

as though to hush the cry of pain that would have escaped her.

The agony passed after that instant, but it left its trace, and Justina realised the full truth of what had happened then—realised that sorrow in a new and a sharper form must be added now and always to the burden of trouble and bitterness which, as Rupert Seaton's wife, it was her lot to bear.

Love with all its majesty, its power, its passion of sweetness and joy had come suddenly into her heart—love for one she must never love; love that, having shown her its exquisite beauty, its divine power for a single instant, must be torn ruthlessly from her heart and set aside from her forever, to be won and shared by another woman.

#### CHAPTER XV.

If Justina could have studied her own pride's sake she would have left Croomehurst before her aunt—Lady Sartoris—arrived as guest and chaperon to Lord Duncheater's house party. She did, indeed, make some suggestion of this to Molly only the morning of the day that was set apart for the meet of the Dunstanley holidays.

It was the first spoken word she had given touching her determination to go. Molly was, as we have seen, prepared for this decision, and yet, despite her quiet acceptance of it in Basil's presence a pang went through her heart as she heard the girl announce her departure, and as she looked on the very slender, absolutely delicate frame of the speaker.

To Justina's great relief Molly made no sort of vigorous protest to the decision, but all the same she would not accept it immediately.

'Wait just a little while longer—till Christmas is well over. I am not going to say all I should like to say, Justina. There are some things which are too strong for argument or pleading, and you and your will are one of those things. All I ask is that you should wait a little longer. You are not very strong, remember. Dr. Wylie told me yesterday you would want care for months to come, and—'

Here Molly broke off. 'I want you to be here when your aunt comes, Justina,' she said, gently, after a moment's pause.

'But that is just what I do not want,' Justina answered, with a touch of passion in her voice. 'Molly, you don't know what it will mean to me—a meeting with Aunt Margaret now.'

'I think I do, darling. Basil and I are not without relations, though, fortunately for our peace of mind, we have established a coolness with most of them. In the old days, before Uncle William died and Bay came into the title, I can assure you I was nearly worried into my grave by a variety of country cousins and interfering uncles and aunts, and yet—'

'And yet, Molly?'

Molly bent forward and kissed Justina. She was arrayed in her well-cut riding habit, and very neat and charming she looked, the likeness to Basil being emphasised wonderfully by this masculine garb.

'Blood is thicker than water, Justina,' she said, very tenderly, 'and there are some cases where own's own kith and kin is an absolute necessity in one's life.'

'Charity is always hard, but charity from one's relations!' Justina broke off with a shudder. Remembrance of the horrible time she had spent under her uncle's roof just after her father's death was full of bitterness still; not even the misery of her mistaken marriage could wipe out that bitterness.

'Charity,' Molly cried, hotly; 'but, my darling little Just, why will you apply such a word to yourself? From whom do you desire or expect to receive charity? You are, thank heaven, able to dispense with all such things. It is not for such a humiliating suggestion that I urge you to cultivate a friendship with your aunt. It is because I want you to feel you will not be utterly alone in your brave, hard life; that you shall have some one who will be a kind of protector and counsellor combined. You know the world perhaps better than I do, Justina; therefore

you will see the value of what I have just said.'

'Must I consider the world before my own feelings?' Justina, asked, wearily, sadly.

'You must, undoubtedly, although there might be one who could afford to set the world at defiance.'

'And why they more than me, Molly?'

Molly's reply was to turn the speaker round and put her face to face with a mirror.

'Read my answer there,' she said, pointing to the lovely reflection most quietly.

Justina blushed and then paled and then sighed.

'No doubt you are right, dear,' she said, as she turned away, 'but it will not make it any easier for me to ask a favour of my aunt. She does not approve of me. She has studiously avoided me for so long there can be such a poor pretence of friendship between us. Aunt Margaret hates everything that is unconventional and Bohemian. She—she objected very strongly to my marriage, and now—' Justina paused for an instant. It was the first confidence she had made to Molly as yet on this subject; and now, when—trouble—and dishonour have come to me through this marriage, she—'

But Molly had checked the speaker. She flung her arms about Justina's neck.

'Trouble has come to you indeed, my dear, dear loved friend, but dishonour—Justina, why do you use such a word? It hurts me—hush, I don't want to hear any more. The story, whatever it is, is your secret. I can guess a little at its burden. There is bitterness and much anguish. There is a remembrance of wrong, but nothing you could tell me would ever let me permit you to share in that wrong. Another's evil doing is not yours. You are the bravest and sweetest and purest creature in the world. And now, having relieved my feelings a little,' Molly added, breaking into a laugh that was full of tears, 'I will go and put on my hat, or Bay will be furious with me for being late.'

She had dropped a farewell kiss on Justina's brow, and had vanished even as she spoke.

It was the remembrance of this little scene that had started the painful train of thought in Justina's mind when she had carried her work into the drawing-room and determined to spend two or three hours looking into and over it.

From one sad thought to another was an easy step, and thus when she had found herself standing looking down on that splendid picture of Leam Greatorex, her anguish had broken loose unconsciously, and in her grief she had confessed to herself a secret and a new sorrow which appalled her by its magnitude at this the very birth moment of its existence.

She moved away from that pictured face; it seemed to mock her with its sold dignity, its proud queenliness; robbed her of all courage and resolution of thought; it awoke within her feelings such as had never come to her before; it made her tremble with a weakness that was not the heritage of her illness.

She was prostrated by the knowledge that had revealed itself to her in the last few moments.

She quivered as though some unseen person or thing had struck her a violent and cruel blow.

She felt frightened, oppressed, almost obliterated, by the force of this new pain that had come so surely into her heart.

As she stood there before the fire, staring into its red-hot bosom in a fixed, unseeing way, there came the sound of horses' hoofs on the avenue outside. As Justina realised this sound dimly the door of the drawing-room was opened and the Earl of Duncheater was announced.

'I must apologise for this visit, Mrs Seaton,' he said, as he advanced into the room, looking much handsomer seen by daylight and wearing a hunting costume than he had done the night of his dining at Croome Hall, 'I am afraid I am interrupting you in your work.'

Justina, by a strong effort, mast-

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