

moment she hesitated to touch it. But, checking her first impulse of disgust, she took and opened it; and as she read, the scene around her seemed to change.

She was no longer in her own luxurious room, but in a cold, bare attic; the rose-tinted electric light faded away, and a single guttering candle burned in its place; her own bed, draped in white, with pink ribbons here and there, became a low, dingy pallet, on which a woman, old before her time, tossed restlessly to and fro.

The letter that had conjured up this picture contained a message from a woman who had once been in Helen's service, and whom she had lately befriended. Margaret Cammell had been her nurse, and had only left her to be married. Often during the first years of her new life she had come back to see her nursing; then she had drifted away from Boston, and only a few months ago she had returned, a widow with two children, broken in health and penniless. Helen had helped her, paying for the boy's schooling, and finding work for the mother and the little girl, a child of twelve and the writer of the letter.

'Mother is ill,' it ran, 'and calling all the time for Miss Helen. She won't eat or speak to us, only always calling. Honored Miss, you are our only friend, and you told us to send for you.—Maggie.'

Ill-written so as to be almost illegible, it was a cry of entreaty straight from the childish heart.

'O Bridget,' cried Helen, 'look what little Maggie writes!'

She handed the note to the maid, who had been with her for years, and who was the confidante of many of her charitable schemes and the companion of her charitable expeditions.

'What shall I do? I am afraid poor Margaret must be very bad. But what could I do if I went to her to-night? The child herself says that she would not know me.' She cast a troubled glance at her white dress, at her long gloves, and at the white slippers in which she was shod. 'If I could do her any good, I—she paused, and then went on, with an effort. 'Yes, then it would be worth while, and I would go.' She looked entreatingly at Bridget, the color coming and going in her cheeks, torn with conflicting feelings, and anxious that someone should agree with her, that such a sacrifice as this visit would be to-night was not expected of her.

'No,'—Bridget spoke slowly, considering her words; for she knew the whole state of the case. 'I guess you couldn't do much for the creature. No one could expect you to go to-night; yet it's hard to refuse a friendless, maybe dying woman what she asks.'

It was hard, very hard, to refuse, but harder still to accede to this request. The young girl had looked forward for days to this dance. Dr. Bruce expected her to be there, and, though she was too certain of his love to fear that her absence would make any lasting difference between them, still she could not bear that he should think even for one night that she was careless of his feelings, or indifferent to meeting him.

There was a pause, but Bridget could read, as plainly as if her young mistress had spoken, the struggle that was going on within her.

'Don't you worry, Miss Helen,' she said. 'Go to your ball and enjoy yourself; and if you have any message for Margaret, I'll take it there myself. I can see to the children, even if the poor mother does not know me.'

'O Bridget, will you?'

For the moment Helen was satisfied. After all, what good could she do to a delirious woman? And to the child Bridget would probably be of more use. Her poor friends need not be neglected, and she could go to the dance in the carriage, which was now at the door.

Quickly she arranged that, after leaving her at Mrs. Lane's, Bridget should be driven to the far-away street where the sick woman lived, and the maid left the room to don her outdoor clothes. She was not five minutes gone, but, returning, she found a change awaiting her. She had left Helen standing in her long white cloak, a soft lace scarf about her head; she found her now clad in a dark fur coat, her white slippers replaced by a pair of rubber boots, a fur cap hiding the jewels in her hair.

'I couldn't, Bridget,' she said in answer to the maid's exclamation of amazement. 'I couldn't go off to amuse myself. Margaret would have been in my mind all the time; and even if I can do nothing for her, I shall not have refused what may be her last request.'

'But Mrs. Lane and those who are expecting you?' said Bridget.

The color flew to Helen's cheeks, but she answered steadily.

'If there is time, I will go in later; if not, my explanations must wait until to-morrow.'

She had not arrived at this decision without a hard struggle with herself; but now that the sacrifice was made, she would not allow herself to regret it.

Driving through the long, dark streets, she could not keep her thoughts from the dance in which she had made so sure of taking part that night; but when she reached her destination all was forgotten in the misery of the scene before her. The room was desolate, just as she had pictured it, but the face upon the tossed and crumpled pillow was changed almost beyond recognition; and the voice that fell upon her ears, even before the door was open, was agonised in its entreaty, as it called her name.

'Margaret!'—the girl bent over the bed, laying one cool hand upon the burning forehead. 'Don't you know me, dear? You were asking for Miss Helen, and she has come to you.' She stretched out her other hand to little Maggie, who, overcome by her vain attempts at nursing, clung to her, crying now from very weariness.

'Miss Helen, for God's sake!—Miss Helen!' moaned the sick woman.

'I am Miss Helen,' repeated the girl, clearly and with gentle insistence.

Margaret did not, could not, understand; yet the cool touch, the strong, soft voice seemed to quiet her, and she held weakly to the hand that was now laid firmly on her own.

Neither priest nor doctor had been sent for—so much did Helen extract from the worn-out child; and Bridget, after some demur at leaving her young mistress, went off to seek them, and to supply the most indispensable wants of the invalid. The carriage had gone, taking to Mrs. Lane a pencil line of apology from Helen; and Bridget, having to do her errands on foot, was gone a long time. The moments passed slowly in the attic. Little Maggie, freed from the burden of responsibility, had fallen asleep from pure exhaustion, with her head in Helen's lap, whilst the mother, quiet so long as her hands were held in that soothing clasp, grew calmer, less fevered, till at last she too fell asleep. The fire crumbled away to ashes on the hearth, but the one watcher dared not rise to put fresh fuel to it. Fearful of waking the woman who for the moment was free from pain, or the child who in sleep had forgotten her anxieties, she dared not stir. Time passed, and she too grew tired, chilled by the growing coldness of the room, cramped until her limbs began to ache.

It seemed to Helen as though half the night had passed before steps paused outside the room, and a hand was laid upon the lock. In reality, it was scarcely two hours since Bridget had left her, and now, though it was she that Helen expected, another figure stood in the doorway—a figure which had been so much in her mind all the evening that, unexpected as it was here, she was not conscious of any feeling of surprise at seeing it.

'Oh, hush!' she whispered, as Dr. Bruce stepped toward her. 'They are asleep so quietly now, poor things!'

But he, smiling down upon her, lifted the child gently from her lap and laid her, still sleeping, on the heap of straw that since her mother's illness had been her resting-place.

Crossing again to the bedside, his experience of sick people enabled him to do what Helen in her ignorance had not dared. Margaret, like little Maggie, was not disturbed at his touch; and then the weary watcher was free to move. But for a moment her cramped limbs refused to hold her, and alone she could not have risen.

Then, as Dr. Bruce put his arm about her and drew her what had brought him to her here. That was easily her to her feet, it struck her for the first time to wonder. He had been attending a case with the district doctor, and had been at his house when Bridget had called. Learning from her of Helen's whereabouts, he had offered to relieve his confrere of the case, instead of going on to Mrs. Lane's dance, which now had no attraction for him.

Nature's own restorer, sleep, was doing more for mother and child than any doctor's skill could do, and in the darkening room those two, so strangely out of place, spoke together in breathless whispers—he speaking first, she listening; and both were happy. Then she too spoke, telling of her struggle, of her victory over inclination.

'I thought truly that I could do nothing further,' she said; 'but I was wrong. Even for this hour's sleep, it was worth while.'

'Worth while?' he repeated. 'I should think it was worth while.' Why, this hour's sleep that your presence has won may be the turning-point with the woman, without which recovery would have been impossible. Besides,' he added, speaking very low, 'it has proved me in the right. I always thought that you were perfect. Now I am sure!'—'Ave Maria.'