

A Woman's Heart

By MRS EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS.

CHAPTER XIV.

It was speedily rumoured about the village that Lord Dunchester was going to entertain a small party at his rather tumble-down, old country house, and that a certain amount of fresh festivities for the Croomehurst young folk might reasonably be expected.

Beatrice Somerset was enchanted at this news. She cantered across the common one morning about three days after Miss Greatorex's visit to Croome Hall, on purpose to entice Leam out for a ride, if possible, and then to chatter and comment on what kind of entertainment Lord Dunchester would give them.

Leam was writing in her own small sitting-room when Miss Somerset was announced. She looked very handsome in her morning gown of serge, with silver belt about her shapely waist and neat linen collar and cuffs at throat and wrist. She possessed very beautiful hands—not small, but well-shaped and of an exquisite whiteness.

Beatrice often declared laughingly, and yet with sincerity, that Leam would have inspired the dignity and respect she always received if nothing had been seen of her but those beautiful, white hands.

She declined to ride with Miss Somerset, but not ungraciously. 'I am going with the Fothergills to the Dunstanley meet to-morrow, and I want to be quite fresh for that,' she explained.

'Is Molly going, too? How jolly!' Bee Somerset exclaimed. 'It is such an age since we had a good day's hunting with Molly. I suppose Mrs Seaton must be much stronger, then, Leam.'

Miss Greatorex frowned almost imperceptibly.

'Between you and me,' she observed, as she sat down again to her writing table and moved her hands about among her papers, 'I don't fancy there has been so very much the matter with Mrs Seaton. I saw her the other day; she looked remarkably well, I thought.'

'Oh! did you see her, Leam? I have been longing to know what you would say about her. Isn't she lovely?'

There was not much discriminating capacity in Beatrice; at least there had been no necessity for developing it as yet. She was so simple and so fresh and so young that she had no knowledge of the art of dissembling, and though, of course, she was conscious of broad effects, such as pleasure and sadness, still the subtler, the less-defined emotions which thronged the breast of a woman like Leam Greatorex were quite unrevealed to her. The sneer, therefore, that had lain lightly on Leam's words as she spoke of Justina was quite lost on Beatrice.

'Is she not lovely?' she inquired, with warmest enthusiasm. 'I have never seen any one so beautiful as Mrs Seaton.'

'You have not seen very much, you must remember, my little Bee!' Leam said, with an effort at playfulness, yet with that faint bitterness clinging to her voice.

'No, of course not,' Miss Somerset agreed. She had seated herself edge-wise on a chair, and was beating her habit skirt lightly with her whip. 'Still, after all, there are others who have been nearly all round the world, and they think as I do about Mrs Seaton. Papa declares she is a revelation to him, and Dr. Wyllie says she reminds him of some wonderful Greek head of some very long time ago, and Sir Basil—'

Leam's hands moved sharply for an instant, as though jerked by an unseen force; then they were still, and she was smiling.

'Well, and what does Sir Basil say, eh?'

Miss Somerset laughed. 'Well, to tell the truth, I don't know what Sir Basil says about Mrs Seaton's beauty; but I think I do know what he thinks. When I was there yesterday I could not help noticing how he looked at her whenever she spoke or moved; and, do you know, Leam, she did look a dream yesterday. She is so very slight, and she looks so delicate, her

face is like a beautiful flower, and, oh! her eyes. I simply cannot take my eyes away from them; they seem to magnetize me!'

Leam looked back in her chair.

'Well, I think the sooner Mrs Seaton takes her departure the better, if she is going to have such a wonderful effect as this on our little busy Bee,' she laughed, but not very heartily.

'Oh! she is going very soon; she told me so yesterday.'

'Is she going to rejoin her husband, or is he coming down to take her away?' Leam made this inquiry in a languid tone of voice.

'Oh! I don't know anything about her husband; I have never heard his name mentioned. I have not thought much about him either. She does not seem a bit like a married woman, she is so young. Why, she looks quite as young as any of the girls here.'

'Have you got any news, Bee?' Leam asked, in a cold, listless sort of way. She was annoyed beyond measure by all this eulogy of the guest up at Croome Hall. She determined to put a stop to it without any hesitation.

'I came to you to know if you could tell me anything. Have you heard, Leam, is Lord Dunchester going to give a ball? You know, of course, his visitors have arrived already.'

'A ball!' echoed Miss Greatorex. 'Poor man, I should think it will be quite as much as he can do to pay his bread bill. You know he is a pauper, Bee.'

'He is very nice!' remarked Miss Somerset, and I call him handsome, too. I hope he will give a dance, Leam.'

'What a baby you are, Bee!'

In fact it was useless to get cross or to indulge in sneers or sarcasm with Beatrice Somerset; she understood nothing but the bright and pretty and pleasant side of life. She was a veritable child, a 'sunbeam,' as Jasper Wyllie had christened her, in his heart; but for all that she was by no means soulless, or the feather-headed, unintellectual creature that Leam half contemptuously classed her sometimes in her thoughts.

'I hope I shall be a baby a long, long time,' she cried, rising laughingly from her chair. 'Now I must be off, Leam; I have disturbed you for nothing; we shall meet to-morrow at Dunstanley, and I hope we shall have one of our old, magnificent runs. And I am glad Molly is coming; it will be like old times; for although I do like and admire Mrs Seaton so immensely, things have not been at all like they used to be since she has been at Croome.'

She kissed Miss Greatorex lightly, and danced as lightly out of the room.

Leam went to the window to watch her mount and canter past. As the pretty vision flushed by, Leam moved back to her seat at her writing table; her brow was clouded, and her mouth looked hard and set. She had passed through many uncomfortable moments in the past three days, and she was now in a curiously restless, and yet at the same time sullen mood.

Those faint, vague thoughts that had flitted like phantoms across her brain in the past had incorporated themselves during the days that had just gone into a purpose, a determination, a desire, and an ambition that was little less than a passion.

To be Basil Fothergill's wife, to reign as mistress of his home and his position, to demonstrate to her grandmother the fact of this social success, to set aside the question of her future and to emerge from her present chrysalis state in the full splendour of a marriage with such a man as Basil Fothergill.

Leam hardly knew herself in her new guise. She was or had been so used to meet all the moves in life with a calmness of frigidity, that this storm of emotion that had suddenly rushed over her unnerved her and aroused her anger against herself.

Yet she was true to herself; she was not the woman she had been; one glance at Justina Seaton's beauty, one glance at Basil Fothergill's face when in the presence of that beauty, had metamorphosed her

whole self, had changed her very self of selves, as it were. The burning fire of jealousy ran hotly through her veins. The restless fever of love, an unknown sensation to her, now moved her every impulse.

She had lost her proud, cold quiescence; she dared not let herself imagine a future without those things that had shaped themselves into a passionate desire. To be Basil Fothergill's wife! The very words, if whispered to herself, brought a thrill to her heart, set her pulses beating high, and yet she knew so well that her path would be no easy one. The man she determined to win was not free to be won as he once was; it would be a long, hard struggle, perhaps, but still she would not falter. The goal for which she worked was a great one; she would not let herself be discouraged even by so formidable an obstacle as the fact, undoubted and impossible to be set on one side, of the living existence of another woman whom Basil Fothergill loved with all the force and truth and fidelity of his manhood's heart.

No, she would not be discouraged after all; her rival, beautiful as she was, was not a free woman. Why, then, should Leam fear her? Why not put her aside once and forever with the contempt she deserved?

Lord Dunchester lost no time in coming over to Croome Hall to consult Molly on the question of the entertainment he should offer to the inhabitants of Croomehurst.

The day he called happened, unfortunately for his plans, to be the day of the Dunstanley meet. Molly, at Justina's eager request, finally agreed to go with Basil to this meet, but she had gone under much protest.

'You will be so dull. I don't want to go,' she had declared, and Justina had answered with a touch of imperativeness that enhanced her loveliness:

'You shall go; Basil wants you, and as for me, I want you out of the way. I am going to have a long day at my work.'

'Impertinent!' Molly cried, laughingly; but her bright face clouded over at the mention of this work. Despite her brave attack on Basil, despite her brave determination to do nothing to stand in the way of Justina's plans, Molly found her position a very hard one to carry out, and as the time passed and she felt the moment draw nearer and nearer for Justina to announce her departure, Molly's heart grew sadder and sadder.

If she had not learned to love Justina for her own sweet sake, there was the fact that Basil loved this girl, and that gave her a place in Molly's heart apart from anything else. But with her own love added to all the rest, the future was indeed a bitter and hard one to have to face.

Justina, knowing nothing of the struggle going on in Molly's mind, was eager to get once again to her work. She shrank from the thought of leaving her friends, and even more still of the pain she must give them by going, but what else lay before her? Her strength was returning slowly, and as vigour crept back into her frame, so came also the yearning desire to get to her task to try and work off that mountain of dishonourable debt which Rupert's cruel shame had left on her shoulders.

She watched Molly go this day with a smile and a sigh. 'Only a few days more,' she said to herself, as she was alone in the quaint, pretty drawing-room. She had unpacked the volume of her old manuscript, and it lay before her in a great pile on the table Molly had spread for her use. 'It will be hard to go, and yet I must—I must.'

She sat for a long time thinking, her face shaded by her hand. She winced even in her thoughts as remembrance of her husband's last cruel act, his desertion of her and the method of that desertion returned to her mind.

She shivered as she realised what a

terrible, miserable trial must have been hers if her long illness had been endured alone unaided by Basil and his sister.

There had come into Justina's heart a great horror, a greater contempt for the man she called her husband. To know he was gone out of her life, out of all chance of daily contact with her, was in itself a relief that had something of joy in it, and yet beyond this relief there lurked a nervous fear. She dreaded she knew not what; she was only certain that fear of Rupert and his future actions must be with her all the time. The words Lord Dunchester had spoken the night he had dined at Croome about the man St. Leger had awakened this fear in all its fullness.

There was nothing to connect her husband with this chance companion the young Earl had met in Paris. On the face of it it was highly improbable Rupert would have remained in Paris, or, indeed, anywhere so close to England, having always the possibility of being traced and discovered, either by her or through her, so clearly before him; and yet, despite this, Justina's heart had given a painful throb of fear and dread when Lord Dunchester had, in a few light words, sketched out a sort of picture of the man whom he called by the name of St. Leger. The picture was one that fitted exactly to the character of Rupert Seaton, or to any one of the type of men with whom he had been so intimate the past year.

Justina grew cold as she let her imagination conjure up all the possibilities of mental anguish that thought and knowledge of her husband's nature aroused so easily.

Should she ever know a day's real peace? While he was with her it had been bad enough, but with him gone from her, out of reach of her influence, thrown into a section of the world that would encourage and help him in the cultivation of his viciousness and dishonourable dealings, who could say what further shame might not yet come upon her through him?

Big, hot tears rolled down the girl's pale cheeks as she sat there thinking.

'If it were all over and done with,' she said to herself, wearily.

In such a moment as this all the pleasure, the real happiness brought to her through the sweet, true friendship she possessed, seemed to vanish altogether; she remembered nothing but her troubles.

'And I must meet Aunt Margaret and submit to her questioning and her protests and her criticism. Oh! that will be even harder to bear than all,' she added, after a little while.

Work was not easy to her in this mood. She left the table and moved about the room to distract her thoughts. She found herself gazing aimlessly and mechanically at all Molly's treasures, and at last, when she awoke out of the curious, blurred mental phase into which her brain often fell after excessive working or too great a strain of anxiety, she found herself standing looking down on a big portrait of Leam Greatorex in all the panoply of her court garments. A picture of a regal, handsome, queenly young woman whose magnificence nevertheless gave a sudden chill sensation to Justina's quivering and deeply moved heart.

'And for her there will be happiness, the truest, sweetest, happiness a woman could ever hope to know in this world. No shame, no dishonour, no desertion; wife to a man who has the heart of a king, the soul of an angel. Oh! I envy you. I envy you, Leam Greatorex! Your heart will never be torn with anguish as mine has been. Life will be full of sunshine and sweetness for you. When you are Basil's wife you—'

She moved abruptly away from the picture, and suddenly put her two cold hands over her trembling lips,

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