

discussed and arranged things in the easiest and most natural way.

At his sister's instigation Sir Basil had a little conversation with the landlady, and after that loquacious lady had given him all the information in her power he went away from the house for a while, feeling convinced, as he went, that Rupert Seaton had undoubtedly abandoned the girl he had married, and gone out of her life perhaps forever.

It must be forgiven Basil, if, in this first moment of grief and anxiety over Justina's condition, he should have set his teeth, and while in his heart he had a fierce anger that was not to be measured in words against the coward and the thief whose name Justina bore, he had prayed earnestly and eagerly that this might be realized, and that the young creature, who was so inexpressibly dear to him, should be henceforth free from the contaminating influence, the evilness, the burden and grief of her husband's presence.

The heart of the man thrilled with

happy-looking sister were absent from it.

Little rumours, or course, leaked out as to the cause of this prolonged stay in London. Miss Fothergill had written explanations to her housekeeper, and it was pretty quickly known that the illness of some very near and friend was the reason that kept both Sir Basil and Molly in town.

The younger portion of the small world that was clustered together around and about Croome Park were not disposed to regard this sick friend with any degree of sympathy or liking, since he or she (the sex of the invalid was not yet known) had most successfully spoiled the beginning of the hunting season and autumnal amusements. Ever since Basil had come into the title and settled down in his estate, matters had been decidedly more pleasant in a social sense for the young folks in Croomehurst village and the surrounding country.

There was always some sort of entertainment provided at Croome.

as not, developed into an impromptu dance.

At last, when November was almost a thing of the past, the news spread about that Sir Basil was not only expected to be coming to Croome shortly, but that he had already arrived, and that Miss Fothergill was to follow him almost immediately.

There was a flutter of excitement mingled with relief at this news, and the appearance of the master of Croome riding through the village on his big bay mare speedily set at rest any doubts that might have been cast on the truth of the rumour.

Quite unknown to himself, though Molly was perfectly conscious of it, and took a sly delight in realising it, Basil Fothergill was something of a hero in the eyes of the female part of Croomehurst community; indeed, his magnificent figure and honest, attractive face possessed a charm for women in all lands and places, and here, where everything took its position by comparisons, Basil Fothergill stood apart and above all the other men,

pealed to his heart. He could love fast enough when the right moment and the right person arrived, and Molly, although she was so happy as 'chateaine' of his house, told herself truthfully and unselfishly that she would rejoice sincerely when that moment did come.

'Basil ought to marry; he would be the best husband in the world; yes, the very best,' Molly had often said to herself. Then sometimes she had sat and pondered over the girls and young women who clustered about their home, and who would, any one of them, have jumped at the chance of being Lady Fothergill, and reigning in her place up at the big house.

They were for the most part bright, pretty, fresh-faced girls, athletic to a fault, perhaps, good at taking their hedges or at playing golf, or at walking their dozen miles. There were a few superior to the rest in point of accomplishments; but on the whole, though they were nice, pleasant, happy girls, they were none of them amazingly clever or intellectual, none



'KEEP UP YOUR HEART, JUSTINA. LIFE CANNOT ALWAYS BE SO DARK,' SAID BASIL.

the only sensation of pleasure possible under the sad circumstances of the moment, when he let himself realize how completely the child had drifted into his protecting care. He had no selfish thoughts, no selfish desires, hopes or regrets; he thought only of Justina and of the joy it was to him to be able to minister, even ever so little, to the girl he knew now he loved with all the tenacity and strength of his vigorous, tender, faithful nature.

The lengthened absence of Sir Basil Fothergill and his sister from their country home was the subject of some discussion and more regret among their neighbours, friends and tenants; they were both established as firm favourites in the hearts of those among whom they lived, and there was a depressed and almost desolate feeling prevalent when the master of the big house and his bright, charming,

Molly Fothergill had a girl's love for fun and brightness, and the moment she found herself in a position to encourage these propensities she did so with a zest and a delight that was infectious. She had a wonderful sympathy and comprehension for all young people, and as Basil gave her carte blanche to do just as she liked, she soon established herself as a leader of all sorts and kinds of amusements, associating with her a group of two or three girls from the families scattered about, who were only too eager to help her in her scheme for making the general life more entertaining and agreeable than life is, ordinarily speaking, in a small country place.

There were hunt breakfasts and shooting luncheons, five o'clock tea was an institution at Croome, and at least twice a week there was an informal dinner party, which, as often

even including the handsome young Earl of Dunchester, who lived for a few months in the year at a rain-shackle old house about a mile out of Croomehurst.

Basil's universal tenderness and courtesy made his seeming imperviousness to all sentiment the more marked. He was gracious to all, and singled out no one person more than another for his attentions.

When he had first come among them there had been a flutter of excitement and hope in every mother's heart near and far, but the time had gone on and Basil Fothergill was as far from choosing a wife as he had been in the beginning.

There were all sorts of theories given for his strange indifference to women, but Molly alone out of all the world knew the value of these theories.

Basil was indifferent simply because, as yet, no woman had ever ap-

peared to him just exactly the sort of a woman Molly would like to see as her brother's wife.

'Except, perhaps, Leam,' Molly would add to herself when she arrived as far as this. 'There is no doubt Leam Greatorex is neither a common nor an intellectual woman. If anything, she is just a little too clever—at least she is too clever for me; but I can't help admiring her. She is a splendid-looking creature, and she would be an ornament to any man's house. I believe, too, Leam cares sincerely for Basil. I wonder if he ever gives a second thought to her.'

This had been a query that had come more than once into Molly Fothergill's mind in the days before that visit to London. She never let such a query come now, for the answer to this or to any such a one was given to her only too surely, too sadly.

Basil might marry a dozen times over, but love in its truest, intensest