

# A Woman's Heart

By MRS EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS.

## CHAPTER I.

It was pouring with rain. Not a gentle, soft, persuasive sort of rain, but a strong, heavy, steady downpour—a very deluge of water that massed itself into a sort of small river on each side of the roadway and washed the wood pavement as clean and surely as though a hose had been played upon it to effect this purpose.

The lamps and the lights from the shops were reflected vividly on the glassy surface of the pavement.

People hurried to and fro in a state of unpleasant moisture. Umbrellas were dripping; and those boots and shoes which had grown a little worn and thin by very constant use were quickly transformed into a dump and inadequate protection against the penetrating wet.

Despite the pouring rain, Fleet Street was as Fleet Street generally is—full of business.

The carts and vans and cabs and omnibuses followed one another in their usual fashion, and not even the discomfort and the dampness could affect the good-humoured, if somewhat rough, pleasantry in which the drivers of the various vehicles indulged.

Everyone seemed resigned with characteristic phlegm to bear the disagreeables of the moment as easily as possible, and everyone was also actuated apparently by the desire to get through with their duties as fast as they could, and so eventually land themselves in a dry atmosphere, if not in luxurious comfort.

On the edge of the streaming pavement about the middle of Fleet Street a girl's figure stood scarcely sheltered from the downpour by a very shabby-looking umbrella. She carried a large brown paper parcel flat and square under her left arm, and her eyes went anxiously toward Ludgate Circus, watching the approach of every omnibus with a heart that was almost as weary as her slender arm.

She had stood there quite twenty minutes, and had attracted more than one casual glance from the people who hurried past her, for Justina Seaton was something more than ordinarily pretty—a fact that not even her shabby hat and still more shabby ulster could disguise.

The lights from a shop window behind her fell full upon her, as she stood there, and showed up her thin, pale face with its delicate rose-leaved tinted skin, and its very large eyes of rarest blue. Her hair, which seemed to be of a great quantity, was coiled neatly under her hat, and her head was seen to be set unusually well on her shoulders. She had a slender, child-like air about her, although she was by no means short, and anyone watching her closely must have felt a pang of pity when she sighed or when she escaped her pretty lips as each monster omnibus rolled past her absolutely full and unable to offer her the shelter and convenience she wanted so badly.

"That makes the sixteenth," Justina said to herself, as another of these familiar and convenient vehicles hailed in sight only to roll on callously indifferent to her anxiety and discomfort. "I wonder what I had better do? It is getting late. Rupert will wonder what has become of me. I would walk on to Charing Cross, but this manuscript is so dreadfully heavy. She sighed a little as she shifted the bulky parcel under her arm.

"Of course, I could go outside," she mused on wearily, "but—" and she shivered. She could face and stand much discomfort, as indeed, poor child, she was obliged to almost every day of her life, but there were several things Justina feared and disliked. One of these was the mere thought of an illness. "What would become of them if she were to be ill?" And another was the proceeding of climbing up to the top of the heavy, swaying omnibus, and being conveyed to her destination on a slippery garden seat instead of being buried in a corner of the crowded inside.

Justina knew it was extremely silly, but the fact remained that even whilst occupying a seat within the omnibus she was never free from a nervous sensation which all her many and oft ex-

ursions had not been able to dispel. However, nerves were things which Justina Seaton must never encourage or permit. Nerves are for those lucky individuals who have time and place and opportunity in which to allow them full play.

A working woman, a woman who, although barely more than a child, yet worked and struggled and laboured as hard as any of her fellow men, has no right to indulge in nerves, and consequently, whatever little fears and idiosyncrasies and likes and dislikes Justina might lay claim to, they were never allowed to obtrude themselves to the detriment of her day's toil and her life's tasks.

A clock booming out half-past six decided the girl now. Full or not full, the next omnibus that came must be her fate for this particular journey. She had some way to go, and Rupert Seaton had a particular objection to unpunctuality. Justina had promised to be home by seven, and home she would go, even at the cost of a long half-hour of nervous misery to herself, to say nothing of the cold and the wet, and the danger that might accrue from sitting exposed to the heavy and steady downpour. With a shiver that went through her most unconsciously, Justina hailed the approaching omnibus.

The conductor gave her very little encouragement.

"Outside!" he observed, laconically, and Justina replied, "Yes, outside," in the same laconic fashion.

She climbed up the wet staircase and tumbled into the first of the chairs, conscious of the old nervous fear that always seized her at this proceeding, and yet of a great relief also, as the weight of the heavy parcel was transferred from her arm to the seat beside her.

The conductor climbed up after her and cast a glance at her of mingled admiration and sympathy. He opened her umbrella for her, and fastened the oilcloth wrapper securely about her.

"A bit damp like, ain't it?" he said, cheerily, while he took her fare. "Not quite the sort of evening one would choose for a picnic, say. 'I'll put you inside first chance I get, Miss; it ain't fit for a dog to sit up here in this rain, that it ain't."

Justina gave him a smile, and then he vanished, and she sat shivering in her place as the omnibus veered and swayed and lumbered along in the way peculiar to omnibuses.

Down the wet Strand with its myriad of umbrellas, for all the world like a field of moving mushrooms, with the lights beginning to flare at the doors of the various theatres, and a warm, pleasant radiance surrounding the many cafes and restaurants, Justina was carried.

Her thoughts were busy ones. "It won't take me long to make these alterations," she was saying to herself. "I will begin to-night after I have made Rupert comfortable. I hope he has not been very lonely. I wish, for Rupert's sake, that sometimes Aunt Margaret would remember our existence." Here Justina gave a little laugh, half-merry, half-bitter. "I think I should not mind changing places with Aunt Margaret's horses. I am sure they are much better off than I am. I suppose Aunt Margaret would have a fit if she could see me now. Fortunately there is no such likelihood. Even if there were, I don't think I should mind. How funny it is," Justina said, thoughtfully, to herself; "how funny it is how quickly I have grown used to not minding. Only two years ago if any one had told me I should have stood for half an hour in that street in the pouring rain for the purpose of catching a laywater omnibus, I don't think I should have laughed; I think I should have been too indignant; and yet here I am, you see, right on the top of the laywater omnibus, and getting slowly but surely soaked through!"

She cuddled herself a little more securely under the wrapper and gave an anxious glance at the parcel beside her to see that it was not getting wet also.

Charing Cross was reached in a few minutes. Justina's champion, the conductor, was extremely aggrieved that there was not a vacancy inside to offer to her; but by a really unusual circumstance, not one of the passengers alighted at this busy spot, and in consequence there was nothing for Justina to do but to sit quietly where she was.

"Luck is against me to-day," she said as this news was communicated to her. "I did not expect to have all this extra work to do, nor did I expect I was going to get such a soaking when I started out this afternoon. Well, I suppose I must not grumble; things are hard now, but they will be better some day soon, and they might be much worse."

Here the girl's solitude was broken by the arrival of another outside passenger, a tall, well-built young man, in a thick, loose, and most comfortable ulster covering him from head to foot. He gave a casual glance at the girl as he sat down, and then he found himself looking a little harder, and then a sort of eagerness came into his bronzed, earnest face, and as the omnibus jolted on into the rain and darkness, he suddenly made a movement, and as he sat down on the seat immediately in front of Justina he spoke to her hurriedly—

"I am sure I cannot be mistaken," he said, in a tone that was full of warm pleasure, and yet had a touch of apology in it. "I could not make a mistake where your face is concerned. You are Justina North—little Justina North, whom I used to tease and play with at Stonedean, how many years ago? You remember me, do you not? Please don't look so startled—don't you remember your old friend Basil—the great, big, clumsy Basil that you nick-named your bear, and used to lead about the old Vicarage gardens with a string?"

Justina's beautiful eyes suddenly lost their somewhat frightened surprise, they gleamed now with recognition and with most sincere pleasure, and her lips were smiling as she put out her hand.

"Basil—Basil Fothergill—oh! I am very glad to see you again, very! Just fancy recognising me so easily! Why, it must be ten years almost since you left Stonedean—I was only eleven then, and quite a baby—and now I am grown up, and yet—"

"And yet—you look just the same, yes, just the same," Basil Fothergill said, earnestly; he was looking at her intently and with much admiration at her beautiful, delicate face.

"I can almost imagine you are going to put the collar round my neck, and lend me growling through the gardens," he added.

Justina blushed and laughed. "Life is full of strange things," she said. "Certainly, I never imagined when you came up here a moment ago that your big, strong figure was in any way connected with my life, past, present, or future. The top of an omnibus, after all, has its uses, I see. I shall have a greater respect for it now than I have hitherto had."

She was talking very quickly, but he saw her lips quiver and something like tears dim her glorious eyes.

He conjectured, and conjectured rightly, that his sudden re-appearance had awakened memories of the past; memories that were, he feared, happier than the present realities.

"I am so glad to meet you again, little Justina—do you remember we boys used always to call you Miss Just?—for you were just and good, and sweet, and noble, even in those early childish days." He paused a moment. "How often I have thought of you—and of your dear old father—"

Justina looked at him, and her expression checked his words.

"Daddy is dead. He died three years ago. I think you will be sorry, Basil, for you used to love him very dearly." Then some sudden instinct, of what exact nature she could hardly have told, prompted Justina to go on speaking quickly. "Everything is all changed now. After daddy's death

I went for a little while to live with his brother—my uncle, Paul North—at Massingtree, and I was not very happy there. Aunt Margaret, my mother's sister—oh! you must remember Aunt Margaret, Basil—she was about then, or perhaps I should have gone to her, but—" Justina paused, "it did not matter very much, because I married a few months after I had been at Massingtree, and then it was all right, you know."

"Married! You are married? My little child-friend Justina married! I can hardly believe it. How old you make me feel!" Basil was conscious of a curious faint touch of disappointment. He was sitting with his arm leaning on the wet ledge of the garden seat gazing intently into that flower-like face under the umbrella. He seemed quite impervious to the discomfort of the pouring rain as he sat there, and Justina had absolutely forgotten to be nervous since he had come and spoken to her.

"I hope you are very, very happy, little Just," he said, almost tenderly. "I am sure if anyone deserves to be happy in this rough, hard world, that person is you."

And while he was saying this he had a dull sort of resentment for the man that could let so fair and frail a girl wander forth on such a day and battle with the inclemency of the weather in such a fashion.

Justina answered him hurriedly. "I am quite happy, thank you, Basil, and I am also a very busy and important person, too. You must not call me 'little' Justina any more, for I am a full-fledged novelist. I earn a lot—oh, a lot of money—by my work. You remember in those old days, Basil, how mysterious I used to be, and how you used to tease me when you found me shut up in Daddy's study, scribbling down poems and stories on all the scraps of paper I could find. That was my beginning, Basil, and though it was only done for fun in those days, it has, I think, been of great use to me since, when work has had to be done in a definite and serious fashion. If you look here," she showed him a corner of her cherished and weighty brown parcel, "you will see the outside of a long serial which, after a little alteration and condensation, will appear in the pages of the 'Journal,' and will achieve a most tremendous success."

"I shall read it religiously 'every word,' he answered lightly, though somehow his heart did not feel light as he listened to her words and looked into her delicate face. "If I may not call you little Just any more, you must enlighten me as to the proper title I must give you," he said, abruptly, after a slight pause.

"My name is Seaton—Justina Seaton," she hurriedly answered him. "I think you must remember my husband, Basil. You were not gone when Rupert arrived at Stonedean, were you?"

"Rupert Seaton! You have married Rupert Seaton!" The words came from him in an exclamation of intense surprise, and of something else, too—a something which, in that same instinctive way Justina had apprehended even without being conscious of her apprehension.

The man sitting before her made quick haste to smooth away any faint disagreeable emotion that his astonishment might have aroused in her mind.

"Why, you are a couple of babies," he exclaimed. "Of course I remember Rupert. He was the last new boy before I left. A pretty, delicate-looking chap. As weak with his fists as any girl, but cleverer than all the rest of us with his brains. He must have been about fourteen then, I suppose, so he is not very much more than a boy now."

"Don't insult my husband's age, please," Justina cried, in a mock serious manner, and at this moment the omnibus had landed them at Oxford Circus.

Basil took her umbrella from her. "You must get down from this," he said, with a touch of authority that

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