

ered the vigour and bitterness of her thought. 'You see how busy I am,' she answered, holding out her two pretty little hands with a gesture significant of their idleness, 'but I am afraid, if you are come on a visit to Miss Fothergill or Sir Basil, you are doomed to be disappointed—they are both away hunting—all Croomehurst seems to have gone to this particular meet to-day.'

'All except me, and I have been there, which is an Irishism,' laughed the young man, lightly. 'I had the misfortune, however, to lame my mare at the start out, so there was nothing to do but to turn back, get another mount and ride across country later on to see if I can pick up any stragglers on their way home. The possibility of joining the run is out of the question now, as you can imagine. All this, however, will not explain, Mrs Seaton, why I am here fluffing myself on you and boring you when you want to be at work. If you want to blame anybody, you must blame Miss Molly; it was she who sent me here. She called out to me to come and bring you her love and that you were to be sure and not work too hard, and she added, she hoped I would do my best to amuse you for half an hour, which I am afraid, the Earl said, with a rather rueful expression, 'will not be very successful.'

'How kind she is! How good! How full of thought!' Justina said, tears coming for an instant into her beautiful eyes; then she smiled at Molly's messenger. 'And you are very good, too, Lord Dunchester, to lose your chance of joining the run simply to give me pleasure. I am quite sure, had you not come here, you would have picked up the rest of the field quite easily.'

Lord Dunchester coloured and laughed.

'I do not regret anything,' he said, cheerily. 'I can hunt any day,' but I cannot always have the pleasure of talking with you, Mrs Seaton.'

Justina smiled gently. She liked him; he was boyish and frank, and she quite understood the interest he had awakened in Molly's loyal heart.

'Suppose you make yourself comfortable,' she said, prettily. 'No—I don't think I shall be able to do any

work to-day; I shall enjoy a little chat with you, Lord Dunchester.'

It was the truth she spoke, poor child, for she felt she was glad of anything that took her thoughts away, if only for an instant, from the bitter sweet channel in which they would flow now for the rest of her life.

They drew up two chairs to the fire, and they talked of many things, but chiefly of the coming Lady Sartoris and her two daughters, cousins whom Justina had never yet met.

'They are not half bad girls,' the young man said, with that slangy appreciation that passes for enthusiasm now and then; 'but they are not handsome like their mother, nor clever either. They are good-hearted and very unaffected: the eldest, Gyneth, will marry well, I think. Anyhow, there is a man in love with her who has plenty of tin, and I don't fancy Lady Sartoris will say "no" when he proposes. I can't quite believe they are your cousins, though. Mrs Seaton, you—you are so different.'

'My mother and Aunt Margaret used to be considered alike, at least so I believe,' Justina answered to this.

'Oh, well, perhaps I do see a little resemblance between you and Lady Sartoris, but it is not much.'

There was a silence after this which Justina longed to break, but scarcely knew how to broach the subject that sight of this young man suddenly revived.

After all, she had absolutely nothing to lead her to suppose that the St. Leger, whom Lord Dunchester had met in Paris, had any connection whatsoever with her husband Rupert; and yet, something, she could not tell what, seemed to link this unknown man in a firm if vague manner to that one who had treated her so cruelly.

It was the Earl who at last introduced the very subject which was occupying Justina's thoughts.

'I am sorry to say I cannot induce my friend St. Leger to join my party. I am awfully sorry, because he would have made everything so jolly. He can turn his hand to anything—a splendid sportsman, a good whip-dancer like the wind, can't be beaten at billiards, and sings and plays like

an angel, or, rather, I should say, like a real good musician.'

'He must have plenty of energy,' Justina said, smiling a little forcedly.

Somehow this catalogue of accomplishments, though it did not tally by any means with Rupert's capabilities, had, nevertheless, a doubtful sound in her ears.

She had heard something of the same kind of thing uttered with enthusiasm by Rupert in those first days of acquaintance with the gang of dissolutes and gamblers who had eventually been his ruin.

'I don't believe St. Leger ever goes to sleep,' Lord Dunchester made answer, laughing, to Justina's last remark. Certainly, if he does do so he don't choose the night for sleep. Yet he must have some rest, otherwise he could not be so fresh and lively all the time.'

'Is he very handsome?' Justina asked, urged on, she could hardly tell why, to probe the matter still further.

'Um—so—so—yes, handsome, I suppose, in a rather bold, coarse style. Oh! there is no doubt St. Leger is not quite the right thing; I don't fancy there is much blue blood flowing in his veins, and I should not be surprised to hear that St. Leger is not his own particular name; but for all that, the man is amusing, and I daresay he would have had a success if he had come down here as I wanted him to do.'

Justina paused a moment or so. The picture he had drawn of this man called up all the repugnance, the weary hopelessness with which she had met those 'soi disant' friends of Rupert, who had been so successful in drawing him away from her influence and launching him on his career of infamy.

Visions of sweet, pretty, happy Beatrice Somerset and others of the young girls she had seen since her arrival at Croomehurst arose to confront the thought of this man, and as she sketched quickly in her mind the possibility of one or another of these simple, unworldly girls won easily by the smart bearing and fascinating manner of such an one, she shivered, for there were very, very few women, Justina knew, who would have been able to bear with such a fate as

had fallen upon her. The force of her thoughts urged her to speak.

'Perhaps it is as well your friend did not come, Lord Dunchester,' she said, not very steadily. 'Success to him might have meant sorrow to others. I—I have met this kind of man you describe, and I do not think they carry much good about with them, however handsome and fascinating they may be.'

Lord Dunchester looked at her for an instant rather curiously; then he remembered that she was a young wife, living apart from her husband, and though no word of explanation had been given him, he understood as much as though the whole of Justina's pitiful story had been laid before him.

'No doubt you are right, Mrs Seaton,' he said, quietly. 'and, after all, I should not have been surprised if St. Leger had not been a failure down here; he is essentially a town mouse, and the country would not be much in his line.'

And after that the conversation drifted on to other things, and the subject was dropped; but there would come a day when both would recall it absolutely, and would marvel at the presentment or unconscious knowledge that had made Justina speak as she had done about this man.

CHAPTER XVI.

After that conversation with Molly and Justina it was an understood thing between them that the girl would not make an effort to leave Croome Hall till after she had met her aunt, and some sort of attempt at a reconciliation, if not of future arrangements, had been come to between Justina and Lady Sartoris.

A few days passed away tranquilly. Justina had returned to her work; she took it up with a zest that was almost a fever. It was a refuge from her thoughts; it was an excuse for her extreme pallor and for avoiding much conversation with Basil, or for being much in his society.

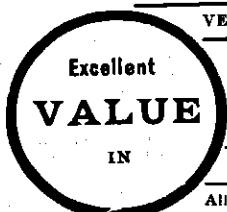
The guests arrived at Lord Dunchester's queer, rambling old house, and the very day Lady Sartoris appeared on the scene she drove over to Croome Hall to renew her acquaintance with Molly and to embrace her niece.

Yes, she had no objection whatever to embracing her niece under the present most desirable circumstances.

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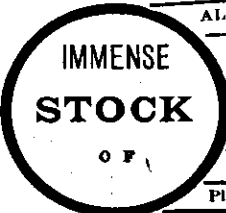
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