

# A Woman's Heart

By MRS EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS.

## CHAPTER VII.

Basil Fothergill let another twenty-four hours elapse before he approached Justina again, either in his own person or in the person of his sister. Although he could give no definite reason for it, he was conscious of a sensation of strong uneasiness about the girl during these hours of holding himself aloof. It was only natural that his thoughts should be sombre ones; thoughts sadder and heavier than any that had yet thronged in his mind.

The blighted young life, the close, horrible association with one so utterly vicious and dishonourable as Rupert Seaton had proved himself to be, the whole of Justina's disastrous surroundings, the realisation of her most terrible mistake, were in themselves thoughts potent and keen enough to fill the heart of all or any one who cared for her, with a sorrow and regret hardly describable in words.

But it was a feeling apart and above these that oppressed Basil all through the long day and night that followed on that early morning visit to his hotel and the drive afterward to Bayswater.

He was not a man given to weakness of emotions or presentiments or any such thing, yet it was absolutely impossible for him to dissociate from his mind the feeling that Justina was passing through a further and perhaps even a harsher trouble than that which had just burdened her.

If he had allowed himself to yield to the impulse in his heart, he would have started without any delay for that humble lodging that was the nearest approach to a home that the girl could claim, but strong as this desire was, Basil conquered it.

He was possessed of the most supreme delicacy and refinement of feeling. Though he was in a mated sense the wronged and injured person in this last transaction of Rupert Seaton's, and though by his generosity and friendship all difficulties and dangers had been removed from the forger's path, still he shrank from intruding himself upon the sacred agony of Justina's grief too soon; he determined he would await some sign from her before going to see her, or risking a chance of meeting the man who had robbed him and dishonoured her.

When the next day came, however, and there was not a word or a sign from Justina, his impulse to go to her to give her help, comfort, protection perhaps, was too strong to be put to one side.

He was so grave and sombre at breakfast time that his sister looked at him anxiously.

"Must you still remain in town, Bay?" she asked, gently, calling him by her own pet name for the big, tender-hearted brother whom she loved so devotedly. "Isn't that tiresome lawyer's business done yet? You know you are looking not at all well. London never agrees with you. You want the sunshine and fresh air of Crome to set you up. Can't you arrange to come down with me to-day, darling?"

Sir Basil looked up hurriedly and yet most affectionately at his sister. She was a slight, small likeness of himself; not pretty exactly, but so frank in expression, so fair and fresh and neat, that she seemed to possess a beauty that was distinct, but difficult to define exactly.

"Do you want to go home so very much, Molly?" he asked.

Miss Fothergill nodded her head. "The place will be at sixes and sevens without me," she declared, munching her toast briskly in her white, even teeth. "You know I only came up for one day, or, at the outside, two, Bay, dear. I am not prepared for a long stay. I have absolutely no clothes with me!"

"What is it you want? Can't you buy a bonnet and shawl somewhere to go out with?"

Molly laughed brightly at this suggestion, given by Sir Basil in a thoughtful, abstracted sort of fashion.

"A bonnet—and a shawl! Good heavens! it is conceivable that a man should suggest such a thing in this

age of civilisation and general enlightenment? Just imagine me in a shawl, Bay! Why, I should look like a scarecrow of the highest quality!" and then Molly Fothergill dropped her light tone and looked at her brother earnestly.

"Of course I am only exaggerating about my clothes; I have plenty with me, and I will stay just as long as you like if I am not in the way, dear," she said, gently.

"You are never in the way, Molly; and just now you can be particularly useful to me. I have something for you to do, in fact, this very day."

"I am delighted to do anything, Bay, dear," and Molly's face expressed her contentment as well as her words. "By the way, did you not want me to go and call on Mrs Seaton? I can do that this afternoon."

"It is precisely this I am going to ask you to do, Molly," Sir Basil broke in, rather hurriedly, and I want you to be very kind to Justina. Put on your sweetest, most gracious little self, and let her feel she has found a friend in my sister as well as in myself."

Molly rose from the breakfast table and paused a moment.

"Does she want friends then so very badly, Bay?"

He answered her quietly, and with convincing sadness:

"She is alone in the world, and she needs a woman's sympathy and love more than I could even tell you in plain words, my little sister. Thank Heaven, such grief and sorrow as have come into that poor child's heart will never enter into your life, Molly; but you will not need the bitter lesson of experience. I know, to let your woman's heart speak out some comfort to her now in her hour of need and trouble."

Tears rose in Molly's clear, brown eyes.

"My heart has spoken already, Bay," she made answer, in a low voice. "Even were she an utter stranger to me, I could not withhold my pity after what you have just said; but you know I cannot call Mrs Seaton a stranger. I have such a vivid remembrance of her in those old days when you were studying under her father's care. Why, I almost believe, Bay, dear," the generous, kind-hearted girl said, laughing slightly; "I almost believe I used to be jealous of little Justina North in those old days. Your letters used to be so full of her, and when you came home for your holidays you could talk of no one else. You had a perfect boyish infatuation for her!"

Sir Basil's face had flushed a little during this speech.

"It was natural I should care for Justina," he answered her, rather hurriedly. "She was only a baby when I went to North's, and the loveliest little creature in the world. You cannot conceive, Molly, how her father adored her. It was more than ordinary love—it was worship; and when I recall those days and realise her sad condition now, I can hardly keep the tears from my eyes for thinking what suffering it would be to poor Richard North if he could only know how his beloved child is placed, and the weight of sorrow and care there is laid on her young shoulders."

Molly put out her hands impulsively toward her brother.

"Oh, Bay!" she said, with a little catch in her voice, "is there nothing we can do? You don't tell me what her trouble is, but surely we can help her a little! Do you think if I tried to persuade her I should succeed in getting her to come down and stay with us at Crome? I should like to show her some kindness, and perhaps a visit to the country might do her some good!"

Sir Basil drew her sister close to him and kissed her tenderly.

"You have hit the very nail on the head, Molly," he said, in a quiet, low voice. "Though we may not be able to do very much for Justina, we can yet give her sympathy and consolation, and I believe if you ask her very prettily she will consent to come to us for a few weeks at least. She can do

her writing at Crome just as well as in London, and she will have the advantage of the fresh air, to say nothing of all the care and comfort my clever little housekeeping sister can give her. It will be a change, I imagine," Basil Fothergill added, with a touch of intense bitterness, "for Justina to feel herself cared for; she has done nothing but fight for herself since her father's death."

Then, rising from the table, Sir Basil stood by the fire and gave his sister a short sketch of Justina's circumstances, dwelling as briefly as he could upon Rupert Seaton's unsatisfactoriness, and avoiding all possible mention of the last most terrible grief that had fallen upon this girl who was so dear to him.

"And do you mean to say Mr Seaton does no work, Bay, and that that poor little thing writes like a slave to keep them both?"

Molly's voice was one tone of amazement and incredulous indignation.

"Sir Basil nodded his head for a reply. "Oh! I call it shameful—disgraceful—horrible. How unmanly! What a horrid, horrid creature he must be! Oh! I do hope, Bay, dear, I shall not meet him when I go this afternoon. I am afraid I shall not be civil to him. I do hate unmanly men!" Miss Fothergill declared, frankly, "and a man who does no work is a shame to his sex."

Sir Basil smiled faintly as he laid his hand affectionately on the girl's shoulder.

"All the same, Molly, though in the abstract I agree with every fiery word you say, I don't want you to let your indignation find voice before Justina. The child has a pride that makes her hard life more bitter and difficult to bear, and—"

"Oh, you can trust me. I will be as careful as possible, and I shall hope, before very long, Bay, that this poor, pretty, young Justina will call me her friend as well as you."

Then the brother and sister parted, and Miss Fothergill spent a busy morning among the smart West End shops that, despite her adoration for her beloved country, always possessed a great fascination for her.

There were a good many things to be bought for Molly's various proteges in the village that stretched about her brother's spacious estate, and then there were so many dainty novelties to tempt her artistic eyes—some things that were absolutely necessary for Basil's particular sanctum, besides a dozen little trifles for her own pet corner; a new, silver-mounted collar for Juan, the spaniel; some large photograph frames in which to place the pictures of her friends, and after she had snatched a hurried luncheon Molly filled her hands full of flowers and started off for Bayswater, not without a little thrill of something like excitement mingling with the interest and pleasure this visit afforded her.

As she drew up at the small house another carriage gave way for her cab, and a glance at this small, neat brougham gave Molly all at once a sensation of its belonging to a medical man. Her theory was proved correct almost immediately, for as she went forward to the door, it opened and a man came forth from the house.

Molly spoke on the impulse of the moment.

"I have come to see Mrs Seaton. I hope she is well," she said, glancing at the woman who held the door open; but her query was really addressed to the gentleman who was unmistakably a doctor.

In another moment she heard all there was to hear. Justina was lying very seriously ill, and though it was early to point to the exact nature of her illness, the doctor seemed to regard it as a grave matter, being attended by high fever and excessive suffering in the head.

"And Mr Seaton just gone to America, too, and she all alone," the landlady, said, in that tone of cheerfulness that is peculiar with some people when brought in contact with trouble and the mysteries of illness and death.

Molly Fothergill answered this sentence quickly. In an instant her decision was made and her duty clear.

"No; she is not alone. I am come to see her, and I shall remain here while she is so ill. My name is Fothergill," she added, turning to the doctor, "and Mrs Seaton is a very dear friend to my brother and myself."

The doctor seemed to find a certain relief in Molly's words.

They walked down the path to-

gether, and he gave her a few instructions and spoke more openly on the illness than he had just done.

"I was feeling very sorry for her, poor child—for she seems little more than that—when you came, Miss Fothergill. She requires great care and close nursing for the next few days. It is the inflammation to the brain, I fear. She seems to be in a high state of nervous agitation and excitement. It seems very unfortunate that Mr Seaton should have had to leave her at this moment. I would have telegraphed for him last night, but the landlady could give me no exact information as to his movements, and Mrs Seaton is in no condition to be questioned. Your presence relieves me of much anxiety, for I feel now that my patient will be in good hands, and that in consequence the illness may go much better than I feared this morning. Doctors, after all, can do very little in these cases in comparison with what a nurse can do. You will, I think, require professional aid, and I can send you a very nice woman the moment you find this necessary."

"I should like her to come at once," Molly answered gravely. "I am not frightened of any amount of nursing, only I am quite inexperienced, and so I should like a proper nurse—and oh! would you be so very kind as to send a telegram to my brother, telling him the facts of the case, and that I am going to stay here?"

Molly gave him Sir Basil's address, and the doctor promised to communicate with him at once. After this he drove briskly away, and Miss Fothergill returned to the house.

## CHAPTER VIII.

Molly Fothergill established herself as guardian of the sick girl and mistress of the entire situation in so quiet and yet so determined a manner that Justina's landlady found herself accepting the new-comer and her commands in the most ordinary way, as though Miss Fothergill had been in the habit of paying frequent visits to this little Bayswater lodging house instead of never having set foot in it before this day that was the commencement of Justina's illness.

Before nightfall Molly had arranged everything to the best of her power; the nurse recommended by the doctor had come, the small rooms were set in the order most convenient for the furtherance of the nursing Molly determined should be as much her work as the nurse's.

Basil had answered the telegram immediately; he had held a short whispered conference with his sister in the little sitting room where Justina had sat toiling at her pen for so many weary hours. Molly was so deeply concerned in the motive that brought them both here that her brother's mental condition was not clearly demonstrated to her; she saw, of course, that he was very grave, and wore the hard, taciturn sort of manner which, with Basil, was always a sure sign that he was troubled and anxious, but Molly Fothergill did not see beyond this manner, and she was also sadly ignorant of the havoc this last sad event was creating in her brother's great, generous heart.

She was a little startled, it is true, for one moment when, having reported all that the nurse and the doctor had to say upon the case, she suggested in the most natural way that Basil should either go or send word to Justina's relations of the trouble that had fallen upon her, and Basil negatived this suggestion instantly.

"They have left her to starve and die as soon as she could—we will not let them do anything for her now. She belongs to us, Molly, for this little time at least, and we will shure her with no one."

The man's voice had been full of an emotion that was almost impossible for his sister to understand; she attributed it, and rightly enough in a certain sense, to anger against the people who had turned their back on the child of his old tutor, and to the indignation which was as strong within him as it could be toward the man who had most evidently deserted his girl wife, and been no doubt the primary cause of her bodily collapse. Further than this Molly did not go at this moment.

She was delighted that Basil made no objections to all she had done and desired to do (she little knew what a comfort it was to her brother to realize that she was with Justina Seaton in this dark hour), and together they