

Croomehurst should cherish a thought that the little flutter of hope called into life by the existence of Basil Fothergill in their midst might develop into a possibility, and from that into a certainty.

Hence it can be well imagined that the advent of one so singularly blessed by nature with beauty as Justina Seaton, brought with it a corresponding amount of consternation, fear and disappointment. Nothing definite was known about the guest in these the first hours of her arrival, her name had not even transpired; it was natural enough therefore that one and all, being acquainted with the fact of Justina's extremely youthful appearance, should class her immediately as a maiden and not as a married woman.

It was through Beatrice Somerset's lively and restless tongue that the fame of the girl's loveliness was made known so quickly and so surely.

Miss Somerset, who was the beloved and only child of a retired naval captain, and who, by reason of her bright, merry disposition, and pretty laughing face, was a general favourite wherever she might go, had lost no time in circulating her description of Miss Fothergill's invalid guest.

"The loveliest face I have ever seen!" she cried, the evening after the rencontre with Sir Basil at the railway station. It was one of Croomehurst's social evenings and a splendid opportunity for Miss Somerset to spread about her news.

At least twice or three times in the month the house of her father, Captain Roche Somerset, was flung open for the amusement and delectation of Beatrice's many friends.

Following in Molly Fothergill's footsteps, Beatrice desired and endeavoured to make life as bright for the rest of the girls scattered about the place as it was for herself, and though, of course, there was not the same amount of prestige accompanying Miss Somerset's social endeavours as of those up at the big house, she yet managed to secure a very fair amount of success.

It so happened that this particular night should have been one of those chosen for her entertainment, and in consequence the discussion on Justina's presence and personal appearance came as perhaps the most exciting and interesting part of the event.

"She is lovely—so delicate and fair, with great big eyes as blue—oh! as blue as the Mediterranean!" Beatrice declared, "or the sapphire in father's big ring. I assure you I never saw any one or anything so pretty; she is like a picture or a dream—not like a human being at all!"

"Bee is getting quite poetical," Leam Greatorex said to a man standing beside her; there was the tiniest suspicion of a sneer disfiguring her well-shaped mouth.

She was leaning back in her chair, looking exceedingly handsome to-night in her dinner-gown of black velvet and jet, with a diamond star shining from the centre of her dark hair brought down low on her brow.

Although her age was scarcely a few months in excess of Beatrice Somerset's, no one could have imagined Miss Greatorex to have been so youthful.

There was nothing girlish about her, all was stately and dignified, the bearing of a woman, not of a girl.

Leam was much admired in Croomehurst, but she was not quite popular. No one could have explained exactly why this was, but the fact remained without full comprehension of its origin.

Leam's mother, Lady Gertrude Greatorex, was too much of a recluse and an invalid to win for herself any decided position in the hearts of her neighbours.

Socially speaking, of course, Lady Gertrude and Miss Greatorex took precedence of every one, not even excepting Sir Basil Fothergill, and perhaps, if the truth could have been spoken, Croomehurst was just a little proud of counting so distinguished a lady among its inhabitants.

It was this fact of her aristocratic birth and standing that had led most people to imagine that Sir Basil's future wife, if chosen from this small corner of the universe, must inevitably be Lady Gertrude Greatorex's handsome daughter, and in her own heart there can be no doubt Leam had had the same thought, not in-

scribed clearly or forcibly, but written there none the less.

Indeed, in thinking of her future of late, and Leam was one who always endeavoured to look far ahead, she had seen no other fate, matrimonially speaking, for herself except as Basil Fothergill's wife and mistress of his house.

It was not that she had not met or did not know many other men, for, as she had been duly presented in the spring just gone, and as duty had passed through the ordeal of a short London season under the august wing of her maternal grandmother, the Duchess of Loamshire, Leam had in consequence been brought in contact with all sorts and conditions of men, marriageable and otherwise.

She had not made a great success in her first appearance. The fact that she was absolutely unendowed, and that her family were proverbial for their poverty had, no doubt, had a great deal to do with this, for it is not an age in which marriages are made for love without some other more substantial capital; and then, again, Leam had always detested her grandmother, and the short time she had been obliged to spend with the Duchess had been a veritable trial to the girl's proud, intolerant spirit, awakening in her all her most ungenial feelings, and making her cold, hard manner more hard and uncompromising than ever.

Leam had returned to Croomehurst, and her mother, fully conscious of being regarded as a social failure by her grandmother and by the world at large, and the realisation of this had embittered her not a little. The result of her visit to London was to awaken within Leam Greatorex a spirit of defiant ambition—a sort of scornful determination to redeem her character in her grandmother's eyes and find herself a position that would place her forever beyond the attack of criticism or commiseration.

This determination it was that had called into clearer and more definite form the hopes and thoughts and suggestions that had always existed vaguely in her mind where Basil Fothergill had been concerned, though nothing had taken firm root or grown into a fixed determination until the evening before, when she had seen Basil's face with an utterly new look upon it bent downwards to a woman as young and far more lovely than herself.

It had, in fact, been the certainty of Sir Basil's absolute indifference and heart-wholeness that had allowed Leam's intentions towards him to have remained so long undefined. She had felt unconsciously that there was no need of alarm or haste.

Miss Greatorex had a sort of contemptuous tolerance for the rest of the young people scattered about her mother's home, not excluding Beatrice Somerset, although there was a far nearer approach to a friendship between Leam and Beatrice than with any of the others.

Molly Fothergill admired Lady Gertrude's handsome daughter immensely, and, as has been shown in her thoughts, she had half sketched out the possibility of a marriage between Basil and this girl.

In her inmost heart, however, Molly confessed sometimes to herself she did not find any great sympathetic attraction in Leam, and though she admired her so sincerely she was not half as fond of Miss Greatorex as she was of sunny Beatrice or several of the many other girls she called her friends.

As for Leam, she was inclined to be a little harsh in her judgment of Molly. She determined that, as Basil's sister and mistress of the big house, Molly should have comported herself with more dignity, more austerity even; that a line ought to have been more clearly drawn between Miss Fothergill and the other young women of Croomehurst, herself alone excepted, and the honour and glory of Croome Hall upheld in a prouder and more regal fashion.

To see Molly scampering about the place like a wild creature on her pet pony, or going for long walking excursions with half a dozen of the neighbouring girls, was something that ought not to have been, in Leam's estimation.

It was all very well for Beatrice Somerset, who, for all her prettiness, was, socially speaking, a nobody; but

for Miss Fothergill, of Croome Hall, it was distinctly not well.

The sort of supercilious tolerance which Leam extended to the inhabitants of Croomehurst generally was not by any means assumed. She was honest in regarding them as so many middle-class people, and although she had by force of circumstances to make her life among them, that was by no means a reason, in her eyes, why she or her mother should allow themselves to be intimate with their neighbours.

Indeed, with the exception of the big house, the Somersets, and once or twice a year at the Vicarage, neither Lady Gertrude nor Miss Greatorex visited any of the houses.

As for regarding the numerous young women in the light of probable or dangerous rivals where Basil Fothergill was concerned, the mere suggestion would have been, to Leam, absolutely ridiculous.

Sir Basil had evidently no eyes or appreciation for the many really pretty faces that surrounded his residence, except, perhaps, for bright, happy-looking Bee Somerset; but Leam had never had any misgivings where Bee was concerned, for she happened to know that there was a barrier existing which would never permit Captain Somerset's darling to become Basil Fothergill's wife, even had he desired such a marriage with all his heart.

The man standing by Miss Greatorex's chair on this particular evening was this barrier personified. Leam knew that, for all her sauciness and innocent coquetry, Bee loved this quiet, grave, almost middle-aged doctor of Croomehurst with all the wealth and fervour of her budding woman's heart.

"Bee is getting quite poetical," Miss Greatorex said, just turning her head towards her companion, as Miss Somerset gave forth that eloquent tribute of admiration for the Croome Hall guest. "I had no idea she could talk so well before."

"She had a good subject for her eloquence," Jasper Wylie made answer, a touch of something like enthusiasm in his voice.

Leam caught herself frowning. "Then you have met this very beautiful young person already, Dr. Wylie?" she said questionably.

"I went to Croome by appointment late this afternoon. Miss Fothergill was anxious I should see her friend and discover whether the journey had fatigued her very much. I confess," Dr. Wylie added, "I should have hardly cared about giving Mrs Seaton my permission to travel so soon after her long illness, but she is very young, and though delicate, I should say her constitution is good, so perhaps no harm will come of her fatigue."

There was a gleam of light in Miss Greatorex's dark eyes, and her cheeks had a sudden touch of colour.

"Oh! so Bee's prodigy is a married woman. That is very interesting, but I fear it will be a disappointment to you Croomehurst bachelors."

Dr. Wylie laughed.

"Oh, I dare say we shall be able to survive it, although, to take a leaf out of Miss Somerset's book, I must say I have rarely seen a more lovely face than Mrs Seaton's. It is not only that she is definitely beautiful, but there is an intense sweetness in the expression, a look of a pure and noble soul in those big blue eyes."

Leam laughed her own particular laugh, which was too well bred to express much amusement. The man's enthusiasm annoyed her, although since she had heard that Justina was a married woman she had not the same annoyance as that which had come before. Still this reiterated assurance of Mrs Seaton's loveliness, added to the fact that her own eyes had had proof that the rumour was only too well founded, was not pleasing to Leam. It was sufficiently aggravating that another woman had appeared in the place she had considered it her right to fill as a close and confidential friend to Molly Fothergill; and, however much married this new woman might be, the constant sound of praise that was meted out to her was almost an offence to Leam Greatorex's proud, arrogant heart.

"I must make haste to see this wonderful young person," she said as she rose to go. "It is not often one has the chance to meet with a really beautiful woman."

Beatrice Somerset, seeing her rise, flew across the room.

"Not going so soon, Leam!" she cried. "I have not had two words with you. Must you go? It is very early, and I half expect Molly and Sir Basil may look in for a moment. I had a few words sent down from the hall to say they would both come after dinner if Mrs Seaton was well enough for Molly to leave. Oh! don't go just yet; they will be disappointed if they don't see you here, Leam."

It was not easy even for Miss Greatorex to resist Beatrice Somerset's pretty manner, and Leam was about to grant a gracious consent to this pleading just as the door was opened and Basil Fothergill's tall, commanding figure entered the room. A touch of colour came into Leam's cheeks and lingered there at sight of him. She resumed her seat and opened her fan, waving it to and fro slowly.

Dr. Wylie had gone from her side, but Sir Basil had no sooner spoken a few words of greeting to his ruddy-faced host and pretty little hostess than he made his way toward Miss Greatorex.

He always had an indistinct sense of pleasure in being with Leam; the girl's dignity impressed him, and he had an honest admiration for her handsome presence. To-night Leam in her well-made black gown, with that diamond star flashing and gleaming on her brow, had a sort of queenliness about her which inspired admiration and respect.

"I have a message for you, Miss Greatorex," Sir Basil said, as he drew up a chair and put his big frame into it. "Molly sends you her love, and, if you have nothing better to do, will you come and partake of luncheon with us to-morrow? I believe Molly has no end of things she wishes to exhibit for your approbation and criticism."

"I shall be charmed to lunch," Leam said, smiling faintly, and looking exceedingly attractive as she did so. In fact, in this moment, with that shadow of warm colour on her cheeks, she had a touch of real beauty about her. "Molly is not with you, this evening, Sir Basil."

"No, she did not like to leave Justina—Mrs Seaton, I mean. Our guest is still, I am sorry to say, very much of an invalid."

"The air of Croomehurst will do her good, I hope. It is certainly very health-giving. Mother declares she is another creature since she has lived here."

Leam was moving her fan to and fro still in that same slow, languorous fashion; her voice was conventionally courteous but cold.

"It certainly is beautiful air," Sir Basil agreed, "and I hope from my heart it will do as much for Mrs Seaton as it has for Lady Gertrude. I fear, however, it will be a long time before she will be able to consider herself well, much more robust and strong."

Miss Greatorex closed her fan.

"Your friend related to the 'Monck-Seaton's?' she asked. "I am intimate with a good many of that family, so perhaps—"

Sir Basil took up the subject rather hurriedly, she thought.

"Oh, no! Justina has no connection with that branch of Seaton's. She would tell you herself she has no very high social standing, Miss Greatorex; but if this be the case, she can most assuredly claim to be a lady in the truest sense of the word both in birth and breeding. I have known her when she was a little fairy of a child. Her father," Sir Basil added, in explanation, "was my tutor and my earliest, most beloved friend. I think that Richard North was as nearly perfect as it is possible for a human being to be."

His enthusiasm of this dead man was, for some reason or other, disagreeable for Leam to hear. She was, without having known it very clearly, up to now possessed of an extremely jealous nature, and Justina Seaton had already succeeded, even though they had not yet met, in rousing this sort of resentful jealousy in Miss Greatorex's feelings toward her to a really marvellous extent.

"It must be very pleasant for you to have so valued a friend staying with you as your guest, Sir Basil," she remarked, in answer to his last speech, and then she laughed. "I am afraid Croomehurst is going to indulge in