

Effie Adelaide Rowlands



*On the Wings of
Fate*

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BY

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ON THE WINGS OF FATE.

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CHAPTER I.

“’T WAS ON A MONDAY MORNING.”

Fractionousness was the keynote of the mental atmosphere in a certain substantial-looking South Kensington house on a certain Monday morning. Not that this bad-tempered atmosphere was peculiar to this one particular Monday by no means. As a rule, every living thing in the house, from the master down to the blind and asthmatic pug that lived under the kitchen table, started the working week in a mood that was detestable in an individual as well as collective sense.

And perhaps the worst offender of the lot was Mrs. Pennington.

Her hatred of Mondays had become traditional.

Seated at her well-worn writing table, surrounded by tradesmen's books of every size, color and description, she was simply unapproachable.

On ordinary occasions gentle-voiced and sympathetic, the advent of Monday saw her transformed into a flushed, querulous, pugilistic person, whose whole attitude denoted war and hatred toward every washerwoman, every butcher, baker or greengrocer that ever had existed or ever would exist. Life in the Kensington household for at least three hours of the average Monday might be likened to the sensation of a train that had suddenly left the rails and was bumping along with a series of shocks, till either the steam was turned off in time or a catastrophe occurred.

That a catastrophe never had occurred is one of those everyday marvels with which we are hemmed about. Why, for instance, “cook”—a generic term which covered a multitude of persons—had never turned on her mistress and thrashed out the end of the “suet question” with fists instead of angry impertinence, was one of those problems which Polly, at least, had never been able to solve.

“You know,” she had said on more than one occasion to Winifred, up in the seclusion of their bedroom, “you know it would take so little to smash mother; she makes a lot of noise when she is cross, but she is such a small thing, anybody could bowl her over in a minute, and there would be an end of the argument!”

“I don't think you ought to talk like that about mother,” Winifred said on one of these occasions. As a matter of fact, it happened to be the same Monday morning alluded to in the very commencement of this story.

Polly, who was making out her washing list, writing the items down with savage dabs to get some response from a pencil with a broken lead, asked in a curt sort of way:

“Why not?”

“It is not respectful,” Winifred explained.

“Then,” said Polly, looking up with a defiant, not to say joyous, gleam in her eyes, “it is the one thing that I shall continue to say! I must have a vent somewhere!” she finished, as she returned to the washing list and the impotent pencil.

After a moment of silent reproach from Winifred, Polly broke forth into speech again.

“Oh, how I hate Mondays! How I loathe Mondays! How I wish one could skip every Monday that ever comes!”

“Tuesdays would be just the same,” said Winifred, with her superior smile.

“There ought to be no beginning to the week at all. What good does it serve? Why can’t we run straight along in one unbroken line, I should like to know? There must be something vicious about a Monday. Look what a bad effect it has on all of us.”

It was now Winifred’s turn.

“I do wish, Polly,” she said, sharply, “that you would come and do your share of the room instead of talking such a lot of rubbish!”

Polly subsided.

“I am coming,” she said, in her meekest way; and after pinning the washing list to the compact brown holland bundle, she put it outside the door, and forthwith equipped herself with duster and feather brush, and set to work to make her corner of the large room as neat as Winifred’s.

This was not altogether feasible, since Winifred’s idea of neatness and hers did not quite coincide. For instance, every Monday, for the last year, at least, Polly had registered a vow that she would set herself the task of mending the old rug by her bedside before another week came round, but the days slipped by somehow, and the rug’s shabbiness became more and more enforced; it was, in fact, as shabby as it could be. Polly gazed at it this morning with a touch of shame.

“I think I will do it now. I can darn it with some of that crewel wool, and I shall at least preserve my neck, if not the original pattern.”

With Polly, sudden suggestions meant operations. She sat down on the floor cross-legged, and pulled the once valuable rug on her knees.

“I shall ask father to give me a new one for my Christmas present,” Polly observed, as she sorted out the nearest shade in her wools to cover over the jagged hole.

Winifred rubbed at her few silver ornaments a moment or two in silence.

“If I were you, I don’t think I would say much about a Christmas present this year,” she observed, after a little while, as she made the top of her old salts bottle gleam like a mirror beneath her industrious leather.

Polly looked up.

When Polly looked upward with her strange gray-green eyes she had the most bewitching air in the world.

“Why not?” she queried, promptly. “We always do have a present at Christmas.”

“This Christmas,” Winifred remarked, sententiously, “will not be like other Christmases.”

Polly frowned and threaded her needle.

“Don’t be mysterious, for goodness sake!” she cried; “you do so love putting on creepy, crawly sort of ways, Winnie.”

Winifred set all her little treasures in their proper places; everything looked spotless and at its best.

“Father has lost a lot of money this year. I heard mother and Aunt Nellie talking together the other afternoon, and I found out then the meaning of lots of things that have puzzled us lately. We are living beyond our income,” Winifred said, rather grandly—she said it as if she were making a notable statement. “We only stay on here because father has a long lease of the house, and we should have to pay the rent whether we lived here or not. Besides, mother told Christina that she hoped things would mend in the next year, and she doesn’t want to make any big change till Chrissie is married.”

Polly darned on laboriously.

The rug was dusty and the floor was hard, and something, she did not know what, seemed to be pressing very tightly on her heart. She was sorry, in a vague sort of way, that she should have been so cross, and that she should have desired her father to give her a Christmas present.

She was not very old or learned as yet, but she had a very deep font of sympathy in her fresh young heart, and Winifred’s clear, matter-of-fact statement seemed to make a claim upon that sympathy for some reason or other.

She recalled her father’s face as he had kissed them good-by that morning, before rushing off to the city, after a hurried breakfast, and what she had called “Monday grumps,” took another form now.

“You mustn’t tell Chrissie that I heard anything, Polly,” Winifred said, suddenly. “Mother told Aunt Nellie she particularly did not want Chrissie to be worried.”

“I’m not a sneak,” was Polly’s retort.

She was thinking little things over in her mind. There had been a great difference of late in her home, things had been wanted very badly, and had remained wanting. Two or three of the maids had been sent away. The lessons she and Winifred had been taking with fashionable masters had ceased in the autumn, and though more studies were spoken of, they were not begun yet.

Oh, yes, there had been many changes in the current of their life this past year. The only thing that had remained unchanged, Polly determined, had been the characteristics of the detestable Monday mornings with the dusting, and arranging and the elements of anger and dissatisfaction throughout the house.

And for this fact, Polly in her thinking, felt as if she had lighted on a truth, too.

Who knew how much care and real trouble had lain closed up in those tradesmen’s books for her poor little mother! trouble that had to be faced and met each Monday morning? How could she tell now, with Winifred’s neat little story of their poverty ringing in her ears, what a weight of anxiety might not have underlain those wordy arguments her mother had fought out with a succession of cooks?

Polly darned her rug slowly, while Winifred having finished her tasks sat down in her own prim fashion in her own prim armchair and continued her discourse.

“I think, too, that father has had to pay a lot of money for Harold this year. I must say I have always thought it silly of father to send Harold abroad. Boys always do get money spent on them so freely.”

There was a decided touch of prettiness about Winifred Pennington as she sat with her small, white hands—Winifred wore gloves to save her hands on all occasions—folded demurely together on her lap, and her wealth of hair—maybe of a tone that was a trifle colorless—arranged about her little head in countless plaits, a custom that is out of fashion nowadays, yet that suited her. Winifred’s eyes were gray, like Polly’s, but how unlike! and her features were as regular as her natural instincts.

“Harold is a duck,” Polly interposed, warmly.

“He is the kind of duck that costs!” was Winifred’s quiet rejoinder. She gave a little sigh that had something of impatience in it. “Chrissie will have a good time this year, at any rate.”

Polly drew the last thread of her darning together with a little jerk, and spread the rug on the floor.

“I wish I knew something more about this man she is going to marry! Just fancy, Winnie, we none of us have seen him yet, and Chrissie is to be his wife in a few months. It doesn’t seem quite right somehow.”

Winifred’s eyebrows went up a little.

“I don’t think it matters very much our not having seen him. All that does matter is, that he is Sir Mark Wentworth, and that Chrissie will be very rich and very happy.”

Polly stood up and surveyed her workmanship.

She was not the best darner in the world, and the rug had rather a drawn-up look where the yawning rent had been, nevertheless Polly gazed at it complacently—it was a feat to have accomplished it at all. Then she shook off the bits of thread from her gown and went to work to finish up her corner.

It aggravated her to see Winifred sitting there so calmly, and the row of little gleaming silver things irritated her still more.

Polly had her own share of such ornaments. A photograph frame that held her mother’s picture, a queer small spoon some one had given her on her last birthday, a piece of old Dutch silver, fashioned to hold holy water and a broad silver belt buckle, all of which were carefully displayed on her little shelf, but all of which were just as black and tarnished as Winifred’s possessions were brilliant and clean.

She had her row of family portraits, too, which were very dear to her. She was wicked enough to confess to herself she was far fonder of Winifred’s picture than she was of Winifred herself.

“That is because I have to live with her, I suppose, and because she does make such a fuss about being clean and tidy. I like dust, plenty of it—nice, thick, black, London dust!” she now and then said, pugnaciously, to herself.

Mrs. Pennington had never trained her girls to be accustomed to the luxury of a maid. She was old-fashioned in her educational theories, and considered a certain amount of housework absolutely necessary for the welfare of her daughters. Hence every morning, Polly and Winifred had to make their own beds, and dust their room, and every Monday they were expected to turn it out thoroughly, and make it as clean as a new pin.

Downstairs in the drawing room Christina had to dust all the china, and to keep the many valuable ornaments in good order, and once a week each girl was sent down for an hour’s study with cook.

The mother, like an industrious bee, hovered over all the arrangements of her house, and her hand was always ready to make a rough corner smooth.

On this particular morning even her clever, deft hands found the rough corner a little too rough to be manipulated.

The usual scenes in the study, the usual fights over the household books had ended, but the trouble was not finished with them. Christina, when she went to seek her mother at the customary hour, found her sitting very still in her chair, her pale, worn, interesting face supported by her hand, which overshadowed her eyes, but could not hide from her daughter the fact that she had been crying.

“Mother, why would you not let me do the books for you? You worry yourself far too much.” Chrissie’s voice was very like Winifred’s—even, musical, rather cold, and there was a strong resemblance between them.

The elder girl was, however, far more attractive; in fact, when Polly declared her eldest sister to be beautiful, she was not far wrong, for beautiful Christina Pennington was, in a delicate, classical way. Her features were almost perfect, her eyes of a wonderful shade of dark-blue, she had the rarest skin, and her figure, though very slight, was well proportioned.

Mrs. Pennington roused herself hurriedly as her daughter spoke.

“I am all right now, Chrissie, dear. I made myself very angry with cook; but she is really too impertinent. I—I am afraid she will have to go.” Mrs. Pennington said this half nervously.

“I wanted you to send her away long ago, dear,” Christina said, quietly; “and if she has been rude to you to-day, I think she ought to go at once.”

Mrs. Pennington colored painfully.

“I will give her proper notice next week,” was her answer. She moved the papers nervously on her desk; there was something most pathetic in the look of her small, thin fingers. “Are you going out, my darling?” she asked, looking up hurriedly.

"I came to know if you would come with me, mother? I heard from Sunstead this morning. Mark wants me to go to his grandmother for Christmas, and I must get at least two new frocks—one for evening, and the other for everyday wear."

"Shall you go to Celeste as usual?" Mrs. Pennington asked. She made a big endeavor to speak lightly, but any person of keen perception would have read the heaviness, the perplexity that lay in her voice.

Christina paused.

"I think so. She cuts so well, and she is not more expensive than anyone else. Grannie's check came to me this morning, happily, and it will just see me comfortably through this visit. I am sorry to leave you, mother, dear, but I suppose I must go, must I not?"

When Christina put a little pleading into her sweetly toned voice she was quite irresistible, to her mother at least.

"Oh, my dear, of course you must go. It is only right and proper that you should be at Sunstead as often as possible, since it is to be your future home. We—we shall miss you, that you know only too well," Mrs. Pennington said, with a faint smile breaking the troubled look on her face, "but we must not be selfish."

Christina kissed her mother in a pathetic little way.

"Do come out, dear," she said. "The air will do you good, and I want your advice with Celeste. No one has such taste as you."

Mrs. Pennington held her beautiful daughter in her arms a long moment, and then broke into words and laughter as she hurried from the room.

"We have just an hour and a half before luncheon. Are the girls coming too, Chrissie?"

Chrissie shook her head.

"Winnie must practice, and it is Polly's day to attend to the plants in the conservatory," she said, very precisely. She exercised a certain control over her sisters.

She moved upstairs gracefully to her own room, and Mrs. Pennington followed more slowly.

Each step she took seemed to be weighed as with lead, and once she stopped and pressed both her hands on her heart before she could go on.

Polly, who had finished cleaning her silver, was on her way to the conservatory—already Winifred's clear, neat scales were running up and down the piano with the perfection of an automaton—when she met her mother at the top of the stairs.

To pop down the watering can and fold her mother in her arms was the work of an instant.

"You duck!" she said, kissing the small, dear, worn face, "do you know how much I love you? Have you the least idea how sweet you are, you lamb and dove?"

Mrs. Pennington nestled almost like a child in those clinging young arms.

"Polly, you have no respect for me," she said, and although she spoke in her usual tone, Polly detected a difference. It was perhaps due to the train of thought that Winifred's chance words had awakened in the girl's mind that she heard that faint difference in her mother's voice.

"Mums!" she said, wistfully, "may I come and help you dress? You are going out, I know."

"I can manage by myself, Polly, and you have a lot of work to do in the conservatory, my pet. Chrissie and I are going to her dressmaker; she has to have some new frocks, as she is going to spend Christmas with Sir Mark and his mother."

Polly gave vent to a deep exclamation of disappointment.

"Oh! mother," she said, "I thought Chrissie would be sure to be with us this Christmas; it is the last she will spend with us in a proper way," she finished, quaintly.

She would have said more, but something urged her not to press the matter to-day.

She picked up her watering can and went slowly to the conservatory.

Winifred had left her scales for her exercises, and Polly stopped to listen. She and Winifred played the same exercises, but Polly played them differently.

"Why do people grow up and get married?" she asked herself. "Chrissie belongs to us and yet that nasty Mark Wentworth comes and steals her away. I hate him! I think he might have let her be with us for Christmas. I am sure dear little mother feels it awfully, but she is such a sweet thing she never complains. She looks very tired to-day," Polly mused on, as she drew a very large pair of gardening gloves over her hands and prepared to do her duty among the plants.

The conservatory, like everything else in the house, had a shabby and rather dull appearance. Fresh plants were wanted and some of the windows were cracked.

"I wonder if what Winnie told me just now is true; if we are going to be very poor?" Polly said to herself.

She looked about her to-day with new eyes, and a certain seriousness stole into her brown, mischievous face.

She was quite a contrast to her sisters, both of whom resembled their mother. Polly, on the other hand, was neither like her father nor her mother. When this was remarked upon she got very angry.

"I hark back," she would observe. "Goodness knows who I am like. I don't think it matters much; looks are not everything, are they?"

For silly little Polly imagined that because she inherited neither her father's good looks, nor her mother's once undoubted beauty, she must perforce be exceedingly plain. She was, on the contrary, exceedingly pretty, a fact that was making itself patent to more than one person by slow degrees.

She was a very young girl, a real old-fashioned young lady, with her head crammed with romantic ideas and any amount of illusions.

She loved sweets and spent all her modest pocket money on chocolate caramels and Turkish delight. Her age was seventeen and a half, and she looked at least two years younger than that, very unlike Winifred, whose nineteen summers might easily have passed for twenty-five.

Polly's hair was, again, a contrast to her sisters'. Winifred had masses of soft dun-colored hair, Christina a wealth of warm brown tresses. Polly's hair was uncompromisingly dark, hair that was never very tidy, but never needed tongs or curling paper, since it had a trick of framing itself about her small head in a most seductively caressing manner.

She called her nose a disgrace to her family. It was a nondescript nose, not quite straight, with a wonderful amount of humor in the cut of the nostrils. It would have been impossible to imagine any other nose to match with those queer, lovely eyes of hers, eyes which had the strangest and quickest gradations of color in them, and which, like their prototype, the sea, could in an instant flash green and then grow wonderfully blue.

"Cat's eyes," Winnie called them, but they had nothing feline, or cunning, or shifty in their expression. They were too clear, too joyous, too full of life and the gladness of life, to have any of the subtlety, the blind sort of beauty one sees in a cat.

From the conservatory Polly had a good view of all that came and went on the stairs, and an hour or so after her mother, looking wan and shadowy but still attractive, followed by Chrissie, a vision of smartness and beauty, had passed down the stairs, Polly became aware that Jane, the parlormaid, was having an altercation with somebody at the front door.

Polly's pulses beat a little nervously. She was beginning to know the significance of troublesome callers by degrees, and she turned with a start as Jane, evidently flushed and beaten, came running up the stairs.

"There's a gentleman, Miss Polly, what's asking for master or mistress, and he won't be said nay. I have told him they ain't neither of them at home, but he won't believe me, and he won't go away."

Polly hesitated a moment. Her heart was beating very quickly, she did not know why, and she felt a little frightened. But she saw something had to be done. She drew off her gloves and her big apron.

"Show the gentleman into the dining room. I will come and speak to him, Jane."

Giving her gown a tweak, and her hair two or three futile pats, Polly went slowly down the stairs.

She was not sure if she were doing right or wrong, but most certainly, if the man would not go away at Jane's desire, then he must go away at her command.

Jane met her at the foot of the stairs.

"He's in the dining room, miss," she said, still hot and angry.

Polly walked in her stateliest way into the dining room.

A young man, tall, and of a very big build, was standing on the hearthrug with his back to the fire. He was frowning darkly, and was evidently in a very bad temper.

“Looks as if he had been born in a hurry on a Monday!” was impertinent Polly’s quick summing up to herself.

She shut the door with a click and advanced into the room.

The young man, who had been regarding his boots, now lifted his eyes and regarded her, and for the space of two or three seconds his exceedingly angry eyes gazed into the girl’s defiant ones while silence reigned.

And thus it was that Valentine Ambleton met pretty Polly Pennington for the first time.

CHAPTER II. THE FIRST MEETING.

It was the man who spoke first.

"I asked to see Mr. or Mrs. Pennington," he said, curtly.

"And you have been told," Polly answered, "that you can see neither, since neither are here to be seen."

"Your servant was most impertinent," the man said, sharply; "her manner was so misleading I insisted on being admitted."

"Yes," said Polly, calmly; "I heard you, and I consider you were very rude."

A faint smile flickered across the man's face for the space of an instant.

"May I ask to whom I have the honor of speaking?" he said, with a touch of amused courtesy.

"I am Polly—I mean Mary—Pennington," the girl drew herself up to her full height, "and may I ask who you are?" she queried, in her own peculiarly frank manner.

"My name is Valentine Ambleton. I am a cousin of Mark Wentworth."

Polly's expression changed.

"Oh," she said, a little frightened now at her temerity. "Oh! won't you sit down, Mr. Ambleton? My father is at business in the city, but my mother will be back directly. I expect her every minute; she has gone out with my eldest sister."

"Miss Christina Pennington?" queried Mr. Ambleton, with a strange tone in his voice as he spoke Chrissie's name.

Polly nodded her head.

"Won't you sit down?" she asked, more and more impressed that she had not received him very graciously. "Or perhaps you had better come into the drawing room. Chris—I mean mother—may be vexed to know you are here."

The mere fact of his announced connection with Sir Mark Wentworth made Polly feel it incumbent upon her to show him a great deal of attention. The air of mystery and grandeur with which the name of Mark Wentworth was guarded by Christina warranted this. Indeed she trembled a little as she imagined all Chrissie would say when this interview was faithfully repeated.

"I will stay here, thank you," Mr. Ambleton answered her, not very amiably. He stood in the same place with his back to the fireplace, and Polly looked at him a little hopelessly.

He was so big, and strong, and he looked so cross. It was a strange thought to come, but she did hope he was not going to worry her little mother. Her heart sank at his demeanor.

"I will get you a newspaper," she was beginning again, nervously, when the door opened and Chrissie and her mother appeared.

Polly effected an introduction with pretty awkwardness.

"This is Mr. Valentine Ambleton, mother darling. He is a cousin of Sir Mark Wentworth's, and he wishes to see you very particularly."

"I will not detain you more than a few moments," Ambleton broke in curtly, as he glanced half compassionately at Mrs. Pennington, and then turned his eyes in a scathing sort of fashion upon Christina. "I would offer you an apology for coming, only that I consider the circumstances of the case warrant my being here. I may as well state that I have a kind of responsibility in connection with my Cousin Mark, and on this ground I am here to-day to protest against this marriage with your daughter. Stay, hear me out," the young man continued, half sternly, as Mrs. Pennington uttered a faint exclamation, "for your daughter I can have no feeling of antagonism, since she is a stranger to me; but as a woman whose life may be utterly marred, I have felt it my duty to put plain facts before her and her parents. My cousin, Mark Wentworth, is no fit husband for any young girl, since apart from other and most potent objections, he is a man whose tendencies under the influence of drink are dangerous in the fullest sense of the word. Had I been in England this summer I would have taken proper precautions to prevent Miss Pennington from standing in the position she occupies to-day."

Polly had turned to leave the room when he had first commenced to speak, but his words held her rooted to the spot, and now she had moved back to her mother's side and had slipped her hand into Mrs. Pennington's cold one.

Never had she seen her mother's face wear such a look as was written on it now.

It was Christina who answered him.

She was very pale, more like a white statue than a living woman, and her voice had a tone in it that Polly had never heard from her lips before.

"We thank you, Mr. Ambleton, my parents and I, for your wonderful kindness in burdening yourself with such a disagreeable duty, and, having thanked you, we have no more to say."

Valentine Ambleton looked at her, and his lips curled.

"I see," he said, in a low, quick tone, "I have made a mistake."

"You have done more than made a mistake," Christina Pennington said, coldly; "you have been guilty of intrusion, and unpardonable rudeness. I think the matter may rest there."

He bent his head and moved away, but the mother, who had been a stunned listener to this conversation, suddenly realized all it meant.

"You must not go. You—you have given me a great shock. My husband and I—Polly, dear, run away—why are you here? This must not rest at such a point," Mrs. Pennington said, conquering her agitation with dignity, "we must investigate the matter."

Then a revelation was wrought in poor little Polly's knowledge of her best loved sister's nature.

Christina suddenly flashed crimson.

"There shall be no investigation," she said, in a choked, angry voice, "I am Mark Wentworth's promised wife, and I shall marry him whatever his cousin may say against him. I have known of your mischief-making propensities, and I have been warned against you," she said passionately, looking directly into the man's eyes. "It is well understood by now how jealous you are of Mark's position, and how you hate him—how you have always hated him. It was a clever trick to come here and try to work harm with me, but you have failed, Mr. Ambleton, you have failed absolutely. My parents have no power to urge or control me. I am twenty-four years of age, and permit no one to interfere in my life. My word is pledged to Mark Wentworth, and I shall be his wife."

Valentine Ambleton heard these bitter words to the end. Polly, obeying her mother, had crept toward the door, but Chrissie had spoken so quickly, all was said before the girl could pass out.

She paused with fast beating heart to look back at the little scene, at her mother's anguished face and Chrissie's hard, stony one, and as her sister ceased speaking, she saw a wave of pity mingle with the contempt expressed on Valentine Ambleton's face, and his earnestly spoken, low-voiced response caught her ears.

"Then may God help you!" he said, and Polly paused no more, but shut the door after her, and ran hurriedly up the stairs to her own room.

She caught the sound of the big hall door close with a sharp bang as she reached the corner that was her only place of retreat.

She realized, as she sat down in a chair, that her heart was beating painfully, and that her limbs seemed suddenly feeble and useless.

Christina's voice, Christina's words, and her mother's white, hopeless misery kept a tragedy alive in her heart.

She felt as if some cruel thing had come suddenly upon her, cutting her apart forever from the old sunny life of her childhood. For Polly had looked on a truth, she had seen into her dearly loved sister's heart, and she had recoiled in her young innocence from the story she saw written there. How often, oh! how often only this very morning she had stood her ground manfully, and fought Winifred's cold, quiet attacks on Chrissie's nature.

"You think her an angel," Winifred had said, barely two hours before. "Well, think it if you like, but I cannot be expected to be so silly. Chrissie is just as selfish as she is pretty. Do you know that she had fifty pounds this morning from Grandmother Pennington, and do you suppose she will offer to share one of those fifty pounds with us?" Winifred had laughed quietly. "She will put it away in a box or spend it on her own back. Oh! Chrissie is no angel, I can tell you!"

"She is my darling sister, and I love her," had been Polly's only argument. "I don't know anything about any fifty pounds, but I do know that if Chrissie ever dreams we want anything she will give it to us at once."

"Will she?" queried Winifred, as she had risen to go down to her practicing. "If Chrissie ever has a farthing she can call her own, she will keep it for herself, you see if she doesn't."

Polly had retorted with some hot word of reproach and loyalty mingled, and then she had gone down to her task of cutting the dead leaves and watering the plants, and she had quickly dismissed Winifred's words as being only a part of that jealousy toward Chrissie that was made a little more patent to Polly each day.

But Winifred's curt, sharp definition of her elder sister came back to poor little Polly in this moment of startled pain and self-communion; a veil seemed to slip from her eyes, and she saw Chrissie as she had never seen her before. Her indignation against the man who had brought such a sudden change in the atmosphere of her home would have been very deep had she not had ringing in her ears those few last words he had spoken, that sentence fraught with a pity too deep to be expressed.

The entrance of Winifred, her usually calm manner quite moved and excited, called Polly back from her thoughts.

"We are to go down to luncheon by ourselves," Winnie said. "Mother is ill, and Chrissie has gone out, and Jane says some one came, and there has been some sort of a scene. I want to know all about it."

Polly brushed her hair savagely.

"I am so hungry I could eat a bear!" she said, and so saying she pushed past Winifred and ran out of the room. Not from her lips should anyone hear aught that was hurtful to one who had been so dear to her, and was still so dear. That was the keynote of Polly's nature—love and loyalty; a clinging faith which not even proof could well upset.

Valentine Ambleton drove directly to a railway station on leaving the Penningtons' house. His sister was waiting for him; she was very like him—tall, handsome, frank-looking. She wore a well-cut traveling gown, and had two dogs beside her, carefully held by a strap.

"You are a little late, dear," she said, but she smiled as she said it.

Valentine busied himself by getting her and the dogs and the luggage into the train before he explained what had detained him.

When they were seated in the railway carriage he did so.

"I am afraid you will give me a scolding, Grace. I have disobeyed you."

Grace Ambleton looked at him keenly.

"You have seen Miss Pennington?"

He nodded his head.

"Well, Val?"

"It is not very well, my dear. Miss Pennington beat me off the ground, and made me look what I suppose I was, an intrusive fool. My good intention bore very bad fruit."

"I am sorry you went," Grace said, after a little pause. "I know you felt it was your duty, but, after all, I never thought with you on this subject. I was quite sure Miss Pennington knew perfectly well what sort of a man Mark was, and would not be moved by what you had to tell her. You must not forget how rich Mark is, and that he has a title. There are, I fear, many women like this one, who will accept these things, no matter what evils are attached to them. She is pretty, I suppose?"

Valentine was stroking the Irish terrier's head.

"She is quite beautiful, and I fell in love with the mother, a gentle, worn creature, whose face showed me her heart was of a different construction to her daughter's; but she had no control. She is a nominal guardian, as I am with Mark. Miss Pennington put forward her independence very clearly."

"What class of people are they?"

"Of our own class. I heard something of the father from old Bulwer this morning. He is a merchant hovering on the verge of ruin. The house looked poor," Valentine said. "It made me sorry somehow, and I was more sorry still when I got outside and realized what a miserable thing human nature is. I had difficulty in being admitted at first, and a young girl, a regular little spitfire, entertained me till her mother came. I suppose you will see something of these people in the future, Grace, since we are to be near neighbors of Sunstead. Naturally, if the daughter is to be Lady Wentworth, the family will be on the scene."

"I don't think I care to know them," Grace Ambleton said, frankly.

And after this the subject dropped, and Valentine opened the newspaper, and settled himself in his corner to read.

His thoughts wandered a good deal, however, and the vision of a certain worn woman's face haunted him.

He had conceived an immediate liking for Mrs. Pennington.

"Poor woman! she has heavy troubles to come, if what I hear is true, and she cannot hope for much love and consolation from her eldest daughter. It is to be hoped the little brown maiden will be more satisfactory. She can hit out straight, anyhow," he mused to himself, with a faint smile, "and I rather like her for that. She is pretty, too," he added, as an afterthought, and this thought arose as a very clear remembrance of Polly's strange, lovely eyes came to his mind.

They remained a memory for a few seconds, and then they faded away, but Polly and her wonderful eyes were destined to be brought back to Valentine Ambleton's memory before very long.

CHAPTER III.

BACK IN FAMILIAR HAUNTS.

A prettier country could hardly be imagined than that to which Grace Ambleton and her brother were being swiftly conveyed, after a lengthy absence abroad. They occupied, as a residence, a quaint, many-gabled house, that lay, surrounded by its old-fashioned garden, just beyond the cathedral boundaries and within sight of the close, in the old city of Dynechester, and all around and about them were scattered relics of a time dead and gone, covered over with that touch of unmistakable age, half delicate because of its intangibility, yet none the less indisputable.

Old trees stood like sentinels alone. The roof of Grace's home was moss-decorated, and the tiny streets that led to the residence were narrow and ill-paved; ill-lit, too, Grace's many girl friends would declare, in the dark winter days, and though there was nothing ghostly or cheerless once the doors of the Dower House were flung wide open, there was some of these friends who declared frankly among themselves that they would rather not live as Grace did in such a queer, many-centuried home, built so close to the cathedral walls and the cathedral burial ground.

Others there were who would most gladly have taken Grace's place in this quaint old house, some for the sake of Valentine, the elder brother, and some for the sake of the laughing eyes and wonderfully handsome face of Sacha, the youngest of the two Ambleton men.

Grace was perfectly well aware of this divided feeling among her friends, but she was quite indifferent to all.

The Dower House was her home for as long as she chose to stay in it. She knew that, and she told herself on the morning after her return from her sojourn abroad, that she would be in no hurry to leave this home again, either for a temporary or a permanent absence. For Grace loved the house where she had been born, and where all her healthy childhood had been passed; she loved every stick and stone about the place.

There was a touch of welcome to her in the tall, gray, stately walls of Dynechester's old cathedral, a voice of greeting in the sound of the familiar clock chimes and bells.

"I never want to go away any more," she confessed to Bob, the Irish terrier, and Nancy, the Ayrshire one, and both animals understood, and were entirely of her opinion.

They had been brought from Dynechester two days before to greet their beloved mistress in London. Val had been detained in town on business, and Grace had remained with him, gratifying her longing for home by summoning one of the servants to come to her with the dogs, which she had been forced to leave behind when she had started for their long tour in foreign countries.

"It is like heaven to be back in the dear old corners," she told herself more than once, and when she met Val later in the day she made him smile by her ardent delight in, and enthusiasm for, her home.

"Not much good taking you everywhere and showing you the great wonders of the world, Miss Grace!" her brother remarked, with a laugh.

Grace echoed the laugh.

"I never knew how much I loved dear old Dynechester till I saw it again yesterday, Val."

Valentine glanced affectionately at his sister.

They were an undemonstrative pair, but few people had a deeper, truer love for one another than Val and Grace Ambleton. The girl's love had other elements in it besides mere sisterly affection and pride. Valentine had been the only parent Grace had known.

It was true she had a shadowy memory of her mother, a woman who had been in constant suffering, and who had leaned upon her eldest boy for protection, but this mother had passed away before Grace had reached five years of age, and such care and thought as the girl had had in the succeeding years she had had from her brother, Valentine.

She was dear to Sacha too, and she loved her second brother devotedly, but Sacha, though her senior by three years, had always fallen into the position of being her baby and care, just as she had been Val's.

Their mother had been a Wentworth, the only daughter of the old lady who lived a perpetual invalid up at the large house beyond the outskirts of the town.

There had been three sons born to this Lady Wentworth, and of these three two had died in childhood and one had married and had begotten an heir to the title and the estates.

Grace had a very vivid memory of her Uncle Ambrose, father of the present baronet, Sir Mark Wentworth.

She had been very much attached to this uncle, and she had sorrowed deeply at his sudden death. It had surprised no one to learn at the time of that death, that by the will of Sir Ambrose, his nephew, Valentine Ambleton, was appointed a co-trustee with an old legal friend, to Mark Wentworth and his various properties.

Val, it was true, was not of the usual age for such a position, but everybody knew that Sir Ambrose had placed more confidence in his nephew's sound wisdom and practical good sense than he did in most men; and though Val was barely more than ten years his cousin's senior, it seemed to all the little world of Dynechester the wisest and best arrangement Sir Ambrose could have made for his son's future, when he appointed his Nephew Valentine to act as guardian to that son.

Sir Ambrose had been dead a little over four years now, and his son had attained his majority the year following his father's decease.

Perhaps Grace alone, out of all the world, knew how much trouble and anxiety her cousin was to her brother, and even she did not know all. She had a certain weakness for Mark; he had appealed to her from the first in the same way as Alexander, or Sacha as he was always called, did.

Mark Wentworth had always been a handsome boy with endearing ways; he had been adored by his father, and this adoration was carried on now by his grandmother, whose only joy in her old age lay in the joy that Mark's mere existence gave her.

His mother Grace had never known, young Lady Wentworth having died abroad many years before Grace could grasp much in her young brain. There were pictures of this mother at Sunstead, and Mark was wonderfully like her. He was so dark as to seem scarcely of English birth. His face was handsome, passionate, attractive, and his nature matched his face as to passion and attraction.

It was not until Grace had grown to womanhood—she was now about twenty-two—that she learned the meaning of the shadow and the anxiety that beset Val so much where Mark was concerned, and when she did learn this she found it hard to grasp at first. But Val was not a man to make a mistake. He had caught signs of Mark's failings when his cousin had been barely more than a lad, and then he had something more than fear to lend proof to his discovery, for Val alone knew the true story of his uncle's marriage; he alone was aware that Mark's mother, instead of dying years before, had lived a wretched, lost existence, confined in a home for drunkards, until a few months before the accident in the hunting field that had brought Sir Ambrose Wentworth's life to an untimely end.

Besides the instructions left in his will, Sir Ambrose had written a letter to Valentine, to be read after his death, in which the unhappy father betrayed to the younger man the anguish that had lived canker-like in his heart all the years that followed on his fatal marriage.

He was bluntly frank with Val, and he entreated his nephew by every means in his power to stand between Mark and his mother's fate.

The trait of that mother's horrible weakness had not been developed sufficiently in the boy at the time the father wrote this letter to cause him to regard Mark's future as hopeless, and he relied on Mark's affection for Val to keep his loved child safe from all temptation.

The trust left to him had been accepted by Valentine Ambleton in no half spirit. He had constituted himself Mark's companion on all possible occasions, and when his work—he was an architect by profession—claimed him, then he looked to Grace to take his place.

He found it necessary for his scheme of protection to tell his brother and sister briefly, the fear that Mark might inherit the failing that had claimed his mother, and that came to him as a terrible legacy from that mother's family, and Grace, at least, had shared his anxiety over their cousin to the fullest degree.

If Sacha was less moved about Mark's possible fate, that was, perhaps, natural, for Sacha had from the beginning of his life learned really to trouble about no one but himself. He was of an utterly different nature to either Grace or Val; there was less stolidity about him. He was never very practical, and lived, for the most part of the time, in happy dreams.

Contrary to the wishes of Val, and such of his kinsmen who in the beginning had had a right to enter into the young Ambletons' lives, Sacha had followed no sound, practical profession; he had taken up art instead, and it was not to be denied that he had marked talent as a painter.

Val, when he found his brother resolved on adopting the brush as a means of earning his living, sacrificed his own feelings in the matter, and there was a very large room in the top floor of the Dower House which had long ago been set apart as a studio for Sacha when he cared to be at Dynechester.

The Dower House was practically a Wentworth property.

Most people imagined that the house and grounds had belonged actually to Mrs. Ambleton when she arrived, widowed, years before, to take up her abode in it; but this was not the case. Sir Ambrose had put the house at his sister's disposal when she returned to England from Russia after her husband's death.

There had not been too much money left to Mrs. Ambleton and her children at this time. She had made, in a sense, a poor marriage. Eric Ambleton had been a handsome young attaché when she had fallen in love with him, and she had become his wife in the face of a good deal of opposition, for most people realized that Eric Ambleton had been a man of promise but of promise only, and most people proved to be right.

Advancement in diplomacy is proverbially slow, and Eric Ambleton struggled on in an onerous and most difficult life, always hoping for better things that never came.

He died while attached to the embassy in St. Petersburg,[Pg 34] and his wife had no other course open to her but to travel back to her old country with her two handsome boys and accept all her brother offered to her.

After her death Sir Ambrose desired Valentine to continue to regard the Dower House as a home for himself and his brother and sister—the little Grace who had been born there so soon after her mother's widowhood.

"My mother will never claim it," he had said, sadly enough. For his wife was believed to be dead at that time, and his mother still reigned at Sunstead, pouring out tender love on young Mark. There seemed to be no reason why the Ambletons should not, therefore, regard themselves as located at the old house for all their lives.

When his uncle died, Val had, however, spoken out very plainly to his cousin, and had insisted upon putting matters on a very different footing.

"I want you to remember that the Dower House is a valuable property, Mark," he had said, in his frank way. "If you were to let it to any outside person you would get a very fair rental for it, and I propose to pay you this rental. Your father was generous beyond all description to let us come here in the beginning, and now he is dead, I

don't want to continue living on that generosity; hence my reason for speaking to you now. I don't suppose you will be a hard landlord," Val had added, with his rare smile; "or that you will turn us out in a hurry, but I want you to remember that you *are* our landlord and of course, if you ever have need of the house, you will let us know."

Mark Wentworth's answer had been characteristic.

"Don't talk rot, Val," he had remarked, in his strong-worded way. "As if the Dower House could ever belong to anybody but you! I don't want any rent, and I won't be your landlord, so you can settle it just whichever way you please."

So Val had settled it by paying each quarter a certain sum of money into Sir Mark Wentworth's account in Dynechester Bank, and Grace approved of what he did.

They were not rich, but they had enough. Val was now beginning to earn a fair income, and they inherited, further, the small income which had belonged to their mother. Latterly, too, they had received news of a possible source of good fortune from some property in Russia, which their father had purchased years before in rather a haphazard fashion, and which had lain dormant all these years.

It had been to investigate matters in connection with this property that Val and Grace had gone abroad. Sacha had remained in England, sometimes running down for a few days to Dynechester, but as a rule living in London, in a pet circle of artists.

Sacha somehow never fell in wholly with the life of his brother and sister.

Val had been sorry and glad to go. He had hesitated some time before he did eventually leave home, but, added to the necessity of personal investigation came an offer of work from a firm who employed him a good deal, and who, chancing to hear of his suggested journey to Russia, found this an excellent opportunity to utilize his services.

Val was glad to leave on this account, but he troubled to go solely because matters had slipped gradually into rather a tangle between Mark and himself. Val had always feared this, for he was above all else sensible, and he had foreseen the time when Mark would resent his interference and the fact of his trusteeship. How or why the bad feeling on Mark's side toward himself had arisen first Val did not know, save that he imagined the younger man had resented certain plain words he had been compelled to speak.

The fact was that Sir Mark, being a very handsome young fellow, with very little mental ballast to keep him from follies, had quickly shown a disposition to lead a life that Val held to be objectionable in every sense of the word.

It was not merely that excitement and dissipation was bound to help the young man on the road to a fatal end; it was because Val considered there was very much indeed that his cousin could have found to occupy him in connection with the various properties in and about Dynechester, and in other places as well.

Val was as lenient as most men over the question of amusement, but duty always came first with him, and Mark most assuredly neglected his duties in the most pronounced way.

There were other things that made Val grave and anxious. Mark had a predilection for the most questionable company, and already Dynechester was beginning to look a trifle askance at the young man.

Grace of course was not enlightened as to the cause of the very sharp quarrel that had taken place between her brother and Sir Mark, just before they started abroad, but she felt without knowing anything that Val must have been in the right.

It had been, as a matter of fact, a very nasty quarrel, and Mark had said many hurtful things.

Up to this time Val had never breathed to his cousin that grim truth about the mother whom Mark knew only as a memory; but when he saw how fast Mark was drifting to the same miserable fate, he felt, cruel as it was, that he must speak out.

The story he had to tell infuriated Mark Wentworth.

"I see your drift," he said to Val, with a sneer; "finding you can't interfere with me and my amusements, and being frightened to death of my getting married, you tell me this abominable thing simply to work in your plan better. Of course a child could understand you! If I die unmarried you come into my title and place through your mother's right, and so you are determined to keep me unmarried. Oh! I can see right through you, my dear Cousin Val, and all your righteous disposal of the present state of things is just a proof of your beastly selfishness. I tell you frankly that if you say much more, I will make this woman you are kicking up such a fuss about my wife to-morrow!"

Val had looked into the dark, passionate face.

"You are not an utter fool, Mark, so I shall not trouble to argue this sort of point with you," he said, quietly. "As to the other suggestion you have made, I hope from my heart that the day will come when you will be happy with a wife to love you, and children to call you father. But that must not be yet, Mark, my lad," Val had added quietly, but sternly. "You have to take a good pull at yourself, Mark, and just pause and look ahead of you. Why don't you pack up your traps and come abroad with us? We should be so jolly together, you, Grace and myself, and——"

"And the Dean's Chapter, too, I suppose, to shrieve me perpetually of my sins, eh?" Mark had queried with a pronounced sneer. Then he had used a very bad word, and he had told Val to "go to the devil!" and he had swung himself away to end further argument.

All this—save what concerned a certain woman about whom Val could not bring himself to speak to his sister—had been told to Grace, and the girl had only too well grasped the difficulties of the position.

"But you have done your best, you are doing all you can now, Val," she had said, consolingly. "You cannot make yourself Mark's keeper. Write to Mr. Baker and tell him he must fill your trust as well as his own while you are abroad. I will write to Sacha and ask him to be as much with Mark as he can. It is just possible," Grace had added, thoughtfully, "that Mark may take a little turn for the better if you are away for

a time. With some natures restraint has a bad effect if urged too much. Mark has grown impatient lately. If you will let me advise you, dear, you will say no more to him, but come away with me, and trust to his own good sense to realize the danger of his position.”

And Val had accepted this counsel.

He had done all Grace had suggested, and he had gone abroad, with a sigh of relief. Determined that no evil feeling between Mark and himself should be fostered by any act of his, Val wrote frequently to his cousin, as Grace did to her grandmother, poor old Lady Wentworth, but Mark vouchsafed no answers, and such news as they had received of him had come through Val’s fellow trustee, Mr. Baker, and from Sacha, when he remembered to write at all.

The news was not cheering.

Mark had plunged headlong into a vortex of dissipation, and the end of this had been a sharp illness, which his grandmother called fever, but which Val knew, alas! only too well, had been an attack of delirium tremens.

Grace and he had been too far away to return at that time, and indeed he was kept abroad much longer than he had anticipated, owing to an increase of work required of him by the firm.

When eventually they returned homewards and reached London, it was to learn a sad and sordid story of Mark’s life during their absence, ending in his announced marriage with a certain Miss Pennington, a young lady whom he had met while she had been on a visit to Dynechester, and who was, so Mr. Baker affirmed, apparently in utter ignorance of the true character of the man she was about to marry.

Close investigation through other channels showed Val only too clearly into what a state his cousin had drifted, and other inquiries elicited the fact that Christina Pennington was undoubtedly a lady, and one who was to be saved from a shocking fate.

The friends with whom she was staying in Dynechester were friends of the Ambletons also, and from one of the heads of this family Val had obtained all he wanted to know about the Penningtons.

His anger against his cousin was unbridled at this moment.

He had had the greatest pity for Mark in the beginning, but for the man who had wantonly flung himself to ruin he had nothing but contempt.

On one point he was resolved. This marriage should not go forward.

He poured out all his heart to Grace, and told her of his resolve to put the truth before Christina Pennington and her parents, and, as we have seen, Grace had not wholly agreed with him in this.

“It is a delicate matter, Val dear,” she had said, gently, “and it must be handled delicately.”

For Valentine had a way of rushing at things too suddenly.

He was so honest himself, he hardly understood the meaning of diplomacy, and Grace not infrequently had to stand between people and his blunt truth.

“It is an abominable business,” Val had said, hotly; and the matter had dropped, to be revived only when the brother and sister met at the railway station to start on their return journey to Dynechester.

Grace could see then that her brother was greatly upset by his interview with Miss Pennington, and her homecoming was a little spoiled by the fear of what would happen when Val and Sir Mark should meet.

It was with relief, therefore, that she learned from her servants that Sir Mark was absent from Sunstead, and she gave herself up to the pleasure of the moment, hoping a little against hope that things might shape themselves better, and that the worst might be averted.

CHAPTER IV. A BITTER EXPERIENCE.

There followed some dull and sorrowful days for little Polly after Valentine Ambleton had made his unexpected visit.

It might truly be said to have been Polly's first experience of sadness, for hitherto life had run along smoothly and merrily enough. But with that curious, painful scene in which Christina had played such a strange part, the whole mental atmosphere of their home life had been charged with new elements, and Polly came upon the fact that it was an easy step from careless, youthful happiness to deep thought and unhappiness.

Neither she nor Winifred knew what had happened to make Christina go deliberately out of her home, but they, in common with the rest of the household, were enlightened as to her intentions when, later in the day, a message was brought from old Mrs. Pennington's house, situated a little way out of London, asking that Miss Christina's things might be packed at once and sent to her at her grandmother's residence.

Mrs. Pennington was downstairs in her accustomed place when this note was brought by a neat maid, and Polly saw that the pallor and the strained look on her mother's face deepened as she read the few curtly written words.

It was just the hour before dinner, and Polly could see that her mother had struggled against her attack of illness, and had come down simply so that her husband should not be alarmed when he came home.

"Father has so much on his mind just now," she had said, when Polly had ventured on a protest; "we must all do what we can to make things bright and cheerful. Has—has Chrissie come in yet, Polly dear? I fancy I heard her steps."

But Chrissie had not come back, and her note brought in at that moment struck the final touch of loving, confident hope from the mother's heart.

She gave the note to Polly.

Somehow, though Polly was younger than Winifred, her mother turned to her more easily.

"Will you put Chrissie's things together, love?" the quiet voice asked, simply. "You see she is very angry with me, and she will stay with your grandmother for a little while."

Polly's eloquent face took an expression of pain and tears.

"Chris does not mean to vex you, mother darling; I am sure of it," she said, eagerly; but her eagerness was not to defend Chrissie as in former times, but to give pleasure and solace to her mother's heart.

Mrs. Pennington smiled faintly.

“Ah! Polly, dear,” she said, with a little break in her voice, “we all make big, sad mistakes sometimes. Pray God my Chris may never live to regret the mistake she is making.”

Polly went upstairs and into Christina’s room with a heart that ached, as she said to herself, “like toothache,” and a blinding mist before her.

It seemed to her almost as though she were committing a fault to find herself in Chrissie’s room at all.

Chrissie’s whole life had always been so different from the rest of them, and her room seemed to convey this more plainly than words.

The furniture was luxurious, the decorations charming, and a whole regiment of pretty and costly things were scattered about.

Christina, fortunately for herself, had been her grandmother’s godchild, and money had never been denied her.

There was some feeling, Polly did not know what it was, between her mother and her father’s mother; old Mrs. Pennington had never been kind or amiable to her son’s wife, she kept all her kindness for Christina.

It was no easy task to gather together all the things Chrissie had enumerated, but Polly did it, eventually.

Her back ached, and her hair was rumpled, and she had torn her dress when Winifred came up from dinner.

“Father is furious because you did not come down,” said Winnie, looking round Christina’s dismantled room with a curious expression; then she laughed. “Well, what have you to say to your angel now, I should like to know?” she inquired. “Nice, kind, sweet nature, hasn’t she, to turn her back on her family at a moment’s notice?”

“You do talk such stuff and nonsense,” Polly observed, sharply. She was hungry, and Winifred had had her dinner. “As if Christina had gone away for good!”

Winifred laughed again.

“As if she ever intended to come back here again! Father says he will go down tomorrow and talk to her. He may as well save himself a journey. Chrissie is not easily moved. She is gone, and I,” said Winifred neatly, “consider she was quite right to go!”

“When your opinion is asked, then give it!” observed Polly, in exasperation.

She sat down and cried a little when she was alone.

She did not want Christina to go, she did not want any changes in her home; everything had been very happy before that big, nasty man had come that morning and upset them all. It was he who had driven Chrissie away.

Of course Polly did not quite think Chrissie ought to have gone, and have left her mother so unhappy, especially when that mother had always been so good to Chrissie.

In a little, stinging way, remembrance brought before Polly very clearly how much had been given to Chrissie, and had been lacking elsewhere.

In every way possible her mother had spared her eldest child. She did not know, in her blind love, that her unselfishness in this had been remarked by more than one

person, and she had surely never dreamed that the day would come when Chrissie would repay her so poorly.

Polly was very unhappy about it; she hated shedding tears, as a rule, but now she wept freely.

"Home will never be the same again," she said to herself, with a desolating feeling pressing on her heart.

She saw the maid who had come from Chrissie, and to her she confided one or two boxes, and a little scribbled note she had written on the spur of the moment.

"Tell my sister the other things shall be sent to-morrow, and oh! please will you be sure to give Miss Pennington that note?"

There never came an answer to that little penciled note, and Polly's loving heart sank very low in the days that followed.

There was much to depress her and to make her sad.

Her mother was ill to begin with, not very ill, only tired, and very weak.

Her father had gone north on most important business. Whether he had been to see Christina or not Polly never knew, and she asked no questions. The story of coming trouble that Winifred had given her that Monday morning was confirmed.

"Father has had some heavy losses," her mother told her, in a quiet, dull way. "We must reduce expenses everywhere. I have given most of the servants notice to go."

"I am very glad," was Polly's remark. "I will be cook, and I will be so economical, mumsy, and Winifred shall be parlormaid and butler."

Mrs. Pennington smiled that wan smile of hers at the girl's enthusiasm, but words seemed to have gone from her for a time. She who had been so brave, who had fought so long against that most hideous of miseries, a false position, seemed to have no more strength left to fight now.

Polly constituted herself nurse in her mother's room, and concocted mysterious dishes.

"You must eat this, my love!" she would cry. "Look, a ragout a la Marguerite, my own invention. You simply cannot refuse it, mother dearest!"

When the news came, conveyed in the form of an announcement in the paper, that Christina was married, the mother seemed to wake from her apathy. She broke into passionate tears; they were such tears as Polly had never seen her mother shed before.

"Oh, my heart is broken!" the poor woman cried wildly. "I never knew I could suffer so much, and through Chrissie! She has broken my heart!" was the moan again and again, while poor Polly stood by, blanched and trembling.

Once the mother lifted her face.

"It is all true, Polly," she whispered, "all that Mr. Ambleton said. She has known it all along—he is a hopeless drunkard, and she has married him, married him against my prayers, against her father's will. What hope of blessing can rest on such a marriage? Oh, I would I had been dead before I had lived to see this thing come to my own dear child!"

Winifred only shrugged her shoulders when she heard the news.

“Sir Mark may be ten times worse than they say, he is still Sir Mark and a very rich man, and Chrissie is now Lady Wentworth. I can’t see what there is to make such a fuss about.”

Polly made no reply. Her heart was surging with pain, bewilderment and doubt.

She was too young to understand it all, but on one point she was very much determined—she detested Valentine Ambleton with all her might and main.

“If he had not come here and made that scene, Chrissie would never have done what she has done!” she said to herself, confidently.

She had her small hands full in these days; her mother’s health gave her much anxiety.

The servants had departed, and though Polly was glad they should go, in one sense, it made the big house very gloomy.

Winifred took her share of the work, but Polly almost wished she had not done so, for all that Winnie did was done with a kind of quiet resentment that made itself felt.

Visitors came occasionally, but few were admitted. Mrs. Pennington’s health was the excuse, so that those who desired to gratify their curiosity about Chrissie’s marriage had to go away unsatisfied.

One guest came, however, who was immediately admitted. He was a favored guest in the Pennington household, and Polly never realized how much comfort and pleasure could be conveyed to her in the person of one human being till the day that Hubert Kestridge reappeared to invite himself to dinner in his usual unconventional manner, and to shed a sort of radiance throughout the house with his bright, happy manner.

It was quite three months now since Kestridge had paid them a visit, and Polly gave a little gasp of surprise when she heard he had come.

He was, in a sort of way, their kinsman, being the stepson of their Aunt Nellie (Mrs. Pennington’s sister), who had married his father many years before, and who was the only mother Hubert had ever known.

Starting in a city office to earn his living during his father’s lifetime, Hubert now found himself a kind of small landowner in Ireland, and he spent the greater part of his life over there, working his property himself, and endeavoring to get something good out of it.

The Pennington girls called him their cousin, but he was, of course, no relation at all. Nevertheless, he brought a rush of warmth to poor Polly’s overtired little heart the moment she heard his voice in the hall below.

“Hubert has come,” she cried to Winifred, rushing up the stairs two at a time in her excitement. “At last something nice has happened! I must run and tell mother. This will cheer her up. What a blessing,” added Polly, thoughtfully, “that we had roast beef

for lunch. Hubert loves roast beef, and he must be so hungry. Make haste, Winnie, and go and speak to him.”

But Winnie was particularly careful in her dress arrangements this evening. She put on her prettiest frock, and brushed and plaited her hair to perfection. She looked very sweet, and modest, and charming as she went downstairs. She remembered as she went that she had a very dismal future ahead of her, and she said to herself, in her quiet little way, that it behoved her to alter this future by any and every means in her power.

“Aunt Nellie was full of enthusiasm for the wonders Hubert had done already to his Irish property. I quite believe he will be rich one of these days. Polly does not care whether she is a pauper all her life,” was Winifred’s final thought. It was a thought born of a certain fact known only to Winifred, and it was not altogether free from irritation. For Winnie could see much in her quiet, little way, and she had discovered the last time Hubert Kestridge had come from Ireland, that he had found something new and charming in little Polly Pennington, something that Winifred feared might lead to complications if it were not nipped in the bud, for it was by no means desirable that Hubert should find Polly pretty or charming, since she, Winifred, had resolved to become his wife.

CHAPTER V. POLLY'S CULINARY DIFFICULTIES.

Polly had no time to devote to self-adornment on this occasion. She had given her attention to her mother instead, and it had warmed her heart with pleasure to see how the news of Hubert's coming seemed to rouse her mother, and to bring back a little of the old light and pretty expression to the pale, tired, sad face.

"I am going to perk you up ever so smart, you love!" Polly informed her mother, after she had made her announcement. Polly had little words and sayings that were peculiarly her own. "You must wear," she said, after a moment's deep reflection, "you must wear your heliotrope teagown. You do look such a duck in it, and I want Hubert to admire you more than ever to-night."

Mrs. Pennington submitted to the offices of this tender little handmaiden almost unconsciously, so great was the pressure of anxious care on her mind.

"But Polly, you are not dressed yourself," she said once, waking from this heavy train of thought and realizing the situation at a glance. "My darling, leave me now; I can finish by myself. But, oh, Polly"—Mrs. Pennington was her whole self in this moment—"we are forgetting. What shall we give Hubert for dinner? He must be hungry, and now cook has gone——"

"And a good riddance," interpolated Polly, with a pin between her teeth.

She was working busily with the arrangement of the teagown, one of poor Mrs. Pennington's best pieces of finery, which, like all else she possessed, needed certain manipulation.

"Just leave all to me, mother dear," Polly went on hurriedly, as she took the pin from between her teeth and fixed it in a knot of lace. "As a matter of fact, Hubert will have a magnificent dinner, quite as good as he gets in Ireland, I'll bet anything. Besides, Hubert is not a guest, he is one of us, and that means he must take what he can get, and be thankful he gets it. Now, my sweetheart, you look like an angel; run along. I heard Winnie bringing Hubert upstairs in the drawing room. Martha shall sound the gong when dinner is ready."

Polly flitted away.

A tired sigh escaped her lips as she went, for she had been on her legs all the day, and though she had dismissed the difficulties so cheerfully, the fact remained that the dinner was meager, and she hardly knew how she was going to alter this at so short a notice.

But the inventive faculty was not lacking in pretty Polly's brain. She dived down the kitchen stairs, where a trusty maidservant, who had been some time in the household and had "understudied" for the various cooks on many an occasion, hailed her coming with joy, and set to work to plan and devise.

Somehow, since the establishment had been so reduced, and her mother had been so weak and troubled, the weight of everything had fallen on Polly's shoulders. In particular, she had monopolized the commissariat department, and Winifred had ceded this and other things with alacrity.

"You are so clever at cooking, Polly," she had said, with cunning prettiness. "Mother will always eat what you make for her."

And guileless Polly swallowed the compliment, and doubled her devotion to the development of her culinary art, not fathoming the subtlety of Winifred's appreciation all at once.

To-night she seated herself on the kitchen table—her favorite place while below—and gazed meditatively at the joint of cold roast beef. It was a very fine piece of beef, and had an appetizing air.

"Admirable as one dish, but it has a desolating effect if not supported with others," she told herself, and then her face lit up.

She would make an omelet, and Martha should concoct a delicious salad, and a jelly from the nearest pastry cook's should be followed by *maccaroni au gratin*. After this there was the dessert, and happily they had plenty of fruit in the house.

But the trick of cooking the omelet and appearing neat and trim at the dinner table taxed Polly too much.

She had already tried to make her head "presentable," as she called it, but she had not had time to change her serge morning gown in which she had worked all the day.

"Well," she observed, as she glanced herself up and down, "I am sorry if I shall offend Hubert's fastidious taste, but he cannot be fed and charmed at one and the same time."

She brushed herself thoroughly, however, then tied herself up in a big cooking apron, and set to work, and in a little while the boom of the gong informed the occupants of the drawing room that dinner was served.

Polly was already in the dining room when her mother, leaning on Hubert Kestridge's arm, came down the stairs, followed by Winifred's pretty figure, and they both looked so sweet and fresh that Polly awakened to the burning of her scorched hands and face, and the shabbiness of her gown with a pang of something like shame.

Winifred gazed at her sister complacently.

Sometimes, she told herself softly, there was some luck in the world.

Never had she seen Polly look so awful in all her life before.

Hubert Kestridge had clasped both of Polly's hot, small hands in his with a heartiness that was almost eager.

"I thought you were never coming to welcome me," he said, with a tinge of reproach in his pleasant, Irish-touched voice.

Polly whisked her hands away.

“You think very silly things. You always did!” she observed; and she went down to the lower end of the table, and took her father’s seat, with a frown on her pretty brow.

Mrs. Pennington looked troubled as she saw how hot and tired the girl was, and the shadow on her face deepened as the omelet was brought in and handed round.

A pang went through the mother’s heart as she set the devotion and love and courageous unselfishness of this child against the heartless indifference, the callous selfishness of that other, that too well-loved eldest born, who had never been thwarted in any of her wishes, and from whom the phantom care—that had been stalking nearer and nearer to the home these past two years—had ever been eagerly hidden.

In none of the carking anxieties that had eaten their way, slowly but surely, to the mother’s heart, had Christina Pennington ever shared. Had her nature been different she could not, of course, have shut her eyes to the truth of things as they were under her father’s roof, but Chrissie had chosen to be blind.

She had always treated her mother’s difficulties, those celebrated “Monday agonies,” as Polly called them, very much in the way she would have treated some eccentric characteristic, and though the tears might have stained her mother’s face, and the trouble have proclaimed itself audibly, Chrissie would never have dreamed of sacrificing one shilling of her really ample allowance from her grandmother to help this poor mother to tide over a temporary financial gulf.

In the old days—not even to herself—would Mrs. Pennington permit the character of her eldest child to come up for criticism, but now, with her heart torn and aching from the blow Christina’s selfishness and worldliness had dealt her, she dissembled no longer, and she suddenly found in Polly’s hot, disheveled looks this night a beauty far greater than she had seen in her darling first born’s undoubted loveliness.

It had been the fashion in the Pennington family, with all its dozens of cousins and uncles and aunts, to consider Polly an exceedingly plain girl. Christina and Winifred, and the schoolboy, Harold, were permitted their claims to good looks, but Polly’s personality had had no admirers among her kinsfolk up to the present time, if, indeed, Hubert Kestridge may be excepted, who had always found a charm in the youngest Pennington girl, even when she had been a gawky, sallow child.

He did not look at her very much to-night. He felt if he did he might betray more than he judged wise to confess to the world just yet, but though he did not look very often, he saw enough to make him eat far more than he required.

He exerted himself to be very bright and cheery, and the very sound of his voice did poor, chilled, anxious Mrs. Pennington as much good as a tonic.

Winifred and he carried on most of the conversation till dessert came, and then the servant having withdrawn, the ever-pressing subjects of the moment were brought forward and dealt with by the young man in a practical, straightforward manner.

He was very sensible about Chrissie’s marriage.

"Now, don't you fret your heart away; take my word for it, Christina will be as happy as the day is long. She was never born to be a poor man's wife."

"But—but the wife of a drunkard, Hubert! What money can smooth that away? What happiness can that bring?" murmured Mrs. Pennington, faintly.

"Sure," Hubert Kestridge said, firmly—since he had come to offer sympathy and comfort he saw no reason why he should not give it in full measure—"sure, and I think, Aunt Phœbe, dear, you'll find that's a story that maybe has but little truth in it. Christina's a mighty particular lady now, isn't she? And is she, do you think, going to mate herself with a man that has no right to the name?"

"I believe," cried Polly, viciously, from the end of the table, "I firmly believe, mother darling, that that nasty Mr. Ambleton just came here and took away Sir Mark's character out of spite. It was very impertinent of him to come at all, I consider, especially when he had nothing but disagreeable things to say."

Hubert glanced up, and his face changed expression a little.

"Ambleton?" he said. "Are you speaking of Valentine Ambleton, I wonder?"

"We are speaking," observed Polly, loftily, "of an enormous brute who came here one day, and forced his way in, and just made mother as ill as she could be. Don't say you know anything nice about him, please, Hubert, because he was just as rude and horrid a man as anyone wants to meet."

"I did not see him," Winnie interpolated, in her even, pretty voice.

Winnie always chose the moment to speak softly after Polly had been more than usually vehement and furious. She studied the value of contrast in all things.

"Do you know him, Hubert?" Mrs. Pennington asked, tremulously.

Hubert Kestridge evaded the question a little.

"I know a man called Ambleton, true enough; but it will not be the same, I'm thinking," and then he turned the conversation on the absent head of the house, and Mrs. Pennington poured out all her fears and hopes to him.

"Robert is in Glasgow now. I heard from him this morning. It seemed to me he wrote more cheerfully. Perhaps the Northern business may help the difficulties here. Robert speaks of remaining up there a while longer, to work up the connection all he can."

"I heard from him, too," Kestridge said, "and I think he's doing the wisest thing, Aunt Phœbe. I'll be glad to see him rid himself of the London business altogether, and stick to the Glasgow branch."

"But that would mean living up North," Winnie said, hurriedly. She shivered even at the bare idea.

"What does it matter where we live?" demanded Polly, sharply, as she cracked a nut. "London or Glasgow, it will be all the same a hundred years hence."

Winifred's face took a pathetic look.

"Oh! mother dear, don't let us leave London. Can't we stay on just as we are?"

Winnie could be very pretty and babyish when she liked. She was so now, and Hubert Kestridge looked at her with much compassion.

"You are all going to be just as happy as queens," he cried, heartily; "little girls like Winnie and Polly have no need to trouble their heads about anything but happiness."

Polly's flushed face had gradually faded into a pallor of fatigue, now it flushed up again.

This speech made her suddenly very angry.

"Come along, Winnie! Little girls have no right to be out of their little beds at such a late hour as nine o'clock."

She blew a kiss to her mother.

"Good-night, precious love," she said; "good-night," she added curtly to Hubert, giving him a darkened glance out of her wonderful eyes, as she marched out of the room.

"I used to think I liked Hubert Kestridge! How could I have been such an idiot, I wonder?" she said to herself, savagely, as she went upstairs. "And I do wish Winnie would not put on that dolly manner now! We aren't very old, I suppose; but we've got to be old enough to help our mother to fight all the troubles in front of her."

She was a long time going to bed, although the room was very cold, for fires had been stopped by her own commands, when economy, in its most rigid form, walked into the house.

Tired as she had been and was, there was a restlessness and a funny sort of pain in Polly's heart to-night that she was not able to subdue or understand.

It had hurt her vaguely to leave the man below in so ungracious a fashion; but yet she had to do it. She hated the thought of pity even from him, and Polly knew to-night that she would have taken more from Hubert Kestridge than she would have taken from any other living creature.

She saw him with old and new eyes to-night. She was very glad to see him, and yet she shrank from him, too.

Her hitherto untried womanly instinct seemed to tell her that in the man's heart there was a sentiment as deep as her own; but while she guessed this she tried to shut the knowledge from her.

Had life glided on in its old fashion, Polly might never have had occasion to rout out her private feelings in this way, and summon up all her courage to dispose of them; but with the advent of poverty and the knowledge of real trouble, a different sort of character seemed born in Polly, and things that would have come to her naturally enough in the past were looked at very questionably now.

The friendship and affectionate sympathy of Hubert Kestridge was one of these things. Not that she doubted the honesty of the man, far from it; but that she had studied his nature too well for her own comfort now. She had always considered

Hubert one of the kindest of human creatures. He had an open heart and purse for all the suffering that came in his way, and that could be alleviated.

From her aunt, alone, Polly would have gathered the depths and drifts of this man's nature, even if she had not known him so well herself, and all things being put together, Polly had a delicate, nervous apprehension of part of the scheme that was formulating in Kestridge's mind just now, and that was so unutterably dear to him.

"Hubert can never pass a beggar in the street. He would give the last farthing he had if it were asked of him," the girl said to herself, with a thrill of honest pride in the man's goodness that could not be denied, but back came the stinging side of this knowledge. "How much more will he not determine to do all in his power to help us now? Of course, I would rather be helped by Hubert than by anyone else, but I don't see the necessity of being pitied by anybody. I am strong, and if we must be poor I will slave and slave, and give mother everything she needs by my own exertions. If we all go weeping and whining we shall be a nice, dull lot! I intend to show Hubert, and all the world," said rebellious, angry, sore-hearted little Polly, "that I am as happy now, and as independent, as I ever was, and he and all the rest can just keep their pity for themselves!"

She was in bed when Winnie came upstairs an hour later. Polly in bed was a delightful sight. She had a trick of gathering her hair into a quaint knot on the top of her head, and when the weather was very cold she swathed herself in a little extra garment of bright red flannel, which lit up the southern coloring of her skin, and was exceedingly picturesque. In bed, too—Winnie had quietly remarked this and resented it—Polly's very beautiful eyes had a new phase of expression; they were soft and dewy, and had an irresistible fascination in their depths. She was reading, but she put her book away with a yawn as her sister came in.

"Wasn't Hubert odious to-night?" she queried, as she lay and watched Winnie proceed methodically to make herself ready for bed also.

Polly always enjoyed watching Winnie unplait and let loose her many braids of hair. Winnie seemed to touch this hair with a tenderness and a pride that was not wholly unreasonable.

Now, Winnie was a very clever little person, and she had not sat and watched Hubert Kestridge's face very closely after Polly had flounced away so angrily without understanding to a great extent the full difficulties and possibilities of her position. To work a complete division between Polly and the young man was her first task, and she had quickly made up her mind how that was to be done.

"I think Hubert meant to be kind, Polly," she said, softly. "He is so sorry for us."

Polly's eyes flashed fire, and she pummeled her pillows viciously.

"What on earth has he got to be sorry about?" she inquired, wrathfully. "We are all well and hearty, and we are not turned out into the street yet, whatever may come!"

Winnie sighed and brushed out her veil of soft hair.

“Well, of course, things are changed, and it’s no use denying that, and we must expect people to pity us.”

“I don’t expect anything of the sort. I consider pity a most impertinent thing.”

“Naturally, to a man like Hubert,” Winnie went on, as she drew her hair well over her face, “there must be something awfully painful about us now. I saw him looking at you to-night, Polly, when we came down to dinner. It was a pity he had to see so plainly that you had just come up from the kitchen.”

“I couldn’t help that,” said Polly, sharply. “I had to cook the omelet, and I couldn’t cook it in my best frock.”

“Of course Hubert is not like most people,” Winnie said, softly; “otherwise he might have thought it was all for effect, you know.”

Polly flushed as red as her little jacket, but she remained silent, for she did not know exactly what to say, and Winnie, brushing back her hair, glanced at her furtively and rejoiced.

“All the same, I hope you are not going to quarrel with Hubert?” she said.

“Why not?”

“You were really rude to him to-night, and we can’t afford to lose friends nowadays.”

“Can’t we? I can, if I choose,” said Polly, doggedly.

Winnie said her prayers and put herself into her pretty, prim night garments, in which, as in everything else, she was such a contrast to Polly.

“I have always thought, do you know, Polly,” she observed, quietly, when her head was resting on the pillow, “that you could, if you chose to play your cards properly, get Hubert to propose to you some day. Men like all sorts of little attentions, and particularly now, if you only make yourself amiable and try to let him see that——”

Polly’s red-coated arm went up to the gas bracket just by her bed, and the room was suddenly made dark.

“Good-night,” she said, in a choked sort of way, and she turned over and lay with her face to the wall, staring with hot, angry eyes into the blackness, and wondering if all her future life was going to be as nasty and bitter and hard to bear as this particular moment.

Winnie’s last speech positively made her wince, as if some hard, sharp weapon had struck her tender flesh.

She hated the thought of the coming morrow, when she would have to meet Hubert. She told herself she never wanted to see him again. Who could say whether the same ignoble suggestion that Winnie had just made might not lie at the bottom of all his sympathetic kindness.

“Well!” she said passionately to herself—“well, if he is waiting for me to be nice to him he will have to wait a long time. I wish Winnie had not said this. I—I cannot understand what can have put such an idea into her head. Perhaps she was right about to-night, and I ought not to have let Hubert see me so hot and untidy. It was a mistake;

but everything was so hurried, and I wanted the dinner to be nice for mother's sake. Yes; I am sorry Winnie has said this, because now I shall be obliged to be as nasty as I can with Hubert—and—and——”

And poor little Polly could not find an easy ending to the train of thought.

Away across the room, in her little white-hung bed, Winifred gave a tiny sigh of content.

“Only a little while longer,” she said to herself, as she drifted into sleep, “and I shall have a home of my own, and be taken out of the horrid things here. Polly is certainly a little fool; but if she will cut off her nose to spite her face she has nobody to blame but herself!”

CHAPTER VI.

THE YOUNG LADY WENTWORTH.

Christmas with the Ambletons was usually made the time for a small but cheery family gathering, and for this particular Christmas following her sojourn abroad Grace had planned out many little extra pleasures for her brothers and herself.

Sacha would come down from London, and the various spare bedrooms in the Dower House would have their complement of relations and old friends.

The time between her return and the advent of Christmas had passed very quickly with Grace. She had any amount of old threads to retie, old habits and duties to resume, and the days had gone happily enough.

The news of Sir Mark's marriage had been the only cloud on the horizon of her busy life, and the knowledge that the angry feeling between Mark Wentworth and Valentine had deepened into a definite quarrel, was a real trouble to Grace.

The two men, who had been appointed by the late Sir Ambrose to act as trustees to his son's estates, had neither of them received any intimation of Mark's marriage. They, like all the world, read the information in the newspapers, and Val's annoyance and regret was shared to the full by the elder trustee.

"I shall never set foot in Sunstead again," Mr. Baker declared, wrathfully, to Val, and Val smiled grimly.

"I expect I shall never be given the chance," was what he said to himself.

He accepted the position calmly enough, but Grace knew he was very much upset by Mark's attitude.

Both she and Val had cared most warmly for their cousin, and the estrangement was a sorrow to them. However, it was no use crying over spilled milk, and Grace determined to go on her way as cheerfully as possible.

The young Lady Wentworth had established herself at Sunstead very soon after her marriage, and this fact cut Grace adrift from her customary visit to her grandmother, for it was not possible to go to the big house when neither its master nor mistress desired her presence.

Grace had been amazed by Christina's beauty the first time she had seen her driving in the quaint old Dynechester streets.

"I begin to understand Mark's infatuation now, Val," she told her brother, when she had returned home. "Lady Wentworth is not merely pretty, she is positively lovely! I never saw a more delicate type of beauty."

Val had only smiled.

"Let us hope she will make the boy happy," he had answered, and Grace had said no more.

She had grown accustomed to seeing Christina in the weeks that followed, and sometimes her eyes met, and were held for an instant by Lady Wentworth's eyes. In

such a moment Grace told herself quietly that the dislike Mark's wife undoubtedly lavished upon Val was extended to herself also.

She had no desire to be friendly with Christina, save only so far as she might have been given ingress to the old, ailing woman up at Sunstead, who missed, she knew well, the constant visits she had been wont to pay.

Grace would also have felt happier had she not remembered the quarrel with Mark.

"Perhaps it will all come right some day," was what she said to herself, cheerily.

Had she ever come across her cousin, she would have gone straight up to him and have chided him in her old, affectionate way, for Mark had always had a great liking for her, but she never saw her cousin—only her cousin's wife.

Christina's presence so constantly in the streets of Dynechester seemed to emphasize the separation between Sir Mark and the Ambletons, for she would flash past in her carriage, in which she sat swathed about in her furs like an empress, and Grace had to watch and see her go as a stranger.

With the coming of Christmas, Grace gave herself up, heart and soul, to her preparations.

"Mark will send us no game this year," she had remarked once to Val, who had answered, quietly:

"Expect nothing from Sunstead now, Gracie dear; but the unexpected!" and Grace had looked at him half wistfully, not quite understanding him.

Valentine did not think it necessary to put trouble into his sister's mind before such trouble was inevitable, but he was a man who saw far into the future, and he felt assured that young Lady Wentworth was not merely an enemy, but one who would carry her enmity very far.

Happily for Val he was kept hard at work these autumn and early winter days. There were many times when he was compelled to be absent from Dynechester for days together, but Grace, though she missed him sorely, encouraged him in all that concerned his work. She would at least have him at home for Christmas, and she would be so happy with both her "children" with her; in fact, it was going to be a happy Christmas altogether.

"I am afraid they will be rather desolate up at Sunstead, Val," she said one morning, just the week preceding the holiday time.

Val was going to London on business, and she walked with him to the station to see him off. He was to bring Sacha back with him.

"Will they? Why?" asked Val, not thinking very much about the matter.

"Firstly, because poor grannie seems so weak and ailing. You know I sent Ellen up to the big house yesterday. She has been twice every week since I could not go myself, and she has made me very sad about grannie. Val, I must go and see her at Christmas time. Poor, dear, old grannie, I am sure she misses me very much!"

Val looked troubled, as he always did at all mention of the separation from Sunstead.

“And then Ellen tells me Lady Wentworth is in mourning for her father, who died last week, I believe. This must make her sad. Altogether, I feel sorry for them!”

Val parted from his sister with that regret that they always felt even at the shortest separation.

“Now, don’t overwork yourself, making plum puddings and roasting turkeys,” he ordered.

“Oh!” Grace said, with a laugh. “My plum puddings were all made weeks ago. Take care of yourself, Val, and, remember, don’t come back without Sacha.”

Valentine was whirled up to London, deep in thought. He was thinking more on his sister’s account than his own. He must try some means of settling this stupid business with Mark, if only for their old grandmother’s sake.

The old Lady Wentworth was, perhaps, of not much count now in the world, but Grace had always been devoted to her mother’s mother, and Val resolved he must open some way by which his sister could resume her ministrations to the crippled old lady. But for this Val felt he would rather that his sister never came into contact with Christina Wentworth.

“They are so wide apart in every sense, they could never assimilate,” he said to himself. “Now, if it had been the mother, or even that bad-tempered, dark-haired little sister, Grace could have got on very differently.”

His thoughts wandered slightly in the direction of Mrs. Pennington and the “bad-tempered, dark-haired little sister,” and he found himself sending them sincere sympathy.

“So the father is dead—poor man! Things were very bad with him, I fear. I wonder if they are left with any provisions. Now is the time for Lady Wentworth to exercise some filial and sisterly affection.”

Ambleton smiled to himself a grim smile at this thought. He had not much opinion of Lady Wentworth, either as a daughter or sister; and then he got out of the train and walked a little way before he hailed an omnibus, and got inside, for it was raining, a nasty, fine rain, and when he was comfortably seated he raised his eyes, and lo! there, immediately in front of him, was no less a person than “the bad-tempered, dark-haired little sister” herself.

To raise his hat and extend his hand was a natural impulse, and as Polly rather grudgingly put her small fingers into his for one second, Val had a distinct pang at his heart, for in truth the girl had a wan, sorrowful look, and was unlike the little flashing-eyed spitfire who had received him that bygone day, as it was possible for anyone to be.

Polly was grown thinner, and she looked slightly older. Her mourning garb was not becoming to her, but the man opposite suddenly saw something that was irresistibly sweet and even beautiful about her.

The omnibus was half empty, and in a little while they had it to themselves, yet neither spoke till Polly rose, and signified her intention of getting out, then Val got out, too.

He asked the girl if he could be of any assistance.

Polly treated him coldly till he spoke most gently of her father's death, then the tears welled up in her eyes.

"It is all so strange," she said, in her pretty, wistful way; "and, oh! I am so sorry for my poor little mother. We are alone, she and I. Yes; we are still in the same old house. Winnie, my other sister, was married just a week before father died, and Harold, my brother, is at school. I am all my mother has to take care of her now."

Val held her small hand.

She had reached her destination, a lawyer's office.

"Will you let me come and see your mother?" he asked.

Polly looked at him doubtfully. How pretty she was with that questioning look on her face! She colored faintly as she met his eyes.

"Yes; you may come if you like," she said. "I may as well tell you," she added, with all her old frankness, "that I have hated you very badly for upsetting us all as you did that day; but I suppose you thought you were doing your duty. Anyhow, I will let you come and see my mother, if you promise to be very kind to her."

And with that she took her hand from his and disappeared, leaving him with a mass of new and strange feelings that he did not seem equal to deal with in that moment.

Late that afternoon he found himself still thinking of Polly, as he reached the quiet hotel where he usually stayed, and he was only recalled from that thought by the arrival of a telegram from Grace, which was not easily comprehended at once.

"If you can come home to-morrow, please do," Grace had written in her message. "Something important has happened, and I should like you to be here."

This was sufficiently vague to trouble Val, and to drive his mind away from all other matters, and yet while he smoked and pondered as to what Grace's message could possibly mean, the vision of Polly, as he had just seen her, hovered persistently in and among his thoughts.

It was almost provoking the way this girl and her eyes haunted him, and yet, such is the peculiarity of human minds, that Valentine searched and brought back that memory each time it tried to fade away!

CHAPTER VII.

A MILD REQUEST.

Grace was standing on the platform at the Dynechester station the afternoon of the next day, as the train from London pulled slowly up.

In her sealskin coat and cap she looked strikingly handsome, but more than one of the people who knew her well had remarked a difference in the girl's usually bright, happy expression. In fact, Grace had a pale, tired air this afternoon, very unlike her general bearing.

The brother's eyes noted this from the railway carriage before they had clasped hands.

"What's amiss, Gracie?" Val asked, as they walked down the platform together; "and what have you been doing to yourself? You look quite ill."

"I could not close my eyes last night," Grace answered. "I had a great shock yesterday. Oh! Val, it is nice to see you! I think last night was the longest *year* I have ever known. No; I don't want to drive. Joseph is coming down for your bag and things, and I can tell you better all that has happened out here in the air as we walk."

Valentine tucked his sister's hand through his arm.

"Fire away, dear old girl!" was all he said.

He knew something of a heavy nature must have fallen on Grace to upset her in this way; she was neither an alarmist nor a person given to any form of exaggeration.

"Somehow I don't believe you will be in the least surprised to hear my news," Grace said, as they walked briskly toward the Dower House, avoiding the town.

The weather had changed. It was much colder.

Up in London there had been sleet and rain, but down here in the country it was dry, flaky snow that was falling, whispering against their faces not unpleasantly, and covering them with a thin white veil.

"Yesterday, just after you had gone," Grace continued, "I had a visitor. I had barely got home from the station, and was giving Joseph some orders in the hall when there came the sound of carriage wheels, and a loud peal at the bell, and before I knew where I was, Val, I found myself face to face with Lady Wentworth."

Val said "Ah!" and that was all; but the exclamation was full of significance.

"You can imagine my astonishment," Grace said, clinging to her big brother, and pouring out all her story with a childlike eagerness. "I am afraid I forgot my manners for a few seconds, I was so surprised; but, of course, I soon recovered, and I asked her into my little room and ordered tea just as if she were in the habit of coming every day. She was quite as much at her ease, and she took the most comfortable chair, and drank the tea with the air of a queen; but I saw her eyes going round my little snuggery, and somehow everything seemed suddenly to look old and shabby. What

strange eyes she has, Val,” Grace said, with a faint shiver. “They are so beautiful, and yet so cold and hard.”

“What did she want?” asked Valentine, after he had piloted his sister round a rather bleak corner, and they were within a stone’s throw of their home.

“Oh! something very simple in her view of the matter. But to me——” Grace could not help her voice breaking for a moment. “Val, she wants the Dower House. She wants our dear old home. She—she barely gives us time to pack our things and get out of it. She wants it in such a hurry!”

By the light of one of the old-fashioned lanterns slung from one of the old walls Grace saw her brother’s face. It] was very stern, white and fixed, as though in pain. The next instant it changed as the man, looking down, caught the tears in his sister’s eyes, and the unhappiness of her expression.

“My poor little Gracie. This is awfully hard on you!” he said, tenderly.

“And on you, too, dear,” the girl answered.

She was silent a moment; then she said, quietly:

“Yes; it is hard. Very—very hard. Somehow it gets a little harder each time I try to realize it, and I think the hardest bit of all is the fact that Mark should be so unkind to us. For, of course,” Grace said, with a sigh, “she could not have come as she did yesterday without Mark’s knowledge and sanction. Could she, Val?”

Ambleton opened the doorway that led them through a large courtyard to a side entrance of the house.

“Mark most possibly knows all there is to know by this time; but whether he sanctioned it or not is quite another matter. I take it Lady Wentworth is not the kind of nature to be controlled by the will of anyone, least of all by such a will as Mark possesses. When she makes up her mind to do a certain thing, that thing she will do, Gracie, dear, if not by straight means, then by crooked ones! What excuse did she give you for commanding this eviction?” Val asked, abruptly, and with that curious grim smile of his, as they entered the house and stood by the warmth of the hall fire for a few moments.

“She said,” Grace answered, as she slipped off her coat and shook it free from the snow, “that her husband had decided to offer the Dower House as a permanent home to her mother and sister. I gathered from what she said that the father’s death had left them very poor. I suppose you think this reason was fictitious, Val?”

Val did not answer all at once.

He had again before his eyes the memory of Polly as he had seen her yesterday, and at this memory the hot anger in his heart melted a little. Truly she had looked poor enough and very sorrowful. It would have given him a touch of pleasure to cede his home to her, and to that poor, weak mother she loved so well; but he knew without any need of words that Christina Wentworth had not the smallest intention of settling these two, either in Dynechester or elsewhere. It was but a clever method on her part

this suggestion of affection and care, and it had been used merely as a means to an end.

To vent her spite on him, there was nothing this woman would not have done willingly, and he was forced to confess that out of all the many things she might have done she had chosen the one best calculated to hurt him. The hurt was not for himself, but for Grace. The girl had a love for the home she had lived in so long that could not be measured by words, and Lady Wentworth must have understood this very quickly, and laid her plans accordingly.

Val felt he was near the truth when he told Grace that Christina was acting on her own account and intention entirely.

He knew all Mark Wentworth's faults, and he condemned them as strongly as they needed to be condemned; but he knew also that the very worst of his cousin's faults lacked the element of cruelty and the desire for vengeance that was prominent in such a nature as Christina's.

This attack, therefore, had been Christina's conception alone. He doubted even whether Mark Wentworth as yet knew anything of the matter, and he had sufficient faith in the young man's former affection for himself and Grace to be sure that the news, when it was communicated to Mark, would make a great impression on him. Naturally, if all this quick summing up on Val's part was true, and Christina had acted without her husband's knowledge, it would be a foregone conclusion that she would be ready with some plausible explanation of her own invention to smooth down Mark's feelings on the matter. Or, perhaps, what was even more possible, having so bold and strong a hold on her husband, she would not trouble to give any explanation at all.

All these things, however, made the bitterness of the moment none the less bitter to poor Grace, and Val hardly knew what line of sympathy and consolation to offer to his sister.

The loss of a house was not irremediable under ordinary circumstances; but Grace's circumstances were not ordinary. Indeed, Val found it difficult to picture his sister established anywhere else save in this quaint, charming old dwelling.

"You are not going to fret and make yourself ill, Grace, I hope?" he said, as the girl came and took off his heavy overcoat. "After all, if we do leave the Dower House, we shall be still together, and that will constitute a home wherever we are."

Grace kissed him as she answered as cheerfully as she could:

"Of course I shan't fret, dear. It—it is just now, at the very beginning, that I feel things a little sharply. Last night—but I won't think of last night," she added, resolutely. "You were not here, so it made all the difference, Val. I have not thanked you for coming back to-day. I hope you have not left any important business. I waited a long time before I sent you that telegram, but finally I had to let it go. I never felt so crushed and lonely in my life before."

“Poor little Gracie!” Val held his sister’s hands in a caressing way peculiar to him, and he drew her to him and kissed her brow. “We will have a thorough confabulation together after dinner,” he said, cheerily, “and now run along and put on a cozy teagown, and tell Joseph to bring some champagne. I am going to insure you a good, sound sleep to-night, whatever happens.”

Grace laughed almost in her old, bright way as she picked up her coat and disappeared, and Val sent a tender look after the girl.

He had always had a pride in realizing the splendid qualities of his sister’s nature, and he knew now that deep as this premeditated cruelty on Christina’s part must cut, Grace would quickly rise superior to the occasion.

He stood a long time in front of the blazing wood fire, and a little of the unbounded regret that Grace must feel at parting from this dear, cozy old home came to him.

He was far removed from being a sentimental man, but he was a man to whom home and home ties appealed strongly, and, after all, the greater portion of his life had been lived beneath this roof.

If he shut his eyes he could see in fancy his mother’s delicate, frail figure pass slowly down the old oaken staircase; the day of her funeral came back to him clearly in this moment of retrospection. He remembered how the boy, Mark, had wept for the loss of his gentle, suffering aunt. There had always been good in Mark’s heart, that small touch of human sympathy which was so redeeming a quality.

Valentine felt sure had he yielded to impulse, and gone direct up to his cousin at Sunstead, that this business would have been rearranged in a very little while.

Though the rift between them was very wide, and seemed to grow wider every day, Val did not allow himself to feel that the once strong bond of affection that had existed between Mark and himself could be utterly broken, and had his cousin been free now from any outside influence, Val might not have hesitated to have gone direct to the young man and in a few, plain words set the whole business right.

The very suggestion, however, of such a proceeding, under existing circumstances, was, of course, impossible.

Christina ruled with an undivided sovereignty, and Val, though his hot, quick anger rose at the knowledge of this, and of the most unworthy use this woman was putting her influence to, resolved not to allow himself to come in contact with his cousin’s wife, or to let Grace be subjected any further, if this were possible, to the keen-edged spite of one whom he regarded as being contemptible.

The dinner that night at the Dower House was a very serious matter.

Despite the champagne, and the warmth, and coziness of the surroundings, Val could not succeed in driving the white, troubled look from his sister’s face.

They talked the whole matter through in that practical, straightforward way so characteristic of them both.

"Lady Wentworth asked me if we could vacate the house about the middle of January. This leaves us very little time to fix ourselves anywhere, Val, even if we had the smallest idea where to look for a new home," Grace had said at the commencement of the discussion.

Val resolutely thrust his own feelings into the background.

"I shall take a week's holiday, and move everything myself. I flatter myself I am worth two ordinary workmen," he laughed, lightly. "We had better send a few words to our Christmas guests, Grace, and explain the situation to them." But Grace, with a sudden rush of color to her cheeks, negatived this.

"Let us have one more Christmas in our usual fashion. I—I don't think I shall ever care for Christmas again," she said, as she bent down to speak caressingly to her dogs, and to hide the rush of tears to her eyes.

"You shall do all you want to do, dear," Val said, tenderly, and then he looked at her half quizzically, "and do you know, I fancy I see something lurking in the corner of your eyes. Have you not been formulating some little plan of your own that you have not told me about?"

Grace smiled faintly.

"Why am I such a transparent person, I wonder? Yes," she added, frankly, a moment later, "I have a plan which I was going to try and put in action before all this happened, Val. I want you to ask Mark to consent to our having grannie to live with us. I am most unhappy about her. She is so old, and suffers so much, and I—I fear," Grace said, in a low tone—"I fear, Val, she does not get the attention she needs. Ellen made me very sad about her the other day. Of course, dear, if you object, we won't move in the matter, especially now," and Grace paused abruptly.

Val, however, took the matter up warmly.

"Now is just the moment to speak, Grace. I have already decided on our new home. We will take that pretty house that poor Mrs. Bentley has been so anxious to let ever since her husband's death. I will go about it to-morrow. We must remain in Dynechester. Apart from my appointment, I am quite sure you would never be so happy anywhere else."

"I feel," Grace said, "that I ought to urge you to let me live in London, then I could make a home for Sacha and for you, too, but——"

The brother understood the "but" to the full.

"Mrs. Bentley's house is charming," he said, cheerily; "it is almost as old as this, and in your skillful hands will be quite as picturesque. We can get into it without any very great bother, and to-night I will write to Mark and propose your plan about grannie."

Grace looked at her brother.

"If he should refuse?"

Val shook his head with a smile.

“Lady Wentworth likes a house with plenty of space at her disposal,” he said, dryly, “and grannie is only a tiresome old woman, who takes much too long to die.”

Grace had never heard her brother speak like this before. Her face grew a little sadder.

“What will be Mark’s future?” she said, wistfully. “I could not help thinking yesterday, Val, how much power lies in this woman’s hands. I believe she could make Mark into something better than he had ever been, and yet I am sure she will work in just the opposite direction. How right you were to mistrust her!”

“And how right you were,” Valentine said to this, “to urge me not to interfere in the matter when Mark’s determination was made. Had I never gone to Christina Pennington that bygone day, it is possible Christina Wentworth would have been our friend now instead of our enemy, Grace. It was a big mistake, and I was so clumsy, I made the mistake worse a hundred times than it need have been.”

He had Polly’s face before his eyes as he said this, and Polly’s little, frank utterance of how much she had hated him for his interference that day. It was wonderful what a softness came over his angry thoughts when he remembered Polly.

“Did Lady Wentworth tell you when her mother and sister were coming?” he asked.

Grace shook her head.

“She merely said she was going to establish them here. I suppose, Val, we have no legal right to this house?”

“Absolutely none. The person who could claim this place for her lifetime is poor grannie, but Lady Wentworth can easily afford to dismiss her from all connection in the matter. Were it not for you, Grace dear, and for all the thousand and one associations that are the very essence of our home here, I should feel almost glad to think that Lady Wentworth’s mother and sister should take our place. They are not of the same world as she. I have always felt a little pang when I have remembered poor Mrs. Pennington. She had a face that would go straight to your heart, Grace, and the sister is——” Val paused, as though he could not find the right word to apply to Polly, as, indeed, he could not.

“The sister, then, is quite different to Lady Wentworth?” Grace said, half listlessly.

She was beginning to feel the reaction of the mental excitement through which she had passed, and Val’s hesitation did not convey anything to her.

She rose as she spoke, and Valentine rose, too.

“Oh! yes; the sister is quite different,” he said, hastily, and with that the subject of Polly dropped.

CHAPTER VIII. WINNING A HUSBAND.

Polly made her way home after her interview with the lawyer, feeling a little less depressed than she had done for some time.

Firstly, this interview had been more satisfactory than she had anticipated, and the report she had to carry to her mother would be cheering in a sense, and then, for some peculiar reason or other, it had pleased her to meet Mr. Ambleton.

Though she had abused him so much and had felt so much anger toward him, later events had occurred that justified Val's conduct to a very great extent in her eyes.

Polly saw now that if he had acted with a minimum of tact, he had been actuated by the strongest feelings of consideration for the welfare of a woman, who, after all, had been a complete stranger to him.

For the rest there was something that was attractive to Polly in this man's appearance. It was not that she considered him even fairly good-looking, but she could not be insensible to his frank, pleasant manner, and to the undoubted sympathy which had pervaded him in this, their second and more agreeable meeting. Maybe, too, the fact that Hubert Kestridge had testified so warmly to the many good qualities that were crammed into Valentine Ambleton's nature had the greatest power of all in putting the man before her in a good light.

"Mother will be surprised to hear that I have met Mr. Ambleton," Polly said to herself, as she jolted home to Kensington in another omnibus. "I rather hope he will come and see her. I feel somehow she might enjoy his coming. My poor, little mother!" Polly added, with a sigh.

Her sympathy and pity for her mother were illimitable, and she was quite ignorant that, on her side, Mrs. Pennington gave her unreasonable sympathy and pity in return.

Things had been so sad, and so full of anxiety these last few weeks, that Polly had not had time to sit down and realize the blow that had fallen on her young heart. She was only conscious, in a dumb sort of way, of a curious pain that seemed to lie heavily always in one spot, and she knew she shrank sharply from even the remembrance of Winnie or of the man who was now Winnie's husband.

As to how Hubert Kestridge had fallen into this position of being Winifred Pennington's husband few people, and Polly last of all, could have offered a thorough explanation. In truth, one person alone could have afforded this explanation, and that person was Winnie herself.

The game she had played had been a very clever, and yet a very simple, one. It is a game that has been played scores of times in the world's history, and may very easily be played many hundreds or scores again, at least so long as there exist women of the caliber of Winifred Pennington. Given two natures so honest, so proud and yet so open to influence as Kestridge's and Polly's, it will be seen at a glance that Winifred's

task of alienating them even before they had thoroughly realized what lay in their hearts, and substituting herself in the guise of the necessary sympathy, was not a phenomenally difficult one. Worked by her sister's slender, iron, little hands, Polly was transformed into a sharp-tongued, bad-tempered creature, in whose eyes Hubert could do nothing but wrong. The few weeks he spent in town were made miserable to him by Polly's apparently undisguised contempt and dislike for him, and if it had not been for Winnie he would have left his self-selected task of looking after Mrs. Pennington's affairs, and gone back to Ireland in a violent rage. It was not, however, possible for him to leave, while Winnie made such constant demands on his sympathy.

"Oh! don't go, Hubert," she used to plead, eagerly, her eyes, filled with tears, upraised to him. "You are such a comfort. I don't know what mother and I shall do when you go back to Ireland."

"It seems to me I don't do much, according to Polly's ideas," Hubert had said, gloomily, on more than one occasion, "I know I am not much account, but still—I came to see if Aunt Phœbe, and——"

Winnie was always ready with some pretty, soothing word. She was always sweet and gentle with him; always so pretty to look at, that her influence stole imperceptibly over the man's troubled heart, and one evening it came to pass that he was holding Winnie's neat little figure in his arms, and was kissing away her tears, and promising her all the happiness and sunshine she longed for so ardently, poor child! It had been a repeated story of the misery of life under the same roof with Polly that, ending in a flood of passionate tears, had driven Winifred, like a child, to Hubert for comfort, and in less than sixty seconds the words were spoken, the link tied, and Polly was lost to him forever! The marriage had followed swiftly on this. Again it had been Winnie's work.

"Take me away," was her perpetual cry. "Oh! Hubert, take me away. I am so unhappy here. Why must we wait for anything? Oh! I don't want a grand marriage. I only want peace and happiness and you!"

And so one fine morning Polly, coming up from the kitchen, where she had been preparing a dainty little luncheon to tempt her mother's appetite, found that mother sitting in the dining room with an open letter in her hand.

The woman's eyes were dry, but they held a strange expression in them, and Polly knew instantly that something fresh had happened.

"Darling, what is it?" she had whispered, running up to that silent, pathetic, little creature.

Mrs. Pennington's own pain was instantly lost in the pain she knew she was about to deal this other dear heart, for Polly's secret had been no secret to her mother.

"Polly, you are all that is left to me," she said, and she forced a smile to her pale lips. "Can you guess what this letter has told me?"

Polly looked down and saw Winifred's neat writing.

Her face went as white as the apron she wore, and for one instant she felt cold from head to foot. Then she conquered herself.

"Why, it is the easiest thing to guess in the world, my lovee, dear! This letter is from Winnie, and it is to tell you that she—she and Hubert are married."

Mrs. Pennington took the girl's hand in hers, and kissed it tenderly. She felt that hand so chill and trembling, that she was well-nigh breaking down; but for Polly's sake she controlled herself. The girl's mind must be diverted, if possible, from the full weight of this blow, and Mrs. Pennington played her rôle accordingly.

Winifred's news had given her a great shock, and though she could not possibly object to the marriage, she did resent most keenly the way in which the matter had been carried out.

She saw in Winnie's conduct a repetition of the heartless selfishness that had characterized Christina's whole attitude during the past and especially the later past.

Mrs. Pennington had not been blind to all Winnie's maneuvers with Hubert, and she had had a longing more than once to speak out plainly, and set matters right in the young man's mind where Polly was concerned; but she was a woman of infinite delicacy and tact, and, moreover, she had never imagined that Winnie's artful artlessness would have reached such a point in such a short time.

There was nothing to excuse this hurried and secret marriage; indeed, there was every reason why Winnie, if she had studied her right duty, should have set aside the thought of marriage until the difficult pathway of her parents' troubles had been made a little smoother at least.

In her very natural resentment at this hasty act, Mrs. Pennington found herself condemning the man more even than the girl.

"Hubert has acted in a way I should never have believed it possible for him to act," she said to Polly, after the matter had been discussed in a few short sentences. "I have always thought that he had a sincere affection for me."

"Do not doubt that, mother, darling," Polly had answered, in a low, hurried voice. "Hubert loves you most dearly."

"Then, if he loves me, he has taken a very strange way of showing it. Surely some consideration was due to me. What is the meaning of this marriage at all? Hubert's duty was to come to me, to speak out his intentions, and to have abided by my decision. I am deeply hurt, Polly, and it is useless for me to pretend otherwise, and how I am to explain the matter to your father I hardly know."

The attitude her mother adopted was one that gave Polly sharp pain in one respect, but in another Mrs. Pennington's outspoken blame did good. It roused the girl from that curious blighting sense of stupefaction that the realization of Winifred's treachery had brought. For, to herself, Polly did not disguise matters. She knew Winnie had been a traitress to her, and she understood all those hurtful words Winnie had spoken so frequently in their true meaning, now that it was too late.

She was bitterly grieved, poor little Polly, to have to hold such thoughts in her heart against her sister; but she was essentially just, and she knew she was not wronging Winnie one iota when she set down the whole blame of this marriage to the girl, and not to the man. She grieved, too, for Hubert's sake, for she, perhaps, out of all the world, knew Winnie in her true character, and she feared for the future.

Her own feelings had been, as we know, wholly chaotic where Hubert was concerned, and this transformation of him into another being—that of a brother—put a definite stop to all the vague dreams and thoughts he had awakened in her mind. Nevertheless, he had always been dear to her, and he would remain dear, even though she might have to stand aloof and never minister to him, or give him a word of sympathy.

They were sad days, those days that had followed on Winnie's marriage.

The bride and bridegroom had gone abroad.

"You know I am always ill in the winter, so Hubert is going to give me all the sunshine he can," Winnie had written in her explanatory letter, and Mrs. Pennington had winced here once again at the unblushing selfishness of her child.

To take Hubert out of reach at this particular crisis was worthy of Winnie, or Christina.

Polly felt both glad and sorry. Glad for her own sake, but very, very sorry for her mother.

They were drawn closer together than they had ever been in their lives in that time, and the mother found a deep joy out of all her sorrow in testing and proving the sweetness, the beauty of the youngest girl's heart.

Then had come that other blow, that unexpected death of the husband and father, and the smaller griefs and regrets were all swallowed up in this great one.

Polly was not quite sure how she had managed to get through those days. She had been the one creature available to do everything, for though there were plenty of relations who might have come forward and aided her, these relations were careful to keep out of the way. They feared being asked for material help.

Poor Robert Pennington's misfortunes were too widely known among his family to admit of much tangible sympathy being offered. But Polly wanted none of them. She did everything there was to be done, and right well she did it. With the lawyer's sanction she determined that she and her mother should remain in their old home until they were fortunate enough to let the house.

Of course, they had to pay taxes, but they were rent free, and it was better to incur no expense of moving till they were obliged to go.

Christina had written a very guarded letter to her mother, offering assistance, but Polly had sent a curt refusal.

She was hotly angry with Lady Wentworth, who made no suggestion of paying her mother a visit, and she felt she would like to have taken Christina and shaken her violently.

How much the girl was spared at this moment she little knew, for could she but have imagined that for the sake of spite and revenge Christina was actually pretending a generosity toward herself and her mother, Polly's weight of care would have been made much heavier than it was. As it was, she felt she had said farewell to both her sisters, and that her mother would have, in truth, in future only one daughter upon whom she could rely.

"We are going to live together, all our lives," she said every day to her mother; "and some day, oh! yes, some day, lovee, we shall be so happy! We shall let this big old house and go and live in the country, and we will find a sweet little cottage covered with roses—and—and things," though Polly was now quite grown up and important, she was still the old Polly in the matter of phraseology—"and Harold shall come home there for his holidays, and we will play cricket, and you shall grow fat. You promise me you will grow fat in the country, won't you, sweetheart? And I shall milk the cows and do a lot of farm work." And the flood of nonsense would flow on till Polly had succeeded in winning a smile from her mother's wan, sad face, and then the girl was content.

"I must make her happy again. I must—I must!" Polly would say, to herself at night, when she lay awake in the small room adjoining her mother's. "How I wish I were big and strong, like Mr. Ambleton. One can command so much when one is big, but when one is small, and a girl, too—well, there is not much one can do but hope and pray, and pray and hope!"

CHAPTER IX. BEYOND RECONCILIATION.

It had been all Polly's work that she and her mother were remaining on in their old home indefinitely.

When the moment for final settlement had arrived, the girl had overruled her mother.

"We can, of course, find a small house somewhere, but by the time we have moved and the rent and the rates and taxes paid, you see if we are not more out of pocket than if we remained on here. The lease is ours for another fifteen years, isn't it, mother, darling? And though the taxes are heavy, we can be very economical in other ways, and then there is space for you to move about in, and air for you to breathe, and a place for Harold to racket in when he comes home. I could not endure you to be shut up in one of those poky houses, at least so long as you are able to stay here, and it seems to me the most sensible thing to do to live on till we sell or let the house."

"I am afraid we shall be considered wrong in doing this," Mrs. Pennington said, nervously.

Polly's eyes flashed fire.

"Who is going to interfere with us?" she demanded. "Who has the right to interfere, I should like to know?"

Mrs. Pennington smiled faintly.

"People don't always stop to consider if they have the right to speak, Polly," she said, then she paused a moment. "I heard from your Grandmother Pennington this morning. Oh! it is a very kind letter."

Polly's lip curled, and there was still anger in her eyes.

"I know the sort of 'kind' letter Grannie Pennington can write. May I see this letter, mother, dear?"

Mrs. Pennington at once gave it to the girl.

"We have no secrets, you and I, have we?" she said, and she rubbed her hand softly up and down the girl's arm. "How could I ever have imagined that my wild little Polly could have grown up into such a wise and clever person?"

Polly crouched down at her mother's knees.

"Do I comfort you, then, a little, my sweet love?" she asked.

"A little? Why, Polly, do you realize that you are my all now?"

Polly laid her cheek on her mother's hand.

"We shall be happy together yet. You see if we are not. We—we only want time."

Mrs. Pennington caressed the rough, brown curls; she could hardly see them for tears. Remembrance had brought back to her swiftly a vision of old, dead days, when her children had been little more than babies, and her husband had chided her, tenderly enough, for the most natural pride and love she had always had in her eldest

born, her lovely little Christina. It gave her a pang now to recall the love she had lavished so freely, and that had given her back no love in return.

The queer little brown baby, Polly, had always crept very closely to her father's heart. The wife had known this, but Robert Pennington had made no distinction in his affection for his children; he had been essentially a just man. There was a strong element of her father in Polly, and the mother's heart was full of pride in the girl's proud courage that fought not only against a first great sorrow, but against all the heavy difficulties that faced them now.

Polly's influence was of far greater value than she had the least idea of herself.

Mrs. Pennington found herself unconsciously emulating the girl in courage and determination.

Sorrow such as hers would never be wholly shaken off; but despair could not live while she had before her eyes the daily example of Polly's earnest resolution to live through her trouble; and Mrs. Pennington knew that the full weight of the girl's hurt was something that was only revealed to her now day by day.

Though Hubert Kestridge had spoken no words and Polly had not even confessed the truth to herself, the mother was only too well aware of the pain that lay at the bottom of the cup of sorrow Polly had to drain. Life truly stretched before the girl, but it would be a long, long time before Winnie's selfishness and treachery would be a forgotten thing. For neither Mrs. Pennington nor Polly deceived themselves about this marriage.

They knew Winifred had made herself Hubert Kestridge's wife purely and simply because she had no intention of facing the poverty and struggle that life in the old home must have been to her. She cared about as much for the man she had married as she cared for an old, discarded glove, and herein lay the sharpest sting for Polly, for though Hubert Kestridge was now passed out of her life, and ought not even to have a place in her thoughts, such was her nature that the knowledge of what lay before him in his marriage could not fail but grieve her.

Nevertheless, she was so brave, so cheerful and so ready to take on her shoulders the whole burden of her mother's cares, that she acted on that mother in the most beneficial way possible, and the two became in these days not merely a loving parent and child, but two devoted friends and comrades eager to fight side by side.

They avoided, by common consent, all discussion of either Christina or Winifred, neither of whom had done anything to show their mother love and thought in her widowhood.

The Kestridges, of course, were abroad, but Lady Wentworth was within a couple of hours of town, and Polly had expected that her eldest sister would surely have left the grandeur of her new home to appear for a few hours at least in the sorrowful atmosphere of the old one when the news of her father's death had been sent her. But Christina was thorough in all she did, and she evinced no desire whatever to hurry to her mother's side.

She wrote a few constrained words to her mother, and to Polly she sent a curt epistle, announcing that as she supposed ready money would be necessary she would be prepared to send a check for fifty pounds when it was needed.

To this Polly sent back a reply.

“When you are asked to send money,” she had written, “you may rest assured it will be accepted. In the meanwhile, let me advise you to spend this fifty pounds in buying yourself a fine, black gown to mark the heaviness of your grief, and the respect which has been such a prominent feature of your attitude toward your father and mother.

“Yours,

“MARY PENNINGTON.”

She had written and posted this in a fit of temper that was not to be measured, and she had not repented of so doing when the temper was gone, though she felt she had cut off any possibility of a reconciliation with Christina by this act. She said nothing to her mother about it.

“She would only fret more than she does now,” was what she said to herself.

Polly’s high-handed treatment of her sister gave her a certain satisfaction, but the manipulation of certain business with her father’s lawyer gave her far more. This business was purely personal, and had been carried out by her quite unknown to her mother.

Her father’s will, made a couple of years before, had been duly read and proved, although so great had been the change in the dead man’s affairs that this will had had as little value attached to it as the paper on which it was written. But apart from the will, there had been a certain sum of insurance money which Robert Pennington had always intended should be divided between his three daughters. In the event of either one of them being well married and provided, the money was to go to the ones or one as the case might be, left unmarried; and should all three be married, then the money was to go to the boy, Harold, to be used for him as his mother should think fit. Polly, therefore, at her father’s death, inherited this money.

This arrangement had been made when Mr. Pennington had reckoned confidently on leaving his widow, if not a wealthy woman, at least in a condition of complete comfort, but the severe losses he had sustained in his business during the last year of his life, had seen his careful provision for his wife melt away with his other capital, and at the time of his death Mrs. Pennington had nothing she could call her own, save a very small yearly income she had inherited from her father.

“Now,” said Polly to the lawyers in her most businesslike way, when the matter of the insurance money was laid before her, and she became aware that she could claim about three thousand pounds as her own—“now, since you tell me this money is mine, I will tell you what I am going to do with it. I am going to invest it in an annuity for

my mother. Oh! yes, I am!" this rather defiantly. "I know all about what I mean to do, and I have quite made up my mind to do it. My mother is far more important than I am, and I want her to feel she has something certain, if small, to live upon during her lifetime. She can then do as much as she wants to for my brother's education, and as I make my home with her I shall share all she has. Please arrange this for me."

Polly had finished with an air that conveyed her desire to have no further discussion on the matter. Her journey that morning she had met Valentine in the omnibus had been to the lawyers to receive the news that her command had been executed.

"And when it is done I shall tell her myself, and then, as the matter cannot be undone, she will resign herself to circumstances."

This is what Polly said to the solicitor when she bade him good-morning, but, as a matter of fact, she had no intention of telling her mother anything about it.

She had constituted herself the business man for the moment, and she could very easily let her mother understand that the winding up of the estate had been more satisfactory than had been imagined. Of course, Polly had had any amount of protest to meet with from the lawyers when she announced her determination to urge her mother to remain on in the big house. She had an answer, however, for all that was put forward against this.

"Suppose," it was suggested to her, "that Mrs. Pennington gets no offer for the house, what then?"

"Why, then," said Polly, promptly, "we shall live in it till the expiration of our lease, by which time any amount of things may have happened. We shall only use a portion of the house. Mother is going to sell some of the more valuable furniture, and we have dismissed all the servants but one. If you can show me that this is going to ruin us, I am prepared to be assured of the fact."

"That girl has got a head on her shoulders!" was one of the remarks that was made after Polly had departed triumphant out of the lawyers' office.

"And a —— good will of her own into the bargain," was a second remark made not without admiration for this same will.

Polly, meanwhile, carried out all her plans, and she was so energetic, so helpful and so bright and courageous, as we have said, that she imbued her mother with some of her spirit, and long before the new year had dropped out of its newness, the two women had settled down into a quiet, even life that had its share of work and thought to lift them out of too deep a measure of sorrow.

Polly's brain did an infinite amount of traveling in these days.

She was turning over a number of schemes in her head, needless to say, schemes that would bring little grist to the mill, and insure her mother even more comfort than she had now.

One day she thought of starting a cooking class, a second day she pictured herself as mistress of dancing to a crowd of little children, a third she had some other idea.

It would be easy, she told herself, to make some use of the big empty rooms, if only once she would hit on just the thing to do. Teaching in the ordinary sense of the word, was something Polly never would have attempted.

“First of all, I know nothing,” she said to herself, candidly; “and, then, I should just get mad with irritation and impatience. I would rather sweep a crossing than be a governess.”

Nevertheless, each day as it went emphasized the necessity more in the girl’s mind that something must be done to add to the very modest income on which they had to live. Harold’s school bills alone made big inroads into this income, and it was only by strenuous efforts that Polly was able to steer clear of debt.

As her mother had foretold, the family in general expressed unqualified disapproval of the arrangement by which Robert Pennington’s widow remained on in the old house, and this disapproval took the form of absenting themselves from the modest menage. Even Mrs. Pennington’s sister, Hubert Kestridge’s stepmother, held herself aloof, but, then, as Polly knew right well, the marriage with Winnie had been exceedingly objectionable to her Aunt Nellie, and she and her mother had to bear the brunt of this anger.

“I don’t think I care very much if I don’t see anyone of my relations again,” Polly frequently informed herself.

The attitude of the family indeed acted on her as a kind of spur. It made her desire for independence greater than ever, and her determination to stand firm by her mother more eager.

As Christmas had passed, and the new year had come, Polly found herself wondering at odd times if that big Mr. Ambleton would ever pay them a visit.

“As he asked himself, I think it would be rather rude if he did not come,” she said once to her mother. “Not that I want him, however,” she added, quickly.

Mrs. Pennington said, in her quiet, soft way, that she thought she would like to see Mr. Ambleton.

“From what Hubert said of him, I feel sure he must be a nice man,” she remarked.

“Well,” said Polly to this, “if he is not nice he must be awfully horrid, for there is so much of him! Big people ought to have more virtues than little ones.”

“Somehow,” said Mrs. Pennington, looking up from her sewing and falling, as she always now endeavored to do, into Polly’s mood, “somehow I think I like little people best, Polly.”

And Polly kissed her.

“Then, now I know you like me a tiny, teeny bit, you darling!” she said.

And after this she sat and watched her mother’s white, thin fingers as they threaded a needle and stitched away industriously, and while she watched she dreamed the only dream dear to her young heart now—the dream of giving this loved

being all those things that her devotion determined were the proper accompaniment of life for such a mother as she possessed.

CHAPTER X.

A WILFUL WOMAN.

Valentine did not lose any time in writing to his cousin to broach the subject of his grandmother.

He made absolutely no reference to the dismissal from the Dower House. He wrote tersely, and put Grace's wish into as few words as possible, and he directed the letter, as usual, to Mark at Sunstead.

He was busy starting all the arrangements for their move—he had not lost an hour in obtaining the house he had desired to have—when an answer was brought to his letter.

It was an answer written in a bold, feminine hand, and Valentine's brows met fiercely as he saw this.

Christina wrote curtly, informing him that in her husband's absence she had opened the letter, and she begged to inform him that she must unhesitatingly refuse, in her husband's name, his suggestion of moving old Lady Wentworth from her present quarters.

"Your grandmother is far too weak to undertake any exertion, and the mere idea of removing her from a place in which she has lived so long, savors, to me at least, of cruelty. I fail to understand why Miss Ambleton cannot visit her grandmother at Sunstead as formerly. Pray let it be understood that I make no protest to her doing this; in fact, I consider it to be a neglect of a positive duty on her part if she continues to abstain from coming in the future."

Valentine threw down the letter with a laugh so strange that Grace, who happened to be passing through the hall, wearing a pale and half-bewildered air—the uprooting of her home goods was a terrible business to her, poor girl!—looked at him startled.

"What is it, Valentine?" she asked, quickly.

"It is only a moment of unreasoning anger, my dear," Valentine answered, after a little pause; "I have a desire to strangle a woman, that is all."

Grace drew a deep breath.

"You have heard from Mark?" she queried.

Valentine laughed again.

"Mark has ceased to exist. The woman he has married is Mark and herself, too. Good God! and to think I was fool enough to imagine this creature was a woman to be saved from sorrow, and perhaps from shame. How she must have laughed at me!"

Grace read through the letter quietly.

"Despite her evident intention to wound and insult there is an element of truth in what she says, Valentine," was her remark, made very gently, as she refolded the letter. "Grannie is very old and ailing, and she has been so many years at Sunstead that it is possible the mere fact of strange surroundings might hasten her end."

Valentine was silent a long while, and Grace watched him as he occupied himself in stripping the walls of innumerable weapons that he had hung there from time to time.

The events of the last few days had completely changed Grace. She looked tired, ill and subdued. With every desire to hold herself bravely through the strange, unexpected circumstances of the moment, she found herself fretting incessantly.

Valentine looked down at her after a long pause.

"This is a second grief to you, Grace, dear, I fear," he said, his voice its usual tone again.

Grace shook her head.

"Not altogether, for I had felt that our request would be refused."

The girl stood a moment by the fireplace, looking wistfully about the old hall that was beginning to wear a chaotic and disconsolate air already.

"Valentine," she said, in a low, grave voice, "if you don't mind, I shall now make a rule of going to see grannie every day for at least half an hour. There are certain circumstances that make personal feelings a matter of indifference, and I need never come in contact with Lady Wentworth."

"You shall do just what seems best to you, dear," Val made answer, gently.

And after that day, though he asked nothing, he knew that Grace stole an hour out of the worry and bustle of the removal to go up and sit with the fading old woman she loved so dearly, and who could not count on many more days on earth.

Christmas had passed, and Sacha had come down from town. To Grace's delight, her younger brother announced his determination to stay and join in the business of the moment.

Grace had an unbounded pride and love for Val, but for Sacha she had more tenderness. The brothers were not very much alike. Sacha was a smaller build altogether. He was a very handsome young man, with an air of delicacy about him. This delicacy it was that made him so dear to Grace. She fussed about him as though she had been his mother.

Sacha had big, soft, brown eyes, that always had an unconscious touch of pleading in them. He was by nature as much Valentine's inferior, as far as unselfishness and sterling, straightforward goodness went, as his strength and stature were visibly inferior to those of his big brother.

Were he and Valentine to have been much thrown together, they must inevitably have come to loggerheads, but the brothers seldom met.

There was a considerable amount of good in Sacha Ambleton, but there were also several qualities in his nature which he never desired to bring to his brother's knowledge.

Mark Wentworth had swiftly found out those qualities, and Val would have been bitterly surprised could he have known that Sacha, if he had not actually assisted and

associated with his cousin in his foolish, dissipated life, had certainly never considered he had the moral right to censure these follies.

Had the matter ever been threshed out between Valentine and himself, Sacha's views of the situation would have been summed up most probably in the remark given, good-humoredly, that he was a man of the world, and did not see that Mark was doing anything very much out of the common, but, unfortunately, perhaps, things had never got so far between Valentine and himself.

Sacha had heard, of course, from both his brother and sister of the rupture between themselves and his cousin, and he had written most sympathetically to Grace on the subject. He had not thought it necessary to tell Grace that he had had Mark's version of the matter also, and he certainly had no intention whatever of letting Grace know that his real sympathy went with Mark Wentworth, and not with Valentine.

"Hang it all!" he had said to himself, "Mark is not a child, and he has every right to take a wife if he chooses to do so. Val has overstepped his limits this time. He ought to remember that Mark is his own master, and it was a decidedly unnecessary act to go and set the girl against the marriage. I think Val deserves all the snubbing he may get. But if all I hear is true, I fancy the new Lady Wentworth must be a woman of spirit, and will not accept Val's interference very meekly."

A theory that was amply proved to Sacha when the news came of Christina's attitude toward his brother and sister, more especially when he heard of the eviction from the Dower House.

"Val has met his master for once," he said to himself, with a faint smile. Since he would suffer no discomfort himself by this change of houses, he was rather amused than otherwise at the first working of Christina's power, though the moment he met Grace and saw how really troubled the girl was, Sacha was truly moved to pity.

He was honestly fond of Grace, and he never remembered to have seen her so ill and sorrowful as she was now.

It was certainly hard, too, that Grace should suffer for Val's doings.

He made himself very sweet to his sister, and though he had a way of disappearing when extra help was needed, his pretty words were almost as acceptable to Grace as Valentine's hours of packing, lifting and settling.

Val worked like several horses rolled into one. He turned himself for the nonce into a carpenter, a plumber, a picture hanger and, indeed, every other sort of convenient and necessary person.

With his strong arms always ready, the furniture was moved about like magic, and Grace's new home swiftly began to look cozy and pretty.

The girl always found something fresh done when she returned from her daily journey to her grandmother's sick room, and Val was amply paid by seeing the color begin to steal into his sister's cheeks and the old brightness come back to her eyes.

Sacha had fallen into the habit of walking with Grace up to Sunstead. Old Lady Wentworth always had been fond of him, and though she was very feeble and her

mind wandered a little at times, she took distinct pleasure in seeing Sacha's handsome face.

Sometimes he would wait and accompany Grace homeward, but more than once she missed him and went on her way alone.

She always imagined on such occasions that Sacha had wandered into the cathedral and was probably making some rough sketch or other. It never entered her head to suppose anything so extraordinary as that Sacha should be sitting in Christina's boudoir, chatting and drinking tea with as much ease as though he had known his cousin's wife all his life!

Sacha had caught sight of Christina the first time he had gone to Sunstead with Grace, and he had boldly taken the bull by the horns, and had asked for an audience, introducing himself with his own particular charm, and claiming cousinship.

"Mark told me I was to come and see you," he said, and Christina received him graciously.

She saw at a glance the wide difference between him and his brother and sister, and she guessed just as quickly that by encouraging him she would give another sting to the man she told herself she hated so thoroughly.

The acquaintance between Sacha and Mark's wife was not long in blossoming into an intimacy.

Mark was boisterously glad to welcome Sacha, and Christina's vanity was flattered and soothed. A portrait was instantly started, and Sacha began to go to Sunstead at all hours. It was quite by chance that this information came to Valentine's ears.

He was not altogether deceived by his brother's sweetness. He knew Sacha could be very selfish. Neither was Val altogether in sympathy with the life the younger man had chosen; but still he was far from imagining how little real depths there was in Sacha's professed affection, and it gave him a shock when Grace's maid, Ellen, in casual mention of Sunstead and its inmates, spoke of Sacha's constant presence there, and of the wonderful picture he was painting.

Ellen was in the habit of going up constantly to old Lady Wentworth, so there could be no doubt there must be an element of some truth in what she said.

Val was in his new "den" when this new annoyance came to him.

Ellen had brought him a cup of coffee and a batch of letters by the afternoon post. She was in the habit of chatting familiarly with both her master and mistress.

Valentine sat frowning after she had gone. He saw in this more of Christina's clever and spiteful work, and at this, the beginning, did not blame his brother so much.

"Sacha cannot resist a beautiful woman. As far as I am concerned, he can go as often as he likes; but I am not thinking of myself in this business now. The woman's treatment of Grace puts a different complexion on everything, and I must resent it. Sacha's friendship will complicate matters. I wondered why he did not go back to town."

Valentine opened his letters mechanically, and ran through them indifferently.

They were all business except one, which bore an Italian stamp. Glancing at the signature, Valentine's face took a gleam of pleasure. He liked Hubert Kestridge sincerely.

Hubert wrote to ask him a favor.

"I want to interest you in a boy, a semi-connection of mine. I suppose, in a sense, he is a relation now, since he happens to be my wife's brother. He has been in school in Germany; but he had to come home suddenly the other day on account of illness. He is now with his mother, Mrs. Pennington, and I am sure this poor woman must be worrying herself to know what to do with him. Pennington left no money, and the boy must earn his living. I want you to tell me if you think you could do anything for me in this matter. My wife is, unfortunately, very delicate, and this keeps me away from England for some weeks longer. Meanwhile, time is precious, and, believe me, I shall take it as a proof of personal favor and friendship to me if you can at any time put this boy in the way of doing something for himself. Perhaps you may find time to see him one of these days."

Valentine folded up the letter, and then he went on with his task of making his new room as comfortable as he could, bestowing his multitudinous papers in cupboards and boxes and putting his books on the shelves, and all the time he was working he was conscious of a warm, pleasant sensation at his heart, and it was only by degrees that he realized this sensation came at the remembrance that on the morrow he would go to London, and that he should see Polly Pennington.

CHAPTER XI. THE BOY'S RETURN.

Harold's unexpected return home was at once a pleasure and a trouble to Polly.

She was deeply attached to her brother; in truth, despite her girlish infatuation for Christina's beauty, Polly had always had more sympathy with the bright, mischievous boy, who had been so dear to her dead father, than she had had for either of her sisters.

It was not merely that both her mother and herself were made anxious by Harold's illness, there was the material difficulty of his future staring them straight in the face.

Something must be done for him; but what that something was to be neither of them could tell. One point, however, was clear—further schooling was out of the question.

Had it not been that the severity of the winter abroad tried him too hardly, Harold would have had another six months, or perhaps a year, in Germany; but now that he was back in London it was a question of setting him to some profession, not of seeking out further education for him.

Polly's trouble about this matter increased considerably after Harold had been home a few days, for it came to her then only too surely that the boy's condition of health was more seriously delicate than she had imagined. The attack of influenza and pleurisy that had been the cause for sending him away from the rigorous winter in Dresden had left something more than ordinary delicacy behind.

There was a look in the lad's face that made Polly's heart contract with a pang.

She kept this new worry to herself, hoping, indeed, that she might be mistaken, and, above all, that her mother should not have the same idea as herself about Harold; but it was a trouble that she found very hard to bear, and that haunted her closely.

She was alone in the big desolate-looking house when the servant announced the arrival of Valentine Ambleton.

Her mother and Harold had gone out on a shopping expedition, devised by Polly to give them both some amusement, and she was occupied in walking about the large, half-empty drawing room, wondering for the hundredth time in what way she could utilize it so that it might bring some small addition to their limited exchequer, when the door opened and Valentine's big form appeared.

Black was not the most becoming setting to Polly's dark prettiness, and her humbly made black serge gown was fitted to a figure that had grown very, very thin of late. The girl had a fragile as well as a sad look, and Valentine had difficulty in recognizing the former little spitfire in this subdued young creature.

Sight of him, however, brought a kind of excitement to Polly, and as they sat and talked the old vivacity and color flashed into her eyes once again.

She had greeted him most naturally, but, of course, she was very outspoken.

"You have been a long time coming," she informed him after a while; "but, truth to tell, I never expected you would come at all."

"I should like to know why you thought that," Val said.

"Oh! because so many people one meets stop and pretend they are glad to see one, and are dying to come and see one again, and they never come near the house. Not that I want any of them," cried Polly, in her most independent manner; "but I hate and detest all who forget my mother."

"I am not a forgetful person, Miss Pennington," Val said, quietly.

Polly looked at him sideways out of her sparkling eyes.

"I think you have a good opinion of yourself. Big people are every bit as conceited as little ones, I find."

Valentine laughed.

"Well, if I am conceited you must try and take it out of me, for I hope to see a great deal of you now if you will let me come. I should have been here long ago, but I have had to help my sister. We have been moving into another house."

"Oh! you poor things," Polly said, sympathetically. "A move is a real calamity. I should hate it. We are told by all our relations that we have no business here, and that we ought to move; but I won't let my mother budge. I know everybody considers we ought to bury ourselves in a tiny house in the suburbs, but mother has lived in this big house ever since I can remember anything, and I mean to keep her here as long as I can. But why have you moved?" she queried, in her frank, direct way. "Hubert Kestridge made us all envious by his description of your dear old home in Dynechester. Were you obliged to leave it?"

"The Dower House belongs to Sir Mark Wentworth, and he requires it," Valentine explained. Had he needed confirmation of his theory that Christina's excuse had been invented, Polly's words would have given it to him, but he had, as we know, at once discredited her declared intention of offering the old house as a home to her mother and sister, so Polly's surprise at his news did not astonish him.

Polly said "Oh!" to his explanation, then she took him downstairs out of the large drawing room to a more cozy corner.

"Mother will be in directly, and then we will have tea. I don't have a fire in the drawing room very often, it makes too much work for one servant, especially as my brother is at home just now. They had to send him away from his school in Dresden. He has been ill."

Valentine stood on the hearthrug in front of the dining-room fire. It was the room where that unpleasant scene had been enacted on that bygone day.

He remembered it now with a strong rush of anger for his folly in attempting to do what he had tried to do, and yet, as he glanced at the girl who was flitting about preparing the tea table, and making everything ready for her mother's return, he felt a touch of real pleasure mingle in with the jarred feelings. For if that bygone day had brought him in contact with Christina and her worthless nature, as Valentine

uncompromisingly considered it, it had also been the means of introducing him to this other girl, who, for some occult reason, had found an abiding place in his thoughts.

As Polly chatted on gayly enough, the man watching her arrived at two or three conclusions about her.

He was not a woman with a woman's keen instinct to help him, yet it came to Val most surely that there was a sore point in connection with Hubert Kestridge and his wife even as there was about Christina, Lady Wentworth.

Each time the name of Kestridge was spoken, Polly seemed to wince, and Valentine all at once determined to say nothing of that letter from Italy which had reached him the previous day.

He was not a particularly diplomatic person, as has been seen, yet his tenderness and large sympathies gave him a certain tact that stood him in good stead now.

He determined, therefore, to work what help he could give the lad Harold in a roundabout sort of way.

He enticed Polly to tell him all about her brother, and the girl was nothing loath to speak of Harold's talent and many other endearing qualities.

"It makes me a little sad," she owned, wistfully, "to realize that Harold is not to have the education our poor father intended him to have. Of course, I am his sister, and so I suppose I am prejudiced, but I call him ever so clever," and then Polly sighed; "only he is not strong."

"Growing boys seldom are," Valentine said in the most matter-of-fact way.

He had caught sight of Polly's eyes, and he saw they were full of tears, but just at this moment Mrs. Pennington and her boy arrived, and the little private conversation came to an end.

It needed no very great skill to read that Polly's anxiety about her brother was well founded. The boy had a very weak, wan look, and Valentine felt a little pang in his big, strong heart as he looked at him. He was an interesting lad, and above the average in intelligence.

Polly poured out tea, and fussed about her mother, and the while she did this she was listening to the conversation carried on between Harold and Mr. Ambleton.

Valentine discovered to his pleasure that he could be of definite use to the boy. From the sketches produced he discovered that Harold had more than a fair talent for designing, and with cultivation might turn his talent in an architectural direction.

"You must come and stay with me a while," Val said. "Will you spare him, Mrs. Pennington?" he queried. "My sister will take great care of him, and, I believe, I can find him some work."

"Oh, mother!" Harold exclaimed in boyish delight, and Mrs. Pennington murmured her pleasure in this arrangement.

As for Polly, she thanked Mr. Ambleton with her eyes, a matter that afforded him considerable satisfaction, and in a little while Valentine brought this visit to a close, and drove away, feeling that he had left something very dear behind him.

Harold talked enthusiastically about his new friend all that evening, and the thought of a visit to Dynechester, and the prospect of turning himself from a schoolboy into the dignity of one who might soon be a wage-earner, brought a glow of color to his pale face.

"I call him a brick!" he cried, as Valentine was discussed.

"He is much too big to be one brick," said Polly, meditatively.

She was wondering if she could let Harold go on a visit without supplementing his rather shabby wardrobe. Finally she determined that they could not afford to indulge in any extravagance, and so on the morrow she packed the boy's school box, and wrapped him in sundry flannels, and confided him to Valentine's care.

"Don't let him sit in a draught, and please send him to bed at ten, and don't keep him longer than you want. It is awfully kind of you to ask him at all. You have made him quite happy."

"I shall remember all your orders," Ambleton said, meekly.

He thought he had never seen anything sweeter or more desirable than Polly looked on this morning as she stood in the big doorway and waved her hand in farewell to her brother.

"Now, Polly will go upstairs and have a good cry," Harold informed him. "Polly always cries when anybody goes away. She says she can't help herself."

Polly did exactly as her brother foretold.

As soon as the door was closed she ran up to her little room and indulged in a fit of weeping. She could not have explained why exactly, but the feeling pressed on her that this visit Harold was about to make would bring her some new sorrow, even while it promised so much that was bright and pleasant. Valentine had enlarged his invitation.

"My sister will write to you in her own name; but I, on her behalf, now beg that both Miss Pennington and yourself will come down and stay with us also," he had said to Polly's mother. "We shall only wait till we are quite settled before expecting you. It is not very gay at Dynechester, but the place is so quaint I am sure it will interest you."

Polly had answered for her mother.

"We shall be very glad to come," she had said, briskly; "and we will go," she further informed her mother when Harold had departed, and they were alone. "It will do us both good. I don't know how you feel, mother, but I need a little change of air."

Mrs. Pennington did not answer immediately. When she did speak she had a strained note in her voice.

"Dynechester is Christina's home, Polly," she said:

But Polly wore a defiant air.

"What has that to do with us? Christina may live in Dynechester, but we need not trouble ourselves about her in the very least. I mean henceforward," Polly added, with

a great deal more firmness than was sincere. "I mean, my lovee, dear, to treat people just as they treat me, and as Christina forgets us, so we must forget her."

It was only on rare occasions that the names of either Christina or Winnie were mentioned between them.

It seemed strange enough to Polly sometimes to look back and realize in how short a time her two sisters had drifted out of her life.

She had a thrill of pity for herself in these moments—pity for all those years of wasted love and admiration she had lavished on Christina. That Winnie would be true to her own peculiar selfishness Polly had always vaguely felt; but the way in which Winnie had demonstrated this finally had exceeded all she had imagined on the subject.

It was in truth a hard task for Polly's virile loyalty to survey her sister's callousness with any great degree of philosophy.

She made a brave show to her mother of indifference, but the wounds that both Christina and Winnie had made were too deep to be healed quickly.

Nevertheless, though there would be pain both to her mother and herself in this suggested visit to Dynechester, Polly determined they would go when they were invited.

"I shall believe in the invitation when it comes," she said, with emphasis, as two days passed, and no letter reached them from Grace. "I suppose Mr. Ambleton thought he was in duty bound to say that his sister would like to see us. It was quite necessary for him to invent something just to please us, wasn't it?"

"I don't think Mr. Ambleton looks as if he invented very much," Mrs. Pennington said, gently. She paused a moment, and then she added: "I like this new friend of ours, Polly; I like him very much."

Polly grunted.

"I don't like anybody nowadays," she said, turbulently. "I don't believe in anybody. I think the whole world is odious."

At this Mrs. Pennington had to smile.

"Things are bad with you to-day, Polly," was her remark.

Polly kissed her.

"I am in a downright bad temper, my darling mother. Just leave me to myself, and I shall come round. Now, I am off marketing. Take care of yourself till I come back."

When Polly arrived home from her modest shopping, her mother handed her two letters, with rather a triumphant expression.

"Harold is enjoying himself immensely, and Miss Ambleton writes so charmingly. She wants us to fix our own time about a week or ten days hence."

Polly read through the letters.

Harold's schoolboy effusion made her smile, but there was something in Grace's pretty letter that touched her.

"I am sure I shall like this girl," she said, and then she began to discuss ways and means. "You must take your smartest tea gown, and make yourself ever so pretty, mother, dear one."

"And you, Polly?"

"Oh!" with a shrug of her shoulders, "I am all right. I never look magnificent, and I certainly shall not pretend to dress up smartly for these people."

"You see," Mrs. Pennington ventured to remark, "you see, Polly, I was quite right, Mr. Ambleton did not invent. I am sure he will be very pleased if we go."

"Oh! as to that!" said haughty Polly, "I shall wait a little longer before I pass any opinion. He will have to pretend he is pleased, whether he is or not. After all, we shall be his guests, remember."

Mrs. Pennington took up the cudgels on Valentine's behalf in real earnest.

"Unless Mr. Ambleton were a very kind man, I am sure he would not have asked Harold to stay with him. Come, Polly, you must confess that?"

"I won't confess anything," Polly cried. "I am a pig-headed person, and when I think things—well, I think them, and there is an end of the matter."

"Under these circumstances, then, it will be better for us to refuse Mr. Ambleton's invitation," said gentle Mrs. Pennington, with a smile just flickering at the corners of her mouth, and, of course, Polly at once combated this suggestion, and Mrs. Pennington's answer to Grace's letter was a cordial acceptance of the invitation for herself and daughter to spend a few days in Dynechester.

CHAPTER XII. A TERRIBLE DESTINY.

Valentine had taken counsel with himself, and had resolved to say nothing to his brother on the question of Sacha's intimacy with Lady Wentworth.

"After all, if Sacha does not see the matter with our eyes all the speaking in the world will not alter things," he said to himself. "It is, of course, his own business to go where he likes and do what he wants to do, and if he chooses to be a friend of Lady Wentworth's, I have no right to object. I should not give the business a second thought but for Grace."

Grace, however, quickly grasped the situation.

On her daily visits up to Sunstead, she had soon learned of Sacha's intimacy with Christina, and though at first she had felt a sharp sensation of hurt that her younger brother should permit this, remembering how she had fared at Christina's hands, she very swiftly found an excuse.

"Sacha is painting Lady Wentworth's portrait," she told Valentine. "I am not surprised, she is a beautiful creature, and should make a beautiful picture."

Val assented to this quietly.

"I suppose Mark approves of this?" he said, half casually.

Grace colored.

It was not easy for her even yet to have to realize that her cousin was on openly declared ill terms with them.

"Mark could find no reason surely to object. Sacha, after all, has not offended him, if we have done so."

A day or two later Grace spoke on this subject again.

"Mark and Sacha are quite friendly," she told Valentine. "I saw them walking together in the grounds this morning." Grace paused. It was evident she had something passing on her mind. "Val, have you seen Mark lately?" was her query.

Valentine looked at her an instant.

"No," he answered; "not for some weeks. Why do you ask, Grace? Is something wrong with him?"

"He looks—terrible," Grace said, in a low voice, pausing before the last word. "Even at some distance, I could see that he is ill—he was leaning on Sacha, walking slowly, as though he were in pain."

Valentine knitted his brows, his pleasant face was overcast.

He answered his sister evasively.

"I expect Mark has been overdoing it. He is never strong. He treats his constitution as if it were made of cast iron instead of being a really poor affair at the best of times."

Grace loitered in her brother's rooms.

"I wish," she began, half wistfully, and then she got no further. Instead she spoke of Harold Pennington, who had been her guest for several days, and whom she liked very much. "Will you be able to do anything for him, Val?" she asked.

"He is young yet; but I think I can mold him to something. The boy is certainly clever, but he strikes me as being dreadfully delicate."

"Indeed, yes," Grace said, thoughtfully. "I heard him coughing, oh! so badly, last night, and I felt so tempted to go in and look after him, Val. Does he not remind you a little of his sister, Lady Wentworth? To me his eyes are just like hers, only softer. Is Miss Pennington at all like Mark's wife?"

"Not in the very least," Valentine said, emphatically. "She has far more beauty."

Grace opened her eyes.

"Harold tells me she is the plain one of the family. I wonder if I shall share your opinion?"

"Wait and see," Val said dryly.

That same evening he spoke to his brother about Mark Wentworth.

"How is he going on?" he asked. "Is he keeping straight? I hear he is looking very ill."

Sacha shrugged his shoulders.

He affected a semi-picturesque attire in the evenings, a dark blue velvet coat as a setting to his white shirt and tie, and diamond studs, and though Valentine abominated this style of dressing, he was forced to admit that his brother became it very well.

"Mark has gone his own gait too long to change easily now," Sacha said. He leaned back in his chair, and smoked his cigarette through a long gold-mounted holder. "I think he is much about the same. I lunched there the other day, and Mark drank his bottle of champagne like a man."

Valentine frowned sharply.

"Why do you encourage him in this?" he asked, in his curtest way.

Sacha opened his handsome eyes.

"My dear Val, what have I to do with it? I am not Mark's keeper."

Valentine pulled away hardly at his pet meerschaum, and there was silence between the two brothers till Sacha spoke again.

"Mark must drink himself to death," he said, quite composedly. "It is his destiny, and a man cannot go against his fate."

"Don't talk that kind of tomfoolery to me, Sacha," the other man said roughly. "Every man's fate is to make the best of his life, and Mark Wentworth started as clear as any of us. He is unfortunately placed, and that is where his bad fate comes in."

Sacha smiled faintly.

"You dislike Lady Wentworth very definitely, I see," he said, and there was a query in the words.

"I would rather not discuss her," Valentine answered, and to end the conversation he took up the evening paper that had just been brought up from the station.

But Sacha, apparently, was in a talkative mood.

"Does it ever strike you, Val, that you are a prejudiced person? Take this case of Lady Wentworth, for instance. What had this girl done that should have set you so desperately against her? Of course, there is open enmity between you now. I don't see how you could expect anything else under the circumstances; but what I don't understand is, why you should have worked to bring this enmity into existence."

"I hardly think you would be nearer comprehension if I were to enlarge upon the reasons that have actuated my attitude where Lady Wentworth is concerned," Valentine said, dryly.

Sacha shrugged his shoulders again.

"As I said just now, I repeat you are a very prejudiced person, Val."

Valentine felt his temper rising.

"Look here, Sacha, let us drop this discussion. My opinion about Lady Wentworth is a matter that concerns myself. If it had concerned you, I take it, you would not have acted as you are acting. But that again is a matter that is your own affair entirely. I prefer, myself, not to speak any further about the establishment at Sunstead, and I regret that I introduced Mark's name at all."

"Lady Wentworth," said Sacha, slowly, "has gone over the whole subject with me. She had charged me to explain to Grace that she had no kind of animosity against our sister, that her cause of complaint is with you entirely."

But this was too much for Valentine. He rose and carried himself and his newspapers to the drawing room, where Grace and Harold Pennington were engaged in playing *bésique*.

"Is Sacha coming in to give us some music?" Grace asked, looking up with her old, bright smile.

Her young guest had worked a beneficial effect upon her spirit.

"Polly will sing to you when she is here," Harold hastened to say. "She knows any amount of songs—old things, you know—'Sally in Our Alley,' and things like that."

Valentine sat down and watched the game.

His angry feelings were gradually soothed as the moments went by, and when ten o'clock struck and Harold rose obediently at Grace's word and left them to go to bed, Valentine was quite himself again.

"The boy looks better, Grace," he said, as the door closed on Harold.

Grace paused before answering. She was putting away the cards and counters.

"I don't know what to think about him, Val. To-day we were in the post office when Dr. Smythson came in, and while he was talking to me about poor grannie, he was looking at Harold, and listening to his cough. He asked me privately if the boy's lungs had been sounded, and I said 'No,' because Harold remembers nothing of the kind. It was pouring with rain when we left the post office, and Dr. Smythson insisted on driving us home in his brougham. I could see," Grace finished, slowly, as she shut away the *bésique* box in a cabinet drawer, "I could see he thought very badly of

Harold. I do feel so sorry, Val. Would it be possible for Mrs. Pennington to send the boy away for the benefit of his health—I mean abroad, somewhere?”

Valentine deliberated a moment before he spoke. “It would not be easy, but it could be arranged if it were deemed imperative. I hope, however, you are mistaken, Grace. To me the boy seems better.”

Grace, standing in front of the fire, shook her head quietly.

“I shall be glad when his mother and sister come next week. I like him so much; but, I confess, he is a little bit of an anxiety to me. The house will be all cozy, I hope, by the end of next week, when my new visitors arrive.”

“It looks delightful now—a real home,” Valentine said, but he spoke abstractedly.

A little later on he inquired of Grace if she knew what Sacha’s plans were.

“Is he going to stay down here much longer? Usually he does not honor us so much,” he said.

Grace hurried to reply.

“Oh! I don’t want Sacha to go before Mrs. Pennington and her daughter have come and gone. He can help to amuse them so well, and besides it is right and proper that he should be here, Val. I am delighted he is staying so long.”

“It certainly will not be right or proper that Sacha should be so constantly at Sunstead while the Penningtons are here,” Valentine said, grimly. “The situation will be a very unpleasant one, seeing that Lady Wentworth ignores her mother and sister completely.”

Grace looked troubled, then her face cleared.

“I will speak to Sacha. He is so clever he is sure to arrange matters well. I don’t want to send him back to London—we see him so seldom nowadays.”

Grace kissed her big brother “good-night” after this.

“I don’t know why, but I feel so tired to-night, I am going to sleep like a top.”

Grace was busy fulfilling this prophecy some two or three hours later when a sharp knock on her door brought her out of her dreams, and made her heart beat quickly.

“What is it?” she asked, and at sight of Val, standing in the doorway, she felt her alarm deepen.

“Is some one ill?” she asked again.

“Put on some clothes, and come into the next room. The boy is very ill, Grace. He came to me half an hour ago, frightened to death. He has broken a blood vessel, and I am going for Smythson without any further delay. I have done all I can to stop the hemorrhage, but I am afraid it is beyond me. He is flat on his back, and, happily, I found some ice downstairs, and I have put some on his chest. Just sit beside him and keep him still. A little ice in the mouth occasionally.”

Grace hustled into her clothes, and went into the next room.

How long she sat listening to the labored breathing, and holding the thin, weak hands in hers she never knew. It seemed years before Valentine reappeared with the doctor behind him.

“We must send for his mother the first thing in the morning,” Grace said, with pallid lips, as the night wore into dawn, and the three sat anxiously round the bed.

Valentine went out when the morning came, and dispatched a telegram to Polly.

He had worded it as carefully as he could, but he was only too well assured that his message would carry desolation to her heart, and his own yearned over her. He longed yet dreaded to see her, and when the train came rushing into the station about noon, and he stood on the platform to receive the slender, black-robed figure, with its eyes strained with anguish, and all life and joy banished from the face, it was with difficulty he restrained himself from catching her in his arms.

“I have come alone,” Polly said, in a hard, hoarse voice. “Mother is ill in bed. I did not tell her all. She thinks I have come to see you about arranging his business, poor boy! I had to invent something. It would have killed her to come as she is.” She lifted her eyes to Valentine’s face after this. “Harold is very, very ill. I know it—I feel it,” she said.

Valentine bowed his head.

“He is very ill,” he answered; “but there is hope.”

Polly buried her face in her hands, and the brougham jolted over the road.

“There is no hope,” she said, brokenly. “Oh! mother, darling, if only I could have stood between you and this last sorrow!”

CHAPTER XIII. HOPING AGAINST HOPE.

Harold Pennington passed rapidly from one alarming stage of illness to another. He was in a high fever when Polly arrived to crouch down by his bedside, and when the doctor came to pay a third visit in the same day, his face alone conveyed to the girl how justly founded had been her despairing cry that there was no hope. Hope, indeed, there was none. The case proved most complicated. By nighttime the temperature had risen still higher, and symptoms of pneumonia had developed.

Grace never left the other girl, and Polly turned to her as though they had been friends all their lives. It was, indeed, in such moments as these that Grace demonstrated her full beauty and wealth of heart and sympathy. She had bitterly reproached herself at first with lack of thought for the boy.

"I ought not to have taken him out," she said to Polly, her eyes full of tears. "I ought to have known that this cold weather would try him."

"Don't say these things," Polly whispered. "It was bound to come. I have felt all along that there was real danger to be feared in his future, and if he were to be a sufferer all his life, I—I almost rejoice that this has come. I grieve more for my mother now. He was her baby. Oh! she loves him so dearly."

As the hours wore away thought of her mother pressed most hardly on the girl, and Grace hardly knew how to console her. In one of her quiet moments with Valentine in the corridor outside the sick room, Grace asked him how they should act.

"I can see that her heart is riven. She wants to spare her mother, and yet the truth must be told, for," Grace added, in a lower voice, "Dr. Smythson fears the very worst. What can we do, Val?"

Valentine answered slowly that he should go himself to London and break the news to the mother, and also bring down other advice.

"Smythson may be mistaken," he said, but Grace shook her head.

"Alas!" she answered, "I don't need Dr. Smythson, or any other doctor, to tell me how poor a chance the boy has. Oh! Val, if only I had not taken him out yesterday!"

Valentine drew his sister toward him and kissed her brow.

"You distress yourself needlessly, dear," he told her. "This has not come through any fault of yours. The boy was doomed to go, and go quickly. I saw it the first time my eyes rested upon him."

He changed the subject here, and spoke of Polly. He was full of solicitude for the girl.

"Has she eaten sufficient food? Try and make her rest a little. Tell her to remember how important it is that she should keep up her strength. I want you to be very good to her, Grace."

Grace returned his kiss.

She misread the meaning of those last few words, and took them to be only the expression of anxiety for one who was his guest, even under such sorrowful conditions, and Valentine did not enlighten her further, did not tell her that the girl sitting, heavy-eyed, with a breaking heart, beside her brother's bed, was to him the sweetest, dearest creature the world could hold.

It was so hard for him to stand outside the door and know that she was within, fighting down so grim and terrible a grief. He longed to range himself beside her, to take from her the weight and the burning anguish of this moment.

At such a time his size, his great physical strength, seemed almost a mockery. Of what use to be so big, so powerful, when he could not even stand forward and protect one whom he loved from all sorrow?

Grace stole back into the silent room, and whispered to Polly her news.

"He will be with your mother in a few hours," she said.

Polly thanked her softly, and turned her eyes from gazing on Harold's white face.

"Don't let her come here. It may be cruel in one sense, but it is kind in another. I want her to remember him as she has always known him, not as he is now. He used to be such a pretty boy," Polly said, slowly, as if to herself.

She refused to leave his room even to rest for an hour.

"The time is short," she told Grace. "It may be hours and it may be only moments. I must be here in case he needs me. He has recognized me, and just before you came I thought he smiled. I am not tired or hungry. I only want to be with him."

Grace left her reluctantly. Duties in the house claimed her from time to time. Death may creep slowly up to the threshold, but life demands attention incessantly.

There were many things Grace had to do.

Valentine was going to London. He must have luncheon, and Sacha, too, did not quite understand why his home should be turned upside down for strangers. All these mundane things fell naturally to Grace's lot to arrange.

In her hurry to see to Valentine's comfort, she had not time to realize the lack of sympathy that characterized Sacha's attitude at this moment.

It, therefore, came upon her with a shock, a few hours later, when Ellen, her faithful maid and helper, informed her that Mr. Sacha had ordered her to pack a portmanteau, and then had been driven up to Sunstead to remain there for the time being.

"Sir Mark wants me to paint his portrait also, and this is as good an opportunity as any," the young man had told the servant, as she obeyed his orders silently. "And I am quite sure Miss Grace will be glad to get me out of the house," he had added.

Grace made no remark when Ellen brought her this information.

It shocked her sharply for a moment to think that the heart of her younger brother could prove itself so insensible to the sufferings of others, but almost immediately her

love began to frame an explanation, if not an excuse, of Sacha's conduct. She translated his selfishness to signify a desire to save her any extra trouble.

"He thinks he will be better out of the way, that with so much to do in the house he will be only an additional worry. I am sorry he should have gone without speaking to me first; and I am more sorry still he should have gone to Sunstead, especially just now; but," Grace added in her thought, "it is hardly just to expect Sacha to quarrel with Mark because Mark has quarreled with us. Will she come here?" was Grace's next thoughts. "Surely her hardness must give way at such a time as this. Though I have no wish to come in contact with her again, I still hope she will remember she is this poor boy's sister, and that her place is near him now."

Unconsciously Grace found herself saying this to the old servant.

"And when Lady Wentworth comes, Ellen," she said, "you must let me know at once. This is not the moment to remember angry or hurt feelings."

Ellen replied to this quietly and decisively.

"Lady Wentworth will not come, my dear," she said. "She cares just as much whether her brother lives or dies as the greatest stranger might care. Sir Mark's wife, Miss Grace, will only come to your house when she can do or say something to make you uncomfortable, and that's just the plain truth."

Grace flushed at this.

"I hope you are wrong, Ellen," she said. "I should not care to think so badly of Lady Wentworth, or any other person."

"I hope I am wrong, but I know I am right," Ellen said, with obstinacy; then her voice changed as she talked of Polly.

"What a difference. Is it possible they can be sisters, Miss Grace? Poor little creature, it makes my heart ache to see her face. She looks very ill herself. I don't think she is fit to sit in that close room, but there's no way of moving her. Is Mr. Valentine going to bring the mother with him, Miss Grace?"

Grace shook her head.

"No; Mrs. Pennington is too much of an invalid. Valentine is going to break the news to her as gently as he can. Miss Polly has entreated him to prevent her mother coming."

"I don't see how he can stop her," Ellen said, thoughtfully. "She may be delicate, but it's only fair and right she should come and look on her boy before he goes. If I know anything of a mother's nature, I warrant you Mrs. Pennington will come back with Mr. Valentine to-night. I had better prepare Mr. Sacha's room for her in case I am right, had I not?"

Grace sanctioned this, feeling that there was wisdom in Ellen's suggested preparation, though she hoped, as Polly did, that the mother might not come.

This wish was doomed to be set aside unfulfilled.

That same night, very late, a cab drove up to the door, and Valentine almost lifted out a fragile woman's figure.

"She is quite exhausted," he whispered in Grace's ear.

Grace put her arms about Mrs. Pennington, and led her into the nearest room, while Valentine followed, looking strangely white and worn.

"I fear I am not a good emissary," he said, sorrowfully, to his sister; "but when she pleaded to be allowed to come to her boy, it was impossible to refuse her. Shall I go and tell Miss Pennington?"

Grace merely nodded her head. She had all her work cut out, she saw at a glance, to minister to this poor, broken-hearted mother, whose haggard eyes and frail look brought the tears in a hot flood to her own eyes.

She had Ellen at hand to help her, and the two women vied with each other in doing all their hearts could suggest to give some strength to the overtaxed frame.

The journey from town, the cold and the aching anxiety had reduced poor Mrs. Pennington to an almost fainting condition, and though her eyes looked pleadingly into Grace's face, she was forced by her weakness to rest before going upstairs.

Valentine stood a moment watching her, then turned and went to find Polly.

He went slowly. He felt truly that the sight of her mother so prostrate with grief would be the last drop in the girl's cup of sorrow, and once again he felt his whole being go out in one despairing, eager desire to stand between Polly and all grief.

As he mounted the stairs slowly he heard a slight noise ahead of him, and looking upward he saw her standing at the top of the stairs.

Valentine could not have told how it was that he divined what news she had to give. He knew nothing definitely but that he stood beside her, holding her two small, cold hands in his.

Polly's eyes were dry, but her voice was as hoarse as though she had shed innumerable tears.

"It came so softly—the end," she said, speaking slowly and with difficulty. "There seemed to be no pain—only just one long, deep sigh, and then another—and then—silence. I waited half an hour, thinking it might be sleep, then I bent over him, and saw that he was indeed asleep, and that he will never waken here again."

Valentine pressed the trembling fingers in his. It was the first time in his life that tears had shut out his sight. He conquered his feelings with difficulty as he led her down the stairs.

"Your mother is here; she has need of you," he said. It was the only thing he could say.

CHAPTER XIV. THE PORTRAIT PAINTER.

Sacha found his quarters up at Sunstead exceedingly pleasant. For some reason or other Christina deigned to be most gracious to the young man.

Sacha, of course, had his own theory in connection with this graciousness. Few women had aught but smiles for him, and Christina, though beautiful, was, after all, only an ordinary woman. It was the most natural thing in the world, he opined, that Lady Wentworth should find pleasure in his society. Mark could scarcely be called an amusing companion, whereas he, in his turn, apart from being attractive, had more than a fair share of brains.

The portrait of Lady Wentworth progressed but slowly. Sacha knew his own business very well.

"You are so difficult to paint," he told Christina frequently, in those days when he first took up his abode at Sunstead, while grief reigned in his sister's home.

"I always think that a doubtful compliment," Christina said, languidly.

Sacha would have been sharply annoyed and surprised could he have known all that was passing in his hostess' mind, and how little real satisfaction his presence gave her.

He felt it necessary to explain his implied compliment.

"One can paint ordinary people easily enough," he told her.

Christina accepted this compliment in the spirit in which it was offered, and so matters passed well between them.

Nevertheless, these days that Sacha spent so comfortably were none too pleasant to Christina. She had heard of her brother's visit to the Ambletons with a faint degree of irritation, and naturally enough imagined this to be a step on Grace's part to annoy her, or to pay her back in her own coin. For, however indifferent Christina was in reality to her family, she did not intend or desire to let the whole world know how matters stood. More particularly she did not wish the world of Dynechester to know how poor was the estate of her mother and Polly and Harold.

Harold's visit, however vexatious as it was to herself, could be explained, since Sacha told her that the boy was about to be trained to his brother's profession; thus, had questions been asked, there was a satisfactory answer to them. Nevertheless, it had angered Christina to know that there was this friendship between those she called her enemies and her family.

Once or twice she had driven past Valentine and Harold, and she had bit her lip sharply as her eyes had met the man's steady, contemptuous gaze.

Sacha would have been vastly amazed could he have known that Lady Wentworth bestowed so much thought on his brother, and more still had anyone told him that she had far greater admiration for that brother's tall, splendid physique than for himself. It

never entered into his head to imagine that he was made so welcome at Sunstead because Christina hoped to annoy Valentine by this friendship.

Popular as he was usually with all women, Sacha might freely be forgiven for supposing he was welcomed by his cousin's wife *pour ses beaux yeux*, and not for so strangely ulterior a reason.

The truth was that Christina was furious with Valentine, not merely for the part he had attempted to play in her life, but because he held himself so coldly aloof from her.

It had not taken her long to learn in Dynechester what position it was this man held, and how infinitely superior he was to the man she had married.

She longed to subjugate Valentine, to fascinate him and rule him, even as she ruled most other men with whom she came in contact.

Valentine was the first person who had punished Christina's vanity, and the woman, while she could never forgive this, never ceased to desire a conquest of one who showed her so openly his complete indifference mingled with his contempt.

That Valentine was so invulnerable to her spite was by no means a satisfaction to Christina. She had been foolish enough to expect that he would have declared some protest to her decree about the Dower House—not, of course, for his own sake, but for his sister's—and as the time slipped by and he made no sign beyond installing Grace and himself in their new house, her annoyance deepened.

Her will in connection with this uprooting of Grace from her old home had been worked in open defiance of her husband. Mark Wentworth had treated his wife to a pleasant half hour when he heard what she had done.

He had a very special vocabulary that came into office when drink and rage together claimed him for their own, and Christina had to submit to hear herself abused in a manner that was a revelation to her.

The result of this scene was to increase her hatred of Grace, for though she would have died rather than have confessed the same, Christina was hotly jealous of Grace Ambleton.

It was not enough for Christina that Grace belonged to Valentine, and sided with Valentine, of course, against herself. She was jealous of Grace's fine presence, and of her sovereignty in Dynechester, and finally, to cap it all, she was jealous of Grace in connection with her own family.

"Polly will, of course, fall down and worship her," Christina had said to herself with a sneer, when she had first heard of Harold's arrival at the Ambletons' new house, and though she had done her best to destroy all illusion in her younger sister's heart, she hankered after Polly's lost enthusiasm simply because it was lost.

Thus it was that she worked to make things even for herself by having Sacha about her as much as possible.

But, after all, it was a poor consolation to fight a one-sided battle, and when Christina found that Grace accepted all she did in utter silence, she began to be annoyed in another way.

“Harold must come and stay here,” she said to herself. “After all, Mark is more powerful than Valentine Ambleton. He can do more for the boy’s future. I shall write and tell him I expect him. It will disappoint Miss Grace a little when she sees how quickly Harold obeys me.”

Unfortunately for Christina’s little plan, she had delayed writing to her brother too long, and the day she would have sent to him, Sacha brought the news of the boy’s sudden and dangerous illness. She would, therefore, have to find some other path in which to parade her power over Grace.

“If there is illness in your house, you had better come and stay here,” she told Sacha, carelessly.

It was exceedingly dull up at Sunstead at these times. Mark, with an outburst of characteristic obstinacy, had refused to invite anyone to his house.

“The people I know well are not the sort of people you ought to know, and all the rest of the world would go to the North Pole rather than stay with me,” he had informed his wife with complete candor; “besides, I don’t intend to have strangers here when poor grannie is so ill. Ask your sisters, if you want anyone, and there is Sacha Ambleton to amuse you. Grace is one of the few people I should like to see here, but, of course, she won’t come now.”

In his heart Mark Wentworth was heartily ashamed of the warfare that Christina waged against Valentine and his sister. The business of the Dower House, in particular, was a sore remembrance with him, and Christina was careful not to introduce the subject too frequently; not because she was afraid of Mark’s temper, but because she had begun to realize that, though she had posed as a power that must be obeyed, Grace’s dignified acceptance of the situation robbed her of all she desired to hold.

The news of Harold’s death placed Christina in a most awkward position, and she hardly knew how to adapt herself to it.

For a long time she sat in thought, and the end of her musing was to go to her husband and tell him what she wished to do.

“You must go to the house, I must be represented. I know perfectly well Polly will want to treat me rudely, but I don’t intend to be treated rudely. I consider the whole affair most objectionable. If my family had wanted to come to Dynechester, I am the proper person to have received them. As it is, I cannot go to your cousin’s house, so you must go in my place.”

Sir Mark was in an obstinate mood.

“You don’t catch me going near Val—no, thank you!” he said, with decision. “I don’t want any more rows. I am sick of quarreling. Very sorry, Chris, but if you want anyone to go you must go yourself. I can’t see, myself, why you need mix yourself up

in these things now. The boy is dead, and you can't do him any good, and you haven't been too kind to your mother and sister, remember, since you have been my wife."

Christina tightened her thin lips.

"Mark, I wish you to go," she said. She was more angry than she could have described.

This was not the first time by many that her husband had let her see he was growing tired of her tyranny, just as he was growing tired of her beauty. Christina had never prized her husband's infatuated adoration of her, never wanted his love, but neither did she want to be so soon dethroned.

"I wish you to go," she repeated, but Sir Mark merely shrugged his shoulders, rang the bell for another brandy and soda, and picking up a sporting newspaper, threw himself into a chair, and dismissed the subject.

Christina swallowed her anger as well as she could. She felt that she was gradually being hemmed about by all sorts of unforeseen disagreeables. For some indefinite purpose of her own she determined to be associated with the somber proceedings at the house where Valentine lived. To write to Polly was impossible, therefore she resolved to write to some other person, and that other person should be Valentine himself.

Her shallow, vain heart saw in this moment her chance of playing a rôle with this man, whom she told herself she hated, but who, as a matter of fact, was the one creature in the world whom she held in a place higher than herself.

"I shall have nothing to do with Polly," she determined. "I shall write to him direct."

And she kept her word.

An hour later one of the Wentworth grooms rode out of the grounds bearing a letter to Mr. Ambleton. Christina had written curtly enough.

"The present lamentable circumstances render it necessary that I should speak with you. Pray let me beg you to waive all objections you may have and send me word what hour you can most conveniently call upon me."

"He will come, he can't refuse," she said to herself as she sealed the letter.

Then she donned a black gown and went into the room set aside for Sacha's use as a studio.

She was strangely nervous and irritable, and Sacha found her far from a pleasant companion.

He would have been amazed indeed could he have seen into Christina's heart, and read there the first tracings of a story destined to be written in unusual and totally unforeseen lines.

CHAPTER XV.

A REBUFF.

The groom that carried Lady Wentworth's letter from Sunstead to the Ambletons' house had been told to wait for an answer to the note addressed to Valentine.

Christina found herself opening the envelope brought to her in her own room an hour or so later, with a new sensation stirring in her veins—that of an excitement that was strongly allied with doubt, and a premonition of disappointment.

Her premonition was fully realized as she glanced at the few curt words written in Valentine's bold handwriting.

"Mr. Ambleton regrets," was all this letter contained, "that circumstances will prevent him from calling upon Lady Wentworth; neither does he see any necessity for an interview between himself and Lady Wentworth."

Christina put the letter down on her table, and bit her lip sharply.

She found it a bitter fact to swallow that Valentine evidently had determined to have absolutely nothing to do with her, good, bad or indifferent.

Christina would have welcomed his anger, but not his indifference, and she could not argue away the resolute tone of this letter, look at it whichever way she might.

Had she sat down quietly and sorted out her feelings at this moment, she must have been surprised at her attitude toward the man whom she had told herself passionately, a hundred times, that she hated. She might, moreover, have wondered not merely why, but how and when, she had discovered that Valentine was not a man to be despised but rather one to be desired?

Dynechester was not a very big world, but Christina had, up to now, lived among small influences and powers, and this being the case she was more susceptible to impressions than another might have been.

Like many arrogant, self-opinionated and selfish natures, Christina had her sensitive points.

She had not known how true had been the basis of Valentine Ambleton's objection to her marriage till after she had become Mark Wentworth's wife. She had heard, of course, that Mark was supposed to be wild, and that he drank more champagne than was good for him, but she had not realized the disagreeables attached to his name, and the unenviable reputation he had made for himself.

Her sojourn at Sunstead had quickly brought all this to her knowledge, however, and with it had come the knowledge also of the high place accorded to Valentine Ambleton and his sister by the very people who openly despised and disliked her husband.

It was all very well to carry things through with a high hand, to surround herself with the panoply of wealth, and endeavor to startle the world about her with complete subjugation to her undoubted beauty. Mistress, as she was, of the finest property

anywhere near Dynechester, Christina found herself absolutely neglected by the few good families scattered about her neighborhood. No one called upon her, at least, no one of any social importance, and the hot anger had surged many a time in her heart when she had driven past the Dower House, and had seen the carriages of these people, who had ignored her, standing outside Grace Ambleton's door.

"They are a set of Low Church prigs and frumps!" she said to herself, by way of consolation; but this was not very satisfactory, and things dragged on pretty heavily for her, until time and chance brought Sacha Ambleton to her side.

But her success with Sacha counted for very little. Sacha, after all, was a very ordinary young man, and his admiration a matter of course.

She had used him to aid her in the task of annoying Grace, because this was the nearest way to touch Valentine, and because she had a restless longing to bring herself in some form or other constantly before the man.

But Christina wanted more than Sacha.

She told herself she would taste real happiness the day that Valentine Ambleton should let her see that he recognized her power, and was ready to do her homage. And she was by no means persuaded that this would never come, not even when she sat biting her lip with vexation over his curt refusal to obey her first summons. A woman of Christina's caliber has always a store of little tricks in reserve, on which she can fall back in emergency, and she consoled herself now by this remembrance.

What would have delighted her more than all would have been the sight of Valentine coming daily to her house as his brother came, not only because his coming would give her personal satisfaction, but because she was only too sure it would upset Grace altogether, and Christina did not like Grace.

It was Sacha who gave her all the information about Harold's death and funeral.

The poor lad's body was, at his mother's request, carried away from Dynechester, and laid in the same grave with his father.

Valentine held himself almost as a son to Mrs. Pennington in this moment of new and acute grief. He did everything to spare Polly and her mother.

"Val is in his zenith when he can be king over everybody," Sacha said many times to Christina, who affected to be much annoyed as well as grieved over the proceedings of the moment.

"My mother is so weak, and my sister is worse than my mother. The proper person to do anything for them just now is Mark, since Hubert Kestridge is still abroad. Your brother is, of course, very kind to do so much; but he is usurping my husband's place all the same."

"Oh! Val was bound to act for your mother," said Sacha to this. "As the sad event happened in our house, he could not let anyone else but himself look to things; and, besides, Mark hates funerals, and is not much good in an emergency, is he?"

Christina had flushed at this.

Sacha's intimate knowledge of her husband was objectionable to her at times. She might confess many things to herself, but she did not care to have those same things told bluntly to her.

She made a parade of mourning, and kept herself shut up in the house those few days that intervened between Harold's death and the removal of the body up to London.

She had made no further attempts with Valentine, but she had written to her mother and had also written to Grace, offering herself in any capacity. She received no answer to either of these letters.

Grace had indeed hesitated before she left Lady Wentworth's letter unnoticed; but Valentine had settled matters for her.

"Why bother your head about the woman?" he had said, almost impatiently, when she had asked his advice. "Put the letter in the fire."

"It looks so rude, Val, to leave it unanswered, doesn't it?"

Valentine shrugged his shoulders.

"Lady Wentworth has her own share of rudeness. She must be treated occasionally as she treats other people. Besides, her writing to you is all a farce. If she really cared two pins about her mother, or had any grief at that poor lad's death, she would not have waited and have sent letters asking to be told what to do. She would have acted without any delay or inquiry. Leave the letter unanswered," Valentine said, a second time, and Grace obeyed him.

She gave little thought to Christina, while poor Mrs. Pennington and Polly were still under her roof, but when they were gone, escorted up to their big, desolate, sorrowful home by Valentine, Grace had time to remember Christina and to ponder on her anew.

Her late close intercourse with Polly only served to make the question of Christina a more difficult one to grasp, yet Grace could not set aside the thought that if one sister could be so unselfish and so sympathetic, another might have her share of such qualities even if in a very minor degree.

Grace recommenced her daily journeys up to Sunstead when her house was empty.

She timed these visits to escape all chance of meeting Mark's wife, and she never saw Christina, but she frequently saw Mark, and gradually it became Sir Mark's custom to meet his cousin as she came down from his grandmother's room and exchange a greeting with her.

Grace could not but be pleased at this show of friendliness, and her womanly heart yearned over the young man who was drifting so palpably into premature age, and ill health, simply through his weakness.

They spoke of nothing confidential in these moments, but they both found a pleasure in merely seeing one another as though nothing had happened to make a breach between them.

It was, of course, not long before Christina became aware of the fact that her husband was on good terms again with Grace. There was a decided jealousy in Christina's heart for her husband's old boyish affection for his Cousin Grace, and this renewal of good fellowship between them annoyed her beyond all measure.

She took Sir Mark to task pretty sharply on the matter.

"Don't you think it very odd that you should go out of your way to be so amiable to Grace Ambleton, when you know that she ignores my existence?" she asked him one day in her tartest tone.

And Sir Mark had answered her with a laugh.

"If it comes to that, how have you treated Grace, I should like to know? Why, you have done everything you possibly could to make her life miserable since you have come here. And why the deuce you should be so down on Grace, I can't see."

"She is Valentine Ambleton's sister, that is quite enough for me. I hate him, and you know it!" Christina retorted, hot anger flaming in her cheeks.

"Well, fight out your fight with Val, and leave Grace alone. You have done your worst with her, now give her a little peace."

It was Christina's turn to laugh now, and she did so in her most sarcastic manner.

"Which means that I am to submit to your friendship with her and take no notice of her personal rudeness to me! Quite charming!"

Sir Mark had recourse to a shrug of his shoulders, and turned away from his wife.

"If you don't take care, Christina, you will be a d——d bore one of these days," was his remark, as he lit a cigarette.

Christina looked after his retreating figure with an expression on her face that was not wholly anger. There was a touch of something like pity in her look—the pity was for herself. She was, in truth, far from being easily accustomed to the fact that already her power over her husband was gone. Such a realization was too humiliating for her to grasp all at once. She had made such a thorough conquest of Mark Wentworth at the beginning that she may be forgiven for imagining her sovereignty would be perpetual.

Her reign had, as a matter of fact, been short with Mark Wentworth.

Constancy was a virtue lacking in him altogether, and he had changed his flirtations as easily as he had changed his garments. Marriage had no more significance to the man than any of these former flirtations, and he had only made Christina his wife because she was a clever woman, and because Valentine had ventured to thwart him, and, by consequence, had driven him to extremes.

Once married, Christina might have worked her influence beneficially had she been so minded, but Christina cared not the toss of a button whether her husband drank himself into an early grave or not. She cared only for such things as concerned herself.

She could and did quarrel with Mark over matters that reflected on her position as his wife, but as to what was good or evil to himself as an individual Christina troubled

herself not at all. True, she objected to seeing him in a dazed, or maybe an excited condition, from the effects of drink, but if he were ill afterwards she gave him no pity.

With all this, she had still imagined, up to quite a late date, that she held her old place in his estimation, and when the moment came and proved to her that Mark had as little concern for herself as she had for him, she was simply mortified.

This mortification was the most disagreeable because it was impossible for Christina not to see that where she failed another could succeed.

Her bitterness against Grace increased a hundredfold. If she could have devised some means of letting Grace feel the burden of this bitterness, she would have been happy. In this, however, as in all, she knew that Valentine ranged himself between her and his sister; to reach Grace, therefore, she must touch Valentine first, and to approach this man in such a way as to satisfy at once her vanity and her hate, was the one task that Christina set herself to fulfill, if possible, before many more months had gone.

CHAPTER XVI. A CHANGED HOUSE.

Valentine took upon himself to question Polly closely about her future in the days that followed on poor Harold's funeral.

"It is surely unwise to remain on in this big house all by yourselves, is it not?" he observed one day, when Polly had told him her plans.

It was his last day in town. Though it would cost him a great deal he was obliged to return to Dynechester.

"We must. We have nowhere else to go," was Polly's reply.

Val curbed the rush of words that would willingly have escaped his lips.

"Why not try to let or sell the house? It is so well situated you would be sure to get rid of it, Miss Polly."

Polly was obstinate, of course.

"I don't mean to try, Mr. Ambleton. Mother loves this old house, and she has so little left to her."

"It seems so sad, so desolate," Valentine said, gently. "I only thought a brighter place might be better for you both."

The house did, indeed, seem chilly and gloomy after his own bright home. There was so much that was old and shabby in it. It seemed to him a grave of hopes and joys, the last spot in the world to restore this girl's happy youth, and keep the courage in her brave heart.

"It is changed—oh! so changed!" Polly said, and there were tears in her eyes and in her voice. "Only a year ago we were all together, and things were bright enough then, even though poor daddy was just beginning to speak of trouble coming. Now he is dead, and poor Harold has gone, and Christina and Winnie are more lost to us than if they were dead, too. Yet we don't want to leave the old home, Mr. Ambleton; indeed, we don't."

"But what will you do here? What life will you lead?" asked Valentine, reluctant to cede his point.

"I want to be busy, and that is my difficulty," Polly confessed. "Sometimes I think I will start a school, and sometimes I wonder if we could make money with a boarding house. Oh!" the girl said, with a flash of her old self—"oh! I can see disapproval and doubt written in every line of your face. Your sister would be much more sympathetic. I wish you were more like your sister!"

"Do you find me unsympathetic?" Valentine asked, simply enough.

He was not conscious himself of the hurt tone in his voice.

Polly did not look at him as she said quite curtly:

"Very!" Then by way of mending things, she added: "You can't help yourself, you know. It's your nature. You are so big, and big people are never sympathetic."

Val smiled faintly.

"According to you, Miss Polly, it's rather a bad matter to be a big person. I remember once you informed me that big people were always conceited."

Polly amended this.

"I did not say all big people," she remarked.

"I appreciate your discrimination," Valentine said, and with that he rose to take his departure. "I feel I have no right to have touched on these intimate questions," he added. "Please forgive me. No doubt your ideas about the house are far better than any I could suggest."

"I think they are," Polly answered him, evenly. "You see, I have gone over the matter so thoroughly, and I am, on the whole, a practical person."

"A tantalizing one!" Val might have said in place of this, but though he was conscious of being pricked by her little, indifferent ways, and though he longed to stand beside her and just quietly annex all her troubles, he determined to accept the fact that this was something that could never be, that he was nothing to Polly beyond a pleasant and kind acquaintance, and with as much philosophy as was possible, he, therefore, abstained wholly from leading the conversation to the point dearest to his wishes.

To introduce the subject of his feelings toward her, to speak of what was buried in his heart, was out of the question, when she showed him so plainly that she loved to guard her independence, and had, as a matter of fact, not too flattering an opinion about him.

It was evident to Valentine that although Polly had seemingly become his friend and the friend of Grace, and although she was most truly grateful to him for all he had done during the recent sad time, the girl had never completely forgiven him for the part he had played that bygone day, and that however kind she might seem to be, in reality she had hardened her heart against him now and in the future.

Valentine was very human, and the thought of this definite barrier to this chance of happiness, hurt him sharply.

Nevertheless, he allowed Polly's autocratic little will to set him aside as though he had been a pigmy, and he started on the task of burying his hopes before they had crept beyond the confines of a dream.

He went back to Dynechester in a subdued mood.

He thought incessantly of that big, gloomy house, and of Polly's thin face and form, and her wonderful eyes. He did not doubt her spirit, but her physique was very fragile. How would she bear with the brunt of life's warfare? Would the future dim the beauty of her heart as it stole the color from her lips and eyes? Or would some other win the right to stand as far as earthly power could go between her and all ill?

Such a question was one that formed itself naturally in the man's mind, for it did not seem to him possible that so fair and sweet a creature as Polly, could be destined to wear out her life in loneliness and the grind and care of poverty.

One thing seemed fairly certain, however, and that was that he was not destined to find his own happiness in her, or lead her to hers through himself.

Could he but have glanced into Polly's heart at the same time that he was telling himself this unpleasant truth, Valentine might have been pardoned if he had instantly changed his views.

Polly had parted with him calmly enough, but once he had gone, she made her way to a corner of the drawing room and gave way to tears, not a violent flood of tears, but a quiet fit of weeping, that wearied rather than eased the heart.

She felt all at once the loneliness of their position.

Till now Valentine had done everything his heart could suggest, holding himself in readiness to serve the smallest wish of her mother or herself. Indeed, Polly confessed to herself that without the help and comfort of his presence, she would have been unable to deal with the sad and difficult circumstances through which they had just passed. But she had been strangely chary of letting him know this, and she had held herself aloof from him in a manner that could not possibly be misconstrued.

She had ardently desired that there should be no misconstruction.

Polly had as keen a mental vision as any woman living, and she had not been able to shut her eyes to the fact that Valentine was drifting out of mere acquaintanceship with her into the deep and troublous waters of a strong feeling, and it was to stem this current altogether that she adopted an attitude of indifference, even coldness, toward him.

And it cost her a great deal to do this, for Polly was the most grateful little creature in the world, and it was not possible for her to be aught but truly grateful to Valentine for all his tender thought and goodness.

She had, however, arranged definite plans in her mind as to her own future, and the chief of these same plans was one that determined she would never again allow herself to care for anybody very dearly. Her mother apart, Polly resolved she would live henceforward independent of any affection.

She had passed through such sharp suffering in the year that had gone that this resolution was but the natural sequence of this suffering.

Though she had meted out the strongest share of blame to Winnie, she could not but feel that the marriage between Winnie and Hubert would never have been carried through had not the man been exceedingly weak, and Polly, much as she had learned to care for Hubert, honestly despised a weak man.

And since Hubert had failed so signally, Polly saw no reason why others should not fail, too, and as she did not want to court any more sharp disappointments, she armed herself stoutly against all growth of tender feeling for other people.

Even with Grace Ambleton she had restrained herself; but with Val she determined there should be no half measures, and she demonstrated her success to herself by shedding many bitter tears over him when he was gone.

“But I won’t let myself care for him! I won’t—I won’t!” she said, doggedly, as she wiped away her tears. “He will be just like all the rest. Why should he be any better? They all seemed so nice in the beginning, and he is very nice now, but as soon as ever I let myself feel I care for him, I know he will turn round and do something horrible! Besides, I want to feel I am strong enough to do everything for mother by myself.”

It was a poor sort of consolation, nevertheless, to rely on this pride in the days that followed.

Polly’s task was a weighty one, and everything seemed more impossible and hopeless since poor Harold’s death, for with this death the iron of despair seemed to have eaten into the bereaved mother’s heart, and Polly caught some of this despair.

Time wound itself along slowly enough, and when the world was beginning to deck itself in its summer clothing, Hubert Kestridge and his wife came back to London.

They took up their abode in a smart hotel, as far removed from Winnie’s old home as possible.

The man had suggested offering to rent some rooms in that big, empty house, but Winnie Kestridge was far more selfish and far-seeing even than Winnie Pennington had been. She vetoed this idea at once, and Hubert had not pressed it. In truth, it would have been a great ordeal to him to have lived under the same roof as Polly. He dreaded, yet longed to see her again.

After some months of close companionship with Winnie, his thoughts of Polly were something exquisitely sweet and sympathetic, and very, very sad. He was careful never to mention her name to his wife, for on no subject was Mrs. Kestridge more bitter, and disagreeable, than on the subject of her youngest sister.

When, however, they had come to London, Hubert had thought instantly of how he could best serve the girl whose love and devotion for her mother set her so far apart from and above her sisters. To offer to aid Mrs. Pennington, much though she needed it, was something he knew Polly would never support, but there were other means of being useful, and his plan of sharing the house had been one of these others.

“Do you want us to die of the doldrums?” Winnie asked, fretfully. “You don’t know how I hate that dingy old house. I suppose I must go there to see my mother, otherwise, I assure you, I would not set foot inside its door again. I hope,” Mrs. Kestridge added, earnestly, “that mother will not cry or make a scene about Harold. Of course, it was awfully sad, but, then, everybody knew he was as delicate as he could be, and live. Mother ought to have been prepared for his death.”

She did not hurry to pay this visit. She had so many clothes to buy, and furniture to order for her house in Ireland, but eventually she did so, and her husband let her go alone, a fact which served to irritate Winnie exceedingly.

CHAPTER XVII. DRAWING TOGETHER.

Polly received Hubert Kestridge's wife very quietly.

The girl was so pale and worn-looking, she had a much older air.

"She looks as yellow as a guinea," was Winnie's observation to herself. "In another year or so Polly will be absolutely plain. And what a nasty temper she has! Of course, she is as jealous as she can be because I have told her that Hubert and I are going to Sunstead."

Mrs. Kestridge had not ventured to face Polly's blunt-spoken tongue unprepared for attack. She was conscious of making her sister wince more than once, but when she condescended to personal remarks then Polly only laughed.

"My dear Winnie, I think you had better go. You evidently have come here because you imagined it was your duty. Now, please, understand you owe us no duty at all. Mother and I can live our lives without you, thank God! and we mean to do it. You are very pretty, and prosperous and happy, so you may go away and enjoy yourself; we are neither pretty nor prosperous, nor happy, and yet we would not change places with you for anything in the wide world! That sounds funny, doesn't it?" she queried, after this was said, and her big eyes flashed, and she laughed again—a laugh that brought the color into Winnie's face.

Mrs. Kestridge tried to carry matters off quietly. She rose to take her departure with a great assumption of dignity.

"It sounds as rude as I suppose you intend it to be; you always had odious manners, Polly. No wonder you are so disliked! You are the real type of an old maid."

Polly stood at the window and watched Winifred drive away.

"An old maid? Yes; I suppose that is my fate! Well, it does not alarm me. As long as I have my dear mother with me, I can snap my fingers at fate, and afterwards——" Polly paused, and she shivered faintly. "Oh! I won't think of afterwards! Enough for me that mother is here, that we are together, and that we want nothing of any man or any woman, either."

A satisfactory state of affairs that Mrs. Pennington completely upset that same night.

"Polly," she said, in her slow, feeble way—"Polly, I wonder why Mr. Ambleton never comes to see us? He promised to come, and I want him. I have his goodness on my heart, and I want to tell him of my gratitude. Write and ask him to come, surely he won't refuse to. I must see him. I have such a longing to see him to thank him for all he did in that terrible time. We are so lonely and sad here, and I want him—he will do me good."

Polly stood and looked wistfully at her mother. She was a changed mother, she had grown so thin, and so old-looking.

There were tears very near to Polly's eyes as she answered her mother.

"The death of old Lady Wentworth must have given him much to see after, darling," she said; "but now, I dare say, he is free again. Anyhow, I will write to him."

She did write as coldly as she could with courtesy, and there was a hard feeling against him in each word. It was so natural, that hard feeling. Had she not lavished the whole of her heart's love on her mother? And yet—she did not suffice. She was jealous of this man, even while she found herself echoing that wish of her mother's to see him. Yes; she was ready to confess that his presence would bring a sensation as of warmth into their chilled, isolated life.

Nevertheless, she worded the letter in such a manner that she felt almost convinced Valentine would not come.

Winnie's visit had upset Mrs. Pennington very much. Matrimony had enforced all Winnie's little peculiarities.

Mrs. Pennington had had no intention of reproaching her daughter, and, indeed, on the contrary, she had shown a pleasure and eagerness to see Winnie again. Mothers have a trick of forgetting and forgiving where others would be less amenable.

But Winnie did nothing to minister to the sorrow that reigned in her mother's heart. She was cold, unsympathetic and self-centered.

Polly caught her mother shedding bitter tears after Winnie had gone, and the girl's heart had ached with a new ache.

She had knelt and wrapped her slender young arms about that mother.

"My darling, precious love!" she whispered. "You are not going to grieve any more, are you? You are going to give me all your worries in the future. Remember, you promised me this."

Mrs. Pennington had responded to the girl's tenderness, but the tears would flow.

"Are you so much stronger than I? Are you not weak and sorrowful as I am, Polly, darling?" Then it was that she had spoken out her desire to see Valentine Ambleton again. Her eager repetition of the wish showed Polly only too clearly that her mother had truly need of stronger help and sympathy than she could furnish.

But with her sweet readiness to think of others, Polly quickly began to see how natural and necessary it was for her mother to long for this man's friendship.

"All her life she has had some one ready to come to her," the girl said to herself; "and this was the office that Hubert could have filled so well had Winnie not spoiled everything. Mr. Ambleton has been so good to us it would be strange if mother did not care to see him again, and frequently. I wish, in a sense, they lived nearer. Grace would be a great help to me, unless she, too, like all the rest, is different from what she seems to be."

Contrary to Polly's expectations, Valentine answered Mrs. Pennington's letter in person the very day he received it. In fact, he traveled up from Dynechester on purpose to pay this visit.

Polly was out when he called, and although she returned before his visit had come to an end, she did not let him know this, but stole upstairs softly, and did not emerge from the seclusion of her own room until she had heard the big door shut, and she knew he was gone.

She found her mother looking quite bright when she went down, eventually.

“Mr. Ambleton has been a long time, and, oh! Polly, is it not nice, they—he and Miss Ambleton—have decided to come to town for some months. Val says he is glad that his sister should leave Dynechester for a little while. She has been much tried by her grandmother’s death, and, apart from this, it seems she is not happy in her house, and frets at having lost her old home. I can understand this so well. Anyhow, I am glad they are coming—very glad.”

“It will be very nice,” Polly said, unsteadily.

This news upset her, and yet against herself she caught the infection of her mother’s pleasure.

The reason Valentine gave for coming to London for a time was so reasonable, that Polly did not for an instant question whether there was not some other motive urging him on to a move that must be fraught, for him, with a certain amount of difficulty.

Neither was Polly to know that this idea had come to Valentine quite suddenly, as he had sat listening to Mrs. Pennington’s plaintive voice.

Winnie would have immediately colored the situation according to her vanity, but Polly, though she had been forced to see, as we know, that she possessed a certain power of attraction where Val was concerned, did not encourage herself to imagine things without very good foundation. She did not, in fact, dwell too much on the fulfillment of this scheme, and only believed in it fully when she received a letter from Grace confirming what Valentine had said.

“We are leaving Dynechester for a few months,” Grace wrote. “My dear Val has got it into his head that a change of scene will do me good, and I am not sure he is not right. Grannie’s death has been a great grief to me; it came at the last so suddenly, and in a sense so unexpectedly, that it gave us all a shock. For this, then, and for one or two other reasons, I shall be glad to be in London for a time, though it always costs me a pang to leave dear old Dynechester. I am anxious to have Sacha with us a little more, and to enter into his artistic life as much as is possible to me, and this will be feasible now, since we shall all three be together. And, then, there will be the pleasure of seeing your mother and yourself, I hope, very often; and this, I assure you, will be a very real pleasure. Valentine will not be able to desert Dynechester altogether, but he will make his headquarters with us in London. We shall be up now in a few days, and I shall call on you immediately.”

There could be nothing but pleasure to Polly in the thought that Val’s sister was coming nearer to them.

Those few, sad days in Grace's home had served to draw the two girls together far more closely than ordinary circumstances could have done. Polly found her heart going out to Grace in a boundless rush of gratitude. The thought and anxiety and tenderness Grace had bestowed on both her mother and herself seemed to have been made greater and sweeter, because of Christina's and Winnie's curious lack of right feeling.

"Do they really belong to us?" Polly found herself doubting at times, when she thought of her sisters.

She was still young enough in her sentiments to cling to certain illusions, and she still could grieve over the loss of that beautiful faith and admiration she had lavished on Christina. For Winifred, Polly had never held such deep feelings.

She and Winnie had lived too closely together to admit of much illusion; nevertheless, love of kin was strong in Polly's nature, and though Winnie had irritated her almost at every turn, she had never forgotten that they were sisters, and as such, bound to care for one another.

When Winnie had married Hubert Kestridge, however, not even the knowledge of this bond could prevent the younger girl from feeling bitter and contemptuous toward her sister.

The rôle Winnie had played was to Polly a despicable one. Had she ever shown the smallest trace of cherishing an affection for Hubert Kestridge things might have been different. But Polly, better than most people, knew just how much good opinion Winnie had entertained for the young man up to the time that circumstances had caused her to change her mind.

Long, long ago, when Winnie had been hardly more than a little girl, she had expressed strong views as to her ambition in the future.

"I mean to marry a title," she had confided more than once to Polly, and Polly had laughed.

"A duke, I suppose? Well, you must make haste, Winnie, there are not many dukes left nowadays."

And though fate had unkindly withheld a coronet from Winnie, she had secured the best means to save herself from poverty and obscurity in her marriage with a man, whom, up to that time, she had always sneered at.

Polly could recall countless times when she had suffered many little pangs on account of those same sneers.

Hubert's brogue, his boyish manners, his open-hearted sincerity, all had been the target for Winnie's contempt.

"A rawboned Irishman," she had once called him, when, by some kind of instinct, she had gathered the delicate secret that was forming in Polly's heart. "I hate being seen anywhere with Hubert, he is so loud, and attracts so much attention. I call him vulgar."

And now she was the wife of the “vulgar, rawboned Irishman,” and her mission appeared to be to let Polly, out of all the world, understand what a fine and enviable position this wifedom was.

Polly could have laughed had her heart been less sore, and her spirits less weary.

When Grace came to see her, she was shocked to find the girl looking so thin and worn.

She herself was scarcely in better trim.

There had been much to try Grace in connection with her grandmother’s death.

She had been forced to come in contact with Christina, and the further insight into the nature of her cousin’s wife had been singularly painful to her.

Christina’s manner to her had been one of scarcely veiled insolence, and Grace did not pretend not to see that Lady Wentworth was jealous of her; neither could she fail to realize the real and miserable truth about this regrettable marriage.

It was, therefore, with a sigh of relief that Grace left Dynechester once more.

“How little I thought I should be glad to go so soon again. I made up my mind to stay for years in Dynechester after our long tour last year, Val. One should never make plans.”

“It is a very harmless amusement,” Valentine had said to this.

Then he had echoed her sigh.

“And yet it is strange how very wrong our plans will go,” he had added.

He had poor Harold Pennington in his thoughts at the moment, and it was natural enough that thought of Harold should bring thought of Polly. He was making plans enough where she was concerned; plans that he felt quite certain were destined to be ruthlessly undone by fate or the girl’s pride.

He let Grace do most of the visiting to the Penningtons on their first arrival.

“Val is so busy,” Grace said, on these several occasions. “I am half afraid, poor fellow, he has upset all his arrangements to bring me to town. He will have to stay in Dynechester the greater part of this week, but he will be here over Sunday, Mrs. Pennington, and then we are all coming to have tea with you, if we may? I want to introduce my youngest brother, Sacha.”

It was impossible for Polly to disguise from herself the vast amount of pleasure her mother derived from the knowledge that Valentine was going to be so near to them.

“Tell your brother I am quite jealous of him,” she said, half laughingly, to Grace. “Mother even looks better when she knows she is going to see him.”

“I wish you shared her enthusiasm,” Grace said, dryly enough. “I should like to see an improvement in your looks, Polly.”

Polly opened her big eyes very wide.

“What is the matter with me, pray?”

“That is what I should like to know,” Grace replied. “Do you know you haven’t even the ghost of a color in your cheeks? And look at your hands, why, they are gone to nothing.”

“I am one of the lean kind, I fancy,” Polly said, indifferently; then earnestly, “but please, Grace, do not let mother know you don’t think I am looking very well. The truth is—I may as well confess to you, though I wouldn’t do so to your brother—this house bothers me a lot. I believe I have made a mistake, after all! Mother would have been better had I moved her to different surroundings; she is reminded every hour here of what she has lost. And apart from this, I find out I am not nearly so clever as I imagined I was.”

“I suppose you are like me in some things; you try to encompass difficulties, and will not see that they are difficulties till they get beyond you.”

Polly nodded her head.

“And this house has got beyond me, Grace; it is so much too big. I am sure we have a ton of dust to sweep up every week. It is getting shabbier and more dingy each day, and the atmosphere of it is so depressing, so—so blighting. You can’t think of all the wonderful ideas I had of utilizing the drawing room, and how they have all ended in nothing.”

“Let me see this drawing room,” said Grace.

They mounted the stairs, and Polly unlocked the door.

“Oh, what happy days I have had in this grim, sad room! It seems hard to believe that I am the same me. If that is not good grammar, you must pass it over, Grace.”

Grace was not thinking of grammar.

Her face had lighted up as she walked about the dismantled room.

“Polly,” she said, suddenly, “I fancy I have an idea this time! Why not let this room, this floor, indeed, to an artist? This enormous window looks north; it is the very best light possible. Sacha, I am convinced, will confirm what I say. Perhaps he might be able to help you.”

Polly’s eyes flashed with something of their old fire.

“It is a splendid idea! Why shouldn’t I have thought of it? I should like it, too. I adore studios, and love the smell of oils, and paints, and mediums, and models.”

At which Grace laughed.

“If you could come in close contact with some of Sacha’s old models, I fancy you might modify that last statement.”

“Anyhow, it is a splendid idea!” Polly cried, and she went downstairs almost buoyantly.

Valentine heard all about this same idea when he arrived.

It annoyed him to find Grace eager to help Polly to help herself. It was perhaps wrong of Valentine, but the truth was, he by no means shared Polly’s regret over her failure to make her own way. Her failure was to be his chance.

He therefore snubbed Grace’s idea from the outset.

"I am sorry you have suggested this to Miss Pennington, for it will only mean another disappointment. The idea is not in the least degree feasible."

"Oh! Val, why? The room would want some alterations, I grant, but with very little cost it could be transformed into a beautiful studio."

"The shape of the room has nothing to do with it," Valentine said, irritably. "It is the suggestion of admitting a stranger, and in particular, an artist, into the house."

Sacha looked up at this, much amused.

He saw his brother was out of temper, and he sought about for a clue as to the cause of this.

"I say, Val, not so violent. What have we poor artists done to call down your wrath on our heads?"

Valentine colored. He had spoken hastily, and had quite forgotten Sacha's presence.

He answered his brother dryly.

"I generalize, of course. I do not mean that every artist must necessarily be objectionable, but I do consider their calling objectionable when connected with a private house. Take your own studio, for instance; you are compelled to have it thronged from time to time with people who are certainly not desirable."

"They are very harmless," Sacha observed.

He pulled his mustache, and leaning back in his chair, looked at his brother thoughtfully.

"I still maintain there is no possibility of Mrs. Pennington entertaining this idea," Valentine said shortly.

"It is not Mrs. Pennington who does anything, it is Polly," Grace said, a little crossly. She did not like having her suggestions set at naught in this way.

Sacha, with a little laugh, changed the conversation, but his curiosity was sharply aroused, and he scented a mystery.

It was, of course, just like Valentine to mingle himself up in this intimate way with other people's affairs; still, there was something unlike his usual manner about him to-day, and Sacha resolved to investigate this matter further.

Accordingly, the next day he arrayed himself in his usual smart fashion, and drove direct to the Penningtons' house.

He sent in his card, and asked for Polly, and the maid ushered him into the well-worn library.

"If she is only a little like her sister she should be at least attractive," Sacha said to himself; and he waited Polly's coming with much interest.

Her first appearance was not effective, but as she lifted her eyes and looked at him, half inquiringly, Sacha, in an instant, understood the situation.

"Why, she is beautiful, quite beautiful!" Sacha said to himself.

He invented, as an excuse, a desire to see the drawing room, and he lingered a long while with Polly, talking over the plan of turning it into a studio quite gravely.

It amused him immensely to see in this an opportunity of disputing with Valentine for the friendship of this girl. He promised himself the pleasure of wiping off several old scores through Polly.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE CAUSE OF STRIFE.

The death of old Lady Wentworth had been a relief to Christina.

She had never pretended any regret or sympathy for her husband's grandmother, therefore she did not pose as a mourner when the end came, and she had a sneer for Sir Mark when he expressed a sorrow that, if incomprehensible to her, was real enough.

"He only does this because he thinks it will please that odious Grace. Of course she will be plunged into grief, and everybody will believe it is real. Perhaps, when she realizes how much her grandmother cared for her, she may cease shedding tears."

For the old lady had died leaving all she possessed to her grandson, Mark. Even her jewels were bequeathed to Sir Mark for his wife's use, and herein lay the cause of great strife between Christina and her husband.

The will that gave so much to Wentworth was of an old date, and the young man felt convinced that his grandmother had intended to have made another, and had been prevented in some way or other.

The love the old lady had bestowed on him as a lad had waned considerably of late years, and had passed almost wholly to Grace; a comprehensible fact, remembering the girl's untiring devotion to her mother's mother.

Sir Mark committed the folly of telling Christina what he thought, and when the lawyers handed over to his wife the various cases and boxes containing old Lady Wentworth's diamonds, he informed her in his roughest way what he considered ought to be done with them.

"They belong to my Cousin Grace. They are hers by every moral right. I mean to pass them over to her."

"Since they are not yours to handle in any sort of way," said Christina, sharply, "you are aware, of course, you are talking nonsense. I wonder you don't suggest passing them over to that dancing girl I heard you discussing with Sacha Ambleton the other day!"

Sir Mark's face took a nasty expression, and a dark flush stole over his brow.

He used some of his choicest language to Christina.

"If ever a man has been a d——d fool, I am that man!" he said, roughly. "And to think I quarreled with the best friend I ever had because of you."

Christina trembled with rage, but forebore to say anything, contenting herself with picking up the jewels in question and carrying them upstairs.

The matter, however, was not brought to an end here, for having conceived an idea, in his stubborn way, Mark Wentworth would not renounce it easily. He went the length of forbidding Christina to wear the jewels.

“As you cared not a brass farthing what became of her, poor old lady, I won’t have you flaunting about in her finery now she is dead. Besides, the things are left to me really, and I mean to take possession of them. Tell your maid to bring them to my room to-day.”

But Christina was more cunning than he.

She sent the jewels to her bankers.

“They were left to your wife for her use, and as I am, unfortunately, your wife, I intend to use them,” she said, with a good show of indifference and courage, two feelings that were by no means well founded, for Christina was an arrant coward, and she had good reason to know that her husband could resort to violence if he chose.

Her quiet determination, however, carried the day for a time.

Mark Wentworth suddenly ended the discussion by taking himself off to London. Christina knew perfectly well the sort of life he would lead there, but she made no effort to prevent him.

“The sooner he drinks himself into his grave, the better for everybody,” she said, recklessly.

She remained on herself at Sunstead, for the simple reason, to start with, that she did not know where to go, or what to do with herself. She made the old lady’s death an excuse to postpone the visit of Winnie and her husband. Christina knew perfectly well that Mrs. Kestridge would make it her business to know all that went on at Sunstead, and there was a good deal that would not bear being inspected.

“Winnie is so sly she will smile at you, and kick or pinch you at the same time,” she said to herself.

Mrs. Kestridge wrote a bitter-sweet letter, but Christina did not trouble to bestow much thought on her sister. She was occupied in trying to work a new element into her life.

Valentine was still in Dynechester. Go where he would, Valentine always seemed to be meeting her. But he never stopped to speak, and the longer he withheld, the stronger grew the longing in the woman’s heart to conquer him.

She remained on in the dullness of Sunstead wholly for this purpose, but her spirit began to grow disheartened as the days went by.

Sacha, who ran down one day for an hour or so to put the finishing touches to her portrait, found her fretful beyond description. He felt it a pleasure and a duty to warn her that matters were going seriously wrong with her husband.

“You must get him away from town for a while, at least. He looks positively awful, and is doing all sorts of foolish things.”

“My dear Sacha! do you think I have any influence? You should ask your sister to interfere.”

Sacha paid back this sneer in its own coin.

“Ah! yes. Grace always had great influence with Mark. She ought, of course, to have married him.”

Christina bit her lip at this, but bit it deeper still when Sacha went on to speak of Polly.

“Why did you not tell me you had such a lovely sister, Lady Wentworth? Why, she is simply a marvel of beauty. We are all mad about her. As for Val, dear old chap, he can’t sleep or eat for love of her. The first time he has been in love, and he has taken the disease very badly. I am painting her. I expect to make a sensation with her portrait.”

All of which stirred up Christina’s cold, selfish nature into something like a tumult.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TRAGEDY ON THE POLO GROUNDS.

It was, after all, by no woman's will that Christina brought Valentine Ambleton to Sunstead once again.

While she was spending her days in fretting over her fate, and chafing sorely at the failure of her scheme to force the man she called her enemy to become her friend, destiny—a sad and tragic destiny—hastened this period of inactivity to a close.

One hot summer evening, weeks after Grace's departure from Dynechester, her butler sought Lady Wentworth as she sat listlessly on the lawn alone, and informed her that Mr. Ambleton desired to see her. Christina was wide awake in an instant; she looked at the servant incredulously.

"Mr. Sacha Ambleton, I suppose you mean. Tell him to come to me out here."

"No, my lady, not Mr. Sacha, but Mr. Ambleton," the man answered.

Christina rose to her feet, and then sank back in her chair again, the folds of her soft diaphanous black gown falling gracefully about her.

"Ah!" she said, quietly enough, though her pulses were beating rapidly, "ah! just so. Well, I will see Mr. Ambleton out here. Tell him to come through the conservatory, and, James, bring coffee and some cigars."

She sat and watched for Valentine to appear through the open doorway of the conservatory.

She did not trouble herself very much to question why he should suddenly pay her this visit; it was enough for her that he had come.

Valentine emerged from the house onto the lawn; he walked deliberately.

He was glancing about him in a sorrowful sort of way.

It was some time since he had been at Sunstead; the place had a pathetically familiar air to him, and brought back hosts of memories, memories of the days when Mark had scampered and jumped about the grounds a merry little lad in a brown holland smock, and Sacha and Grace had played with him, and driven the old head gardener wild with terror at their antics. And now——

Christina, as she rose to greet him, saw that his face was pale, and his eyes wet.

"You have come to tell me something disagreeable," she said; she trembled a little, and did not hold out her hand, and perhaps for the first time in her life, she completely forgot herself for the space of a moment.

Her voice, her words had something childlike in them, and as Valentine saw that she trembled, he immediately felt some pity steal out toward her.

"I have come to fetch you," he said, simply and very gently. "Mark wants you."

"Where is he?" Christina's hands were held tightly together, and a different emotion swept over her.

She guessed his mission now, and she resented it sharply, for she knew, only too well, what the material significance of this mission meant to her henceforward.

"Is he ill?" she queried on, and her voice was clear and hard. "What has happened? Please do not give me your news in little bits, Mr. Ambleton; I prefer it all at once."

"Mark has had an accident; he is very ill."

"Will he die?" asked Christina.

For the second time something childlike stole over her. She was, after all, very young, and whatever her faults had been, she was now face to face with tragedy, and Valentine remembered this, and remembered her youth, and in this moment he was very near to forgiving her her faults.

He answered her in the same simple way.

"You must try not to look for the worst. Mark is young. We must hope."

"What has happened?" Christina asked again.

And he told her tersely the story of that same day; how Sir Mark, it seemed, had gone to some club grounds near London to play a game of polo with one or two of his friends, in order to try a pony he had just bought, and how he had been unfortunately struck on the head in a close scrimmage, and been thrown and dragged, the pony taking fright, and racing off with its senseless burden a considerable distance before it could be stopped.

"Mark lies at the clubhouse. He has had every attention, and three doctors have seen him. Happily his companions thought of sending to us, and I have hastened to you without loss of an hour. I thought I might tell this better than any written message, but I am clumsy at this sort of work. You must forgive me. I hoped to have softened things a little."

"I am no coward," Christina said. Her brain was revolving rapidly. She knew that her husband would die, perhaps he was already dead. This gave her no heartache, since for many a week now she realized that she hated this man she had married, hated him thoroughly. But death robbed her of more than a husband. It took from her power and wealth, and worse than this, it restored to those whom she had dominated, all that had once been theirs, morally, if not actually.

With Sir Mark's death his title would die, as he left no son, and there was no other heir, and with his death Sunstead and all its domains would pass to his Cousin Valentine, eldest son of his father's sister.

This was something that Christina had always known, something she had always hated to know, because in her imagination it was a prospect that could give to Valentine's sister all that Christina desired to take from her.

Up to that time, too, when other feelings had begun to dawn in her thoughts of Valentine himself, she had given him an equal share of resentment with Grace; but by degrees this resentment had gone, and now as Christina stood in the summer twilight beside his tall form, she remembered only that she would be free, possibly was already free, and that this man about whom she had dreamed and pondered so much,

would be master in her husband's place, and that, as such, was more desirable to her in every respect.

The memory of what Sacha had said about Polly's attraction for Valentine came back to sting her; but Christina put the sting aside. Would it be possible for Polly or any other woman to stand against her? True, Valentine had given her no right to imagine he was conquerable, but then Christina had not been placed as she would be placed in the future.

A wife and a widow were two widely different creatures in the moral philosophy of such a man as Valentine, and Christina fell back on the only salve she had been able to find during these past weeks for her vanity, the certainty that had she been unmarried she would have brought Valentine to her feet whenever she had desired.

The easy complacency with which Sacha had tried to embark on a flirtation with her had but emphasized the deliberation of Valentine never to approach her.

This had been her one touch of self-satisfaction and consolation, and the fact that Valentine should have set aside all his rules and have hastened to be with her on this particular evening, framed itself in Christina's wholly selfish mind now as meaning everything that it did not mean.

She cast her thoughts far ahead in this moment, and she instantly set herself a rôle to play now and in the immediate future.

"I will go with you," she said, in a low, troubled sort of way. "Of course I will go, if you tell me poor Mark really wants me; but——" She paused. "But," she went on, more hurriedly, "he has not wanted me much of late; he has made his life so far apart from me—it is only natural I should hesitate lest I make a mistake now."

"There can never be a mistake in being generous under certain circumstances," Valentine said, gently.

He did not tell her that poor Mark would not know she had gone to him, that all chance of recognition was over.

He hastened her a little in her preparations, however, for they had a journey before them, and he, for his own part, sorely desired to whisper a loving word to his cousin before the end came.

Somehow or other, almost against himself, Valentine found a sort of tenderness mingle in with his pity for Christina. He was so truly soft-hearted where women were concerned, and Christina appealed to him this night.

She was no longer the brilliant, imperious beauty; she was very young, very unhappy and very pathetic.

She did not shed tears, her emotion seemed too great for any such outlet; she sat very still all the way to town, and her face grew tired and pale as the journey came slowly to an end.

In her black garments—the simplest her wardrobe could produce—there was an air of affinity with that dear, slender girl, whose wonderful eyes, and fresh voice haunted

him all the time, and anything that could even suggest Polly to him was dear to Valentine.

He was, therefore, tenderness itself to Mark's wife. No one seeing them together, and noting this tenderness, would have believed that, up to a few hours before, this had been to him a woman he had despised and almost hated.

There was not a trace of the worldling or the courtier about Valentine. He was absolutely sincere, and just as he had held anger and contempt in his heart for Christina in the year that was gone, so now he put aside those harsh feelings and gave her pity in all sincerity.

She touched him sharply, and once she brought the color flashing half-shamedly into his face. It was when she spoke of the past.

"Ah!" Christina had said, breaking a long, long silence suddenly; "ah! how right you were! How right! and how wrong I have been! No wonder you have hated me so dreadfully all this time, but you did not know how you hurt me, did you? And you could not know, either, that I regretted my willfulness immediately. But I tried to do my best, indeed I did, Valentine. Please always remember this, that I did care for Mark, and I would have cared more and more if—if only he had let me. It was a big mistake, and you were right. I have wanted to say this to you ever so many times, but you would never give me the chance!"

"You must not fret about these things, now," Valentine said, soothingly.

Her distress was so real to him he felt as though he were in close contact with an aching human heart, a heart suddenly charged with the sorrow of a folly, worked into a tragedy.

This was about all Christina did say on that long, long journey. She was content to sit in her corner of the railway carriage and feel herself watched over and tended by this man, whose allegiance she had craved for so sharply, and who had seemed so far away.

To Valentine it was a torture each time the slow train was brought to anchor at some small station; every minute was a minute lost. Yet he clung to the hope of seeing Mark again, and it was a great comfort to know that Grace was with the poor fellow. Mark would not know that Grace was there, for consciousness had left him while his injuries were being attended to; but there had been a moment in which Valentine had bent over his bed, and had been rewarded by a flash of recognition from the dull eyes.

It had been Grace's suggestion that Christina should be brought. It was a duty to bring the wife to her dying husband, but Christina little guessed how much this duty was costing Valentine. She had no desire to reach London.

If the train could have gone round and round in a circle she would have been content. Her imagination conjured the present into a dream of the future, that future when, as Valentine's wife, it would be her due to receive all his care and anxious thought.

"I shall win him," she told herself, confidently. Now that she had come in direct contact with him again, she felt she had been right to have faith in her powers, for she saw his weakness. Nevertheless, he was not a man to be won as she had won Mark Wentworth.

It was not merely physical loveliness that would have sway with this man; there must be a nature as well, just that gentle, half-timid nature that the conventional man credits the conventional woman with possessing. Valentine was, so Christina quickly determined, one of those men who did not care for independence in a woman, but who would lose his head and his heart to a delicate, clinging creature who dared make no step alone.

"He to care for Polly!" she said to herself, scornfully. "Why, the idea is absurd—that is, unless Polly is changed altogether. All her life she has been a spitfire and an independent creature. She could not possibly attract this man."

London reached, Valentine piloted Lady Wentworth into a cab, and they drove away through gaslit streets on and on till they reached the country-like neighborhood where poor Mark Wentworth lay dying.

It was a long drive, and the cab jolted roughly from time to time, but the air of the summer night was cool and fresh, and the sky spread its star-spangled canopy in wide, dark beauty over the city.

When they reached their destination it was growing toward midnight.

Grace came down into the entrance of the clubhouse to receive them.

She spoke no word at first, but her two hands went out to Christina, and Christina, remembering the part she had set herself, let her hands rest in Grace's strong ones.

She looked very white, and frightened, and sad in this moment, and Grace's heart softened as Valentine's had done.

"Oh! I am so sorry for you—so sorry," Grace said, and then the tension of her nerves gave way, and she broke into tears. "Oh! poor Mark!" she said, hoarsely, and she turned away.

Christina did not shed tears, but she was equal to the situation all the same.

"I want to go to him, please," she said to Valentine, lifting her eyes to him piteously. "Will you take me?"

And Valentine bowed his head, and led the way up the stairs; but he had not gone many steps before he had to turn and support her, and fragile as Christina was in appearance, her weight grew heavier and heavier till, as they came to the top of the stairs, Valentine felt she was unable to move further, and looking down on her pale face pressed against his arm, he saw that her eyes were closed, and he told himself that she had fainted.

The further thought came to him that he had wronged this woman deeply, when he had accused her of having no heart, and a bitter pang of reproach mingled in with his pity for her, and with his grief, deep, true grief for the poor young fellow lying dead in his prime only a few yards away.

CHAPTER XX.

CHRISTINA'S TRICKS.

Polly Pennington was standing looking out on the falling rain.

The girl's face wore its habitual expression of sorrow and anxiety, but there was some deeper emotion than usual written in her eyes.

Behind her, in a large easy-chair, sat her mother, and Mrs. Pennington's worn face had a flush on it, a flush and a look that was akin to anger.

"I confess I do not understand you, Polly," she was saying, and her tone was fretful in the extreme. "No one has been more severe than you have been on the faults of others. When you have been so pleased, you have accused your sisters of great lack of consideration, of selfishness and many other disagreeable things; and now, when it is your turn to act differently, you take an attitude which I am sure neither Christina nor Winifred would have adopted. I am both surprised and hurt with you!"

Tears came creeping up to Polly's large eyes, blotting out the scene from the window.

She said nothing, and after an imperceptible pause, her mother went on speaking.

"It is quite the best and most natural thing in the world that your widowed sister should desire to come to her old home in this her hour of trouble. There can be no argument to urge against this."

Polly frowned.

Of all things in the world she hated hypocrisy and crooked dealing, and with the full knowledge of Christina's character now given her, she could not but feel that some ulterior reason lay behind her sister's desire to share her mother's home for a time.

Polly did not want to think cruel thoughts of anyone, but she was not quite impressed with Christina's attitude of woe for her lost husband.

It was true she had never met poor Mark Wentworth, never seen Christina and he together; she was forced to judge her sister by what her instinct warned her was false.

There was a superficial ring altogether about Christina's sorrow; her widow's weeds were too smart, everything about her was too pretty. There could not be real lamentation, the girl told herself not scornfully but regretfully, when the question of dress and appearance was so paramount. Besides, in some of her quiet moments with Grace, Polly had introduced the subject of Christina's married life, and had quickly grasped from what Grace left unsaid the sort of union it had been.

All this, however, had belonged to Christina, and Polly told herself quite frankly that if her sister chose to wear pretty garments and pose as a beautiful object of pity, that was her sister's business and not her own; but when Christina suddenly, and for

some reason unspoken, proposed to quit her luxurious rooms in a fashionable hotel to take up her place in her mother's house, Polly may be forgiven if she felt both annoyed and doubtful.

What was there in the shabby old house and the straightened circumstances to draw Christina back to what had once been her home?

Polly was not vain enough to imagine that she could be an attraction, while for her mother, Lady Wentworth had never shown even ordinary consideration or courtesy since her marriage, and Polly felt sorrowfully it was not love for this troubled mother that urged her to return now.

There was something in the matter that Polly could not understand, and yet that jarred her.

Her mother had welcomed the suggestion with delight. It was an unexpected gleam of happiness to her, this thought that her eldest born should, after all, have evinced a desire to be with her, and for the first time since they had been alone together she found occasion to be very sharp, even angry with Polly.

To her mother's heart, Christina's wish was most natural, and Polly's plainly spoken objection to Christina's coming upset her altogether.

Polly bore patiently with her mother's anger; it was a little hurtful to her to find once again how easily this mother turned to other influences for pleasure and solace, but Polly forgave the hurt because she knew the worth of her simple, true-hearted mother's love, not merely for herself, but for all belonging to her.

When she saw that her annoyance was giving her mother cause for uneasiness, she tried to put it on one side.

"I am a nasty, remembering sort of individual, you know, love," she said, falling into her old way, so as to carry things off more lightly, "and you are a sweet, forgiving one; there is all the difference between us! Since it is your pleasure that Christina should come here as she suggests, let her come. The house is big enough to hold even her boxes, and she can have her old room. I will write to her, if you wish, to-night."

Mrs. Pennington's face lost its irritation and grew placid and gentle again.

"Thank you, Polly, dear," she said. "You always do what I want. It makes me so happy to have my poor Christina here just now. You must see, dear, that I could not refuse to do what she asks. I am her mother, remember."

"Yes, darling, you are her mother," Polly answered; to herself she added bitterly; "The mother she has neglected and forgotten for this long year." But never for an instant, she now determined, should any harsh or bitter word cross her lips.

It was a whole fortnight since Christina had journeyed from Dynechester to London to learn she was a widow. It had been by no means an unpleasant fortnight to her.

She had left herself entirely in Valentine's hands, and he had taken full care of her.

He had installed her in a hotel, and summoned her maid. He saw her every day, and was more moved than he could have told her by her quiet, pathetic attitude.

He told Grace how sorry he was for her.

“With my usual pigheadedness I have stuck to my first opinion that she was a worldly, hard woman; now I see how wrong I was. You cannot think how she grieves, Grace.”

“Yes, she grieves, certainly,” Grace said.

She had much more she would have liked to say, but she did not say it.

She did not, for instance, tell Valentine that the night he had called agitatedly for her to come and minister to Lady Wentworth as she lay prone and, to him, senseless in his arms, she had at once seen that neither the fainting fit nor the sorrow were real.

She would have been amused by Christina’s tricks had her heart not ached for her dead cousin and his marred and wasted life.

Only one sharp remark did Grace make in connection with Christina, and that was when Valentine told her of Lady Wentworth’s eager desire to go and live with her mother for a time.

“It is as well,” was what Grace said, “is it not, that Lady Wentworth did not move her mother and sister into our old house, as she intended doing?”

But Valentine did not catch the irony.

“It would have made no difference,” he had answered, quite simply, “for I should never have moved them, and Lady Wentworth could have gone to them just the same. In fact, I think I should like you, Grace, to propose this arrangement to Mrs. Pennington.”

But Grace drew back.

“Polly would never consent to this.”

And Valentine frowned suddenly.

Polly’s strong will seemed to come up against his at every turn. Plan as he might for her, his plans were always upset by her in some way or other.

“I believe Miss Pennington cares enough about her mother to submit her own feelings to those of this mother,” he said, stiffly.

“Speaking extravagantly in a sense, and yet with truth, I believe Mary Pennington would die for her mother. Her love is no thing of threads and patches,” Grace said to this.

She spoke with a warmth that was akin to affection, and Valentine felt his heart thrill at her voice and words. Almost he had put his secret into Grace’s hands, but at this very moment Sacha interrupted them by entering the room.

“Lady Wentworth has sent for you, Valentine,” he said, carelessly; then he laughed. “She keeps you busy, old chap, doesn’t she?”

But Valentine was hastening from the room, and as he went, Sacha looked at his sister.

“Grace, you must be prepared for a result to all of this.”

“All of this what, Sacha?”

“This close contact with a clever woman, an arch coquette, a woman with strong ambition.”

Grace looked at her younger brother in a troubled fashion.

“I don’t understand,” she said, slowly. “Surely Valentine is only doing his simple duty by looking after poor Mark’s widow.”

“A widow who will not remain a widow long, if I am any judge of things.”

“What do you mean, Sacha?” Grace asked, this time in sharp vexation.

Sacha answered by another question.

“Do you really mean to tell me you cannot see what is likely to happen?”

Grace colored hotly now.

“I don’t pretend anything, Sacha. Yes, I do understand you, but you are quite, quite wrong. She cannot forget Mark. And you do Val a definite wrong.”

Sacha broke into a laugh.

“My dear girl,” he said, in his wisest way, “I accuse Valentine of nothing. Val is as honest as he is big, but despite his bigness he will be but a cipher in miladi’s pretty hands, for he is certainly not a man of the world, whatever else he may be. As to forgetting Mark—well, by this time we all know the truth about this marriage. Mark cared as much for his wife as his wife cares to remember his memory. I was in the house with them a good deal, and I am not inventing. It was a miserable marriage, and Lady Wentworth is quite right to try and console herself as quickly as possible. The fact that she might remain mistress of Sunstead is a most important factor in the working of her schemes, I assure you.”

There was an element of spitefulness in Sacha’s speech.

He had been by no means averse to a flirtation with Christina, and his vanity rebelled now against her determined admiration for Valentine.

He had done his best to make her uncomfortable in this matter by insinuating little things about Valentine’s growing attachment to Polly, but he had evidently not upset her very much.

As to Sacha himself, he had the double dissatisfaction of knowing that while Christina’s ambition drew her toward his brother, leaving him in the cold, Polly, whom he really admired, treated him with an indifference passing almost beyond the limits of courtesy.

With Grace alone was Polly her own sweet, lovable self, and Grace had fast grown to care for the girl as though she were a sister.

It was Grace who came to Polly’s rescue when Christina, having carried the day, had been duly installed in her old home. It was impossible for Grace to shut her eyes to the fact that Polly was not merely looking tired and ill, but was tired, and ill also in mind and in body.

After Christina’s arrival there seemed to be no more peace or pleasure for Polly in her home.

It had been necessary, of course, to engage another servant to wait as much on Lady Wentworth's smart maid as upon anybody, and despite this extra help, Christina made large demands on everybody in the house. Mrs. Pennington found herself trotting to and fro constantly, but this rousing did Mrs. Pennington no harm; the harm was being done to Polly.

Grace continued her daily visits to the house just the same after Christina's appearance there, but both she and Mark's widow avoided each other as by mutual consent, and her visit was paid to Polly alone. She always found the girl deep in household duties. The quiet life Polly and her mother had lived together this past twelve months had come to a complete end. Mrs. Pennington was always now with Christina, and Polly could not grudge her this, since Christina was able to give her mother so much that she needed.

The wonderful part of it all to Polly was the fact that Christina should all at once evince such a desire for her mother's companionship. Polly was not to know what an important part her poor, simple, unconscious and loving mother was being made to play in Christina's scheme of winning Valentine.

Valentine continued to pay many visits to Lady Wentworth.

There was so much in his hands to arrange for her in the winding up of Sir Mark's estate, and his visits were always visits of business. But Polly did not even guess this.

CHAPTER XXI.

HER SISTER'S SECRET.

No, Polly knew nothing of what was true. It was not given to her to read into Valentine's heart and see what was written there, and her own heart grew cold as she remembered how she had told herself once that this man was learning to care for her, when all the time he had cared for another, and that other Sister Christina.

It was a repetition of her story with Hubert Kestridge all over again, and Polly's proud spirit winced.

Her life with Christina in the house was a torment to her now; gradually but surely, her courage flagged as it had never flagged before. The change was marked very visibly in her face.

"Yes," she said one morning to Grace, when the latter had been questioning her, and insisting that she could not feel well, "yes, Grace, dear, you are right. I do feel ill. I suppose it is a kind of reaction. This has been such a sad year and there has been so much struggle and trouble. I would give, I don't know what, to go away. I want to be in some big, fresh place. Grace, will you help me to get away? I—I—don't think I can struggle on much more."

Grace took the matter calmly into her own hands.

"When can you be ready? We will go together. Will that suit you? Or, better still, you shall go alone at the first, and I will join you. I know just how you feel, and I know that a change by yourself will do you all the good in the world. I know more than this—I know the very place for you. One of our old servants, who left us to be married, has set up a lodging house at Beachcroft. I will write and tell her you are coming. She will take all care of you, and you will love the place. It is small, and wild, and free, but it is just the place for you! Tell me, little Polly, will you go if I make all arrangements?"

Polly looked round her with big, pathetic eyes. Of late they had lost their sea-green brilliancy, these eyes, and looked gray only and very tired.

"Yes, I will go," she answered. "Mother has Christina now, she will not miss me. I will go, Grace, dear, and I will go to-morrow—this very day, if possible," she added, hurriedly turning away to hide her face, but not before Grace had seen her tears.

And in effect, she did go that same day, and when Valentine came to the house, eager to catch a glimpse of her, he was told she had gone away.

It was Christina who announced Polly's departure. Christina had her own way of telling him.

"We are rather low-spirited to-day, mother and I. We have lost our little Polly for a while," she said, looking her loveliest, and very gentle and sweet to boot, in her widow's cap and trailing black gown. "It has cost us a lot to part with her, but," with a sigh, "I urged mother to let her go. The truth is—I feel I can speak to you on such a

matter, for you are more than a friend—dear little Polly wanted to get away before the Kestridges arrive in town. They are coming over from Ireland to-morrow, and will of course be here a good deal. Hubert Kestridge does not exactly look like a man who could inspire a *grande passion* in any woman's heart, does he?" Christina queried, softly, with a fleeting smile.

Valentine had a sharp pang through his heart.

He felt as though he had at last lighted on the true reason why Polly and he still stood so widely apart. But he had a sudden revulsion of feeling for Christina. All his old distrust of and dislike for her returned.

"I think," he said, in his stiffest way, "I think, Lady Wentworth, you are wrong to tell me this. If it be true, it is your sister's secret, and should be respected. Shall we go through these letters from your lawyers?"

Christina complied, biting her lip sharply to curb her anger.

She had made a false move, that she saw instantly; but such was the power of her vanity and her determination that she did not let this disturb her very much.

She could not gather very easily from Valentine's manner whether his rebuke had come from an angry or from a hurt feeling.

He went through such business as they had to transact as quickly as possible; and he left the house eventually with a curious longing not to set foot in it again.

Christina might have been content with the success of her introduction of Hubert Kestridge's name could she have known how painfully the matter clung to Valentine's memory all the day. He could think of nothing else, and the more he thought, the more he seemed to light on a truth, and to feel that he stood in close contact with the secret of Polly's young life.

Up to now he had had a warm liking for Kestridge, but there seemed an element in this recital of the marriage with one sister, instead of another, that suggested cruelty. For it was, in a degree, incongruous to Valentine's knowledge of Polly's proud, high-spirited nature to credit her with wearing her heart out in a love given unsought.

There must have been some deeper chord struck between herself and Kestridge other than simply cousinly affection. Probably Kestridge had flirted with pretty Polly, and then at last, had turned away from her, and married her sister. Whichever way he turned the matter, it remained hurtful to him, and at last he resolved not to think further about it, and to put, if he could, all memory of the girl he loved from his mind.

There was nothing, not even the shadow, of a pessimist about Valentine Ambleton. He was far too clear sighted, too practical, to be anything but optimistic in almost everything, and up to this moment he had been strongly optimistic in his thoughts and dreams for the future.

True, Polly had given him little enough encouragement. Friends they had become, in a sense, but he found her a thorny little individual, and nothing he had done had seemed to bring them any nearer. Yet he had not renounced his hope, rather had it grown stronger and more earnest of late.

His cousin's sad and unexpected death had put Valentine in a very different position. He was now a wealthy man, a man whom any woman, however worldly, would have been glad to marry, and he had rejoiced in the knowledge of his money, and of his many possessions, purely because of his love for Polly, and for his Sister Grace.

Each time he had gone, at Christina's bidding, to the shabby old house in Kensington, his eyes had been blind to her beauty, his senses had never once been moved by the fascination of her presence.

He had looked only to see Polly; he had dreamed only of the moment when he could transplant her, this slender, brown-skinned little creature, with her bewitching eyes, and sharp, childlike speech, away from this, her shabby and trouble-shadowed old home, away back to that other where he had spent the happiest days of his boyhood, and in and about which all the memories of his life seemed woven.

And each day he had gone hoping to find that the time was propitious, and that this happy moment might be his, and every day he had left the house chilled and disappointed, because he had never seen Polly, or seeing her, he had found her short tongued and very cold, but never so chilled and disappointed as to-day.

Now a broad streak of clear, cold light had been cast upon the situation, and in this light he saw how poor and feeble had been his hope. It was all very well, however, to make resolutions and to contract with himself to set aside all thought of Polly and his love for her. In these matters mind is not everything, and nature is too strong voiced to be silenced at will.

Valentine went about his business just as he would have done had Christina refrained from telling him that pitiful little story; but though he walked, and spoke, and wrote, and eventually traveled down to Dynechester just as he usually walked and spoke and traveled, he was conscious, actually conscious, of a great difference in himself, and he looked ahead at his future half nervously, for this was his first actual consciousness of the power of heart over mind, and he hardly knew how the future was to be faced with this dull, aching pain clamoring to be healed and never healing.

"Time, I suppose," he said to himself, wearily, "time will put things right again."

But he had no faith even in time.

Life in its simplest aspects had changed to Valentine when he had told himself in quiet, measured terms, that his love for this woman, the first, the only love he had ever known, must be taken out of its setting and destroyed.

He was glad to be obliged to go to Dynechester; he escaped contact with Sacha, who annoyed him more than he could describe, since they had been thrown so much together; he was even glad not to see Grace before he went, although he would like to have heard from his sister some news of Polly, and if all were well with the girl.

This sudden departure, this quitting of her mother, all served to bear testimony to the truth of what Christina had told him, for it was so unlike Polly to permit herself to

be separated from her mother; it must, therefore, have been some very strong motive that had urged her departure.

Grace was absent when her eldest brother ran into their temporary home, and, picking up his bag, took himself off to the station en route for Dynechester. She was, therefore, unable to enlighten him, as she was in a full position to do, on all touching Polly.

Grace had managed everything.

She had telegraphed to her old servant, and had received a reply, saying there was room and over for any friend of Miss Ambleton's.

Then she had gone up with Polly to her bedroom and had helped to pack a modest little box, and then she had whisked Polly away, out of the house into a cab, and into a station, and finally into a train, so quickly that Polly had been bewildered.

Speech came in the form of remonstrance when Grace, having kissed Polly tenderly, left the carriage as the train was beginning to move, and dropped a pretty purse into the girl's lap as she did so.

"Oh! You mustn't! Grace, dear, you mustn't!" Polly cried, but the door was shut, and the train glided away, and all she saw of Grace was a fading vision of a smiling face, whose lips bade her be well and happy.

Polly sat down in the empty first-class carriage, and at the beginning she cried, and she reproached herself all round.

"How good she is, and how selfish I am! and how will mother manage without me? Will Chrissie look after her well? I hope so, but I am afraid not. I hope my darling mother does not think me unkind; it is wrong to run away just because one is tired and troubled, and yet—yet, oh! it is nice to be away! to be safe from things that hurt one to hear and see. Mother would forgive me if she knew, and I shall go back to her cured, quite cured," Polly assured herself, severely; and she shed more tears as she said this, for being quite cured meant sweeping even the remembrance of Valentine out of her thoughts, and that was something that would take long to accomplish, if indeed it was ever accomplished at all.

By and by she grew more calm, and sitting down in a corner, she watched the landscape slip by.

The air from the wide, open country greeted her with a sweet, fresh whisper, and little by little her spirit rose, and something of the old mischief and enjoyment of life came back to lurk in her eyes.

When the sea flashed into sight, a vast mirror reflecting myriads of diamond sun rays, she almost laughed.

"I am glad I came," she said to herself, and she said it many times as she was driven in a ramshackle old fly over the rough road from the station to Beachcroft.

"It is the sort of place where you could live quite comfortably in a bathing machine," Grace had said. "Primitive to a degree. Why Betsy Blaine should have chosen this sort of place to start a lodging house, I never can tell; but she is quite

content, and it seems that she makes her enterprise pay. It will do you any amount of good, Polly, and Blainey will take such care of you.”

Grace had given her a note to deliver to her landlady, but Mrs. Blaine had no need of any urging from her former young mistress to be extra kind and thoughtful to Miss Pennington, for she had lost her heart to Polly on the spot. As she said to Grace on a later occasion:

“She’ve got eyes, miss, that fairly witch one; and when she smiles, why, she’s just lovely!”

Polly spent that first evening of solitary holiday in wandering over the beach and sea-washed rocks.

The tide went out very far at Beachcroft, and it took Polly quite half an hour to walk to its rippling, white-frothed edge, and when she had arrived there, she did, of course, just what one would expect Polly to do; she sat down on the wet sands, took off her little shoes and stockings, and slinging them about her neck, she waded through the murmuring wavelets, feeling like a creature set free after a long term of imprisonment.

It was a glorious sensation, and no amount of discomfort robbed that evening of its full measure of joy.

What if she did drop one of her shoes in the water? She could walk barefoot back over the rocks, a feat that delayed her so long in reaching the parade—magnificent name for about a dozen yards of asphalt in front of the few houses Beachcroft could claim—that she found Mrs. Blaine waiting for her at the door with some anxiety.

A large tub of water to cleanse away the sand from the little pink feet, a delicious supper of lobster, homemade bread, hot cakes and honey—Polly had a really excellent digestion—sleep in the large, fresh lavender-scented bed, and then dreams to put an end to a day which had begun with a broken spirit and real misery, and finished more sweetly than any day Polly had known in the last year.

“I am getting splendidly cured,” she murmured to herself, in her last moment of conscious thought. “By to-morrow I shall have forgotten that I ever had a heartache or that there ever existed a man called Valentine, or a woman named Christina.”

A delightful statement to go to sleep upon, but alas! the next morning the ache stole back again, and the weary question started anew.

“It is because it is a wet day,” Polly said to herself, valiantly. “I am always in the dumps on a wet day.”

But it was more than the bad weather that brought that ache, and as the girl counted up the years that she might possibly live with that dull, cold pain perpetually in her heart, she may be forgiven because the tears came.

CHAPTER XXII.

A DEFINITION OF A WIFE.

Valentine returned to London on this same wet day.

It was raining hard as he started, and the summer wind blew a storm of raindrops against the window as he journeyed up from Dynechester.

Something in the sound of the wind and rain recalled the sea, and brought with it that curious longing that the sea can stir in some natures.

Valentine wondered in a dreamy way where Polly might be at this moment.

"I suppose she is with some relations," he said to himself.

He wished vaguely he could know where she was, he had a distinct dislike to feeling that she had passed out of his radius, as it were. And then he wished vaguely that he could forget all about her.

But a heart's love knows little of wisdom!

Arrived in London, Valentine had a mass of work to do, and in the course of getting through it fate brought him sharply up against the very man about whom he had been thinking so much, and not very gently.

He shook hands with Hubert Kestridge cordially enough all the same, and when Winnie's husband asked him to luncheon he agreed, and the two men repaired to a restaurant close at hand.

Valentine had time to examine Kestridge during the meal, and gradually his hard feelings melted away and pity instead of anger came into his heart for his companion.

"Where do you hail from, Kestridge?" he asked. "You don't look any great shakes. I verily believe you have grown thinner."

"We crossed from Ireland last night. Am I changed? You have not seen me for a long time. I fancy I am about the same bulk, anyhow."

They spoke of desultory things for a time, and then all at once Kestridge changed the subject.

"Ambleton," he said, "I am awfully glad I met you to-day. I wanted one friend to wish me good luck before leaving England, and of all my friends, I would sooner have had you say this than any other man."

"Leaving England? What do you mean, Kestridge? You sound as if something were wrong."

"Something is wrong," Hubert Kestridge said, unsteadily. "Not something, but everything. Ambleton, I am a miserable man. I have made such a mistake—oh, God! what a mistake; and yet even now, looking back, I hardly know how this came about."

"Are you speaking of your marriage?" Valentine asked, in a low voice.

The other inclined his head to mean assent.

"I am not sure that I follow you," Valentine said, curbing a certain inclination to agitation. "I was given to understand you were very happy."

"I hardly know who could have given you that statement," Kestridge said slowly. "I have never been happy with my wife, never. I never cared for Winnie. She was the one of the family I never cared about."

"And yet you married her!" Valentine said, very coldly, and with a great deal of reproach. He resented this kind of confidence.

"And yet I married her, as you say," Hubert Kestridge repeated, and then he looked up, "or rather, she married me. Ambleton, let me speak out to you! I know you to be the soul of honor. I want you to judge, and tell me if I am doing right or wrong."

"The duty is too solemn," Valentine began, but the other went rushing into speech.

"We married—put the blame on whom you will—we married; yes, but my heart was never given in marriage. I had given it long before. Have you ever seen Polly?" he queried, suddenly. "It is Polly I love—Polly I have loved from the first!"

"Take care, man!" Valentine said, in a stifled sort of way. By what chance did this thing come to him now?

"Oh! I do no harm by saying this to you," Hubert said, half recklessly. "You are the sort of friend one trusts to death. Yes, it is Polly I have loved, and yet I married Winnie. How did it come about? Oh! it was easy enough for my wife to twist and turn and maneuver things so that she made me believe I was hateful to Polly and dear to herself. I have her own word for this. We have quarreled many times, but never as we quarreled last night. Things were put clearly enough between us then. Winnie has a keen tongue and uses it well. She left me little that was pleasant to remember, I can tell you, for no man cares to acknowledge himself a fool, and this is what she proved me to be. After all, Ambleton, we are fools in a clever woman's hands! Winnie twisted me just as she willed. It was the hour of their poverty. She hates poverty. I was available as a means of escape from her home life. What was easier than to throw dust in my eyes? Polly, strange, lovely little creature as she is, was hard and cold to me. She refused me mere friendship. She slighted me on every occasion. She lent strong color to all Winnie told me, and yet sure I ought to have understood her," the man said here, bitterly enough. "She is made of different stuff to either of her sisters. The very thing that drew Winnie to me kept Polly away. Had she grown rich instead of poor, I might—who can tell?—have stood in a very different position to what I am now."

There was silence a moment, between them, and then Valentine spoke.

"Do you do yourself any good by saying all this, Kestridge?" he asked, gently enough, though in truth, he was not utterly in sympathy with Hubert.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"It can do no harm. Whatever comes or goes, Winnie has cut me away from all chance of happiness."

"She is your wife," Valentine reminded him.

"What is your definition of a wife?" Kestridge asked, recklessly. "A woman who tells you frankly to your face that you are abhorrent to her, that she only consented to

be your wife because of such material advantages as might come to her through you; a woman who confesses to have worked mischief between you and the one creature you love; a woman who refuses flatly to live in your home, and who sends you to Jericho or the devil, it matters not which?" He changed his tone. "By what she said last night, Winnie has made it practically impossible for us to go on with this farce of marriage. I have made my plans to go abroad, to leave her mistress of my money and of the situation. I fancy she'll get along pretty well without me. I don't know what you think."

Valentine remained silent, but the expression of his face was as eloquent as words.

"I believe you consider me wrong to do what I mean doing," the other said, a trifle sullenly, breaking the long pause, and Valentine looked up and replied frankly:

"I make no difference between you and any other man," he said, coldly. "To me a husband's duties can never be set aside lightly. Whether for weal or woe, you are married to this woman; your place is, therefore, with her, unless, indeed, she gives you far stronger reasons than these you have spoken of, to leave her."

Hubert Kestridge colored hotly, and it was his turn to be silent now.

"I know you are fully in the right, although you hit it out so hardly," he said, at last. "Perhaps, if you were situated as I am, you would not be so hard."

"I don't mean to be hard, Kestridge," Valentine said, instantly, "but I have a trick of plain speaking, and, remember, you sought my advice. You must not think, however, that I am too cut-and-dried to deny you sympathy. Of all sad mistakes, a mistaken marriage is surely the hardest to suffer. You have been the victim, if you will let me say this, of your own weakness. After all, a man cannot be urged to such lengths utterly against his will, and if you were sure of the other girl's love——"

Valentine paused.

He found it far from easy to say as much as he had said already.

Hubert Kestridge answered him quietly.

"Ah! but I was not sure, Ambleton. Nor am I sure now. It is my wife who tells me that Polly cared for me. I have never dared to think this for myself! She says it now to make the hurt deeper, the breach between us wider. Something seems to assure me it is only her malice that suggests this. She knows I loved her sister; it is easy, therefore, to invent now a story of how this sister loved me."

The two men remained silent a long time.

Valentine felt an oppression like a pain upon his heart.

He was truly sorry for this man before him, and yet it was but natural that he should shrink from Kestridge a little, for circumstances, one and all, pointed to the fact that what Winnie had said to her husband out of malice was the full truth.

In his single-minded honesty Valentine never dreamed of accusing Christina of any motive in telling him what she had told him, although at the same time he had strongly objected to having done so, but as he was utterly blind to the schemes Christina was forming for the future, it was not likely he should imagine she had

introduced this story of the girl's attachment to Kestridge only to sever all possibility of his approaching her with his own story. And it was, therefore, all clear to Valentine now, that Polly did care for this other man, and that it was because of this love she had torn herself from her mother's side and gone away, he knew not where, rather than risk a meeting with Kestridge.

Consequently, he would have rather seen any other creature in the world at this moment than the moody, unhappy man opposite to him; and it was impossible for him to resist a sigh of relief when Hubert, after a few, conventional words, rose and they separated.

To attempt to minister to Kestridge's trouble was a task beyond Valentine; nevertheless, he felt sorry when they were apart that he had not tried to do something.

Hubert's face haunted him all the day, and it gave him, therefore, great satisfaction to receive, a few hours later, at his chambers in the city, a penciled note from the young man, saying that he had resolved to change his plans.

"I shall go abroad for a little while, for I think this is necessary; but I shall return and take up my duties, as you suggested. I am awfully sorry, old fellow, to have bored you with a recital of my worries, but I feel better altogether since I have seen you. Your plain speaking has done good, you see."

Valentine was touched by the note, but his interview with Hubert had put the finishing touch to the restlessness that had lived with him all day.

He felt suddenly that he in his turn needed to go away.

He had almost a fear to go back to Grace, and laugh, and talk, and eat, as though life was just as usual.

"Twenty-four hours alone somewhere out of the beaten track will do me good," he said to himself, and he determined to send a telegram to Grace, announcing he should not be at home that night.

He said no more than that, for in truth at the moment he did not know where he should go; but as he finished his business, and walked out into the streets, an idea came rushing to his brain, an idea born of that vague longing that had come to him earlier in the day as he had sat in the train and had watched the raindrops patter on the window.

"I will go and see the sea," he said to himself. "I will go to Beachcroft. Blainey will, no doubt, find room for me; and if not, I can always sleep at the inn."

CHAPTER XXIII. THE SYMPATHY OF THE WAVES.

The wet day had ended in a storm of wind and heavy rain, with waves running mountains high.

Polly had, of course, not remained in the house all that day.

When luncheon had come and gone she donned her rough, old-fashioned ulster, buttoned on her stout pair of boots, and pinned her sailor hat securely on her dark curls, then off she went, a little against Mrs. Blaine's good counsel.

"You'll get as wet as wet, miss. The wind is blowing straight from the sea, and it'll drench you fair," she remonstrated.

"Oh! I shall like it," Polly cried, her spirits striving courageously to be bright as of yore. "I really want to be blown just inside out, Mrs. Blaine."

And Mrs. Blaine laughed.

"It isn't everybody as can get a wish as easily as you'll get yours, miss," she said, "but you'll be back to afternoon tea, won't you, miss? and mind you don't lose your hat; the wind at Beachcroft is pretty strong."

Polly was fully prepared to testify to the truth of this a few moments later, when she found herself driven back against a wall by the force of the rain-drenched wind, and had to stand there struggling to get her breath, for quite two or three minutes. But she was not alarmed—it would take a stronger wind than this to baffle Polly—moreover, she loved the fierceness of the elements, the stinging of the rain on her cheeks, and the keen, strong scent of the sea in her nostrils. It invigorated her, and seemed to sweep her through and through, driving away care and saddening thought, and all the other phantoms that had haunted her brain.

She picked her way slowly down the beach.

The sea was much nearer the parade now, and the thunder of its strong, high-rearing waves, as they leaped onto the beach and broke in a storm of snow-white foam, followed by the hissing noise of the receding water, as it drew shoals of stones into the ocean, was almost deafening.

Polly was a long time reaching any point of shelter, but she had picked out quickly a large shelving piece of rock that had been engulfed half an hour or so before by the restless waters, and here she determined to sit and watch the waves fulfill their allotted task, and recede from the shore.

By eventide the water's edge would be as far out as it had been the preceding night, but it would take some time for that to come, and Polly promised herself a whole afternoon under the shelter of the seaweed-covered rock. It was strange to feel herself free. All the past year her days had been set to match her mother's wishes, and sweet as this office of love had been, there was no doubt the girl needed a change altogether.

She could not have found a place better calculated to do her good than this wild, little coasting village, and Grace's quick thought had been a very happy one.

It was not possible to restore her girlhood's buoyancy in full, for whatever might have come, her life had passed through such dark shadows these many months that the trace of them would never wholly pass away; but assuredly even this short sojourn in fresh scenes, this break in her arduous and thoughtful existence, had done her good already. She forgot all those stinging, hurtful things that had driven her from home, as she sat and watched the rolling sea, and heard the thunder of the foam-decked waves break on the wet beach.

"It's just lovely!" she said to herself. "How I wish Grace had come with me! When will she come? She said in a day or two. I must write to her to-night, and tell her to hurry up this day or two; I want her. How funny it is, and sad, too, that I should find a stranger so much sweeter, and kinder, and necessary to me than my own sisters. Grace is more than my friend, she is my comfort; yes, I want her very badly. Not that I am lonely, though. I feel quite, quite happy here."

Forgetful of her promise to Mrs. Blaine, Polly spent the entire afternoon out of the house.

Gradually and gradually the waves receded, till there was a wide stretch of rock, and beach, and damp sand between the sea and herself.

The wind seemed to die down as the tide went out, and the rain became less fierce and settled into a thin drizzle.

Polly emerged from her cave, and picking up her skirts, went fleetly over the slippery rocks, down once more to the water's edge.

She had discarded her old ulster and hat, and had left them tucked away in a corner of her late shelter.

She was not afraid of losing them, for, as she said to herself with a laugh, "he or she who would steal my ulster would undoubtedly steal trash; while as for my hat, well, the less said about that hat the better."

So there was nothing to protect her slender figure in its rough black serge, and the wind played fine havoc with her pretty brown curls; but Polly cared not. A little rain would not hurt her, and as for the wind, she welcomed it as a friend.

Poising lightly and easily on the wet surface of the rocks, she sprang from one to another with all the assurance of a bird; and when she reached the end of the journey, she stood for one instant with outstretched hands, as though her spirit, indeed, would wing her across the ocean just as the seabirds took their flight.

Had there been anyone to admire the girl in this hour, there could have been found no one surely to deny her beauty. The eyes alone were a wealth of loveliness in themselves; the old fire, the old curious opalesque shades of color had come back to their depths, marking them as jewels of some priceless order in the quaint little brown face.

Unfortunately there was no other human being to gaze upon this pretty creature.

Beachcroft had a deserted, and doubtless to most eyes, a desolate look on this stormy August afternoon.

Mrs. Blaine was the first person to coincide with this idea.

She went to the door many times to look for Polly, and each time the wind and the rain drove her indoors again.

"If this had come in June and July I'd like to know where we'd have been!" she said to herself.

She could not help being a little anxious as the hours slipped on and on, and Polly never came, but already she had caught enough knowledge of the girl's nature to feel convinced she would not be harmed by such infelicitous weather as most people would be.

She set about preparing a dainty little dinner, and she took far more care for Polly's repast than she did for that which was going up to her drawing-room lodgers, two old ladies, who, needless to say, had not dared to put their noses outside the door this day, and had watched Polly's peregrinations amid the wet rocks with a scandalized air.

The dinner was almost complete when there came a ring at the bell, and Mrs. Blaine went hurriedly to answer the summons, expecting, of course, to see Polly's slim form standing on the step.

"She'll just be drenched," she said to herself, and visions of Polly, indulging in a hot bath and partaking of some of her wonderful herb concoction to ward off a cold, came to her as she went.

The recommendations she had received from Grace to take the greatest care possible of Miss Pennington were translated very literally by the good soul; it was, therefore, with a sincere intention of taking the girl in hand now that Mrs. Blaine opened the door.

The figure on the step was not Polly's, but a very tall, stalwart individual, who had evidently alighted from the fly that was crawling slowly back to the station.

"How are you, Blainey? I have come down for one night; can you take me in?" asked Valentine, genially.

"Lor', Mr. Valentine, what a surprise! Come in—come in! Lucky enough I've the dining-room floor empty just yesterday. There, I am glad to see you, and that's the truth, sir. Miss Grace she said nothing about your coming when she wrote yesterday."

"She did not know it, that's why," Valentine explained.

He looked about the small, humbly furnished room with pleasure, all was so bright and fresh, and Blainey's welcome was so sincere, he felt already better.

"I'm a bit overworked," he further explained, "and so I ran down here all on the spur of the moment. I know you are always glad to see me, and now you are going to give me one of your own particular little dinners, if it's no trouble."

“Nothing’s a trouble for you, or Miss Grace, or Mr. Sacha. I’ve got too good a memory of all the kindness I’ve had from all of you, sir. As I was a-telling Miss Grace’s young lady, when she arrived here yesterday, I——”

“What young lady? Is——”

Then Valentine stopped, and his heart beat very quickly.

He guessed at once who it was that had come even before Mrs. Blaine could speak the name.

“Such a dear, nice young lady, with the sweetest eyes, sir, but a very fragile look, like. She wants care, sir, as Miss Grace wrote, and I’m afeared I’m not doing my duty letting her stay out all this blessed afternoon in this weather.”

“Is Miss Pennington out now?” Valentine queried, his voice catching a touch of anxiety. “But surely this is very late; it is just eight o’clock, and it’s quite a wild night.”

“Oh! she loves the rain and the wind, so she says, sir! But you’re right, it is very late. I must send my old man down to find her. She’ll be down on the beach, I expect.”

Valentine pulled on his mackintosh again.

“I’ll go,” he said, briefly. “I know Miss Pennington, and besides, I’m a bit stronger than Blaine, and if she should have fallen and hurt herself——”

“Oh! don’t say that!” Mrs. Blaine cried, and the tears started to her eyes. “Oh! sir, what will Miss Grace say if she’ve hurt herself——”

Valentine hastened to reassure her, and strode away in the growing darkness as he spoke.

“What a funny world we live in, to be sure!” he said to himself as he went. “I come away from London for the purpose of pulling myself together and learning, if possible, to forget this girl, and I arrive to find her here before me. Is there a destiny in this? Or is it only mere chance?” Then came a thought that made his pulses thrill. “Shall I dare my fate? Shall I speak and know the worst—hear from her lips the confirmation of what my heart tells me is true?”

The blustering wind had almost gone, but the rain was falling.

Dark as the evening was—extraordinarily dark for August—it was possible for Valentine to scan the shore and to distinguish at once if any person was moving on it.

He stood and looked carefully over the expanse of low-stretching rocks, and he was about to turn away, convinced that he must look for Polly in some other direction, when the flutter of something white in the distance caught his eye.

The heavy storm clouds parted at that instant, and permitted a flicker of pale moonlight to streak the sea and the shore, and as he stood still, hesitating, the white fluttering came to him this time quite clearly.

“It is a signal. Some one is there!” he said to himself. Then, like lightning, came the thought, “It is she, and she is hurt!”

Forthwith he started to get down to the spot where the white showed, and he soon found it was by no means an easy undertaking. The rocks gave but poor footing for his powerful steps, and he had pretty quickly to fling aside his hampering mackintosh and pursue his way with as little plunging as possible.

By degrees he drew nearer to where he imagined Polly to be. Just before approaching her he called aloud.

"Hello! Is anyone there?" he said, and his voice was not in the least like his usual voice.

It was Polly who answered him, undoubtedly and assuredly Polly.

"As you have come so far," her voice said, clearly and sharply, "I suppose you must have seen that some one was here."

"What is the matter?" shouted Valentine.

"How do I know what is the matter?" queried Polly, irritably. "I'm all crumpled up, and I think I'm broken all over."

Valentine smiled to himself.

There was not much real hurt, he was now assured; nevertheless, he feared she might have sprained herself in some way.

He moved cautiously toward her, and he heard her laughing softly to herself as he plunged wildly from one piece of treacherous seaweed to another.

He certainly was not a figure of grace at this moment.

As he came quite close to her he spoke in his natural voice, and Polly gave a great start. She recognized him then. Before he had seemed to her one of the few strangers she had caught sight of from her window.

"I hope it is not so bad as that," Valentine said.

"Oh," she hurried to reply, "I am not really hurt at all. I—I just slipped, and somehow I managed to get my left arm wedged in here, and I can't move it very easily. I also twisted my foot. How d'ye do, Mr. Ambleton?" she finished, demurely.

Val sat down on an adjoining rock and proceeded to help her. Her position was not a pleasant one.

"But you must suffer very much, I am afraid," he said, as little by little he drew the small arm from its uncomfortable place. "You must tell me if I hurt you."

"It all hurts a little," Polly said, wincing beneath his touch. "My hand and wrist are so swollen that I am afraid the arm is broken. Is it?"

He felt it tenderly from wrist to shoulder, and as far as he could judge, there was nothing broken or displaced, either.

"You must be badly bruised," he said.

"I am," Polly observed, quietly. "I am as—as Mrs. Blaine would say, a mask of bruises. I am rather glad you came, you know, Mr. Ambleton. I was making up my mind I should have to stay here all night, and then, I suppose, by the morning I should not have been here at all, seeing that the tide comes in at midnight."

"How long have you been like this?" asked Valentine, unable to withstand the witching delight of the situation, even though she was suffering, and her heart was closed against him.

"I think it must have been a month," Polly said, thoughtfully.

"I want to get you up on your feet. Can you stand?"

"If I lean on you; but I expect you won't like that. I am very heavy, you know."

"Give me your right hand," Valentine ordered gruffly.

"What are you doing down here?" queried the girl, as she was lifted slowly to her feet, a proceeding not unconnected with a good deal of discomfort.

"I came to blow away some cobwebs out of my brains."

"How funny!" Polly said, faintly; "so did I! Aren't—aren't cobwebs nasty, clinging things?"

She hardly knew if she were speaking coherently, for Valentine was moving her slowly back over the rocks again, and her injured arm throbbed and quivered with a feverish pain that was well-nigh unbearable, while she had a funny lightness in her head.

Whether he answered or no, she could not tell.

She was not fully conscious of all that followed, save that she realized she was being taken nearer and nearer to the parade.

As they were passing the rock which she called her "home," she asked to stop.

"I have left my hat and ulster here," she explained. "I want to get them. Mrs. Blaine will think I have gone mad if I go back like this."

"Polly, do you know you are wet through?" demanded Valentine, as they both sat down and recovered breath a little.

"What do you mean by calling me 'Polly'?" she asked, frigidly, and he hurriedly apologized.

"I beg your pardon. I forgot myself."

They sat very still again, and Polly felt all the hot unrest and trouble unfold itself in her heart again. She could endure the bodily pain, but this was another kind of pain, and she fretted under it.

She seemed hemmed about as by a network of unpleasant circumstances. Of what use to run away, ostensibly, from her mother and her daily life; but, in reality, from the chance of meeting this man, and then to be thrown in close contact with him in the course of twenty-four hours.

She tried to fall back into her old sharp speech, but body, and heart, and brain were weary.

"After all, what does it matter? Call me what you like, it makes no difference."

"Doesn't it?" Valentine said, quickly. "That's a big mistake—a very, big mistake."

He had brought out her ulster, and she had let him throw it round her shoulders. Her hat she still kept on her lap.

"Oh! don't let us discuss these sort of things," she said, still wearily.

She did not understand him, but she felt a curious sensation that they were verging on something dangerous.

“By all means; it is high time you were indoors,” Valentine said, coldly. “Do you know it is nearly nine o’clock?”

“Is it? I dare say, I lost all count of time down there. What—what are you going to do, Val?” the girl added, hurriedly, as he stepped over to her and picked her up as though she had been a child.

“I am going to carry you,” Valentine said, coolly; then he laughed and looked down at her. “At last I am your master,” he said, and he held her small form closer in his arms.

“What do you mean by that?” Polly’s voice sounded very low indeed.

“I dare say you know what I mean quite well. If you don’t, I will explain it to you to-morrow. To-night the only explanation you can have is supper and bed.”

He moved on briskly up the remaining portion of the beach till the parade was reached. There Polly stopped him.

“Put me down,” she commanded. “If you are my master it is your duty to obey me.”

At this they both laughed, and the laugh seemed to free something in the hearts of both.

Though the rain was falling, and the hour was growing later and later, they made no haste to reach Mrs. Blaine’s hospitable door.

“I am going to ask you a question, Polly. Will you answer it?”

“Ask it first, and then we will see.”

Valentine drew breath.

“It is a big question, Polly,” he said, and his voice sounded very tender, very gentle, very, very sweet in her ears; “but you can settle it with one small word. Polly, you know I love you, dear. Will you be my wife?”

CHAPTER XXIV. AT THE MOMENT OF VICTORY.

"It is very strange Polly should go away when I am here."

Christina made this remark at least a dozen times in the day following Polly's departure.

It was a wet day, as we know, and Christina was exceedingly bored in her old home.

She sat expecting Valentine all the afternoon, and as dinner drew near and he had not come, she got cross as well as bored, and she fell back upon Polly as a vent for her ill temper.

Poor Mrs. Pennington, who had felt the void in her life the very hour of Polly's leaving her, said all that was in her heart for her youngest girl; but the mother's tender recognition of Polly's love did not impress Christina.

"After all, there is nothing to make a fuss about," she said to herself. "Polly has to look after mother, whether she likes it or not. It is her duty."

It was obviously Christina's duty also, but she made no haste to fulfill it. She lived her own way entirely; her mother was quietly uncomfortable, and she herself was most uncomfortable.

"I shall have to go to a hotel," she said, irritably, to herself, as a second day dragged its weary length to a close. She did not understand why Valentine did not come. He had gone to Dynechester, she knew that; but he had said he should only be in Dynechester a day, and still he did not come or write.

There was absolutely nothing to amuse Lady Wentworth.

She might have gone to see her sister, Mrs. Kestridge; but Chrissie and Winnie had never been friends, and Chrissie felt that under existing circumstances, she would find little satisfaction in meeting Hubert Kestridge's wife.

Winnie carefully refrained from visiting her mother's house, now that her husband had left her for his tour abroad. She was not much moved by what her mother might or might not say; but she had no desire to meet Polly just then, for Winifred's jealousy of Polly had become a mania, and the very fact of Hubert's departure, of all the nasty things she had said, made this jealousy deeper.

Later on the afternoon of this second day Lady Wentworth drove to call upon Miss Ambleton. She was relieved to hear that Grace was out, and she asked for Mr. Ambleton, and Sacha came down.

Sacha had an air of latent mischief about him.

"Is it Valentine you want, or myself?" he asked.

"I want to speak to your brother," Christina said, a little coldly. She was beginning to dislike Sacha.

“Ah!” said Sacha. “How unfortunate, you have just missed him; but, I believe, if you drive back to your mother’s house you may find him. I know he was going there. Shall I tell the man to take you straight home again?”

“If you please,” said Christina, stiffly. “I shall not encourage many visits from Sacha,” she said to herself, as her cab rolled homeward again.

She was, of course, thinking of the future, of those days when she would be queen again at Sunstead—queen this time, with a real king.

There never came even the shadow of a doubt across her mind as to the fulfillment of this dream.

Valentine’s changed attitude with her since her widowhood was too marked to permit of a doubt, and Christina chafed inwardly at the long months of regulation mourning which must, of course, ensue before Valentine would speak to her, and tell her of his love.

She found that Sacha had been rightly informed, and that Valentine was with her mother when she arrived.

She went to join them with her sweetest, most pathetic look.

Mrs. Pennington and Valentine were sitting hand in hand as she entered, nor did they change their position at her coming.

Christina stood in the doorway, and paused a moment. There was a wild beating at her heart; though she had built on a triumph, she had not tasted the sweetness of this triumph till now. Here, in this very room, where he had flung scorn and hard words at her, he would kneel at her feet, her slave and her lover, for Christina, looking at him, and reading the new and radiant expression on his face, never hesitated to set down this change in him to the fact that he had unburdened his heart to her mother, and they had been talking over his happiness together when she should be his wife.

Mrs. Pennington saw Christina first.

“Chrissie, dear, you have come at a good moment. Mr. Ambleton—Val, has brought me very sweet news. It is the happiest news I have had for many a day.”

Valentine rose and was looking at Christina, and as their eyes met the woman’s brows contracted faintly.

“Do I share in this good news?” she asked, and her mother answered warmly:

“We all share, for are we not all one? Valentine, will you not tell Chrissie your news yourself?”

“I believe,” Valentine said, simply and rather shyly—“I believe Lady Wentworth must know it already. I fancy all the world must have seen how dear your little girl has grown to me.” He paused, and Christina’s heart beat on furiously, but this time there was no melody in the beat, nothing but hot, miserable anger. Then Valentine went on, hurriedly. “I love your sister, Polly, Lady Wentworth, and I am happy to tell you she consents to be my wife.”

Christina’s lips were very thin. For an instant she could not speak, then she turned and left the room.

"I congratulate you both," she said, as she went, but her tone was so cold, so strangely hard, that her mother looked pained.

"Poor Chrissie," she said, wistfully, "she does not mean to be cold; but her sorrow is so new—too new, perhaps, to let her find happiness anywhere."

Valentine stooped and kissed the speaker.

She was Polly's precious mother, and as such she was precious to him; but, in truth, he had long ago given a large share of his respect and love to gentle, patient and sad Mrs. Pennington.

"I was sure you loved Christina," Polly had said, when she had answered his one big question with one small affirmative word.

"And I have been torturing myself because I was equally sure you loved Kestridge."

Polly had colored in the darkness.

"Shall I confess to you that I was very, very nearly doing this?"

"Did you not do it altogether?" Valentine queried, jealously.

Polly shook her head.

"No; not altogether, dear," she answered him, and he was satisfied. When he went down after his interview with Mrs. Pennington he found Grace ensconced beside Polly, who, much against her will, was stretched out on a couch.

"Oh! Valentine, thank you! thank you!" Grace said, as she kissed him. "I have always longed for a sister, and Polly is just the sister I should have chosen."

Valentine knelt down beside his little sweetheart's couch.

"And I have to thank you for a mother. Polly, all is done as you desired it, and your mother's home is with us henceforward at Sunstead. We will choose her the largest and brightest room, and Grace shall share with us in her happiness."

"I like you," Polly said, suddenly, as Grace had discreetly retired. She buried her face on his rough coat. "I like you very much!"