

form would never enter into any marriage he might make, for it was given in all its splendour of tenderness, of passionate yearning, to the poor, fragile creature who had been brought back from the jaws of death, as it were, by a miracle.

Molly had soon learned to love Justina Seaton. She would have done so willingly to please Basil if even it had not been so easy a task; but from the first moment she entered into Justina's shadowed life and took up the work her womanly sympathy and goodness allotted to her Molly Fothergill was conscious of a new sensation; a rush of new affection; a clinging love for this brave, young thing who had fought and would have to fight against as hard a lot as can fall to most humans.

It was impossible for the sister within her not to feel regret that was keen as sorrow over the secret she had read in Basil's heart and eyes; but it was equally impossible for her to let wisdom or sisterly love or any other feeling stand between herself and Justina.

The girl's loveliness of mind as well as body; her desolation; the fact of her cruel fate; the sweetness of her nature; all combined to draw her closer and closer to the heart of the girl who nursed her through the terrible illness with a tenderness and a devotion passing words. And when the convalescence began, it was Molly who planned first and afterward insisted on carrying away her invalid to the comforts and the fresh, clear air of their country home.

Basil was dispatched down first, and Justina and Molly were to follow him in a day or two.

Justina had tried to make some protest—to urge the necessity to return to her work and take up her checked career, but Molly put every protest vigorously on one side.

'You shall do what you like when you are well, but until you are well you will do as I like, Justina, so please let me hear no more on the matter. After you have been a little while at Croome, you will feel another person, and if it is work you are troubling about, well, you can set your mind at rest. I will have an assiduous prepared for you, and when I consider you are sufficiently strong to do so, you shall go up there and scribble to your heart's content—more than that I shall not promise.'

Justina had smiled faintly, but there were big tears in her eyes, and when she was alone she let them flow freely.

The tenderness, the care, the love she had received was something too great for her almost to realize.

She was so unused to any consideration, so accustomed to fight for herself, this new state of things simply destroyed her strength of will, even sapped her courage. And then when she remembered the horrible wrong her husband had done to the man who had proved himself more than a friend, more than human, in his generous forbearance and goodness, Justina's proud heart seemed to be struck by some keen, sharp sword, so great was the pain, so overpowering the anguish of realising her husband's dishonour and cowardly sin.

When she found how earnestly both Sir Basil and Molly desired her to be with them at Croome, Justina determined to go for a time at least. There was no way possible for her to show her deep gratitude, her illimitable recognition of their great goodness, save by sacrificing her own will to theirs.

If she could have obeyed the dictates of her pride only, she would not have agreed to go on this visit; not because her own dependence upon them was hurtful to her, but because she suffered when she let herself remember the wrong, the shameful theft, of which Rupert Seaton had been guilty.

She would go for a little while till she was grown stronger and more fit to start out in the old, hard groove of labour and trial. Her whole soul was set now on working for one end—to pay back to Basil Fothergill the sum of money which her husband had obtained through forgery.

Once she was only half as strong as she used to be, she would begin at this tremendous task, and pride and honour would be the staff to support her on the road she had to travel.

She left her lodgings with no regrets—indeed, she was glad to be away from a place where she had been

so deeply tried—and she set forth for the journey to Croome, finding a pleasure in watching Molly's delight and excitement grow greater and greater as her home was approached.

'Now I know how much you have done for me,' she said once in her soft, low voice to Molly.

Miss Fothergill leaned forward in the carriage and put her hand on the speaker's lips.

'I do love Croome, but I love you much better, and I would do everything over and over again, if it came in my way. I am a silly person, aren't I, Justina? But I never can grow out of excitement, and I am so happy at the thought of bringing you back to our dear old home, I feel half out of my mind. I mean you to get enormously strong, and fat, too—don't laugh, if you please, Justina; I said fat, and, as I happen to know what Croomehurst air can do when it is roused, I know what I am talking about!'

At the station a carriage was waiting, and Sir Basil was waiting on the platform. He had been there quite a quarter of an hour before it was necessary, and as he stood leaning against the wooden palings a train had come in from another direction, and among the passengers who alighted from it were two young ladies and a couple of men.

The girls were in riding habits, and from their well-splashed condition had evidently been riding across some very heavy country, their attendant squires being in an equally muddy condition.

Sir Basil shook hands with them all. 'I am come to meet my sister; she arrives to-day,' he explained, and then he turned to the tallest young woman.

She was not particularly handsome—at least not in the stiffness of her riding garb, having a rather thin, sal-low face, but her eyes were magnificent, and her carriage exceedingly good.

'I am sorry to hear your mother is not very well, Miss Greatorex,' he said.

'Oh! there is not much the matter really,' Leam Greatorex answered. 'You know mother is very neurotic, and this damp weather does not suit her exactly. When are you going to pay her a visit, Sir Basil? She would be so glad to see you any time!'

'I will go very soon—perhaps to-morrow. Are you going to walk home? Won't you all be very tired?'

'Oh! it will take off the stiffness,' cried the other girl, by name Beatrice Somerset, a fresh, smiling, young creature. 'Come along, Leam; we must be starting. Sir Basil, give my love to Molly, and say how enchanted I am she is home. We shall begin to live again now, shan't we, Leam?'

Leam Greatorex's answer was a glance out of her splendid eyes up at Sir Basil; but he did not see it; he was looking almost eagerly down the line; the signal was given, and a puff of smoke in the distance denoted the coming of the train.

The four young people bade him an adieu and went away. The walk homeward was accomplished by Miss Greatorex, at least, in utter silence.

She was thinking of the man they had just left, and she was wondering with a thrill at her heart if she should ever grow into that nearer and closer intercourse with him which she had desired for so long a time.

There had been no definite hope or ambition formed in Leam's mind about Basil Fothergill up to this day, but somehow this afternoon, how or why she could not have told, she was conscious of an eagerness, a longing or yearning to break asunder the coldness of this man's indifference to herself, and to touch upon the heart the wealth of love and passion that she knew was hidden beneath this indifference.

'Leam, you are very unsocial,' Beatrice Somerset cried after a while. 'You have not spoken a single word since we left the station!'

'I have been listening to you, Bee; you forget you never give another person a chance to speak.'

'How impudent!' Miss Somerset touched her friend lightly with the whip, then she looked backward. 'Here comes the Fothergill carriage; let us stand and give Molly a salute as she passes!'

The girl drew up at the side of the road as she spoke, and her companion honoured her, Leam standing a little apart, a tall and superb figure in her well-cut habit.

The carriage rolled by, Molly all

smiles and laughing words and gratulations.

'Can't stop now because of my invalid; it is too damp; shall see you both to-morrow!' she cried, as she blew each girl a dozen kisses.

'Oh, Leam!' Beatrice Somerset exclaimed. 'Did you see Molly's new friend? What an exquisitely lovely girl!'

'By Jove, she's right!' one of the men said under his breath.

Leam made no answer; she had grown a shade paler. Justina's beauty had not been lost on her, nor had the flush of eagerness on Basil Fothergill's face escaped her. She had the sensation of being hurt most keenly; it was almost an insult to her to note that change in this man's looks. His universal indifference had given her a satisfaction to realize. She had felt that the day she should win him would be a day of triumph indeed, but to-day a sudden difference had come upon her, upon him, upon the whole world. She did not know exactly what her thoughts were—only she was conscious all at once of a strong hot wave of jealous dislike for the pale, lovely girl who had come to be an inmate of Croome Hall.

CHAPTER IX.

Justina Seaton had not been established twenty-four hours at Croome Hall before the rumour of her beauty and delicate charm had spread through the little country place with the rapidity of a fire or an infectious illness.

Of course, as is common to all villages or small communities, news was

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