace mantilla, which formed an effective background to her wonderful old head, and

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draped her slender, sloping shoulders, and wrapped her frail arms down to her hands, which were like little white claws crowded with magnificent diamonds.

The stones shot out sparks of emerald and orange and scarlet fire as she raised both hands, and held them towards me.

“Why, it’s the little girl we saw that morning, Orpheus!” she cried, with a delighted surprise in her imperious old tones. She looked at me, searchingly. “The little girl called Morwenna, which means ‘white as sea-foam.’ She is very white now, and her big eyes are as blue as the sea itself. Yes, she’s a beauty. It is the fate of our family to be beauty-worshippers—as I dare say you’ve been told, child,” she added to me, “have you not?”

I heard myself mutter something unintelligible, and I turned away, shy of meeting the searchlight gaze of those piercing eyes against the pillow.

As I did so I caught a fleeting glimpse of the face of Nurse Egerton. It startled me so much that I nearly exclaimed aloud.

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I had already seen that she was a well-turned-out and nice-looking girl; she could not have been more than twenty-four or five. But in that moment her face had changed to the face of a much older woman. More than that, it was the face of a woman distracted with misery, and—yes! anger. Why . . . ?

In another second I thought I must have been mistaken; I could not have seen that look. It must have been my imagination. Nurse Egerton, perfectly tranquil now, stepped forward and said quietly to her patient: "If I allow this young lady to stay and talk, you must not excite yourself. You know you promised, Mrs. Wright!"

"Hold your tongue, Orpheus!" snapped old Mrs. Wright.

She seemed to hypnotise me. . . .

How else was it that she persuaded me to send for my belongings from the Club, and to come and stay with her, there, in that house in Well Walk?

A day later I found myself promising to

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give up my work for as long as she might need me.

She needed me! That was the keynote of it all. She got hold of me by that absurd passion which I always had for *giving*. I gave her pleasure in watching me; comfort in thinking that I was a link with that lost grandson of hers—never mentioned, by the way, by any of us. I gave her an interest in the remnant of life that remained to her. And, oh, I am ashamed of it now, but I simply had not the courage to take them away again.

“Your pretty face and your pretty ways, little Morwenna, are all the amusement I have left,” she declared, on the second day. “Don’t take them away, child, till I’ve finished being able to appreciate them. I shall not keep you long, I expect.”

Again, what could I do? (Oh, I paid for it afterwards, for my lack of courage and honesty!)

I found myself forced into making her house my home. A thousand times rather I would have been at Frith Chambers, working with the

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“three R’s” under Mr. Lancaster. But there I stayed in the old-fashioned, luxurious house that always seemed to me to have the shadow of past trouble, of past anger, brooding over it, brooding. . . .

Or perhaps I imagined an unhappy atmosphere, since I was so unhappy in my false position!

He—Mr. Lancaster—wrote me a short, stiff, ill-expressed note, saying that he, as the only other member of her family, would be grateful if I would stay with his grandmother. (She was his grandmother too, I remembered, with a little start.) And the trained nurse, looking at me with a glance as detached as if I were a bottle of tonic instead of another young woman, told me she feared “it might have serious consequences if her patient were crossed in something on which she had set her heart.”

She added firmly, “*serious* consequences.”

“Very well, Nurse Egerton,” I said, “I will stay. But——”

“Orpheus,” called Mrs. Wright from her bedroom, “send in my Sunshine, please.”

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I was her "Sunshine"! And I had soon found out why she called her nurse "Orpheus." It was because she had the duty of blowing out the air-cushions which are piled high behind the old lady's stately Duchess-of-Devonshire-like head. And when the nurse is doing this, her pretty, puffed-out cheeks did look rather as if she were playing some musical instrument.

"Orpheus, to the life!" said old Mrs. Wright to me, the first time I watched the proceeding.

I smiled at Nurse Egerton, but she didn't smile back at me. She never smiled at me. I should have wondered whether it were one of the duties of trained nurses not to smile, but that she did smile, often and gently, at her patient.

Evidently she didn't like *me*.

I imagined that it was natural jealousy at seeing her patient, whom she had attended devotedly for the last three years, turning from her to give all her gratitude, all her affection, to a stranger, a mere, unpractical, rather babyish, pretty girl.

"Give me a pretty face to look at, and I don't

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care whether the owner of it has a heart of gold or not!" was one of her startling remarks one day, when she woke up from her afternoon nap to find me bringing in a cup of hot milk for her. "Hearts don't matter, because I don't see 'em; faces I do. And besides," she added, "I don't believe that any one who hasn't got an ugly disposition can have a really ugly face. So don't preach to me about the inside being better than the outside, because I won't have it!"

Then again, she said, ruefully, "But I ought to know that handsome looks can be spoiled by unhandsome things;" and I guessed, suddenly, that she was thinking of the man who was the reason for my being there at all. That was the only time she had seemed to remember, that, and an allusion to "only sons." She said once it was better never to rear a chick or a child than to have just one baby and to give him lives to play with as one gave him a coral and bells. . . .

"He's bound to break them," said the old lady. "He did."

That was the only time she mentioned "him"

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—and though the shadow of him and the thought of him haunted the house like a ghost, I had no idea even of what “he” really looked like—until one afternoon.

It was the cook-housekeeper, wife of the old family butler, who enlightened me.

She had taken a fancy to me from the first, because as she says, I “don’t need everlasting waiting-on, like most of these young ladies.”

“Ah, miss, I don’t wonder, if I may say so, that you were the only one of the lot that poor Mr. Paul really cared for!” This burst from her one day when I was downstairs in the Victorian basement.

It was the first time I had ever heard him mentioned by name.

“It’s the girls’ afternoon out, and there’s nobody about, miss, dear,” cook murmured. “If you’ll step in here a minute, I’ll show you something.”

And she opened a kitchen drawer, and from under a truly cook-like chaos of wooden spoons, an “Old Moore’s Almanack,” a clean glass-cloth, a polishing pad, and a packet of pear-

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drops, she drew forth a cabinet photograph in a red-leather frame.

“There, missy,” she said, fixing her eyes on my face while she handed me the photograph, “do you know who that is?”

“Oh, yes!” I cried readily. “Isn’t it good?”

For the photograph showed me exactly what my employer, Mr. Paul Lancaster, must have looked like ten years ago, at twenty-one or twenty-two. There were his broad, sloping shoulders—the shoulder that had been so comfortably supporting to me when he had broken to me what he had thought was very bad news, and what I thought must be ill tidings of Jim.

There were his fair, smooth head, and his clear eyes looking very straight out at me. There were his firm mouth and chin, only there was a more wilful and defiant expression about the whole face than I had been accustomed to associate with the man who was at the head of affairs in Frith Chambers.

Perhaps that was only because he was so much younger when the photograph was taken!

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“Yes, it’s very like him,” I said, as I handed the photograph back again to cook.

“Oh, miss, dear, won’t you keep it? I meant you to have it, if you hadn’t one like it.”

Why should she imagine that I should possess any portrait of the young engineer with whom, except about twice, I have never been on any but strictly business terms?

“I think it’s only right that you should have it, miss, if you don’t mind accepting it from me. Only, miss, whatever you do, don’t let the mistress see it! The last time poor Mr. Paul went away she burned all the photographs in the house that was ever taken of him, even his little baby ones, and this is the only one left.”

“Mr. Paul!”

It suddenly flashed upon me that she meant not my Mr. Lancaster—I mean, not my employer, Mr. Lancaster—but the Mr. Paul Wright who was his cousin.

Then, looking closer, I saw that I’d just been misled by a very strong family likeness.

Ah, no, they weren’t *really* alike, these two young men.

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How different were their expressions! Mr. Lancaster, boyish, honest, straight, sterling, kind. . . . Paul Wright, defiant and, yes! What they call "a devil"—I have heard girls who say they rather like that look. Well, I can only say that I never do, and never have. It takes all sorts to make a world, as old cook herself once told me, and if there weren't some of his sort, there would not be some of all sorts. . . .

I can only tell you that his "sort" did not and never could have appealed to my sort.

But I couldn't refuse the photograph. I knew that, for as long as I was with her, I mustn't let his grandmother suspect that I hadn't been on the friendliest terms—Oh, dear!—with that young man.

And if she were not to know, nobody in the house must ever dream that there had been no attentions from that dead young man to me—no friendship between us, not even the shadow of an acquaintanceship.

So I thanked cook, and went up the kitchen stairs, holding in my hand the framed photo-

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graph, which I must smuggle away into a drawer as soon as possible.

As I reached the black-and-white tiled hall, I found myself confronted—unexpectedly confronted—by the other man of whom I had just been thinking—my late employer, Mr. Paul Lancaster. He had just been let in by Nurse Egerton.

At the sight of me they stopped quickly, and I saw the eyes of both of them turn, as if they couldn't help themselves, to what I was carrying in my hand.

I felt myself blush until it *hurt!*

This was because I had never before been made to feel, so completely, my own false position.

I had begun by telling one fib—then another, now everything in my life was made up of fibs and falsehoods and prevarications. I was living a sham, and it was the shame of this that made my cheeks blaze.

They couldn't be expected to put it down to anything so out of the way. These two people, who knew the Mr. Wright on whom I had never

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set eyes—how I wish I had never heard of his name!—these two imagined that I flushed merely because I was a girl in love, “caught out” in the act of dreaming over the portrait of the man whom she has loved and lost.

And this, of course, made me blush more furiously than before! How I hated myself and them, and every one else, at that moment!

CHAPTER X

A NEW FACTOR IN THE AFFAIR!

NURSE EGERTON'S coolly professional accents broke what was to me a most embarrassingly awkward silence.

“If you will wait in the drawing-room for a moment, Mr. Lancaster, I will go upstairs and see whether Mrs. Wright has finished her nap, and if she will be able to receive you for a few moments presently.”

“Thank you, nurse,” said Mr. Lancaster, and I stood aside to let Nurse Egerton precede me.

Her trim figure, with its mauve print gown, its white apron, and the cap which is always as fresh and crisp as a camellia petal on her chestnut hair, disappeared round the curve of the wide staircase, and then I turned to follow her, to run to my room and hide that incriminating photograph of the stranger whom I had

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never seen, at the very bottom of my lowest drawer.

But Mr. Lancaster's voice, speaking as gently as he had spoken to me on that fatal afternoon in the office before I came to live under false pretences in this house, held me back.

“Miss Beaugard, will you come into the drawing-room with me for a minute before I go up to my grandmother? I have a message to give you.”

I did as he asked, still clutching the photograph, which I couldn't leave on the hall table, and which I didn't know what else to do with.

I sat down on a low, wide couch, covered with a pleasant, faded cretonne, of which the pattern must have gone out of stock about the year of Queen Victoria's first jubilee. Mr. Paul Lancaster sat down close beside me, and gave me his message.

It was from the “three R's,” delivered to him, apparently, by Miss Rickards. It was merely to say that my three fellow clerks missed me very much, and that they would be glad if, some Saturday afternoon, when I was not too

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busy attending to Mrs. Wright, I would, if I cared to, meet them out for tea somewhere.

That was all; there was nothing in the message that need have been in the least upsetting. Yet, quite unexpectedly, it upset me horribly. It was the thought of the simple kindness and good-heartedness and candour of these girls, whom I had deceived. Through meaning to be kind to them, what a tangled web I had woven for myself!

I suddenly felt the contrast between the open and straightforward affairs of the "three R's" and the complications and shams in which I was involved. I longed to be out of it; I longed to be back at work as I was before I had hit on the fatally successful ruse of using Mr. Wright's name as the sender of sweets and flowers and little luxuries that mattered not at all!

I longed for the routine and companionship in Frith Chambers. This house, with its haunted atmosphere of the old unhappiness and unexplained wrongs, weighed on my nerves as a nightmare weighs on one's chest.

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I felt a kind of horror of everything here—of the beautiful, proud, miserable old face of Mrs. Wright upstairs—of the coldly professional manner of Nurse Egerton, who so jealously resented my unwilling intrusion . . .

I was puzzled, bewildered. I felt like a child who had lost its way. I felt that I should have been happier anywhere else—even in that “quiet country rectory,” the very thought of which had been such a bugbear to me.

All these depressing thoughts seemed to sweep over me in a great wave of misery, carrying me off my feet in the very moment that Mr. Lancaster stopped giving me his message.

And, to my horror, I found myself doing something that I had never for a moment anticipated doing.

I flung up my hands with a gesture of uncontrollable despair; I cried desperately, “No, this is too much for me! I can’t bear it!”

And then I buried my face in my hands, and let my head sink into the old-fashioned cushions, as I gave way to tears and sobs that simply wouldn’t be denied.

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A sudden horrible feeling of being so alone, so utterly alone in the world, mingled with everything else, and as I sobbed, I put out, blindly, one of my hands. I felt I must have a human hand to cling to. It would have been the same to me if it had been Nurse Egerton's, or the doctor's, or even old cook's; but presently I felt my fingers folded in a firm, strong clasp that was comfort unutterable.

“I am so unhappy—so unhappy!” I murmured, half into the cushion. And the hand still held mine, while I heard Mr. Lancaster's voice, infinitely pitying and gentle, respond:

“I know! I know, dear!”

(“*Dear!*”)

That one word seemed to go through me like the touch of an electric wire.

I had read before in books of how a word, a touch, had worked miracles, but I had always imagined it to be romantic nonsense—an exaggeration for the benefit of idiotically sentimental novel-readers like the Miss Settles, in their “quiet country rectory” at home.

But now I know it to be literally true. That

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touch of Mr. Lancaster's hand, that one word of endearment, so utterly gentle, even though it was spoken only out of pity for a girl whom he imagined to be sobbing her heart out over the loss of his dead cousin—these things had worked the miracle—the miracle of revealing me to myself.

I saw new meanings in a dozen things which I had misconstrued ever since I had gone to work in Frith Chambers.

I knew now why I was so angry that Mr. Paul Lancaster in business found it expedient to be a person so totally different from the same young man at a dinner-party. I knew why I had had that shock of delight when he had once more spoken in a friendly manner to me, and had held me so gently when I nearly fainted over the shock of fearing that something had happened to Jim.

I knew why those agonising blushes had burned my cheeks just now when he had come upon me with his cousin's photograph in my hand.

It was not entirely the misery and embarrass-

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ment of my false position in this house that made the days seem so long and the nights so restless.

No, it was something much stranger still. It was the fact that I, who have never given myself up to day-dreams and fancies about love, should have been for all these weeks, and without realising it, in love myself.

Some girls come to that knowledge gradually—step by step, seeing their way, and smiling as they come. But I had come upon it in one terrifying moment. I felt as if I had fallen backwards into the swimming bath at the deep end.

I gasped as the truth flashed upon me. *In love——!*

Yes, I was in love—had been in love since that first evening—with this other Paul!

And still Paul Lancaster sat beside me, utterly disturbed in the kindness of his heart over something that didn't happen to be my trouble at all.

He was stroking my hand as gently as any woman could have done, and he was murmur-

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ing soothingly, comfortingly, "I know, dear, I know!"

He—who didn't know anything! To be calling me "dear" in that tone of an elder brother!

Surely that brotherly sort of kindness must always be the last straw to a woman who has just found out that what she feels towards the speaker is the very reverse of mere "sisterliness"?

Anyhow, it was more than I could bear.

"Don't!" I cried, in a choked voice. "Please, you must never call me that!"

Silence for a moment, then I heard Mr. Lancaster's voice say, falteringly:

"I am sorry, I never will again! I always do the wrong things—always——"

Another misunderstanding! He thought that Paul Wright had been the only man whom I could ever allow to call me "dear."

"But please believe me," he went on—still in that brotherly tone—"that if there were anything in the world that I could do to comfort you I would do it."

"Oh, I know you would!" I said, with rather

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an unsteady laugh. Comfort? It was a comfort to me that such a man lived. Others might think him "awkward." Others might say he did the wrong thing. But it was never "wrong" for me. For *me* he was right. Yes, he was, always, exactly right for *me*.

He had slackened that comforting clasp of his hand.

I drew my own away. I fumbled for my handkerchief in the cuff of my black satin shirt, blew my nose, dried my eyes, and pulled myself together to reply.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Lancaster. And do please forgive me for having been so very silly to-day. I am not often like this." (Indeed, I have never been like it before in my life.) "And as for Miss Rickards and the other girls, will you please thank them very much for their kind messages, and tell them that I am writing to them to-night, and——"

"Mr. Lancaster, if you don't mind waiting, Mrs. Wright will see you a little later this afternoon," broke in the cool tones of Nurse Egerton, who had entered softly, and stood there,

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looking very self-possessed and trim, and making me feel more dishevelled than I had ever done before.

“Miss Beaugard, if you don't mind, she would like you to go up to her now.”

“Oh, yes, I'll go at once!” I said, glad of the excuse, and I ran out of the room and up the stairs.

CHAPTER XI

ABOUT PEARLS—AND TEARS

UPSTAIRS in the big bedroom, I found rather a disconcerting change in my old lady's manner.

She was sitting up in her black mantilla, much more upright than usual. There was a flush on the ivory of her cheeks; the dominant grey-blue eyes were brilliant.

Never since I had seen her had she looked so far from being ill.

She began, as she often did, by telling me to "come nearer, so that she could look well at the prettiest thing in the house."

(I often wished she would not say that before the chestnut-haired nurse, whom many people would think prettier than I am!)

But generally I did not mind obeying her and standing to let her stare at my eyes and my short thick curly hair and at the contrast be-

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tween my absurdly white skin and my black frock.

That afternoon, however, I faced those keen old eyes of hers very reluctantly.

I knew she would notice. She did.

“You have been crying, Morwenna,” she said quickly. “Why!”

I said appealingly, “Must you ask me?”

“You needn’t answer me, child,” she said gently; “but it puzzles me for all that. You have not cried before, since you have been staying here in this—in my house.”

“No,” I said. It was quite true that, up to now, since I came here to occupy this extraordinary position of seeming to be the sweetheart of a dead man whom I had never met I had not shed a tear.

“Then why now?” asked the old lady curiously, speaking more to herself than to me. “Is it that you have only just realised something?”

I nodded.

For this was bitterly true, indeed! It was only now that I realised what a revolution had

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been happening in my feelings during the last weeks.

“Strange,” said old Mrs. Wright, peering at me with her wonderful eyes. “I see a look on your face, now, Morwenna, that I have waited for all these weeks, and still had never seen before—the look of a woman who can love.”

“Oh, it shows, then!” I murmured unhappily, and I covered my face with my hands and turned away.

“Don’t hide your face from me, child,” said old Mrs. Wright gently. “I shan’t have much longer to look at it.”

“Oh, how can you say that?” I began unhappily. “You know you are so much better than you have been.”

“I believe I am better for seeing that look in your eyes, child,” said the old lady. “It’s a comfort to me to know that in all his wild and reckless life, the life I helped to make so, my grandson did gain the affection of one innocent girl, and kept it innocently.”

“Please don’t!” I choked. “Please—I can’t bear to hear you say that now.”

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For my heart and eyes and ears seemed full still of the image—not, not of the dead Paul (as she imagined!) but of the living one downstairs.

“Sometimes it happens like this, I know,” said the old grandmother, musingly. “A bird’s wings never look as white as when it flies. And love, sometimes, is a slow fuse that breaks into flame long after the hand that set it has disappeared. Tell me, child. You did not really care, then, for our boy while he was alive?”

“No,” I said truthfully enough, and waited, holding my breath, for the next question, which I felt must needs be answered with a lie.

But she said nothing further. Instead she said:

“Ring the bell for Orpheus.”

I rang, and Nurse Egerton appeared.

“Is my—is Mr. Lancaster downstairs still, Orpheus?”

I noticed that she never called him “my grandson.” I don’t think she ever cared for him. Hearts are so different.

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“Yes, he is waiting for those papers you wished him to take to the bank.”

“Tell him to come upstairs here at once.”

The nurse hesitated, with a glance at her patient.

“Do as I tell you, Orpheus, or you’ll go, and give place to a nurse who will,” flamed out old Mrs. Wright. And the nurse, without a flicker of annoyance through her professional mask, slipped out of the room.

I was going to follow her. I didn’t, oh! I didn’t want to see him again to-day, but old Mrs. Wright stopped me.

“You shall go in a minute, child. Wait until they come up, because Orpheus has something I want for you.”

In another moment the nurse had come back, and I saw the tall bulk of Mr. Lancaster darkening the late afternoon light which filtered through the casement, but I could not look at him.

Mrs. Wright turned to her nurse.

“Orpheus, find the key of my sandal-wood

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box. . . . Good. Now bring the box here to me. Thank you.”

She opened the heavy, square casket of fragrant wood, carved and bordered with mother-of-pearl.

What a curious hoarding-place—what a still more curious hoard!

It was full of treasures mingled higgledy-piggledy. A cairngorm brooch, tasteless, huge, and hideous, had wound round and round its long pin strands of the most marvellous pink, spiky coral. There were little boxes, their leather lids open and gaping over their empty, cream satin-lined shells, there was a handful of rings, one or two with diamonds as good as those which Mrs. Wright wore always on her white and claw-like fingers, other mourning rings, plaits of hair, some pinchbeck trifles, and a collection of cameos, set and unset.

There were earrings of every sort, too, long tortoiseshell drop ones, with fairy-like gold inlay, amethyst studs, one pair of large silver ones, each as big as a pendant.

And, wound in and out of this extraordinary

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tangle of gems and rubbish (inextricably mixed, like the good and bad qualities in a human heart!) there was a pearl necklace. A necklace of many strands, and of graduated pearls, from the great front pearl that seemed almost as large as a wren's egg, to the wee pearls along the end, which seemed no bigger than the "hundreds and thousands" on a christening cake.

"I want to see Morwenna put that necklace on," said old Mrs. Wright's distinct and commanding tone from her pillows, and she held the wonderful milky gleaming strands out to me.

Obediently I took it, but my hands were shaking, and I could not snap the curiously wrought silver old-fashioned clasp.

"Fasten it for her!" said old Mrs. Wright.

I saw Mr. Paul Lancaster make a little movement as if he would do this. My heart seemed to lift. It flashed across me that I would *love* to let him fasten a necklace for me, tie a shoe-string, put a wrap about me. Anything that would bring him near me for a second, just then. . . .

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But he checked himself.

Drearly I realised—or thought I realised—why. He thought that I, who had forbidden him to use a term of endearment to me—his cousin's sweetheart, as he imagined—would not like him to come even as near to me as fastening a necklace.

It was Nurse Egerton who stepped forward and snapped the old-fashioned clasp.

The touch of her fingers against my neck was professionally light; in fact, she could not have been more gentle.

But, even so, how that touch betrayed her.

Just as love can break through its disguise of rough handling, so can hate appear in the touch that is nothing but gentle.

In some subtle, unexplained way, that touch of Nurse Egerton's fingers on my neck allowed me to realise how utterly she detested me.

I had tried to be nice to her, always: it was not my fault! Just because a poor old lady had taken a fancy to me, as sick people are always understood to take fancies!

But the quiet, mask-like face of the nurse

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seemed to send out rays of hatred towards me, even as a lamp sends out rays of light, as I stood there, wearing those stranger-pearls.

“Difficult to tell which is the whiter, the old necklace or the child’s young throat,” said Mrs. Wright. Then turning to her grandson she added, sharply, “Isn’t that so?”

“It—it suits her very well,” he said quietly, “I think.”

I felt his eyes on me as if the pearls had been suddenly molten into a burning circle round my throat.

I put my hand up to unclasp them.

“Keep them on!” commanded Mrs. Wright. “I wish to see them there. But, for a little, you can go now, child. You two stop; I shan’t keep you long. Kiss me before you go, Morwenna.”

And I bent down and kissed the flushed ivory of her cheek before I slipped out of the room.

I went back to the empty drawing-room and sat on the sofa, where I had broken into such hopeless sobbing half an hour before.

Tears are twice as bitter when their cause is

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misunderstood, and would Mr. Lancaster ever understand why it was that I had broken down just then and there? I did not even know whether to wish that he should or should not.

I think . . . that he should . . .

For it came back to me, all that the “three R’s” had said of his looking at me, liking *me*. Supposing that wonderful thing were true? Too good, too good . . .

But I lost myself in a day-dream over it. I don’t know how many minutes it was before I came out of it, to find myself in the drawing-room that was almost dark, but for the light of the lamp outside in Well Walk.

A shiver of loneliness went through me.

I stole out of the drawing-room into the hall, and there I met Mr. Lancaster, coming down noiselessly, but in a hurry.

“Oh!” I said quickly, but not knowing quite what to ask him. “Is Nurse Egerton still with Mrs. Wright?”

Without answering he took my hand, led me back into the drawing-room, shut the door, and turned up just one of the lights, the one by the

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piano. I saw that his face was white and drawn and serious.

“I say——” he began softly. “I’m sorry to say something—another shock for you——”

Even as he said it, I knew what had happened.

“Mrs. Wright!” I whispered. “She is—dead?”

He nodded.

“She died about ten minutes ago, very quietly. She lay back just as she had finished speaking to us, and she was gone in a second,” he told me. There was silence for a moment. Presently he added, “Now, what do you wish to do? Shall I take you back to that Club where you were staying before, or will you stay here with the nurse to-night?”

The nurse! I felt a childish terror of being left alone with this strange young woman who hated me so. I faltered something about being better away, being no longer of any use in Mrs. Wright’s house.

Mr. Lancaster looked down at me again

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quickly, with an odd, half-wondering, half-pitying expression on his face.

“Perhaps,” he began—“perhaps it will save time and complications if I tell you something at once.”

“About her?” I interposed quickly and softly.

“About my grandmother, yes, and you. ‘Her house,’ you said,” he added. “I may tell you, Miss Beaugard, that this is now—your house.”

“What can you mean?” I stared at him.

“I mean,” he said, “that just before my grandmother died she drew up another will, which Nurse Egerton and I signed as witnesses, and in it she left this house and everything here—all her property, all she possessed—to you!”

CHAPTER XII

A CLASH OF WILLS

I MUST skip some time in my story now, hardly knowing myself whether that time runs to days or weeks; a time packed with bewilderment and complexity to a brand-new heiress.

An heiress—yes, that was what I found myself.

It was I who was supposed to take over the management of that great house, and to pay off the nurse, and to settle about whether the servants were to stay on, and to interview the most alarming-looking, legal gentlemen, with noses like hawks' beaks and eyes that seemed to go through you, bringing stacks of papers about goodness knows what in the way of business and settlements and shares, which I, and nobody else, was supposed to sign!

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Bewildered, stunned, reluctant, but still Mrs. Wright's heiress . . . !

And why? Because I had been brought to brighten up her last days with . . . my own false pretences.

I suppose nine girls out of ten would have found courage then and there to confess the whole of that absurd yet disastrous story.

But I can only tell you, with shame, that this courage was not mine.

Only one very definite resolve I did make, and intended to keep.

I blurted it out to Mr. Lancaster in that drawing-room of the Well Walk house, where he was waiting with me for an interview with one of those legal, hawk-people.

I looked straight at the young man—a thing I did not often do, lest he might discover how difficult it was for me to look at anything else while he was in the room, and I exclaimed, “I won't! I won't *do* this!”

He opened those honest grey-blue eyes of his. I went on very quickly.

“I mean I won't have anything more to do

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with all this; it's no use any of them bringing any more papers for me to sign. And I am not going to have anything to do with arrangements about the house or the furniture, or the jewellery, or the plate, or anything that's here! I don't consider it mine, and I refuse to look upon it as such."

"But, Miss Beaugard, it is indubitably yours," said Mr. Lancaster, in that calmly reasoning voice which men will still go on using to women who disagree with them, although I should have thought that all these centuries might have taught them that it's no earthly good.

"You see," he went on, "it is the only will that old Mrs. Wright made since the loss of her grandson. It is perfectly correctly drawn up, and correctly witnessed by Nurse Egerton and myself."

"You!" I blurted out. "But it's you who ought to have it!"

"I don't know what you mean," said Mr. Lancaster looking at me.

"You do!" I contradicted. "You are her

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only remaining relative, aren't you? Everything would have gone naturally to you, even if no will had been found—if I hadn't been there."

"Still, you were there!" said Mr. Lancaster, in that horribly reasonable tone, which there is no contradicting, "and, as a matter of fact, there are reasons why, even if the money had not been specifically left away from me, I should not have cared to touch it."

"I am sure I don't care to touch it," I went on, looking quite angrily at him across the width of the drawing-room.

He was standing on the hearthrug with his back to the fire, and I was sitting on the chintz sofa, where I had flung myself that other afternoon.

"It was only because she was so very ill, and took strange fancies into her head that she hit upon this sudden idea of leaving everything that ought to have been her grandson's to a perfect stranger, who was nothing to her," I said.

"Nothing to her?" said Mr. Lancaster

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quickly, and looking away from me. "You know she considered you as almost a daughter."

"That doesn't make it any less impossible for me to take her fortune. I can't do it; I won't! There's only one thing of hers, which, for a reason of my own, I would wish to keep."

"What is that?" asked Mr. Lancaster quickly; but before I could answer him, "Mr. Griffin" was announced.

(Mr. Griffin being the very hawkiest of the lawyer people.)

With Mr. Griffin there, looking more like a bird of prey than any one could possibly have expected of a human being who wore beautifully-creased trousers and gold-rimmed eyeglasses, there ensued the longest and most exhausting argument in which I had ever taken part. The wordy wrangles with my great-uncle about whether I was to be allowed to come up and try to earn my living in London were as nothing to it!

It was all, of course, about that wretched will.

"I don't wish to accept the terms of it; I

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won't take the money. I wish to retire in favour of Mr. Lancaster."

This was what I heard myself saying, over and over again, in answer to Mr. Lancaster's puzzled, curt remonstrances, and in spite of Mr. Griffin's polished and suave and thoroughly logical arguments.

Neither of these two men seemed ever to have heard of that eternal verity:

"A woman urged against her will
Is of the same opinion still."

And to neither of them could I possibly explain the whole truth of my refusal; it would sound too grotesque, too incredible.

Little coward and idiot that I was, I *could* not confess that "Mr. Wright" story to Mr. Lancaster; not now when I knew who it was that I cared for all the time. Strange and inconsistent as it sounds, that was the bar.

I could only go on repeating obstinately, "I am not going to touch that money."

"Nor am I," said Mr. Lancaster, more quietly, but, as I saw, with equal obstinacy.

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“Then a fortune goes begging,” said Mr. Griffin, the lawyer, with a sort of humorous gleam in his eye that seemed to tell me it wouldn’t go begging very long if he had the shadow of a claim to put into it. “Here we come to a standstill, then? Well, I can only suggest that Miss Beaugard will probably regret her decision, and that she had better take a little more time to think it over.”

“I have thought about it until my head aches!” I said indignantly, “and there is only one thing that I can agree to doing—that is, to refuse it absolutely. There is only one of all Mrs. Wright’s things, as I said just now, which I would like to be allowed to look on as mine to do what I like with.”

“What is that?” asked Mr. Paul Lancaster quickly.

I put my hand up to my throat and drew out from under the black collar of my blouse the only ornament which I have worn for weeks.

It was the beautiful pearl necklace which old Mrs. Wright had brought out of her jewel-casket on that last afternoon when I had seen her,

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which she had made me try on, and the clasp of which Nurse Egerton had fastened round my neck.

I had worn it there ever since, partly because I didn't want, in putting it back into Mrs. Wright's jewel-casket, to touch any of the old lady's things—a kind of superstitious dread kept me from this.

Again, I didn't know into what other hands I could safely entrust the pearls now that Nurse Egerton had left, and thirdly, I didn't feel it was safe to leave them in my little bedroom which I have got back to at the Club; so I have always worn them round my neck.

“I should like to keep these,” I said again.

“They are yours, anyhow,” said Mr. Paul Lancaster gently. “When my grandmother gave them to you that afternoon, she meant them as a present.”

“It's all that I shall accept, then,” I said defiantly, “and now there seems nothing really for me to stay for.”

The two men looked at each other, and shrugged their shoulders in a sort of resigned

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despair, still thinking, I know, of other reasonable arguments which would so easily convince this unreasonable young woman if she could only be got to listen to them, only, of course, she can't. They might just as well have taken a razor to cut through a log.

I walked to the door, and Mr. Lancaster opened it for me, coming out into the hall.

"You are running away, you know," he told me quite gently, "from responsibilities."

"They are yours," I said firmly. "I leave them to you."

"A woman can't take the law into her own hands, and dispense it how she likes," he argued.

"Then it is a great pity she can't!" I said obstinately. "Perhaps soon, when the stupid old laws are not all made by men, she will be able to. Anyhow, I am making a beginning."

He smiled a little at this, and for a moment we stood there in the old-fashioned hall behind the red and green and yellow glazing of the heavy front door.

Neither of us seemed to know what we were

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waiting for. Still we waited. "And what else do you intend to do?" he asked me gravely, at last. "Do you mind telling me?"

I hesitated for a minute. Then out it came, something I had wanted to say for a long time.

"Mr. Lancaster! Let—let me come back to you."

"To me?" he repeated, and I saw the oddest expression cross that fair boyish face. I think he coloured deeply—but I was afraid it was only the reflection of the stained glass. "To me?"

"Yes, to work for you, with the others, at Frith Chambers. I must work, and I liked that work, and Miss Rodney said I was getting on so well——" I spoke urgently, for he was beginning slowly to shake his head.

What? Wouldn't he let me come back? Oh, it was so little that I asked! Just to be under the same roof with him during the hours of the business day! Just to have the chance of seeing him once during that day, even if it were to be given orders in that most aloof voice of his! Just not to lose *everything* of him!

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“Please let me come,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

He looked troubled. “But—! You see there’s no earthly need for you to work, *anywhere!*”

“We have had all this out in there,” I said, with an impatient glance towards the drawing-room door, behind which I expect that beak-nosed lawyer was appraising all the wonderful old china and cameos and silver in the cabinets, and wondering what extraordinary make of human beings they could be who each refused to turn things so obviously valuable into cash for themselves.

“We have argued it all out,” I repeated, “and I have told you that I refuse to live on—on money like that. I have a little of my own,” I said ruefully, remembering how it was that unfortunate four pounds a week that differentiated me from the “three R’s,” gave me the power of making them presents, and finally landed me into this complication of the wrong Mr. Right, of his grandmother’s will, and of the fortune which I could not touch.

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“I will work well, Mr. Lancaster, oh, I promise you! You will never again have to find fault with me, as you did before——”

“Don’t!” muttered Paul Lancaster. Then he said, “Well, and supposing you didn’t come back to Frith Chambers, where would you go?”

“Somewhere else. Not *here*, I mean. I’d go back to the City, I suppose, and tramp about from office to office until I found somebody who thought I’d do.”

“Good Lord, no! I say you mustn’t do that,” he declared, almost violently. “No!—Look here,” he added, slowly, reluctantly, “perhaps you had better come to me—to Frith Chambers. For the present, I mean, of course.”

My heart gave a great thump of relief, but I only said quietly:

“Thank you. Shall I begin again on Monday next?”

“If you feel that it is necessary——”

“I do. Thank you.”

I turned to the front door.

He held it open for me.

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“Are you going back to your Club now, Miss Beaugard?”

I wondered if he thought of seeing me back to that Club. . . .

But I told him no, I had to pay a visit to the nurses' hostel where Nurse Egerton stayed. I had something I wished to say to her.

Then I said good-bye to him and went off. Above all my other feelings was one of happiness because, whatever happened, I was going on working with him still!

Yes; I was “as far gone” as that. . . .

CHAPTER XIII

TWO KINDS OF GIRLS

I REACHED the door of the nurses' hostel. Yes, Nurse Egerton was in, if I would step into the sitting-room.

I stepped into a pleasant-looking room, with pretty furniture and pictures, and plenty of frivolous-looking fashion-papers about on the table, and a piano with tango-music and the score of the latest musical comedy put up on it.

I suppose, that if hospital nurses were not frivolous about everything that has not actually got to do with their work, that work would get the better of them, and make them too depressed, too solemn and important-feeling to go on living like ordinary girls. Ordinary girls can take things light-heartedly or not, as they choose, the hospital nurse has to *learn* to keep light-hearted.

A pretty, matronly-looking woman in blue

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alpaca, with a little frill to her cap, looked in for a minute, and said:

“Oh, you wish to see one of our nurses?”

Then, when I mentioned Miss Egerton's name, replied:

“Yes, she has just come in from reporting herself to one of the doctors.”

A moment after she disappeared; and Nurse Egerton, in her immaculate uniform, and with that flower petal of a little cap just resting on her chestnut hair, stood before me.

“Good-afternoon, Miss Beaugard,” she said, civilly, but without offering to shake hands. She never had shaken hands with me, not all the time that we were living together in the Well Walk house and having our meals *à deux* in that dignified old dining-room.

Again I felt positively timid before this young nurse, who, however capable she may be, cannot be more than five or six years older than I am.

And then I determined that it was silly of me to let her make me feel nervous—even to make me feel as if there must be some good reason why she disliked me so.

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Perhaps it was only a misunderstanding: and, perhaps, when she knew why I had come, she would alter her feelings.

I had made up, some time ago, a little plan about her. I hoped, I thought, that it would touch her; in her place, I know, I should have thought it "nice" of another girl.

So I began, taking my courage in both hands.

"I have been wanting to see you for some time."

"Oh, yes. Won't you sit down?" said Nurse Egerton politely.

And I sat down on a chair beside the table; but she wouldn't sit down. She stood, erect and trim, with the table between us—as if her own manner were not barricade enough.

I went on quickly.

"It's about something of old Mrs. Wright's which I wanted you to have in remembrance of her."

I saw her take a movement backwards, then she said briskly:

"Oh, it is very kind of you, Miss Beaugard, but I couldn't dream of taking anything else!

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My legacy was already much more generous than I could have expected.”

“But a legacy is only money,” I said, deprecatingly, because, really, I am beginning to look upon mere money and what it involves as a fairly definite curse. “I wanted you, who did so much more for her than I ever did, to accept something personal, something which had really belonged to her.”

“Thank you, Miss Beaugard, but that’s really quite unnecessary.”

Her tone was final. But, already, I had put aside the black fur ruffle at my throat. I un-snapped an old-fashioned silver clasp; and I drew it out, the memento that I wanted Mrs. Wright’s nurse to take—the pearl necklace.

They gleamed, those milky, graduated strands! gleamed like a ray of moonlight as I held them out. As gently, as appealingly, as I could, I said to the young woman who was staring from them to me: “Here is what I want you to have. Please——!”

She just stared.

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“Please——!” I said again. “I should so like it, if you would take these.”

“The pearls?” said Nurse Egerton in the most frozen voice I’d heard, even from her. “His grandmother’s pearls?”

“Yes——”

“What must you think of me,” she said, icily, “to offer those—to me?”

I felt chilled all over by her tone.

I faltered. “You won’t *take* them?”

“Did you, for one instant, imagine that I should?”

I looked at her.

Oh, dear . . . was this to be another well-meant offer repulsed? Was I fated to go through life longing to give things to people, and always having my gifts returned with the very reverse of thanks?

It had begun with “Mac” and her stockings at that business-college.

It had gone on with the “three R’s” at Westminster, who couldn’t be induced to accept a few flowers or sweets from me in my own person.

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Later, there was Paul Lancaster, who would not allow me to give back to him what was his own by right.

Now, to crown all, here was Nurse Egerton, with indignant offence beginning to flame through the mask of her cold civility, refusing to touch the jewels that I held out to her.

I faltered, "Why—why won't you?" She opened her mouth as if to say something. Then she gave a hard little laugh instead. Then she asked me, "Have you any idea of their value?"

"I—I don't see what that has to do with it."

"Well, Miss Beaugard, perhaps I do. Let us say, if you like, that I should not care to be under such an obligation to a stranger. And——" she pressed her lips together before she said it—"thank you for thinking of it."

Even then I didn't see what I had done. Oh, if Paul Lancaster always said and did the wrong thing, it was certainly a quality that we shared in common. Surely he had never been as clumsy as I was that afternoon, in my attempt to be friendly and tactful!

I did not even see that I ought to go now,

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and leave the girl whose feelings I had hurt. I was too hurt myself, I suppose.

But that afternoon I was feeling extra miserable and lonely, tired after that exhausting argument with those two men, hungry for affection.

Anyhow, it suddenly came upon me all at once that I couldn't bear this thinly-disguised dislike of another woman any longer, that I must come to some understanding with her—break down this barrier.

I dropped the disputed pearls down on the table between us, and held out my hands to the other girl. I said to her earnestly:

“Why won't you let me be friends with you?”

“Friends? oh. . . . It is very good of you to wish it——”

“Ah, don't speak to me like that,” I begged. “I am *not* happy! I can't bear it if you sneer at me——”

But her face never softened.

“Why must you look at me like that?” I urged. “Why did you take a dislike to me

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the first minute I came into Mrs. Wright's house?"

She raised her eyebrows, but said nothing. I went on: "Why need we be unfriendly? We are both girls. We both seem to be alone in the world. We've lived in the same house, the same sort of life. We've both been fond of the same person, haven't we? so——"

Here I stopped abruptly, for over Nurse Egerton's pretty, shut, contemptuous face there had come a sudden change.

She drew a step back and retorted curtly:

"Then you did know, and you pretended you didn't."

"Pretended I didn't know what?"

"Why I could never be friends with you. You knew all the time," and the hatred in her voice was now quite undisguised.

"If you mean," I said, rather bewildered, "that I guessed you might mind a little that Mrs. Wright should take that unaccountable fancy to me, when it was you who did everything for her, and who were so much longer with her——"

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And then again I stopped, for again the nurse's face had changed, she turned sharply aside, but not before I had caught sight of the wave of scarlet that had swept irresistibly up to the roots of her chestnut hair.

Then I knew. I knew what she meant and had meant all along. My own, newly-realised feeling for Paul Lancaster helped me to this other girl's feelings.

She had cared for the other Paul!

It was not on account of poor old Mrs. Wright that she was jealous of me; no, it was because of the wild, good-for-nothing grandson who had been killed in that railway accident, and who had (as she imagined, to add to the general complication) cared for *me!*

“Oh—” I gasped.

What could I do to comfort this girl who had lost him—though not in the sense that she thought? what could I say to make it right?

“My dear—my dear!” I cried impulsively, compassionately, and I sprang up, came round the table, and would have taken her hands, but

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that she edged away from me as if the touch would hurt her.

“You misunderstood me just now,” I cried, “when I said that we had both cared for the same person. I meant his grandmother, I didn’t mean him. Listen. I will tell you the truth.”

And I blurted it out—the only thing that I thought could be of any comfort to her at all:

“I never cared for him!”

Oh, if I’d known! This was certainly my second wrong thing, of all the well-meaning wrong things I’d ever done, or said! I could not have voiced anything more unfortunately, no, not if I’d tried to hurt and offend, instead of trying to comfort.

Nurse Egerton turned upon me the face of a fury. “You didn’t care?” she cried. “*How dared you not?*”

In the mirror over the mantelpiece of that commonplace, cheerful, pleasant little room I caught sight of our two figures confronting one another in what looked like a regular duel of feelings unmasked.

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The young nurse, her trim figure drawn up defiantly erect in its mauve-and-white uniform, her face passionate, distracted, and furiously resentful; her eyes flashing hatred at the other girl, who, dressed all in black, lifted a small pale, frightened face from its dark furs to look at her appealingly.

Between us, on the table, lay the gleaming strings of pearls which might well stand for the many tears which the pair of us had shed, or must presently shed, for one reason or the other. But meanwhile Nurse Egerton had found her tongue, and was using it.

“You didn’t care? you didn’t think him ‘good enough,’ I suppose, ‘for the love of a good woman’—oh, how I despise ‘good’ people,” she flamed out. “It simply means that they know, feel and understand nothing about people who are *alive!* You were ‘shocked’ at him, I dare say! You thought him a black sheep, a bad lot——”

“No, no,” I began, but she raged on.

“He was spoilt and idolised and brought up to think he could do as he liked; why shouldn’t

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he do it? He was only 'bad' because it was in him to be so much more *something* than all these people who go on being nothing (and good) day in, day out. Nobody asks *them* to be anything else! But Paul——! Women flung themselves at his head. I've seen them look at him——every kind of woman——from the smart Society woman to the shabbiest little waitress-girl——they only asked to be allowed to spoil him, all of them——”

She paused for breath. I thought the only thing would be to get in *my* story, here. I began, falteringly, “But, Nurse Egerton, I didn't——”

“You!” she broke out contemptuously, “I know your kind. The girl who doesn't give a man a gentle *look* until she's certain of getting a bargain. The 'good' girl who metes out every word, hedges herself round with primness and propriety and gets men to think that she, who is just stingy! is worth more than a woman who, because she loves, is *generous*. (I don't understand why men don't see that.) You never loved him——”

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“I know, but——”

“There was more good in one of his failings, though, than in all the virtues of a prig like his cousin!”

“No, stop!” I said, angrily now. I was not going to hear a word against Paul Lancaster. But this girl who'd loved that other Paul did not seem able to hear anything at all.

“I hate you all, you cold-blooded prigs,” she cried quite wildly, her breast heaving under her starchy apron-bib. “I simply look down on these straight and sterling and constant and perfect characters you make so much of. You needn't think it's sour grapes,” she protested, while I could only gasp at the extraordinary change in her now that she had dropped the guarding professional mask. This was the real Nurse Egerton! She declared, laughing disdainfully, “I've been loved by the sterling and the straight! And what was it? Always a worry and a weariness; always like riding on a flat tyre! A 'sterling' lover ought to be kept for the girls like you, Miss Beaugard, sweet innocent girls with no ideas or power of love!

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But he——! My lost darling. . . .” Her voice changed suddenly. “No one understood him as I did. He was beginning to see it. He would soon have known that I was his mate, made for him. Only——” Here a great sob seemed to tear its way out of the other girl’s very heart as she went on in that tone of concentrated jealous rage: “Only then he must have met *you* with your soft voice and your kittenish face and your blue eyes with nothing behind them—and you took him from me!”

“I didn’t——”

“You did! And why? Not because you cared—you admit it! Not because he swept you off your feet and because you felt you had to have him if it meant murdering half a dozen other women! No!” her voice rose angrily. “But because you knew there would be money——”

In my turn I cried, “How dare you?”

She took no notice. “You’ve got it now,” she cried contemptuously. “You’ve got all you wanted, and I wish you joy of it!”

“Stop!” I said again, and this time so an-

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grily that she really did stop and seem about to listen. I meant to give her something to listen to. She should hear the whole truth, now. I felt myself boiling with anger at what she thought of me already—that came first.

“To begin with,” I said, heatedly, “I’d like to tell you that I am not going to touch a penny of that money as long as I live. Because——”

At that moment the door of the nurses’ sitting-room opened again, and in bustled the matron.

“Nurse Egerton,” she said quickly. “Dr. Harvey has just ’phoned up for you. You will have to be off to that case at once, please. Not a minute to lose.”

And the chestnut-haired girl, once more the trained nurse, and nothing else, flew, without another look at either of us, out of the room.

The matron explained to me that the case was away in the country and would mean weeks. I left my address, asking to be told when Nurse Egerton returned.

I had thought of writing to her the story which had been interrupted, but thought better

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of that. What, put that grotesque story down in cold blood, colder pen-and-ink? No, I'd wait until the girl who'd loved Paul Wright returned, and then I would make another appointment to see her.

I was glad that at least she'd heard enough to know I wasn't going to touch a penny of my inherited "fortune."

How little I guessed that after all I was fated to break that resolution and (in spite of all I'd said about the fortune) to *accept* it!

CHAPTER XIV

THE WOLF AT THE DOOR

IT was one of the "three R's," curiously enough, who settled the question.

Yes, I had been back at work for nearly a month—the daily routine of work that seemed, somehow, much gloomier than it used to do in the days when I didn't know who "Mr. Wright" was, and before I guessed how much too fond I was growing of Mr. Lancaster.

That young man had shown no further interest in the girl who'd robbed him and who wished to restore what she had unwillingly robbed. A distant "Good morning" was almost all I ever heard of his voice. The sight of his fair head and big boy's figure against the white panelling, once a day, was the only break in life's monotony.

Then came the break with a vengeance. Catastrophe! in the shape of a big Bank smash,

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the failure of "The Celtic and Borderland."

It was the Bank that had held all my money. My four pounds a week had gone. . . .

Curiously enough, this did not seem to matter to me at all. Not much deprivation to me, to live on my tiny salary now that I had "cut down" my chief luxury: *giving!* A good store of clothes I had,—furs and frocks more than a business-girl needs—before I came to London. . . . During the whole of the evening after I'd heard of the smash I did not realise anything but a sort of dull relief that I was a business-girl like any other, now: without the wretched "private means" that had been the start of all my troubles. Money! I hated the word. . . .

But it was when I came to the office next morning that I realised!

Miss Rodney, the fair-haired "R" who lived with her invalid sister in a small house in Putney, turned up looking as white as a sheet, with black rings round the eyes that evidently had not slept all night.

Presently I learnt why. She had been *really* "hit" by the colossal Bank smash.

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All the money that the Rodneys possessed, barring the slender salary which my Miss Rodney earned at Frith Chambers—all the tiny capital of which the interest paid the doctor's bills for the sister, and the rent, and the extra milk, and the maid that had to be there to attend to one sister while the other was out working—all the necessities of life, everything was lost to them.

The other two "R's" and I were dumb with sympathy; those other two knowing only too well, from their own poor little histories, what it meant to have the wolf at the door.

I didn't "know." But I could guess. . . . And suddenly I resented it bitterly, the loss of my own capital. I could have used it now. They would have accepted help from me; oh, surely!

I resented it more as the week went by that had meant ruin for thousands.

Bit by bit the pitiful tale came from Miss Rodney. The house sold up, the maid dismissed, the poor little invalid sister moved into cheap lodgings—everything sold that had any

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value whatsoever, even to the very beautiful Cosway miniature of some Rodney ancestress.

“We are at our last gasp,” I heard poor Miss Rodney confide one afternoon, in a despairing whisper to Miss Rickards.

She wouldn't have said it to me, whom she imagined in the same sort of trouble, and also fretting my hardest over Mr. Paul Wright. She wouldn't have said it, either, to Miss Royds, who had already tried to help her by taking the invalid sister for week-ends into her own over-crowded home.

“And what we shall do at the end of this month,” she added, “Heaven only knows!”

“You will get more work,” Miss Rickards tried to comfort her. “You're sure to get another post. Mr. Lancaster's very kind, in spite of that stand-offish manner, which doesn't seem to see what has been happening here. He'll give you a good recommendation.”

I looked up. Poor Miss Rodney! I wondered why in the world she should be losing her job just now? I said softly:

“I didn't know you were leaving.”

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They all looked at me.

“My dear, have you forgotten?” said Miss Rickards. “All our jobs at this place come to an end at the end of this month. The indexing and proof-reading will be finished before then, and the place shut up. We shall all have to look out for something else to do.”

“Oh!” I gasped. I felt as if I had been walking down a lane so long that it really had no turning, and as if, quite suddenly, a blank wall had erected itself without a word of warning in front of me.

An end of the work here? This place shut up? Work elsewhere?

All this to me, meant one thing only. Even the brief, starved little bit of comfort of seeing Mr. Lancaster just once a day was going to be taken away from me.

I should never see him again!

I sat there stupefied, staring at the old-fashioned carved mantelpiece with the big crock which had held the flowers that I used to have sent in to me with Mr. Paul Wright's card at-

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tached. I felt as if this were the end of the world.

I must certainly be the most miserable person in that world.

Then my eyes fell upon the misery in little Miss Rodney's face, and I was furious with myself for my selfishness.

For my unhappiness of being in love was not all unhappiness. There were moments when just to have felt it, and to have known what it was like to meet another human being whose smile could have made sunshine all over the world for you, even if it didn't. Yes, there were moments when I felt that this was worth it.

But for Miss Rodney, who had to see the only relative she had left in the world suffering, doing without things, there was no compensation.

If I could have helped——!

If I could have taken my private means, and have made them of some good in the world at last——

And then another thought seemed to open full blown in my mind.

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Not help her? Not with that great legacy going begging? Not with that house? Those many bedrooms? That comfortable furniture? The means to pay for any luxuries an invalid might need?

There she was, weak for want of proper nourishing food, cold, because fuel is so much a scuttle. And there was I, with all my scruples. Would it be wrong to throw them overboard? Wasn't it the only right thing to do?

In less than five minutes I had made up my mind about that. And at the end of the afternoon, I presented myself before Mr. Lancaster in his room, to tell him what I had decided to do.

CHAPTER XV

A WOMAN'S PRIVILEGE

“**I** HAVE changed my mind. I've thought better of refusing to accept Mrs. Wright's legacy. I think—I think I am going to take it after all, Mr. Lancaster.”

There! It was out. What would he say, I wondered, as I stood at his desk feeling more than silly, but mutinous still.

What he said, very quietly,
“I am very glad to hear it.”

As for what he feels—well! How can one tell that of a man who keeps his eyes as expressionless as two grey glass marbles in a slab of a face? (*Darling!* all the same.)

There was no more to be said. But I tumbled with excuses.

“They ought—everything ought to be yours. You needn't think I don't still think so,” I said,

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defensively. "But you won't take the house—you won't touch the money——"

"No," said Mr. Lancaster, and his tone added, "not if you asked me for a hundred years."

Well, of course I had said all that sort of thing myself. And, I can tell you, it was not easy to think of having to "climb down" about the affair, and to eat all my words, and to face the smile of that very hawk-nosed lawyer, the one who had listened to what I had to say that afternoon, when I insisted that if Mr. Lancaster would not take what was his by rights, it could, as far as I was concerned, go begging for ever.

The same hawk-nosed lawyer, with whom I had to go through more of that endless business of document-signing and interviewing, was certainly very trying with his one or two remarks about its being "a lady's privilege to change her mind."

He would have been more trying still, I expect if Mr. Lancaster hadn't very kindly come with me, and been there all the time that I was

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getting through that hateful, that revolting business.

“And now about letting or selling the Hampstead house,” he began.

I said quickly:

“I don’t want to let or sell it; I want to go and live there again at once.”

“You want to live there?” echoed Mr. Paul Lancaster, staring at me across the very legal-looking office as though he thought I had taken leave of my senses. “To live there alone?”

“No, I hope not,” I said. “I shall have a companion. In fact two companions.”

The brilliant plan about the Rodneys, the plan responsible for my whole change of face, I did not say anything about.

Only, I began to arrange for it. I—feeling about fifty-three!—advertised for servants to keep up as it ought to be kept the solidly comfortable old house.

The old cook, who was there when I went to stay with Mrs. Wright, had departed, with her pension, to a cottage in the country. I en-

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gaged a woman who came to me with testimonials from a countess—(oh, how terrified I was of her—not of the countess, but the cook!) with her husband, who looked as if he'd stepped straight out of a drawing in *Punch*, to act as my butler and general factotum.

I, Morwenna Beaugard, with a live butler of my own! It seems too *weird*. Still, there he was. And there were the parlourmaid and the housemaid, and the German boy (yes! think of it, a *German*), for the boots and knives, all calling me “madam” with the greatest (outward) respect, and all going to be paid wages by my—that is, it is Mr. Lancaster's really—but as far as they are concerned, *my* money!

There was plenty of it, too; enough to buy poor Miss Rodney all the comforts and coals she'll need for a million years. Oh, how gorgeous it was to be able to *give*, once more!

At the office I broke it to them in the brusquest way. It was at tea-time. I said to Miss Rodney:

“I'm leaving this place, you know, a week before the month is up.”

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It was, as a matter of fact, agony to me to do this. It meant that I was to cut short, by six whole days, the time I might still be with Mr. Lancaster.

(Still, as he knew that I was moving into the Well Walk house, what excuse could I offer to him that I should continue to work at Frith Chambers—I, a young woman of means again? I wasn't indispensable to him either in my work—or any other capacity.

So he had accepted my notice gravely and politely, without putting any further questions about what I was going to do.)

“And I want you and your sister,” I went on to Miss Rodney, “to come and stay with me at once, for a nice long visit at my home.”

“Home?” said poor Miss Rodney, with a light coming into her eyes that just showed me how uncomfortable poor Miss Grizel, the sister, must have been in lodgings. Then she said, “I thought you lived at the Fortieth Century Club, Baby Beaugard?”

“I used to. But I've come in for a home of my own now, and I've got to have a companion

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or a chaperon or something in it. So—I *do* so wish you'd both come and stay there, while I'm looking round for a suitable person?"

Of course she didn't guess that I never intended to find anybody more "suitable" to living there than herself and sister!

But for a moment I had doubts. . . . Would she accept? Would it be the usual refusal that I'd get?

No. For herself she might have had "too much proper pride" to "inflict" herself or something idiotic of that sort. But the invalid sister settled it. She thanked me, almost with tears, as she accepted the invitation—"for a *short* visit," she said.

She asked where this new home of mine was. I gave her the address.

Little Miss Royds burst out:

"Why, isn't that where we went that afternoon when——"

Then she checked herself, evidently wishing that she had bitten her tongue out rather than risk distressing me by reminding me of that fatal afternoon.

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I dare say she was rather surprised at me, because I said composedly:

“Yes, you remember the house we passed that day when we met that old lady and her nurse? That was Mrs. Wright. That was her house, and she has left it to me.”

Tableau!

CHAPTER XVI

A LADY OF MEANS—AND MOODS

FROM what I saw of her while she was alive, I am sure old Mrs. Wright possessed a strong sense of humour.

So that if she could have looked on from the Spirit-world and watched the girl whom she used to call her "Sunshine," during the next few months of my story, I don't think she could have helped laughing at the spectacle!

I zig-zagged from one mood to another, in those days of being a householder of means!

At one moment it was delight. Pure delight to have Miss Rodney and her gentle invalid sister—who looked just exactly like a stray starved kitten that has been taken into "the warm" and comforted with feeds of cream—safely and happily settled under a roof from which no brokers and bills can dislodge them.

They imagined, the dears, that they were

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there on a visit. They didn't know that their "visit" was my only excuse for being there, and that I intended it to last as long as I did!

But then there was my mood of desperate misery, desperate shame. For I was there under false pretences, even if for a good object, and I did feel it. . . .

Why did I "ever practise to deceive"? Why, a thousand times, did I ever start this tangle by picking up and using that ill-starred card-case and that name I wish I'd never heard? I meant it to stop there! This other has been forced upon me——

Then came a mood of "Well, it was not all regrettable. I cheered up that poor old lady's last days by my fraud!"

Then, "Surely I pay for all I get, by all I suffer! I do *mind* being a base little humbug! I do atone by . . . never seeing the only man I could ever care for!"

Further, there was an alarming mood of "*How will this end?* For it can't last. These things never do! Murder will out. And so will robbery, and so will taking a man's name

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in vain! Somehow, somehow I shall be found out. I was too much of a coward to own up about that 'Mr. Wright' story before. And now I simply can't. But it may come out in spite of me. And then WHAT shall I do?"

Again I sometimes thought of nothing but my terror of the Rawlinsons, to whom I had to give orders, realising all the time that they looked upon me just as a rather tiresome baby-lunatic!

At other times, reaction set in, and I was swayed by a mood of gayest bravado.

What did anything matter! Stupid people! Stodgy old house! I skipped about it humming snatches of musical comedy tunes—(just fancy, there were no revues, even in those days, as yet!) I moved the furniture about and changed the look of all the rooms; and once, yes! I remember the afternoon when I flew to answer the bell myself, nearly falling over Franz, my Prussian menial, in the hall.

(If that young man took up as much room in a trench as he did in a room, I can imagine the trial he must have been later on!)

I opened the door to an enormous assortment

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of large hat-boxes, which I had just ordered up on approval from Cherisette's in Bond Street. Then back I dashed, with two fashionable and feathery creations on my head and one in each hand, into the drawing-room, to show them off to Miss Grizel Rodney, who was lying peacefully on the big chintz couch.

“What d'you think of this tango-coloured turban with the black osprey?” I demanded, twirling it round my finger. “Price eight guineas only! Or do you prefer this impertinent looking little three-cornered velvet affair with the cockade? It looks rather like a highwayman's hat. So I'd better buy it. Don't you think so? Because”—here I broke into nervous uncontrolled giggling—“I sometimes feel such a lot of sympathy with—with highwaymen, and robbers!”

“I think you are a foolish child to let yourself go into these mad high spirits,” said gentle Miss Grizel, quite anxiously. “You are what Scots people call ‘fey.’ Take care this gaiety doesn't give way to the very opposite of merri-

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ment presently, Baby Beaugard! As they say to children, 'it'll end in a cry'!"

"Pooh! Why should it? I don't believe in allowing oneself to be anything but gay. And I've no reason to be anything else," I told her.

"Here I am," I went on, "able to do just whatever I like—to order hats by the dozen, to have dear, nice, kind people like you to stay with me in my own—my very own—house! To go where I like, say what I like, know whom I choose, to take no notice of any one else—not of any one! You know I've got a brother who would try and put a stop to that sort of thing if he were here. Only he's in Ceylon, and I take pretty good care that he doesn't have any very clear idea of what his only sister really does now she's in London on her own!"

I paused for breath, and went on:

"Then there's another young man who might try and dictate to me about what I ought and ought not to do. He did try once. But it wasn't any good. I don't believe in people acting as brothers to one when they're no relation at all, really. Do you?"

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“Perhaps,” suggested Miss Grizel Rodney, hesitatingly, “this young man did it because— because he cared more than a brother.”

“Not he! Oh, not he! He only interfered for love of interfering, and because he was a prig and a prude and a layer-down of the law,” I declared, feeling a sort of perverse relief in abusing Mr. Paul Lancaster, even though she didn’t know I was talking about him.

“However, I don’t see him now,” I said, “and I never shall again. I’m my own mistress nowadays, and mistress of a house without even having to bother to get married for it! Isn’t that fortunate? Don’t you think I’m a very lucky girl? I don’t believe you do, entirely. But I am—I am!” I said, and gave gentle Miss Grizel a big hug to emphasise my words.

Then I tossed the hats on to the top of the grand piano, and went and sat down again on the big white bearskin rug in front of that blazing fire.

“One must amuse oneself,” I rattled on. “By and by one will be too old and embittered—like poor old Mrs. Wright——”

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“My dear—”

“And then one will be sorry,” I pursued, drumming with my high heels against the rug, “that one didn’t get the very utmost out of one’s youth while it lasted!”

“My dear child——”

“So I’m going to! D’you know, a plan about that has just occurred to me!” I cried. “And if you promise not to shake your head over me, and call me ‘fey’ any more, I’ll tell you what it is!”

And I did.

Presently the other Miss Rodney came home from her new job in the newspaper office which she goes to now that Frith Chambers is all closed up, and found me sitting on the end of her sister’s couch, very busy with a pencil and a large slip of paper.

“What have you there?” she asked, smiling.

I said pompously, “A list of names.”

“Names of whom?”

“Of all the guests to the dinner-party,” I told her, “to be given on Valentine’s day.”

“Dinner-party?” she repeated, opening her

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blue eyes. "Whose party, my dear, and where?"

"Here, of course!" I laughed gaily. "And mine! I'm having my house-warming, I beg to announce, next week. Oh, it is going to be such fun! After all these grey days, hurrah for a dash of rose-colour! You'll just see what a real, regular lark it's going to be!"

Why did nothing warn me how that "lark" would turn out?

CHAPTER XVII

THE HOUSE-WARMING

“**T**HAT’S what’s the matter with this house,” I told myself. “It wants parties. It wants people, new people to drive away the unhappy memories of the old; lots of people!”

But for my first dinner I thought I’d only seat ten—five ladies and five men.

For the girls there were, of course, my colleagues, the “three R’s,” myself, and Miss Grizel Rodney—who was looking much prettier, and much less like an invalid since she’d been taken in and cherished by—yes, I may as well say it—a houserobber!

For the men—to start with, there was Miss Rickards’ fiancé, the music-master, who’d got a job in London now, instead of Dublin.

Then there were those brothers of Miss

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Royds's, the two boys she was always talking about. They seemed to be very lively—that was good! (“Frank sings comic songs, and Charlie does imitations.”) So there were our entertainers. That was three.

Four? Well, it seemed rather silly to ask him after I came to London to avoid him! But what about Great-uncle Joseph's idea of “a Mr. Right” for me—what about Georgie Settle? I heard he'd come down from Oxford, and that he was in London at the Bar. . . .

I always detested him, but I knew he'd never cease to admire me—and what equals an obvious admirer (*not* a “Mr. Wright!”) for giving a girl moral support?

And a hostess of twenty-two (looking seventeen!) giving a dinner-party in a “poached” house, and using exquisite old silver and fairy-like cut-glass and a priceless Wedgwood service all of which *ought* to belong to the man she'd poached the house from—well, all I can tell you is she needed all the moral support she could raise!

But now the fifth man!

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“I don’t know anybody else in London,” I said, looking at the Rodneys with my pencil poised above the list in my hand. “We must have some other man, to make it even. Who shall it be?”

I saw those two girls exchange quick glances. I saw my Miss Rodney raise her eyebrows at the other one, as much as to say: “Shall I suggest it?”

Miss Grizel shook her head in an easily-recognised “Better not.” Then my Miss Rodney said demurely, “I don’t know at all, dear—can’t think of any one.”

“Yes, you can—you do!” I said. “I saw you were both thinking of somebody then. Who was it?”

They both smiled, caught out. I saw the youngest Miss Rodney flush a little in the warm light of the fire, which I always kept blazing half-way up the wide chimney—another extravagance to which I have no earthly right.

“Come,” I said, “who have you been discussing?”

My Miss Rodney said: “Well, if you must

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know, we think you might ask Mr. Paul Lancaster.”

I turned away.

I said: “He wouldn’t come.”

“Wouldn’t he!” said Miss Rodney, in a tone that delighted me again; but it was ridiculous to be delighted—I knew that.

I said, more obstinately, “I’m sure he wouldn’t come. Anyhow, I am not going to ask him.”

I didn’t. I wrote a cool little note to Georgie Settle (who had accepted my invitation by ecstatic telegram) to ask him if he could bring a man.

He wired: “*Collins was at Magdalen with me; overjoyed to come to your dinner.*”

So, I thought, there was our party complete without dragging in the man who ought to be the master of the house.

And for this one evening I meant to forget all about him. I would forget everything except that I was young and pretty and rich enough to do what I liked—and that what I

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liked was to give ten young people a thoroughly good time.

The dinner part of it I decided to leave to the Rawlinsons, telling them that everything had better be exactly as the Countess used to have it. At times, by the way, I had found Her Ladyship a great trial to live up to. But she was useful, this time, "though I must say," I told Miss Grizel, "I am a little surprised at the enormous quantities of champagne and old Scotch whisky that she seems always to have had!"

On the other hand, I didn't think that there were nearly enough sweets, or crystallised violets, or ice-puddings, so I revised that part, thereby, I know, dropping another peg in the estimation of the Countess's ex-butler and his wife. Never mind!

As for flowers, the house was soon a perfect bower of them—growing azaleas in pots, masses of hothouse roses, and huge bowls full of narcissi and lilies of the valley. The whole place was transformed, as if it were a fairy-tale, and

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the two younger servants, the housemaid and parlourmaid, flew about it, all smiles.

Even Franz, the German boots and knives boy, with whom I always had fearful trouble because he quarrelled about international politics with everybody else in the house—even he seemed to be in less Prussian mood. He even took it as a joke when the parlourmaid, who was only eighteen, even if she did stand five feet eleven, tore down a large coloured lithograph of the Kaiser which he had pinned up over the scullery sink, and stamped upon it.

Yes, a sort of ball-room atmosphere of delighted anticipation permeated the whole house—on that *fatal* day!

And our gowns? I insisted on buying frocks for every one of the “three R’s.” I have told them that unless they allow this, all is over between us—“not only that, but that I shall be very miserable, and I know they don’t want to make me any more miserable than I am now. . . .”

It was hardly fair to use this as a weapon, for, of course, they all immediately thought of

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“poor young Mr. Wright,” and put my grief down to his account, and they daren’t refuse!

So they all had lovely frocks, and the invalid Miss Rodney a green-grey teagown which, as they all said, was enough to make anybody want to be not very strong, and be able to wear it.

As for me, what should I wear? I decided to leave off my black, my “fall-of-soot-on-a-fall-of-snow” effect. I can wear black when I’m old Mrs. Wright’s age. I decided to burst forth into colours, and, for my gay evening, to choose a gay dress.

Oh, it was a daring little creation, I thought! Yellow as sunshine; crinkly and corollaed as an Iceland poppy, and cut low off my shoulders so that at first I thought I must sew in a chiffon ruche or something.

Then I thought I wouldn’t! No! The more daring—the better, to fit my mood!

Just like Georgie Settle, I thought, to let me down at the last minute as he did.

“Greatly regret, Mr. Collins cannot come.”

This was the wire I got this evening at almost the eleventh hour. I was in my kimono

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in Miss Rodney's enormous bedroom—the room, by the way, that used to belong to Mrs. Wright's pretty, chestnut-haired Nurse Egerton—doing Miss Rodney's hair a new way for the evening, when it arrived.

“There!” I said, “isn't this annoying? That makes our party uneven again, and I do hate having one girl too many; it instantly makes what men there are think such a lot more of themselves, which isn't necessary, goodness knows, and yet there's nobody else I can ask on the spur of the moment, now can I?”

“Yes!” said both the Miss Rodneys together, and I knew what they meant. Well, it's they who have forced me into it, I didn't really mean to do it.

The maid at the door said demurely, “The boy's waiting, miss; is there any answer for him?”

“No, none,” I said, but in the same breath I added: “Yes, he can take a wire for me.”

I dashed to the writing-table in the corner of Miss Rodney's bedroom. I took out a telegraph-form and scribbled on it as if for dear

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life. It was to ask Mr. Lancaster to come and dine with us, if possible, at eight o'clock.

At ten minutes to eight that evening we were all assembled in the big, flower-filled drawing-room: fair Miss Rodney in dull Dresden blue; dark, vivacious little Miss Royds in tomato-red; gentle Miss Rickards in a silvery-grey that matched those threads in her hair, but at the same time brought out the pink flush of happiness in her cheeks, and made her look younger than ever.

Peeps at myself in the glass showed me that, though I say it as shouldn't, I had never looked better. The frock was full or skimpy in exactly the right places—that is, right for the fashion of *that* year! So as not to look too young, I had wound an orange velvet fillet about my curls, clasping it with a lemon-yellow aigrette that stood impudently upright.

Miss Rickards didn't want me to wear it; she said it gave me the appearance of a cherub trying to be a little devil. I didn't care, I just wanted to look wicked for once, and I was glad of the new, dare-devil light which shone, for the

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first time I had ever seen it there, out of my eyes, and if my own eyes in the glass hadn't shown me that I really was delightful to look at, the eyes of all the four young men, my guests, would have told me over again—I couldn't help seeing that!

I couldn't help wishing, just to pay him out, that the other, the fifth young man I had invited, would turn up soon, and would see that I—that he—well, anyhow, that he would see.

But it was five minutes to eight, and our last guest hadn't come. Terribly short notice, of course; perhaps he hadn't even got my wire.

Well, everybody else would enjoy themselves, they were beginning already, in fact! The drawing-room was a buzz of talk and laughter. There had been no ice to break, and I wondered how much more festive it would get after the champagne, the songs, and the dancing!

I hadn't allowed the drawing-room curtains of riotous parrot chintz to be drawn; I said I liked the glimpse of the quiet blue night beyond the Heath. . . .

But ah, I could not keep away from the win-

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dow, from stealing glances out, towards the lamp in front of the entrance.

Would he come?

Yes? No? . . . No; probably no . . .

I had just given up all hope, when, suddenly, yes! There he was. The lamplight shone full on the outline of a head and shoulders that I knew. I couldn't see his face under his opera-hat. Well, I didn't need to, I should have recognised anywhere that characteristic breadth, that tall figure and striding walk.

He'd come! I turned from the window, all a-flutter, hoping that Mr. Lancaster hadn't seen me looking out! After all, though, why should I mind if he had? I was his hostess. Any hostess has a right to be anxious about the coming of the last guest if she doesn't want her well-thought-out dinner to be spoiled.

So I turned back to the room, clapping my hands. I said, in a gay, artificial voice, which I had never heard before: "We shall be able to go in directly, our last guest has arrived. Mr. Paul Lancaster is coming up now." At the same moment there came his ring at the bell.

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I went on chatting gaily about private theatricals to Charlie Royds.

It seemed an hour before anything else happened! Remember, I had not seen him for weary weeks. Now, in these bewildering circumstances, I was to see him. I was his hostess, of all things in the world! Paul Lancaster my guest!

Feverishly I wondered again if he would find me looking pretty. . . . I believe I held my breath until the drawing-room door opened.

It opened.

The august form of Rawlinson appeared just inside. And that ex-butler of a countess, with his most "high society" manner and his most crystal-clear enunciation, proclaimed in tones that seemed to ring through the room a name that made every other sound in the place stop dead, and brought me and eight other people springing to our feet aghast as we heard the announcement:

“MIS-TER—PAUL—WRIGHT!”

For a second I felt just as one feels in a dream that one knows is a dream.

THE HOUSE-WARMING

I felt myself saying, "I shall wake up presently, and find out that this can't be. It can't! Of course, Mr. Wright is dead!"

Another second, and I was staring at the young man in evening dress who strode into the drawing-room with one quick, challenging glance from one to another of my assembled dinner-party.

A tall, young man, broad-shouldered, like "my" Mr. Lancaster, and, like him, fair; just a little like him, too, in the face which, from one hasty glance, I saw to be clean-cut and boyish.

But this was not he. This was not anybody but the original of a photograph which I had once seen—the rightful owner of the house, Mrs. Wright's grandson!

Discovery was bound to come . . . hadn't I dreaded it? It had come in the shape of my tenth guest.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TENTH GUEST

THE rosy brightness of the drawing-room seemed to grow darker round me.

I heard a man's voice—it was one of the Royds boys—calling:

“Look out, sir! You've frightened Miss Beaugard! She thinks you're a ghost! She's going to faint!”

Then came an arm slipped gently round me—it was Miss Rickards'—and a handful of cold water was dashed in my face, that and a scent of violets were all of which I was conscious for a minute or two.

I afterwards found that Miss Royds had snatched a great bouquet of Russian violets out of a crystal bowl on the table near me, and had flung the water from them into my face.

I sat up, gasping, drops of water trickling down from my curls into my eyes.

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I glanced round. Everybody was standing up, looking as agitated as if they had just escaped from a house which had been on fire. I heard myself cry desperately:

“What has happened?”

And then a strange man's voice, low-toned, pleasant, yet with mockery in its accent, answered:

“What has happened? As always, the unexpected. No, I am not a ghost. A ghost has to have been killed first, hasn't he? and, you see, I was not killed in that railway accident, after all. I have come back.”

Forgetting all the others I looked hard into the face of this stranger, who returned the stare.

I waited for a breathless second . . . everybody else in the room seemed to melt away from about us. I was sitting on one of the low chairs. Then the young man came close up to me. He took both my hands firmly into his, and bent down as if to whisper some tenderest greeting.

But what he said, softly and hurriedly, was, “I've heard about it from the lawyers, you know. Well?” his tone was a mixture of

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amusement, surprise, and a kind of insolence. "What about it? Do we have it out now, you and I, or afterwards?"

"Afterwards," I faltered, gathering my scattered senses together, with a glance at my party, all clustered together at the further end of the big room. They were thrilled, I know, to imagine that the tragedy of a young girl's life was to end happily, as they thought! after all.

I, the intruder, the humbug and fraud who was going to be unmasked, could not endure to think it must be before all these . . . I faltered, "Afterwards, please!"

He nodded. Then:

"Dinner is served!" boomed the august voice of the imperturbable Rawlinson at the door.

Miss Rickards stole up to me then, with a smile and a clasp of the hand and a whisper about "thinking they had better be getting on."

Her fiancé, looking over her shoulder, seemed almost as if he were going just to bow a "good night" and go. And then there were murmurs from the Roydses about "quite understanding,"

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and being "so frightfully bucked, don't you know!" but "really thinking they wouldn't stay——"

"Stay? But, of course you must!" broke in the unfamiliar voice of the unexpected guest—or host. "We can't have the party broken up like this! We won't hear of it! Time enough for—er—explanations afterwards, isn't there? The dinner party must go on,"—turning to me—"mustn't it?"

He added, almost inaudibly, "You'll have to play up to me——"

Feeling almost grateful, I "played up" as well as the spur of this moment allowed me.

"Of course they'll stay. They can't *not* stay!" I cried, and managed to laugh. "Come along! You all know who you've got to take in, I think?" this to Georgie Settle and the other men. Then holding my head high under its yellow aigrette, I turned to this miraculously-re-turned Mr. Wright.

"You've come to take the place of your own cousin, that other Paul, who's failed me." (I

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added a soft "*Thank Heaven!*" to myself.)
"So will you take me in?"

"With pride!" said the tenth guest, while mockery danced in his blue eyes.

And we all went down.

Looking back, I can scarcely remember what really happened at that nightmare of a party.

Courses came and went, dishes were handed to me by the imperturbable Rawlinson, of which I ate mouthfuls, tasting nothing.

There was a buzzing and chattering round me of the other guests—much talk of "congratulations"—much laughter, in which the man at my side seemed to be joining satirically—a popping of champagne-corks.

I know I drank champagne; I had heard that it was good for moments of stress! And presently I was laughing too, and bandying chaff with Georgie Settle on my other side.

He had become sentimental, and was accusing me, *sotto voce*, of having most cruelly jilted him.

"'Jilted' you? What a fearful fib!" I heard myself crying quite shrilly. "How can there be

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any 'jilting' where there has never been anything in the shape of a love affair?"

"Ah, Miss Morwenna, that's because no lady admits that any affair has been a love affair," broke in the rather excited voice of one of Miss Royds' brothers, "until the 'one and only' happens."

"Yes," broke in the voice of the other Royds. "You mean 'until Mr. Right comes along,' as that white-whiskered old saying has it!"

Then my companion's voice: "Does that mean Wright with a W, or Right with an R?"

Then a confused murmur of voices.

"In this case it's the same thing!"

"Yes, in this most fortunate case!"

"Like the end of a novel!"

"Like a fairy-tale, a tale of adventure."

"Like Eugene Aram, or—what's that other chap?—Rip Van Winkle come to life!"

"Yes, and to find a party and everything in honour of it! Isn't it wonderful?"

"Wonderful, indeed!" the man at my side broke in with his malicious gaiety. "I think

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we all ought to drink a toast to that! Fill up your glasses!"

Again Rawlinson with a snowy table napkin draped about the big gold-topped bottle, came and filled the priceless tall champagne-glasses, scarcely to be bought nowadays, with the bubbling liquid gold.

"You give the toast, Morwenna." ("Is that your name?") Mr. Wright added hurriedly into my ear. "My felicitations; you've chosen a pretty one!") "You give the toast."

And, desperate with bravado, I saw, reflected in the big sheet of looking-glass that formed the base of the table-centre, a positive Bacchante of a girl, flushed rose-pink, with brilliant eyes and an excited smile and tossed brown curls glittering with drops, and a daring yellow gown that fell away far too low from her neck and shoulders, and a slender white arm that held aloft a champagne glass, while a small but shrilly laughing voice cried aloud:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to drink to Mr. Wright! Here's to my Mr. Wright with a W! And Mr. Right with an R for every other

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girl present! May he very soon come along for them—‘For he’s a jolly good Fellow!’ ” I recklessly started the song.

The Royds boys took it up, and it rang through the room, up to the old corniced ceiling, making the drooping lustres on the chandelier quiver and tinkle to the sound—“Which nobody can deny! which nobody can deny——”

I wondered, in the midst of it all, what Rawlinson’s late mistress would have thought of the party—what Rawlinson thought. . . .

But the one thing at the back of my mind was the “afterwards” when I was to have it all out with the man who had been decent enough, after all, to let me mark time up to then.

They all enjoyed themselves, I expect, putting down my wild, unnatural excitement, my *pathetic* rowdiness, to the fact that I was “overjoyed.” (*Heavens!*)

And they all, those others, seemed in league to cut short the smoking, the talking, the singing—to bring me nearer to the end of the party, and to that dreaded “afterwards.”

Well, it came. . . .

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They all went . . . even Miss Rodney and her sister slipped off to their room without saying "Good night." They thought it only kind to leave me the drawing-room to myself at the first possible moment—with him.

How big he looked, against the disorder of the drawing-room, with cushions awry, and coffee-cups all over the place, and the atmosphere still vibrant with the talk and laughter of the party who had stood between me and what he had to say to me!

Well, it was face to face now. I turned and met his eyes, feeling very small, very helpless, and very much at bay. For a moment he looked down on me without speaking.

Then he said slowly, "You funny little adventuress!"

I stiffened all over myself. It helped me not to be frightened, being so angry. I echoed, "Adventuress . . ." Then I said hotly, "Don't dare to say such a thing to me!"

"Why not?" asked the young man, almost amusedly. "I know what you've done, you know. Bamboozled my grandmother into

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leaving you her house and money because she thought I was attached to you. I! To a girl I'd never seen. A pretty good joke that. Worth coming back from the dead for. Worth leaving off being a 'Wilful-Missing.' ”

Not knowing what to say, I blurted out, “What is a ‘wilful-missing’?”

The young man's voice hardened as he said, “Somebody who thinks he's better dead, and ‘goes dead,’ to all intents and purposes, for the sake of other people. I was in British Columbia when I heard the news of my grandmother's death . . . even wilful missings can be badly in need of money, you know. So I came over—to what?”

I looked at him, helplessly.

“You can judge of my surprise,” said Mr. Wright quickly, “when, on presenting myself at my lawyer's office and having got over his surprise and delight, etc., at finding that the returned prodigal hadn't been done for after all in the railway smash which should have accounted for him—I found that the money and the house and everything had to be claimed, not

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from my cousin, but from an utter stranger—a young woman to whom my grandmother in her last illness seemed to have taken a very strong liking. Nothing extraordinary in that, you will say.”

I couldn't say anything.

“You will admit that the extraordinary part was the *reason* my grandmother had given to the lawyer—apparently also to my cousin—for singling you out as her heiress!”

“Yes,” I murmured.

“Can you explain yourself at all?” demanded Mr. Wright.

Well, then I tried. . . . In faltering, ill-expressed feverish little sentences it came out at last, the wild and silly story I ought to have told so long ago. The story I have written here.

He listened, sometimes cynical, sometimes half-amused. . . . He put questions to me now and again, about my own people, my life in the country before I came to work in town. Once he said, “They manage these things better in the East! No woman ought to have money of

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her own, and young girls ought to be kept behind a Purdah!"

He asked, "Then you're the girl my precious cousin told me to leave alone, the only time I came to his office?"

"Yes," I said, remembering that day at Frith Chambers. "I know your voice now. You told him that you'd do as you chose. I overheard. But, since you'd never seen me, how did you know he meant me?"

"I didn't," said the young man who had been cross-examining me. His voice was gloomier as he said, "I thought he had the neck to be speaking of somebody else. . . ."

I remembered then that he had told his grandmother there was one girl he'd cared for. Now, from his manner, I imagined her dead.

He was looking at me, hard.

"And that's your story, is it?" he began again. "And you object to being called an adventuress? I find you in my grandmother's house, with a party of cheery young friends, obviously rejoicing in your good fortune—champagne, hot-house flowers, and heaven

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knows what not! I congratulate you on the dinner, Miss Morwenna; it was a very good one. All the same, don't you think the whole set-out rather justified me in what I have just said? What did it look like?" Then, more brutally: "And what did you look like?"

He pointed at one of the big mirrors, and I turned to see myself full-length in that low-cut, daring frock, that aigrette crowning my curls at a rakish angle, which Miss Rickards had said made me look wicked.

And the face below the aigrette was no longer the face of a girl, it seemed to me! I felt years older, and I looked it. It was the face of a very miserable young woman, found out in the midst of some unspeakable folly.

And I dropped my head and turned away from the mirror with burning cheeks. As I did so I heard him say, almost curiously:

"She can still blush! A very pretty colour too!"

At that I turned on him again.

"Don't speak to me like that!" I cried. "You are a gentleman by birth—that I know, because

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I knew your grandmother, and I know your cousin; and he knows that my people at least were the same. You can turn me out of the house—in fact, I am going; I'll go to-night—but you must not speak to me as you have just been speaking——”

And I stopped, for I knew that in another moment I should break down and disgrace myself.

“Women’s tears don’t make any difference to me,” remarked Mr. Paul Wright, but in rather an altered voice. The insolence was gone from it, though the words remained insolent. “I’ve seen too many of ’em.”

I held my head high.

“I wasn’t thinking of crying,” I said. “Do you mind telling me what you are going to do about this thing?”

I clenched my hands to stop them from trembling; for I had begun to see a perfectly awful picture of the future, with Uncle Joseph’s grey hairs brought down in shame to the grave, and my brother Jim cabled for from Ceylon to appear in court and see his only sister in the

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dock as a common felon! Steadying my voice, I asked him:

“Do you intend to prosecute?”

Then, while he still stared at me, came what seemed like five minutes' deathly silence.

Then he said, “No. The lawyers have had quite enough money out of us as it is.”

I breathed deeply.

He said, “As for what else I shall do——”

Here Rawlinson appeared at the door, evidently coming to see whether it was not time to put out all the lights, and close up for the night. He withdrew with an apology, but I wondered whether he were thinking that “Her Ladyship” would not have stayed up after the rest of a dinner-party had departed to go on talking and talking to the last guest.

But Mr. Paul Wright seemed to think there was something in the butler's point of view, for he took his elbow off the mantelpiece, straightened himself, and said:

“Well, I suppose I'd better go. I shall come again, of course, and I shall expect to find you here. So please don't talk about leaving the

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house to-night in those ridiculous satin slippers, because it can't be done. Good night."

He turned to the door.

Then he said, in a voice that made me suddenly remember that this young man was supposed to be very attractive to women, "I say, I did not really think you were an adventuress. No real born adventuress would have let her butler choose the champagne. . . . Au revoir!"

He went, leaving me to a sleepless night.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FIANCES

WHO would have dreamed that, the next time I saw that young man, I should become engaged to him?

Yes! Really engaged. . . .

The time between his leaving me and that next call was one of agony. It held just feverish futile planning of what I was to do next for myself and for the Rodneys. For myself—well, I should have to work, of course. But the Rodneys! My Miss Rodney had got a fairly good post in a newspaper office now, but her sister . . . I wondered if I could appeal to Mr. Wright for poor Miss Grizel.

I did not know how I should face it all, I did not know!

Of course the Rodneys would hear all about my fraud. So would Paul Lancaster. That was the worst of all!

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From him I received a short note the day after my party.

“DEAR MISS BEAUGARD,—It was very kind of you to invite me to your party last night. Unfortunately I had gone out for the evening when your telegram arrived, and I did not receive it till I came home, when it was too late to let you know.

“With regrets, believe me,

“Yours very truly,

“PAUL LANCASTER.”

I did not know whether to feel relieved or sorry that he had not been there. In one way I had escaped a horror. On the other hand, it would have meant that the worst was over, and that he knew this tangled, crooked tale of my deceits and humbug, and it would not be still to face.

It hung over me—Oh, I wish I could explain to you how it loomed!

Yes, on the morning after the party, I felt I wished I could lie back again against the big

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frilly pillow, go to sleep and never wake up to face the complications and the hideous difficulties that were before me.

The Rodneys. . . .

Fresh situation for myself. . . .

Paul Lancaster. . . .

Poor Miss Grizel Rodney, who was so comfortable here, turned out. . . .

I had brought it upon myself!

I saw nobody until the afternoon, when Paul Wright came again.

Then I went down to him in the morning-room, a little room looking over the garden at the back. I wore my usual black; he was in a grey suit with a mourning-band. Handsome, I suppose they would call him, but I did not find him sufficiently like his cousin to be *really* handsome. He shook hands as if it were an ordinary call. Then we sat down and he asked me a few more questions about my time here with his grandmother.

Then I made what excuses I could find for myself.

“They told me,” I defended myself, “that if

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I crossed her in anything it was dangerous, that I was to agree with everything she said, that it was a question of whether her last few days were happy or miserable, according to whether I fell in with everything she wanted me to."

"Who told you all this?"

"The doctor and your cousin, Mr. Lancaster, and her nurse."

"Meaning Nurse Egerton?" he said.

And as I answered him, "Yes," I saw again the pretty face flushed with anger under the chestnut hair. How *she* had loved him! . . . She, too, would have to hear the story. Well! I had meant to tell her. I would write to her at the Hostel, later.

I wondered if he would say anything more about her? . . . No. . . .

He said only, "Well, I suppose I owe it to you now to tell you what I made up my mind to do, yesterday, with regard to you."

"Yes, yes!" I said.

"At first," he said slowly, "when I left you I intended to offer you a pension out of my

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grandmother's money in consideration of your having been some pleasure to her in the last days of her life. Heaven knows I never was. Never! Yes, to offer you this pension on condition that no more was said about the whole affair. You could give any explanation you liked to your friends, or to anybody who knew of the breaking off with me."

I gasped at this. Did he really mean that he was letting me off? But this is——

"It's frightfully generous of you!" I said. "Can you really mean it? To have nothing more said, I mean? For, of course, I am not going to take any more of the money. If you must give it away give it to the Rodneys. I won't have it."

"I am not offering it any more now," he said quietly. "There's another alternative which will still mean that nobody need know of your——call it prevarication——and it will mean even less talk about us. Can't you guess what it is?"

"No," I said, staring at him, this extraordinary young man, who was like, yet so unlike,

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my Mr. Lancaster—who could break his grandmother's heart with his bad ways, and who yet could have such power to win a woman's love as had been shown by the frantic jealousy and grief of Nurse Egerton; who turned up without a word of warning or explanation, when everybody imagined him six months dead—who could be so stingingly insolent, and then turn round and behave with such unheard-of generosity.

“What else is there? What do you wish me to do?”

“This,” he said quietly. “I suppose all your friends, and my cousin, and any other people who knew you and the story of this house, imagine that you were the girl I wished to marry?”

“I suppose so,” I said, flushing again with shame. “I mean—yes, they do think it.”

“Well,” he said, still quietly and steadily, “let 'em go on thinking it. There are several reasons, but let one suffice for you—that I consider I have knocked about too long as”—he gave a bitter little laugh—“an uncared-for

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bachelor. I should be all the better for persuading a 'nice girl,' even if she were as ignorant of the ways of the world as you are, you poor little amateur in fraud, to take me in hand. That's what I have come to ask you this afternoon. Will you, Miss Beaugard, go on being mistress of this house? I mean, will you marry me?"

I wondered if he were mad. . . .

Presently I heard my own voice, very small and faltering, saying the next thing that occurred to me, namely:

"Mr. Wright, are you in fun?"

"Fun? No; I never asked a woman to marry me before, so you ought to consider it a bit of a compliment," he said, with a funny little twisted, rueful smile. "I have given a night's hard thinking to the question, and it seems to me it is not a bad idea. As I said, it will put a stop to a lot of talk there might be; and here are we, two people pretty much alone in the world—you are rather alone, too, aren't you?" he broke off.

"Yes—oh, yes!" I said forlornly.

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“And we are also people who won’t expect too much of each other,” he said, while I looked at his face, boyish, wilful, but . . . what change had steadied it, making it older and more reliable than the face of his portrait?

“There are things about me,” he went on, “into which I shouldn’t wish my wife to look too closely.”

I supposed he meant his disappearing for six months into the wilds, leaving a torn and flame-singed coat, with a card-case! in a railway smash to account falsely for his whereabouts.

“You would leave me alone about those?”

“Yes—oh, yes!” I said bewildered. “But as for marrying you—oh, it’s impossible!”

“Why?” he asked, smiling at me as if I’d been a child who’d asked him the time. “Because you’ve heard that I’ve not a particularly shining reputation? I don’t think you need be afraid of that now. Remember the comforting old proverb about a reformed rake making the best husband. I think you’d find me a tolerable one. I shouldn’t exact much. And as for the odd reason that made you settle down

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here by fraud—those Rodney friends of yours—you could do what you liked for them once you were married to me.”

“So very kind of you,” I stammered, “but really——”

“You should have plenty of freedom,” he assured me, “plenty of pocket-money and frocks—everything a girl wants.”

Everything! I smiled very bitterly.

What an idea he had of “everything” that constitutes a girl’s happiness!

Perhaps he noticed the change in my face, for he added quickly:

“Is there anybody else? I mean anybody else you might have been likely to marry instead?”

“No,” I said, drearily. For by now I had persuaded myself that if the other Paul had wanted me, he would have said so.

Then something struck me.

I said: “What I want to ask you is—is there no other woman to whom you ought to be saying this?”

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“Another woman? Are you thinking of anybody special?”

His steady gaze—a little like his cousin’s at that moment—and his tone showed me he knew that I was thinking of somebody.

“Who is it?” he asked, authoritatively.

I said it, tentatively enough.

“Nurse Egerton!”

His reply to that seemed to slam a door in my face. It was so curt, so surprising.

He said, “Nurse Egerton is married!”

“Married!” I gasped. That chestnut-haired passionate girl, whose secret love-tragedy she had angrily displayed to me after she had left this house where we’d lived for weeks together! I knowing nothing of her, or she of me!

And I was a fraud, and she—

“A married woman!”

“Yes,” he said shortly. “That’s all we need say about her. If you please, her name will not be mentioned between us again.”

So this is one of the things into which he does not wish his wife to look very closely! Strange! What hidden story was there?

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“And your answer?” he added. “What is it?”

“What can it be, Mr. Wright? It must be ‘No.’ Don’t you understand that a girl can’t marry some one whom she has scarcely seen?”

“No?” he said mockingly.

It was as if he had said: “But she can use his name for that of her lover, whether she has seen him or not!”

He added, “I am not asking you to marry me at once, out of hand. There could be an engagement of sorts, couldn’t there?”

“Do you ask me to answer that, too, at once?” I said timidly, but a little defiantly, as I glanced over his shoulder at the portrait on the wall of his grandmother as a very lovely girl, a white-clad bride. She was smiling, smiling. Ah! As a bride she had been loved! She had not submitted to any “engagement of sorts.”

She had loved, too.

I said, “Of course, if you don’t mind my never *caring* for you——!”

“I don’t bargain for it,” said Paul Wright.

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And then his blue eyes danced mockingly again. It was almost as if they had told me, "It will be a change! Women have always 'cared' for me!"

But he only ended up by saying, "If I don't mind our not caring for each other, it's 'Yes,' is it?"

"Yes," I agreed. (There was nothing else to say.)

He nodded as he held out his hand. We were engaged.

CHAPTER XX

AN "ENGAGEMENT OF SORTS"

WE were engaged—to be married “as soon as I thought I could stick it,” said Mr. Wright. “No hurry.” . . .

So I continued to live in the big Well Walk house with the Rodneys “for the present”; and he (my fiancé) took on some old rooms of his in Jermyn Street. He talked of “work”; I don’t know what it was. Something to do with investments. I am afraid I wasn’t interested. . . .

Looking back now, I can see how extraordinary that young man must have found me, to be so little interested in him! All other women seemed to like him so much. Both the Rodneys found him charming. I—— Well, if a man is *not* the right man for a girl, no reasoning will make him so. Yet how kind he was, this “reformed rake,” who was going to marry

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a reformed humbug out of pity and to make the best of a bad and complicated business! Shall I ever forget the day he brought me my engagement ring?

It was in the drawing-room that had witnessed our first meeting that I came in that afternoon to find him.

"Won't you sit down?" I said, remembering as always the absurdity of my having to ask him to sit down in what was, after all, his own house. He had given it up of his own free will, but how could I look upon it as mine?

He sat down at one end of the sofa, and I sat on the black satin pouffe the other side of the hearthrug. Silence fell between us.

He broke it, saying flippantly but not unkindly:

"This is rather a chilling distance to be set between two newly-engaged people! Won't you come and sit down here"—touching the sofa beside him—"and let me show you something I have brought for you?"

"Very well," I said, trying not to sound too reluctant. I sat down by him on the very edge

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of the sofa, and looked straight in front of me at a green bowl of growing jonquils.

Again the kindly, flippant tone sounded beside me:

“What are you thinking of?”

I was thinking of my friend, the younger Miss Rodney, now an engaged girl also. The sub-editor in that newspaper office had fallen in love with her, and they were to be married in the autumn. I knew how happy she was. And ah, the contrast! She was at that moment hurrying to meet her fiancé. I had taken ages putting on a fresh blouse so as to postpone this evil hour of my interview with mine.

So I said lightly:

“Oh, I wasn't thinking of anything particular.”

“Well, you don't seem in a great hurry to see what it is I have brought for you!”

He spoke as if I were a child to whom he was showing a new toy, then put his hand in his pocket and drew out a little oblong box of white velvet. Under his fingers it flew open, and disclosed to me on its padded bed of white

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satin a wonderful ring of sapphires, with tiny brilliants set between each.

"How lovely!" I said, trying to speak heartily—but being engaged had taken all the "lilt" out of my voice as well as all the spring out of my walk and the joy out of my heart.

I hoped I should get accustomed to it—imagine that, you happily engaged girls! I *hoped* it! For at that moment I had only been engaged two days, and only ten minutes of these had been passed in the society of my fiancé.

He said, "I chose blue stones, you see, for the obvious reason. You have very lovely eyes, Morwenna, if I may say so."

"You may if you like, of course." And a pang rent me to think that if only Some One Else had cared to say that, the whole earth would have been transformed for me into a fairy rose-garden, lighted up by a silvery full moon and a million pink lights. If—if it had been another man!

This man said, in his half-amused, half-piqued tone: "Does she *like* her ring?"

"Oh, yes! Yes, thank you——"

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“May I put it on for you?”

“Oh, I can,” I said.

He let me put it on myself.

I leant forward, looking at the flashing blue fire of it, and wondering what it would feel like to wear somebody else’s signet-ring, say: yes! just his plain gold signet-ring with his monogram: “P. L.—”

“So now we’re really engaged,” said Paul Wright’s voice closer to me. “You’ve got your ring—don’t I get anything?”

I saw what he meant, and felt perfectly *awful* about it.

I clenched the hand with ring into the drapery of my skirt; I stiffened my back to the ordeal. I waited a second until I was sure that I had my voice well under control. Then I said steadily:

“If you wish it, you may kiss me.”

There was an odd mixture of expressions in my fiancé’s tone as he replied, “Oh! Thank you so much.”

(I couldn’t quite make it out.)

He put his hand out, taking mine with the

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ring on it; and then just when I was stiffening myself once more for the trial which had to be faced, he raised my hand to his lips, and kissed it very lightly; then dropped it again, and moved a little way back from me.

Was that all? In my relief I wonder that I didn't say it aloud. Perhaps my expression did, for my fiancé answered it.

"My dear child," he said, "don't imagine I shall ever try to rush you into anything you don't like. Take your own time, by all means."

"Oh, thank you," I murmured, all gratitude. "I do think you are kind!"

"I'm glad you don't consider me a mere ravening wolf," he said dryly. Then, in a tone that was almost coaxing, I heard him say, "Perhaps you won't always dislike me so."

"Perhaps not—I mean—I mean I don't dislike you. How could I? I'm too grateful!"

"Good," he said, dryly again. "We'll see if gratitude can be turned into . . . anything less copy-bookish presently. Of course we shall have to spend rather a lot of hours to-

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gether, I'm afraid. Afraid for your sake, I mean. What shall we talk about?"

I shook my head, gazing again at that glittering new fether on my finger.

"What do most engaged people talk about? Love, I suppose," he suggested with a short laugh. "Have you any theories on the subject, you pretty child with boy's curls and an Early-Vic. muslin frock? Tell me!"

But oh, how I wanted to avoid that of all other subjects! I said, shyly, "Do you like reading? Your grandmother thought I read aloud rather well."

"Oh, you propose that we shall spend our tête-à-tête as an engaged couple by reading aloud instead of conversing? Very well, Morwenna. What did you read to my grandmother?"

"I used to read Jane Austen. Shall I read some to you?"

"Anything," he said, and sat back among the cushions on the sofa.

I rose, fetched out the first volume of *Pride and Prejudice* from the Chippendale bookcase,

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then sat down again on the black satin pouffe, and began to read aloud.

Steadily, for an hour and more, I read, forgetting all my troubles in the delightful society of the Miss Bennetts.

I was living in the past when the present reappeared in the august form of Rawlinson, carrying the huge silver tea-tray that had been a wedding present to my fiancé's grandmother. He found me laughing as I read.

So let's hope he thought I had just picked up the book to quote some amusing passage to my young man. For it was only just in time that Paul Wright, who had fallen fast asleep! had started up with a jerk, and had sat upright among the cushions, looking as alert as a sentry on duty.

Then Miss Grizel came down, and presently the other engaged pair, looking ridiculously happy, came in—and then, at all events, there was plenty of conversation.

From Paul Lancaster I received a stiff and staid little note of congratulation on my en-

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gement to his cousin; since when I did not see him again.

Miss Rodney had heard that since his work on the Encyclopædia had come to an end, the young engineer had taken up some road-surveying job, somewhere in the country.

My fiancé never mentioned him. His name was therefore never in my ears, but oh, how persistently his image remained in my heart! His broad-shouldered figure, his face of a big boy, his rather gruff, reluctant speech, and that smile and dimple of his that changed his whole appearance in a second!

They say the sight of one man drives out the remembrance of another. It wasn't so with me. It made it worse, I think, that these two cousins were, superficially, alike. Paul Wright reminded me with every look and every word that he was not the right Paul!

In his way he was perfect. No; he never "rushed" me. He kept to his times for calling when I expected him. Mondays, dinner. Tuesdays and Fridays, an hour after dinner. Saturdays we lunched together and spent the rest

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of the day "doing our duty" as he put it with a quaint look. Very often we went to the theatre, and I found myself reflecting that theatres and picture-galleries and music-halls did away with quite a lot of the terror of an engagement.

Its "terror"! What would Ella Rodney have thought of that idea!

On Sundays he came to tea and stayed to supper—talking a good deal to Miss Grizel, who grew to like him more and more. So did I. Oh, yes, I grew to like this fiancé of mine, this queer mixture of by-gone "wildness" and present-day respectability and settled-down-ness.

Perhaps, if I had never seen or felt anything else, I should have imagined that "liking" to be all one need feel towards a husband.

Nowadays, looking back, I see he was wooing and wooing me all the time to do more than "like" him, the handsome fellow who had been so much adored. . . . What an irony. . . .

Then came the day when he told me he had got four tickets for the Artists' Ball at the Albert Hall on the following week; should I care to go?

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Should I care? For gaiety, and movement, and colour, and mad music, and having no time to think? All these essential things would be at the Ball!

“And do you think your friend Miss Rodney and her sub-editor would care to join us?”

Miss Rodney and her sub-editor, who loved dancing together, but who never before had been able to afford tickets for anything more than a two-and-sixpenny “hop” at the Kensington Town Hall, were simply overjoyed.

I hadn't looked forward to enjoying anything since I had been engaged. I looked forward to this!

I wanted to go as “Carnival” in a powder-puff skirt, with one pink rose, a wisp of tulle and a breath of fresh air as a bodice—it was Paul Wright who stopped that.

“Not your style—or mine,” he said, unexpectedly. “Remember, we're highly proper, engaged people. Long skirts, please, my child, and something not too noticeable.”

“A violet, perhaps?” I said, laughing. I felt quite gay at the thoughts of the noisy, jolly

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evening that was before us. "Or a Gainsborough girl, in the simplest of white muslins and blue sashes, with criss-cross sandals and a blue ribbon in my curls?"

"That would suit you admirably," he said. "And I would wear the man's dress of the period myself." Silken kneebreeches, a brocaded waistcoat, a full-skirted coat and a bob-wig suited him, too. Miss Grizel Rodney said, when he came to call for me, that we were the best-looking couple she had seen! Then, as usual, she slipped out of the drawing-room to leave us alone.

"Yes, you are very charming, Miss Gainsborough," he said gravely, and took my hand again, the one that wore his sapphires, and kissed it. It is the only kind of kiss that had marked our engagement, and of this I had always been so glad.

But now, seeing how good he had always been to me, how generously he had behaved in every way, and what a lot of trouble he took to think out things to please me, from the kind of stones in my ring to this very evening's

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amusement, I felt that I had been chilly and grudging and ungrateful.

So, impulsively, I said:

“Won’t you—you may, this evening, if you like. I m-mean, kiss me properly. I shan’t m-mind.”

“Shan’t you, by Jove?” he said quickly. “Why, then——”

He took a swift step towards me, I saw his eyes light up.

And in that glance I read what “most girls” have found to be true of “most men,” namely, that the men are ready enough to kiss an attractive girl, whether or no she is “the right” girl. For to them, a kiss is not what it remains to us—a gift for the one and only beloved.

It was a man’s poet who wrote the lines:

“When far away from the lips that we love,
We have but to make love to the lips that are near!”

At that moment, I saw that, whatever image of another woman it is that stands always between us, she, for that instant at least, was banished from the mind of Paul Wright.

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And I, remembering "it's my duty!" would have gone through with it. I would have let him kiss me as he chose.

I shut my eyes, and then, in the very moment of trying not to flinch, I found myself, without meaning to, shrink instinctively back.

Wildly I thought, "I hope he hasn't noticed——" He must have noticed, though.

For lightly and affectionately, even as a brother might have done it, it was my cheek only that he touched with his lips.

Then we went off to that dance; and as we did so, a hope was born in my mind. What lots of girls fell in love at dances! Couldn't I *manage* it?

CHAPTER XXI

THE SHADOWY THIRD

THE beginning of that night's dance seems to me now more like some wonderful coloured dream than any real dream that I have ever had.

Through streams of limelight in rose-colour and orange and emerald-green, the fantastically-attired figures of men and women danced and shimmered like jewelled motes in shafts of sunshine.

The crash and rhythm of music, mingled with the laughter and talking, made the whole air vibrate. Everyday life seemed a thing apart. Nothing was real, but this colour and rhythm, and the swing of the waltz.

How long ago, the days of those costly and gorgeous dances that went on until morning-light and that filled more space of the morning

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newspaper than do the official communiqués, now!

I don't know how often I danced with my fiancé; it seemed to me that for hours we whirled over that perfect floor in perfect accord; his arm steering me without effort, my steps answering to every touch.

I was enjoying myself as I had not done for six whole months and longer. Free from care as a bird on the wing, I felt that a weight of loneliness were dropping from me at last.

Music and movement drugged me, as they've drugged many a lover before now, into oblivion. Or so I thought for the time. That garish light and colour made what was near me indistinct. I sat at a supper-table for four with Ella Rodney and her fiancé and my own, and I was my gayest self.

"It suits you to enjoy yourself," said Paul Wright. "We must come more often to this sort of show."

We danced again, and a curious thing happened to me. I think it happens to most girls who have imagination, and a lover whom they

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don't want—and a some one else who is no lover, but their only love.

The man's arm about my waist seemed suddenly to be that of another man. The blonde face above me, blurred by our rapid circling, was another's, another's!

I was waltzing then with Paul, *my* Paul.

I closed my eyes to keep up the illusion. In my mind, as we danced, I was talking to him in a long, fond, foolish, imaginary conversation, to make up for the long months of silence that had been between us.

How many girls have played that game? Safe enough, when the dream-confidence can be whispered into a lonely pillow, but not so safe when the unwanted lover is within sight and touch. . . .

Presently, as I was murmuring half-timidly, half-triumphantly to my dream-partner Paul Lancaster, "Is it possible, then, that after all this time you do really care for me a tiny bit? . . ." I realized with a start that I had spoken the words aloud—and to Paul Wright.

Close in my ear he answered quickly, ar-

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dently, "Little Morwenna, do you want me to, then, after all?"

I was dumb.

His arm—it was his arm, and all the dreams had vanished!—tightened about me. "Do you?" he insisted through the waltz-music. "Do you?"

I faltered: "Wait—I'm giddy——" We stopped. He drew me aside under one of the arches.

"You are white," he said, abruptly. "Would you like to go home now?"

"Yes,—oh, yes! I would like to go away!"

"Shall I find the others—— No: impossible to find any one in this mob," he said. "Come along."

And presently I found I had left the dream of light and music and colour that had become only a nightmare to me. Scarcely knowing how I came to be there, I found myself hooded and cloaked in a taxi beside my fiancé.

"I won't bother you with talking, little girl," he said, to my intense relief—though I need not have been surprised. Paul Wright was one

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of the few men I've ever met who knew just when a woman didn't want to be talked to. I suppose his long and varied experience with them had taught him. But now I was learning something too, and I wish I could pass on the conviction of that knowledge to any girl who is hesitating. There is one thing that is counter charm and proof against the charms and tact and knowledge of the most attractive man in the world—and that one thing is love for another man, who may be blundering, tactless, boyishly clumsy, but who is right for you.

There's no explaining this; none!

In silence we got to the end of the journey. Paul Wright helped me out of the cab and opened the door for me with my key. I had told the Rawlinsons they were to go to bed, and that nobody was to wait up; they were to leave the spirit lamp with some soup and wine ready in the dining-room.

"Thank you," I said, holding out my hand.

"Thank you so much! Good night."

He held it for a moment, looking down at me.

"Do you know, child," he said, "that when

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you speak to me you never use my name?
Can't you say for once, 'Good night, Paul'?"

Instantly that image which had been with me at the dance rose up clear and distinct as a picture on the cinema-screen. It was to that other, and to no one else, that I spoke.

"Good night, Paul."

And I know that Paul Wright began from that moment to think that he had made way with me, that I had begun to love him in the way that he was used to! Still he was too clever to "rush" me. Only his voice held a note of triumph as he returned ever so softly, "Good night, little Morwenna, *darling!*"

CHAPTER XXII

ONE SPINSTER'S VIEW OF IT

I TIPTOED up the stairs without turning on the lights, but there was a thread of yellow light from under Miss Grizel Rodney's door. She was awake, then.

Presently I heard her voice calling softly:

“Is that you, Ella?”

“No; it's Morwenna,” I called back, in a whisper, and I pushed the door open a little.

Miss Grizel was sitting up in bed, with her fair hair, plaited into two braids, looped up beside her ears, and giving her the look of some frail little Early Victorian lady against the background of the pillow.

“I have only just woken up,” she said, smiling. “I heard you come in, and so I thought—— But are you by yourself?” she asked anxiously. “What is the matter? Why, you are flushed scarlet, child—your eyes look

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as if you had fever! Give me your hand. Your hands are cold as ice! What is it?"

The kind tone, the warm touch, seemed to loosen in me some spring which had been paralysed. Without a moment's warning I flung myself forward into Miss Grizel Rodney's arms, sobbing on the delicate little night-gowned shoulder. My hood fell away from my curls with the Gainsborough blue ribbon. I flung my arm with its white ruffles across my eyes. Sobs choked me.

"My dear, you are overtired! You must be ill!"

"No, I am not tired! No, it's nothing so hopeful, and easy and pleasant as being merely ill!" I cried wildly. "It's—oh, Miss Grizel, I must tell you—I must tell somebody, or my heart will break! The matter is, that I am engaged to the wrong man."

Miss Grizel patted my shoulder until I had calmed myself a little and was apologising for having frightened her.

She smiled.

"Do you imagine, Baby Beaugard, that this

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is the first time I've had to do with engaged girls?" she laughed softly. "Or that I've never before met that time-honoured institution, a lovers' quarrel?"

"Oh! There was no—no quarrelling——"

"Did you tell me that you were 'engaged to the wrong man'?"

"Yes!" I faltered, miserably.

"Well, my dear, isn't that part of the time-honoured institution? Do you suppose that there's an engaged girl breathing who hasn't thought—or won't think—at one time or another during her engagement that this is her fate? It's human nature. 'Ah, he disappoints me! He doesn't come up to my hopes and dreams! This isn't what I ought to feel! After all, perhaps he isn't the right man,' the thought comes; then—flick! it's gone."

"Yes, but, Miss Grizel——"

"That mood's as common as a cold in the head. Only it doesn't last as long, and it's easier to cure. The cure for it being to think of every other girl's fiancé, and of how inferior he seems beside your own."

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“Miss Grizel, that would cure the cases you are thinking of, but not mine!” I cried wildly. “You don’t understand; it isn’t that I am finding fault with Mr. Wright—I am only too grateful to him. You don’t know the reason—you don’t know how much reason I have. I am not thinking of his deficiencies. So far as behaviour to me is concerned, he hasn’t got any; he has been perfection itself to me—it is not that!”

Here I dashed my handkerchief across my eyes, heavy with fatigue. I swallowed a big lump in my throat, and I uttered briefly those four words that are responsible, I expect, for half the love-troubles in the universe.

I said: “There is somebody else.”

Miss Grizel stared at me.

“Somebody else? Somebody you care for more than Mr. Wright?”

I nodded vigorously; I couldn’t speak.

There was a silence in the comfortable and pretty bedroom. I saw Miss Grizel’s delicate kindly face grow more and more troubled. Anxiously she asked:

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“How long, Baby Beaugard, has there been somebody else?”

“Always,” I said, briefly and energetically.

“*Before——?*”

“Centuries before!”

Miss Grizel nodded. “Then Ella was right. It should have been his cousin.”

“He went away,” I explained. “He never cared.”

“So, having lost the right man, you accepted the wrong one,” said the little invalid. “The most senseless, miserable thing that any girl can do.”

“You think so? I thought that, if a woman can’t have the best, she’s wise to take the second-best. Then, at least, she’s something.”

“She has her dreams,” said Miss Grizel softly. And the look of the eyes in the small pinched face was wonderful. “And some people believe that it is better for a woman to lose her right hand than that she should be disillusioned by the spoiling of her dreams. Can’t you return thanks, Morwenna, that you are only

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engaged, and not really married to the wrong man?"

"But I've been feeling that I ought to marry him. Oh, you don't know what I owe Paul Wright! I shall be grateful to him till I die. I should feel too utterly thankless and mean——"

"It's meaner," she said, "to marry a man out of gratitude. Far better be like me, a solitary spinster to the end of your days. Far better, child, to break it off!"

Those three words seemed to me like a door flung open of a prison . . .

Break it off!

It was not too late, after all.

Break it off—what I should be spared!

I went to my own room, determined. Yes; I'd break it off, the very next day.

CHAPTER XXIII

“AKIN TO LOVE”

AND to think that after all I did nothing of the kind. . . .

I told Miss Grizel, afterwards, that it was not because of “gratitude.” But I didn’t tell her why it was. . . .

I had strung myself up to tell Paul Wright as soon as he came. Not that I imagined it would be so very much of a wrench!

Why should he mind so very much? He had never pretended to be in love with me, and there were plenty of other girls who would be only too delighted to marry him for the sake of settling down—girls who hadn’t a real Mr. Wright of their own, and who would become genuinely fond of him.

I meant to waste no time beating about the bush. . . . But it was he who came towards me, looking unrecognisably worried, older and

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drawn, to say to me, “I have something to tell you.”

“What?” I said quickly, standing to face him on that rug.

He looked at me, and said in a queer strained voice, “Perhaps you won’t think it so bad as all that. . . . What a colour you’ve got! Fresh as paint, in spite of dancing all night . . . that’s where the girl of twenty scores so heavily over mere ‘finish’ . . . I’m talking rot, aren’t I? . . . But let me look at that pretty face of yours while I can. I shan’t have the chance much longer.”

“The chance?” I wondered how he could have guessed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m going away——”

He must have guessed. How? I stared.

“Where to?” I gasped.

He gave a curt little laugh. “Oh, back, I suppose, to the husks and swine. No place for nice little girls with sapphire eyes! . . . You’ll wear those sapphires to match them, will you? always? Only, my dear, you’ll have to get them made up into a brooch, or wear them

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on another finger now—since you won't be wearing any engagement-ring of mine any more."

Again I wondered, all in a flurry, how he knew I was going to break it off.

I think he had been talking for a moment or so before I grasped that the breaking-off was being done by *him!*

"When I asked you to marry me, Morwenna, I had a right to do so—so far as my financial position went. By the time I had come into my own by taking it from you—you most innocent of little adventuresses!—I was a rich man. Now there's an end of that—I am ruined!"

Still I stared at him, unable to see how that could possibly have come about.

(I was an idiot about money—always!)

As he went on talking rapidly, the truth gradually, though not very clearly, unfolded itself to me. With his dead grandmother's fortune my fiancé had been speculating wildly—investing it in this, that, and the other. What the companies were, or why they should suddenly fall down like a house of cards, I hadn't

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enough business knowledge to realise. I only comprehended dimly, that most of his time, when he disappeared from the house here, where he came to visit his fiancé so conventionally, had been passed in the City, dabbling in schemes with men who had been too clever for him; so all his money was gone, just as irretrievably as my own little income had six months ago in the City and Borderland.

“But that’s not the worst,” he wound up desperately. “If it had been only my own money, it wouldn’t have been quite so black—after all, a man can get on—even a man who hasn’t been brought up to work. He can always, as I told you, get a job at tending those pigs in the far country. If it had been only mine——”

“But whose else’s is there?” I asked dazed.

“Yours,” said Paul Wright heavily—“yours too.”

I sat down, hardly knowing I had moved. He stood. He went on to explain to me that, thinking to make what he called a “big scoop,” he had taken the half of his grandmother’s for-

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tune which he was settling on me, but of which the interest only was being paid to me quarterly. He had taken that and invested it in the same disastrous concerns, and the result was that, except for what I might have in hand of my quarter's allowance—there was nothing left—nothing!

“All that remains—and thank goodness I fixed that up before I began this game,” said Paul Wright—“is this house. Now that land up here is so valuable, it should fetch a good deal by selling it, or, if you wished, it could always let well. Yes, you should manage to get a good tenant, Morwenna.”

“I should manage?” I exclaimed. “What do you mean by saying I should manage?”

“Well, my dear, it's your house. That, at any rate, is saved out of the fire.”

“It is not saved for me,” I said firmly. “Don't you understand that I never mean to take it? It's yours, and you will live in it.”

And then it struck me as so funny that this house, over which I and that other Paul had argued and disputed, should again be the bone

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of contention—this time between me and Paul Wright.

“But I shall disappear,” he said, “leaving you in possession. Then what will you do?” He asked the question quite lightly, so that I was absolutely unprepared for what happened next.

He had been standing up by the mantelpiece, I sitting in my favourite place, the big black satin pouffe on the white bearskin rug. As suddenly as thunder breaks, the flippant, dare-devil expression of his face broke up, and he cried out startingly:

“No—don’t tell me what you will do! It’s enough that I shall never see you again! For I have no one else, Morwenna, no one in the world! I shall be alone again—and, my God! how am I to face it?”

And then, without a moment’s warning, he had flung himself down on his knees on the rug beside me—had thrown his arms round my waist, and buried his head in my lap.

He was sobbing.

I had never seen a man cry before, and I do

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hope to goodness I never shall again—never! It's too awful—I don't think I could stand it! To a woman one can say, "Yes, poor thing, go on, it will do you good!" and a child one can pick up and comfort.

But one feels so utterly helpless with a man. To begin with, one knows that it must be some very unusual suffering that wrings from them that utterly unnatural confession of it. And then one also knows that those heavy sobs and those reluctant tears are not being a bit of comfort to them, but the reverse. In fact, as Byron says about the difference between a man's crying and a woman's: "To us 'tis a relief; to them 'tis torture."

"Don't—don't!" I implored him. I took his hands. He clutched my fingers as if he were a drowning man grabbing at a life-buoy.

"You mustn't!" I said, incoherently. "It's not—not so bad as all that! Even if the money is all gone——"

"It's not the money I'm thinking of," came brokenly from the lips of Paul Wright. He bit them to steady them. Then he said, simply

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but startingly, something I had never dreamed of hearing from him. “It’s you, Morwenna! Losing you!”

Could I have heard aright! I could scarcely believe it—I was almost tempted to pinch myself to see if I were awake.

And yet there was no mistake. There I sat on the black satin pouffe, staring, half-believing and entirely miserably, at the man with the desperate face, white-lipped and wild-eyed, on his knees before me.

Desperate, because he was losing me after all! It was the last thing I had ever expected of this man, with whom I had kept on easy, friendly terms for six months of what he himself had specified as “an engagement of sorts”!

“I don’t understand you!” I cried. “You can’t mean that you really care for me?”

“I am all broken up,” he said, “at the thought of losing you!”

“But I thought you only liked me? I thought you were fond of me—just as one is fond of a child? You’ve often called me ‘pretty child.’”

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“Yes, that was how it began! It is different now. Remember, there have been six months of seeing you, going about with you, getting accustomed to the idea that there was some one in the world who belonged to me, and who would mean a home, and having to keep straight for her sake. I was so sick of everything else; here was something that *stayed*. And then, last night at the dance—I fancied *you* were different——”

“I didn’t think,” I faltered, more miserable and confused than I had ever been before. “I never imagined this of you.”

I looked at him. The thought of what I had to do was growing clearer in my mind.

He seemed to pull himself together, pushed his hands through his short, thick fair hair, got up from his knees, and stood looking down at me.

“Well, never mind, then,” he said, in a strangely gentle tone. “I’m sorry I let you know about it. Don’t worry about it. There’s only one thing I ask you to do for me, and that is to let me provide for you as I suggested just

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now. Say you will take that, Morwenna, as a last favour to me—and then it’s good-bye.”

I had taken my resolution, I must act on it.

“Good-bye? No, it isn’t!” I cried.

My own voice sounded strange in my ears.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that it shan’t be good-bye—you needn’t go away!” I cried impetuously. “In fact, I won’t have it!”

For my mind now was full of one feeling—I should not now be able to do as I had intended and break off my engagement with Paul Wright, I couldn’t—couldn’t deal this blow to the man who had stood between me and ruin and exposure.

Before I knew that he cared it had been different. Gratitude alone would not have kept me to him. This was where pity came in—and with us women I think pity is the strongest feeling in the world, next to love.

Love was not for me, but the joy of giving could be mine.

“I won’t give you up. Don’t go away,” I

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cried, holding out my hands. "If you want me, I will be yours!"

"Ah, what? At last?" he cried, incredulously.

And his whole face so lighted up; he came towards me and took me in his arms with a gesture of such immeasurable joy and relief that for the moment all I felt was the comfort that having sacrificed my own feelings could make this enormous difference in the happiness of a fellow creature.

That was a kind of drug to me; it helped to deaden the pain which must come later, the bitterness of being engaged—still and irrevocably engaged—to the wrong man!

CHAPTER XXIV

LOVE AT LAST

“PAUL?”

“Yes, little Morwenna!”

“Do you want to catch the 6.45 train back to Baker Street, or will you stay to a milky sort of supper here?”

Paul Wright, lying at my feet among the daisies of the grass-plot in front of the farm, smiled up at me.

“The milky supper, please, my dear. I’ll make it the last train up. It’s so peaceful here.”

“Very well,” I said. “I will tell Mrs. Clare I shall want some more eggs.”

I got up from my deck-chair and went through the wonderful entrance of the farm where I had taken rooms; a pure Gothic arch crowned by a carved coat-of-arms half-smothered in ivy. A flight of shallow, worn stone

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steps led down to the grass-plot with the sundial and the border of old-fashioned flowers.

That garden and that entrance to what had once been a great house gave the place the air of a convent and made me, Paul Wright's fiancée, feel like a young nun who had renounced all worldly joys for a vocation.

My vocation, I felt, was to make Paul Wright as good a wife as possible.

We were to be married in a month's time—in May.

I had ceased to dread it. I hoped that after all it was going to work. He, my fiancé, seemed so contented, though quieter, older, careworn. He worked as a clerk in the City now—he! who had never done anything in his life but follow his own devices. The Hampstead house was let. He came every Sunday to spend the day with me. After we were married we intended to settle down in a country cottage near the farm, whence he could go up to the City every day, and where I could have a little garden of my own.

The whole plan of our lives would be, as he

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said, "so peaceful"; the days as quiet and undisturbed and long as the evening shadows which would fall at last. . . .

I hoped he would be perfectly happy. . . . He was very fond of me, though there had been no repetition of that passionate appeal of his when I had promised him, "I will be yours——"

He has told me, since, what he thought of me during that last phase of our engagement. He had given up, it seemed, all idea of teaching me to *love* him: thinking I was one of the many girls who do not ever, cannot love. He put me down "as that most *unmeltable* type of iceberg, the iceberg who is just 'affectionate.' "

(I suppose he knows better now. . . .)

"Mrs. Clare," I said, coming into my landlady's homely kitchen, "Mr. Wright will stay to supper with me to-night, please."

"That's right!" said Mrs. Clare heartily. "Do him a lot more good staying another hour or so in the fresh air than getting back to that stuffy town of his! You'll excuse me bringing in the things myself, Miss Beaugard. My little

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Annie will put out the things for you, and you can boil the fresh eggs on your little spirit-lamp, like you did that time with your newly-married lady-friend.” (This was Ella.)

“Certainly, Mrs. Clare. Are you going out?”

“No, miss, but I’ve got a gentleman expected who’s walked half through Buckinghamshire this afternoon, and I’ve got to see to his room at once—I’ve only just heard.”

I had forgotten to get fresh flowers for my sitting-room table, so I went out through the back-door into the kitchen garden to get a bunch of wine-dark fragrant wallflowers. I got them; I strolled idly down past the garden, on to the field path; I was revelling in the scented cool of the evening. It was growing rapidly dusk, for those were the days, remember, before we had adopted “Summer-time.” I turned aside to follow the flight of a big white moth fluttering above the hedge. Then I heard some one coming up behind me. I half turned to the tall, broad-shouldered figure that I had expected. It had stopped.

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“Paul——” I said.

And taking a step back, without looking at him, I leant my head back against his shoulder in a way that he had said was “such a friendly little way.” It always pleased him.

But now he didn't move. He did not speak. I turned my head up, quickly, to look into his face. . . .

What, what was this?

What had happened?

Once before I had taken one of the two cousins for the other.

This time I had thought I was speaking to Paul Wright, and behold——

I heard myself cry out, loudly and wildly, before I knew what I was going to say, “Oh! Oh! It's the *other* Paul . . . it's Paul Lancaster. It is *my* Paul!”

And before I knew what he would do he had caught me to him, had clasped my outstretched arms about his own neck, had called me by name; and then bent his fair head and kissed me as I had never (thank Heaven!) been kissed before.

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It was a supreme and whirling moment, mad, delicious, outrageous, with no excuse for it except that it was *our* moment.

We, who had never spoken a word of love to each other, met suddenly like this and found it perfectly natural that we loved! It was all so utterly unprepared—and yet not so. I had been loving him, calling him to me in my mind for all those months, and I knew now, I knew that all those months he had been silently calling me to him.

I forgot everything except that I was standing with the man I loved, in kindest shadow, with the soft night falling around us and only the bright eyes of the stars upon us, and far across the fields the red light of the farm. I only knew that he still held my hands clasped against his shoulders and that I leant against him, wishing that I might stay so for ever. It was happiness at last. It was waking up out of a bad dream.

At last I heard his dear voice, muttering incoherently, "Look here! I always say the

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wrong thing, darling. And this knocks me out so that I don't know *what* to say——”

“Don't say anything. I will. I've always loved you most frightfully,” I heard myself telling him, perfectly shamelessly. “Always; haven't you?”

“What? *Ra-ther!* Why, that very first evening at the dinner-party——”

“Say it again!” I entreated him, “so that I shan't have begun before you!”

——“And all those weeks on the blessed Encyclopædia!”

“When I thought you hated me! You were as cold as the North Pole to me, and I—I couldn't *talk* Polish! You ought to have known!”

“I got jolly little encouragement!” Then he said, “But listen! I mean, tell me about yourself. I thought you were in my grandmother's house with the Rodneys? How do you come to spring up here? I never knew you knew the farm? I used to stay here as a boy—such jolly times! And I came back to it because those times were before I'd seen any-

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thing of you," Paul Lancaster explained: "because nothing here, at least, would remind me of the girl I was eating my heart out for——"

"And you say you always say the wrong thing!" I laughed fondly.

——"I came here for a tramp after I finished a job of work in this country. I thought I'd have such lots of things to remember, here, that they'd shut out the thought of the little face that—— No! don't hide it! And the first thing I bump into coming across the meadow is the girl herself. I thought you were a ghost, Wenna! What brought you here?"

"Oh, never mind those bothering practical things for a minute! Just a minute! What was it you called me—Wenna?"

"Wenna. It was the little name I always gave you in my dreams, dear. Don't you like it?"

"*Oh!* And no one has ever called me it before——"

"Thank goodness!" said Paul Lancaster fervently. "That's all mine!"

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“Everything is all yours! Why—why couldn't you have said—asked—before?”

“I meant to, the very instant that Frith Chambers business came to an end!”

“And then you went away without a word. Oh, Paul, why?”

“Why? Don't you remember?”

That brought me up standing.

Remember?—I had forgotten everything. Forgotten the other Paul, our engagement, our marriage—to be in a month——

I gasped.

“Paul,” I said falteringly, “there is such *miles* to explain to you about that. I don't know how I shall ever do it——”

“There's heaps of time before us *now*,” said my Paul, happily.

And now I think of it, how many weeks was it before he confessed to having got “the hang” of the whole abjectly silly story that came out bit by bit—the Rodneys, the card-case, the flowers, the private means, “Mac,” and the rest of it? He does know now. But then, at that mo-

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ment, he wanted only to know whether I had ever liked his cousin as well as him.

The tone of my "Never! *Never!*" must have convinced any one.

"But *he* cared all right?"

"N-not at once, Paul!"

"But later? Oh, of course later——"

Oh, what wouldn't I have given to be able to deny that! But a picture rose before me of Paul Wright's face on the day when he came to tell me that he had lost all the money, and must break his engagement.

Again I heard his broken voice—"It's you, Morwenna—losing you!"

"I am afraid," I admitted almost in a whisper, "that he did care later."

Paul Lancaster dug his heel into the meadow-grass below the tree, for a moment he said nothing. Then he cleared his throat.

"Well, I don't blame him. . . . When did you break off the engagement?"

I felt myself turn cold all over.

Of course, being an honourable man, this Paul I loved must imagine that all that other

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affair was "off" before I had allowed him to take me in his arms, speak as he had spoken.

"Paul, stop; I haven't told you everything!" I said hoarsely. "Oh, Paul, I am engaged to him still!"

Oh, if I could only take the sickening regret that filled my own heart at the moment, and insert a little of it, just a little, as a sample of what may be before her, into the heart of any girl who contemplates becoming engaged—to the wrong man!

How right Miss Grizel was! Better a lifetime of loneliness than that companionship. As once before, I looked back on the ghastly strain that it had been. It was as if to carve an exquisite piece of sculpture one had taken a plumber's tools; or as if to lay the foundations of a house one had tried to employ the finest instruments of a cameo-maker.

That sounds ridiculous, but it's no more anomalous than to try and make gratitude, affection, pity, do the work that can only be done by love.

Paul Lancaster, who had dropped my hands, snatched them up again.

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“‘Engaged’ Wenna? Only to me. It’s me you love.”

“Yes, yes! But I promised to marry him!”

“I know,” between set teeth. “Still, you can’t dream, of course—you’ll have to tell him that you’re breaking that promise.”

“But—but I’m not!” I gasped. “Don’t you see he needs me? More than you. I’m all he has. He says so. I shall have to go back to him now——”

“Yes, and tell him you’re dreadfully sorry, but it’s off.”

There was a pause. Wonder filled me. “Could it be *right*, and yet so very much what I wanted to do?”

“It’s a rotten job for you, darling,” said Paul, but relentlessly. “Shall I come with you, or would it be better for him, poor chap, if you told him alone.”

“Alone, I think,” I faltered.

Slowly I drew away from the protecting comfort of Paul Lancaster’s arms. Truly I was to pay for the happiness I found there. Slowly, reluctantly, I turned towards the farm.

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Then I cried out suddenly:

“Oh, Paul! Paul, look!”

My lover echoed my startled exclamation.

“Look! The place is on fire!”

For the farm, which we had last glanced at as a dark bulk under the trees, lighted up only by that danger-signal of a red lamp in the parlour-window, was now vividly illuminated as by flash after flash of summer lightning.

A rolling cloud of white smoke, starred with sparks, curled above the old-fashioned chimneys; flames shot up, a confused hubbub of shouting, screaming, and calling reached us from the yard.

Fire!

Black figures were running to and fro against the livid façade of that wonderful old building. One taller than the rest had flung himself forward, pointing.

“Come on,” called my lover, and took me by the arm to hurry me on. Breathless, we arrived at the scene of confusion, the dreadful bonfire that had marked our betrothal evening.

CHAPTER XXV

A CRY FROM THE HEART

NO one knows—no one ever does seem to know on these occasions—how the fire was started at Mr. Clare's farm.

A dropped match on the woodwork, a spark from a horse's hoof into the straw of the barn, and outhouses seemed to blaze like tinder; while every one within call worked like a galley-slave, fetching and handing along and flinging on to the fire the buckets of water that did at last extinguish the eager flames that had, after all, done less damage than was feared. The farm was saved.

No one belonging to the farm had been hurt, except that the Clares' little girl burnt her fingers trying to snatch out of the still smoking outhouse a rag-doll, whose body had not ceased smouldering.

But in a small panelled room in the west wing,

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which is untouched by the fire, Paul Wright lay dangerously ill.

It was a half-charred beam that had crashed down on his head, felling and stunning him into unconsciousness from which he's only roused to rave, delirious and fevered.

He knew no one—no, not when I went up and took his hot hand, feeling more wretchedly self-repoachful than I can ever describe.

The accident had nothing to do with me, and yet I could not rid myself of the feeling that it was my fault that he lay there, his blue eyes frighteningly bright, his face lean and flushed, his tongue rambling on of things I know nothing of—sometimes in French, in other tongues.

The doctor, who had wired for a nurse, said it was "grave."

It was agony to me. If he didn't recover, I should always be haunted by the knowledge that I had deceived him. If he did recover, I should have to confess to him that deceit, how for months I was engaged to one man—loving another.

Paul Lancaster had taken a room at a cot-

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tage a mile away. I had arranged to stay with Paul Wright until the nurse came—but of what use had I been, all through that night of fever? Mrs. Clare relieved me at dawn. I slept—when one is twenty-two one will sleep after almost anything.

As soon as I was dressed again that good woman came to me.

“Miss Beaugard! Miss, dear, he’ll know you now, I reckon,” she said. “He’s calling for you.”

“I’ll come,” said I, hastening to the room that was left untouched by the fire at the back, and into which they had moved the injured man.

“Dearest!” called the voice of Paul Wright wearily, appealingly. “Where are you, dearest?”

It was like a knife into my heart to hear him call so, and by that name, for the girl who felt herself belong, in every fibre, to another man. Mingled with my sorrow for the man lying there so helplessly, there was a queer, illogical stab of anger on the other Paul’s account.

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“I wanted to speak to her,” went on that feverish voice, “and she’s gone!”

“No; I am here, Paul,” I said gently. I slipped into the darkened room and up to the bed. I took his hot hand. Often the touch of mine has seemed to soothe him.

This time he surprised me by turning away with a quick, pettish movement.

“Who are you? I don’t know you.”

“Paul, you asked for me,” I said unhappily. “It is Morwenna!”

“Morwenna? A pretty name. All girls’ names are pretty that end in ‘a’—Laura, Erica, Margarita,” Paul Wright babbled on inconsequently, his blue eyes, unnaturally bright, roving about the room. “There was a Danish girl once called Asta. (Jolly nice little girl too. . . .) It gives a name a much more feminine sort of sound, that final ‘a.’ Sybil hasn’t got it. Yet she’s feminine enough, Heaven knows! Sybil! I wanted to tell her something.”

What was this? I drew my hand away, but

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he didn't seem to notice. He was gabbling on to himself.

“If I ever see her, I shall tell her. It was on her account that I went away, you know. It was because of her that I let everybody think I'd been done for in that accident. Let her think so. Then she'd forget me. I wasn't worth what she was beginning to think of me. No man's worth it, least of all me; Sybil dearest!”

I stared down at him wonderingly. Where was it his delirious fancy was ranging! About something that had nothing to do with me or his engagement to me.

“I thought she was here a minute ago,” he insisted. “I felt her somewhere about. The sort of girl you'd know was near, even in the pitch-dark, or with your eyes shut. The only one I've ever met like that. She was near. Sybil!”

“Paul! Paul!”

It was not my voice that called his name. I was standing there, silent, bewildered, not knowing what I ought to do or say, when there

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were light, hurried steps on the staircase outside the half-open door.

The door was flung open. The woman's voice that had cried "Paul!" exclaimed: "Where is he? Let me pass; I must come to him!" And half involuntarily I found myself moving quickly aside to make way for the impetuous entrance of a slim, trim figure dressed in deep black.

She flung herself on her knees beside the bed, threw out her ungloved hands to the sick man.

"I had to come!" I heard her gasp, in a voice that was bafflingly familiar to me. "I've come. You see——"

Paul Wright sat up suddenly against his pillows. And I heard him call out, as loudly and clearly as if he were in the full pride of his strength:

"Sybil! I knew!"

And I knew her too; Nurse Egerton!

The name—the black dress she wore—the passionate tenderness with which she took Paul Wright's fever-wasted hands and buried her

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face against them—these things filled in some of the blanks in that story a sick man's mutterings had betrayed.

But this was no time for telling of stories—no time for the asking of a single question.

These two loved one another. They were together after long and bitter separation; and this was their hour.

I left them to it.

CHAPTER XXVI

A WOMAN'S DUEL

I WAITED, sitting on those shallow steps of the farm that had seemed like a convent.

I hoped that Paul, my own Paul, might come up from the cottage, but there was no sign of him. Never mind. I could afford to wait; thinking, thinking. I went over in my mind that old, never-solved question of Attraction between a man and a maid, and what it is that makes attractiveness . . . and how it is that for one girl a man may be a Prince Charming, to another, the same man is a bore. "Attractive!" Of a woman, too, there is no saying which she may be considered. To some she is, to some she isn't.

That girl upstairs would drag Paul Wright back from Death's door to talk to her, I was sure. I was equally sure that *my* Paul would

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see nothing in her but an efficient smart-looking little woman. So it is all the world over, with all the men and all the girls one meets!

Then, as I was wondering what sort of an interview I must presently have with the girl who had ousted me (thank Heaven!) from my ex-fiancé's sick-room, I hear her light step behind me, her curt, polite "Miss Beaugard, may I speak to you now?"

I jumped up. "Oh, do," I said. I showed the slim, black-clad visitor into my "parlour," where Mrs. Clare had laid cold lunch for two. "Come in here; and do sit down, Nurse Eger-ton."

"Thank you, but I'd rather stand," said the girl whom Paul Wright called "Sybil." Her face was flushed, and there was still some of the wonderful light in her eyes; but it faded as she looked at me into something colder, more defiant. Coldness, defiance, and that half-timid curtness were mingled in her voice as she made the announcement: "I ought to tell you, first of all, that I have come here to nurse Mr. Paul Wright until he is well. And then"—a

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sort of defiance rang out in her tone—"then we are going to be married."

"Of course!" I said. I should have smiled, but her manner froze me. "Yes! I gathered that, Nurse"—here I put in with a desperate effort to break the ice—"Nurse Sybil!"

"My name is Mrs. Egerton," the girl in black corrected me. "My husband died ten days ago. I dare say I shall shock you——"

Flushing at the sneer, I shook my head in protest; but she went on, looking out of the window at the sprays of japonica, the garden, the field beyond, the stream meandering through it—not, not at me! She said stiffly:

"I owe you some explanation, I suppose. He—my husband—was thirty years older than I was. He was my patient in the nursing home where I went after I left the hospital where I trained. He became absurdly fond of me, offered to marry me, and I refused him, of course. Later on, he was supposed to be dying, and he gave nobody any peace until I promised to go through a form of marriage with him on his deathbed. He insisted that he wanted to leave

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me his name and what money he had when he died. I gave in," said the young nurse, with a little short, wearied sigh. "I thought it brutal to refuse a poor old wretch who had only a few hours to live. He lived five years after that."

"But you weren't with him?"

"No. He was in a lunatic asylum," said the young nurse dryly. "I went on with my profession, keeping (since I'd promised) his name. For two years I was nursing Mrs. Wright. Then——" She flushed again.

"You mean," I said as gently and sympathetically as I could, "that it was then you met, and grew to care for, her grandson. Isn't that it? I can understand."

"You think so?"

Her cold eyes were fixed upon a Morwenna Beaugard whom they saw, I knew, as a demure and mercenary and loveless Minx. (Yes! That is how a woman-rival can sum up the girl whom some man knows only as his infatuated and self-less slave.) Then she broke out:

"He understood. He saw that for a word

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—a look, I'd follow him to the ends of the earth, whatever name I bore! Be shocked if you like, but that was how I cared. And how he cared was—that he went away. Knowing in his heart that there could never be an end made of all this while I thought he was alive, he let me think him dead. You know that part of the story, Miss Beaugard. That was where you came into it.”

“Yes, I must explain to you——”

“No; you must let me finish——”

“Tell me one thing first,” I said. “How was it that, since he seemed to be dead for your sake, he came alive again when his grandmother died?”

“I knew you'd think it was for the money,” the other woman said scornfully. “Well, it wasn't. It was because of a rumour that had gone about concerning me—that my husband had died, and that I was remarried. He came back to see—Oh, I don't know! He's human—very human, after all! He may have hoped it was not true. I let the story stand. Through people we both knew, I allowed him

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to think it true that I had fallen in love with another man.”

“Why?” I asked wonderingly.

There was hate in her voice as she retorted:

“Why? Because of you. He had told his grandmother that there was *one* girl. . . . Mr. Lancaster told us that this one girl he cared for more than any other was working at Frith Chambers.”

I drew a long breath, leaning against the lattice.

“Now,” I said. “This is something I have to explain, if he hasn’t done so.”

“I never asked him,” retorted Nurse Eger-ton.

“Then *I’ll* tell.”

I did. For the third time in my life, I went all over it again, that absurd story of mine that had led to all this tangle; the girls in the office, the flowers, the card-case—all of it. Breathlessly, incoherently, bit by bit, it came out. . . .

I’d thought I’d paid, long ago and over and over, for that unspeakably silly piece of deceit.

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But I hadn't felt entirely punished for it until I heard Sybil Egerton laugh.

For she didn't believe it!

She didn't believe in the motive!

"It sounds very spontaneous and young, Miss Beaugard," she scoffed. "But would you have done it if, say, the name of Paul Wright had belonged to a man as poor as Paul is now?"

"Of course! I didn't know him from Adam! How should I know if he were rich or poor?"

"Oh! How do people know these things? You must forgive me."

"It's you who don't forgive me," I said, looking steadily at her.

She looked steadily back.

"Do you expect it?" she asked. "You were for six months engaged to Paul Wright."

"Yes. But you see how that came about. You see the sort of engagement it was," I pleaded. "Oh, don't pretend you don't know the difference! He loved you—I see it now—all the time!"

"Was there never a time," said Sybil Eger-

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ton accusingly, "when he said, and believed, that he had come to love you?"

I was silent. I remembered that afternoon at the old house, when I'd prepared to break off the engagement to be stopped by that young man's appeal of "You, Morwenna! Losing you. It breaks me up!"

And, before I had time to form a fib that I knew would be useless, she continued:

"Do you suppose I don't know how often a man is in love with more than one at a time? I am 'a man's woman,' you know. Women don't like me; I hate them! Men confide in me. And I've heard and seen so often that the right woman, if she doesn't happen to be available, is no safeguard against"—she looked at me at last—"the girl who's there."

"What can I say?" I said, feeling helpless. "You've always hated me. If I tell you I never cared for him, you will be angry still——"

"Well, I should think so!"

"And if I had cared it would make it no better."

"Not a bit."

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“And what if I tell you I’m going to marry somebody else?”

“What difference would that make? Married or single, *you’ll* never know what it is to love. If you did, Miss Beaugard, you’d know what I meant. Why, if he’d given you nothing but one admiring look as he passed, I should still be jealous of you.”

“Then there must be a lot of girls you may be much more jealous of,” I retorted, in my haste, remembering that fevered muttering about “*There was a Danish girl once, called Asta.*” How Nurse Egerton must hate—or would have hated her!

But, to my utter astonishment, she said, much less seriously: “Oh, girls he made love to before he met me—I don’t mind them.”

(Strange!)

“Ah, then——,” I pleaded more hopefully, “why ‘mind’ me? Look!” I pointed out of the window. “Look at that cloud reflected in the stream, a white cloud. Last night there was a pink cloud reflected there. It’s passed and left no trace. This one will pass. That’s

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about as much as the thought of me was in the heart of Paul Wright," I argued. "And now look at that golden water-lily beside it. It grows, it sways there day and night, rooted in the heart of the stream. That is like *you*."

She was silent.

"Do believe me," I urged. "Try—not even to be friends, but to stop being enemies before we say Good-bye! Couldn't you shake hands with me now?"

There was a pause. Then she said doubtfully. "You sound sincere. But can a woman be sincere? It isn't feminine."

"Then I am not feminine," I pleaded. "I am not what Paul Wright said this morning about you."

"What was that?" she said sharply, and raised her chestnut head. Her eyes widened as if she must read from my face every word I had ever heard from him about her.

And conscientiously I repeated his words. "*Sybil is feminine enough, Heaven knows. She has the attraction of a score of women. The sort of girl one would know was near, even*

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in the dark and with one's eyes shut. The only one I've ever met who was like that!' That's what he said when he was 'wandering' and calling aloud for you."

"Did he?" Her voice was changed. "Fancy your telling me. . . . I thought girls only repeated the *horrid* things they'd heard about other girls. It was good of you, Miss Beaugard."

Then swiftly, unexpectedly she made a movement towards me, put one slim black-clad arm around me, and dropped a shy, impulsive kiss of friendliness upon my cheek.

"Oh, it was generous of you!" she exclaimed, brokenly. "Nothing on earth could have pleased me so much to hear, and yet you didn't keep it to yourself! You gave me that!"

Thank goodness that at last I had hit upon something that she didn't refuse!

CHAPTER XXVII

SAILING ORDERS

THAT evening I threw a wrap on over my dress and wandered out down the fields towards the station lane between tall-growing hedges.

I had seen Sybil Egerton changed from the elegantly-dressed young widow into the trim mauve-and-white nurse of old Mrs. Wright's time, and she had disappeared, with a smile that she had never given me in those days! into her patient's room. Thank goodness she had been calling at that Hostel when the news came through that a nurse was required for Paul Wright! It had made everything straight.

And I had written to the friend who would have wished it so, to Miss Grizel, who lived with Ella and her husband. I had written to my own people.

SAILING ORDERS

I was feeling tired, dazed, but content with my day's doings.

There needed one thing only to make that content complete. . . .

Against the dark trunk of a tree there glowed the red spark of a cigarette. It moved, then described a circle into the hedge. I heard a laugh, a soft call of my name:

“Morwenna! Wenna!”

“Ah, Paul!” I cried gladly. “I wondered where you had been all day!”

“In town, dear. Just nipped down again between trains,” said my lover as he strode forward out of the shadows to take me in his arms. “You looked like a little bat flitting alone—or ought I to say a little white moth? Blind as a bat. I always say the wrong thing. . . . But look here. Tell me.” His voice grew serious as he put me down. “Has anything happened about—that poor fellow?”

“Yes. He's going to get well.”

“I mean, about his . . . engagement?”

“Yes!”

“Ah! You've told him?”

THE WRONG MR. RIGHT

“No!” I said, laughing to myself in the gloom.

“What do you mean, Wenna? Doesn’t he— isn’t he well enough to hear?”

“Oh, he’s well enough not to care who I’m engaged to, or who’s engaged to me, as long as he isn’t!” I laughed. “Oh, Paul, I’m let off more easily than I deserved! He’s engaged himself, without a word from me, to some one else, some one he likes much better.”

“Must be entirely off his head,” said Paul Lancaster, with conviction. “What’s the meaning of it? But never mind; tell me presently. Three-quarters of an hour is all I’ve got to settle things in.”

I looked up, wondering at the change of tone.

“I’ve got to get back,” he explained. “I arranged the dickens of a lot of business to-day. I don’t know if I’ve done the wrong thing again, but the job seems sound enough to take——”

“*What ‘job’?*”

“This new one of mine,” he explained, “in Cape Town. You’ve got two more days to

SAILING ORDERS

pack up and leave this place, Wenna," he informed me. "In three days from now we shall be married——"

"Married!" I gasped.

"Must. We're off in four; I've got our passages booked——"

I gasped again. "*Our* passages?"

"Dashed if I'm going out alone," declared my lover. "Don't you want to come, Wenna?"

I just laughed, nestling my head into the curve of Paul Lancaster's great hard boyish arm. After this tangle of talk and misunderstanding and misery I was only too happy to give silent consent to anything he planned for me—for Us!

What was there to say? What has any girl to say, when after false starts and blundering, the *really* right Mr. Right comes along?

THE END

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