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DR. CRAIG'S WOOING

By E. M. WHALLEY

IT is a fearfully foggy night, Doctor, had you not better wait and let me send for your motor?"

Dr. Craig laughed and replied, as he shook hands with the husband of his patient, "Thank you, but I much prefer walking to motoring—in a fog. Good night," and before his friend could further remonstrate with him, the fog had swallowed the doctor's handsome person in its gloomy arms, and his brisk step resounded in the deserted street as he hurried home to the bright fire and cosy dinner he knew awaited him in his comfortable bachelor abode over which his good housekeeper, Mrs. Holmes, presided.

Go-sips said that every marriageable woman in Middleville had done her best to win the heart of the popular young doctor, but so far he still remained free with no deeper love in his life than that which he gave to his beloved profession, in which he was rapidly making a great name for himself.

The fog began to lift as Dr. Craig neared his house, and as he reached his gate he was surprised to see what looked like a huge bundle lying across the pavement. Hurrying towards it the doctor found it to be a neatly dressed woman, evidently a lady by her appearance, lying apparently lifeless, her bloodless face turned towards the skies.

Making as complete an examination as the fog would permit, Dr. Craig decided that the woman had merely fainted, and without a moment's hesitation he lifted her up in his strong arms and carried her into his house.

Mrs. Holmes hurried to meet him as was her habit on rainy evenings to take his coat, and seeing his strange burden she at once led the way into the library where a bright fire was burning in the hearth.

It was typical of the excellent terms upon which Dr. Craig and his housekeeper lived that neither spoke until the frail stranger was comfortably placed upon the couch and had rewarded their efforts towards restoration by giving signs of returning consciousness. Then the doctor, feeling Mrs. Holmes deserved an explanation, recounted in low tones the way he had stumbled upon the unfortunate woman, and added, "There is no doubt but that faintness was caused by exposure and lack of food."

Mrs. Holmes' voice was very tender as she replied, "Poor young creature, and she is a lady without doubt, every line of her beautiful face speaks of gentle breeding and refinement."

As she finished speaking the patient moved, and as the colour came into her lips her eyes slowly opened. Glorious eyes they were, of a deep violet blue shaded with lashes as dark as the heavy folds of hair which fell away from her smooth white forehead.

The girl gave no sign of fear as her eyes wandered round the unaccustomed room, much as a waking child slowly, and half-unconsciously views its surroundings.

Mrs. Holmes had stepped away from the couch, her instinctive delicacy telling her how painfully the knowledge of her plight must prove when the girl should awaken to a full realisation of the situation.

Dr. Craig never took his eyes off the face of his patient, and at last those roving violet eyes met his.

Like a flash full consciousness came back to the girl, and with a half cry she attempted to regain her feet.

Placing a hand gently but firmly upon her shoulder the doctor begged her to lie still, and then as she sank feebly back upon the couch, and with a sob covered her face with her hands, Mrs. Holmes came to her side, and Dr. Craig passed out of the room, leaving the two women together.

"You are with good friends," Mrs. Holmes tenderly assured the poor girl, who, comforted by the good woman's kindness, soon ceased to weep, and tried

to explain how she came to be where she now remembered she had sunk down utterly exhausted.

At that moment the door opened, and as the girl started to her feet with a cry of terror, Dr. Craig entered the room bearing a tray of light refreshments which he placed on a small table by the couch, and speaking in his most kindly professional manner, ordered the girl to eat what he had brought her.

She tried to thank him and explain, but he would not hear a word. "We will leave this lady to enjoy her supper, Mrs. Holmes," he said, as he opened the door for his housekeeper. Before following her he said gravely to his visitor, "When you are refreshed if you will ring the bell, I shall be glad to come and hear anything which you may care to tell me," then he bowed politely, and passed out of the room.

An hour later, when the doctor had finished his dinner, Mrs. Holmes came to tell him the young lady was much refreshed, and would like to speak to him.

He went to her at once, and found her seated in a chair by the fire, her hands clasped nervously in her lap, her beautiful head bent as though she wished to be seen as little as possible.

The girl's whole attitude was one of utter dejection and timidity. As the man looked at her he felt almost ashamed to intrude upon her grief, but his sincere wish to help her in her helplessness made it necessary for him to hear her story, and sitting down in a low chair on the opposite side of the fireplace, he waited patiently for the girl to speak. The glow from the fire lit up in little shadows the white, sad young face.

Dr. Craig was a strong man in every sense of the word, and with a strong man's feeling for the weak and helpless. Never before had that pity been more keenly awakened in the man than it was for the slight girlish creature who crouched by his hearth in so sorry a plight.

For some moments neither spoke, then without raising her bowed head the girl said nervously, in a low, sweet, refined voice:

"I am not going to attempt to thank you for your kindness to me this night, but if you care to hear my story, I will tell it to you before I go from your house, comforted, and thankful to you for your hospitality."

The doctor answered gravely: "I shall be glad to hear anything that you may care to tell me."

The sympathy in the man's voice brought the tears into the girl's eyes, with an effort she kept them back, and speaking quickly, as though fearful lest the mastery she strove to gain over herself should desert her she began her story.

"My father is Mr. Holt, of Carey Hall, Westmorland, I am his only child. My dear mother died when I was a girl about ten years of age. A year ago my father arranged a marriage for me. I hated the man. Yes!" she repeated in a tired voice, "I hated him, so I ran away from home, and went to London. My friends had always told me how well I acted, and I hoped, with the help of the money I should obtain by the sale of my jewels, to keep myself until I could get an engagement in some touring company. I took rooms in a house where I was told theatrical people lodged, and every day I went round to the agents. They took their fees, telling me I should soon hear of a good part, but weeks went by, and still they could not get me an engagement. Oh! it was too terrible! Day after day I spent going from one agency to another, sometimes sitting in the waiting rooms for hours, hoping that a manager might be there who would engage me, but there were so many actors and actresses who seemed equally anxious to find employment, that I do not wonder no one wanted me."

Here two big tears rolled down the worn young face, and fell upon her pretty hands, folded listlessly in her lap. With a brave effort, she controlled herself, and went on, more slowly, and rather shyly:

"There was an actor staying in the same boarding-house where I lodged. I often met him on the stairs and at the agents, and one day he walked back with me, and we had tea in the sitting-room together. I was so lonely, and he was so very kind," she added wistfully, looking timidly into the doctor's face.

He nodded back at her with a kind smile, and said gently:

"Go on with your story, I'm very interested."

"We soon became very friendly," she continued, "and one day I told him all about my leaving home. He said that he thought I had done quite right, and spoke so beautifully about the seriousness of marriage and the beauty of true love, that I felt he must be a very good man, and I learned to trust him more and more, so that when he asked me to marry him, I quite thought I loved him, and two weeks later we were married."

The Doctor, sitting quietly listening in his easy chair, could not have explained for worlds why, when the girl made the last statement, he suddenly felt as though something had slipped out of his life which he would have given all his medical knowledge to have been able to hold. There are still some few things in this work-a-day world which science has yet to solve. Had a woman experienced a like sensation her intuition would have told her that she was in love. As to Doctor Craig, being a man, and an educated, healthy man, such an idea never entered his head, and even if, by any chance it had, he would have laughed at himself for a fool. And yet

that is exactly what happened. He had fallen in love with this girl who had come so strangely into his busy life.

It is the fashion, now a days, to laugh at love, as one does at ghosts, and I am not surprised, for there are so few people who are capable of loving. But there are still hundreds who can love, and who do love. And when love comes to such a one, more often than not it comes suddenly, without warning, and respects neither laws nor persons, and death alone can quench it; nay, I dare not say that death itself can put it out, for if there be anything in this world that we may take with us into the next, surely it is love.

For a few minutes neither spoke; they were both looking vacantly into the fire; the woman with her body bending forward, her hands unconsciously gripped together, her eyes with an expression in them, half of shame, half of terror.

The man also gazed into the fire, for he fell instinctively, that the girl would rather he did not look at her.

At last she continued:

"We walked back from the church to the boarding-house, intending to leave later in the day to visit a sister of his, who lived at Brighton, but as we entered the house the landlady told Mr. Morton a lady was waiting to speak to him in the dining-room."

"A lady!" he cried, and his face went so white that I thought he must be ill.

"He told me hurriedly to go up to my room, and he would call me if the lady was anyone that I should care to see. Then he went into the dining room, and shut the door loudly behind him."

"I thought his manner rather strange, but, imagining it might be someone on business, I went up to my rooms, and completed my packing for the journey."

"In about an hour's time he joined me, looking very excited and worried, and coming over to where I was sitting, he took my hands in his, and told me, with tears in his eyes, that unless I at once consented to go to my father's house in town, where we had seen from the papers that he was staying, and tell him of our marriage, and ask him to lend, or give us, five hundred pounds, he would be a ruined and dishonoured man."

"Can you not, can you, imagine my consternation?" excitedly continued the girl, her face ablaze with the memory of the scene she seemed to be living over once again.

"I told him that the thing was impossible, and that I would rather die than ask my father for one penny. I reminded him of the way I had left my home, and how he himself, who now begged me to return in such an ignoble manner, had approved of my so doing. He would hardly listen to me, but continued to implore me, for his sake, to subdue my pride, and remember that, as his wife, I owed him obedience. At last I grew angry, and told him that he had no right to ask such an impossible thing of me, and then—oh! God! can I ever forget it! He struck me in the face with his clenched fist and as I fell to the floor dazed by the blow, he walked out of the room, cursing me as he slammed the door behind him."

Here the poor, overwrought girl burst

WHY?



I.

Why should the French gentlemen in the French cafes always look like this—



II.

When, for variety's sake, they might look like this