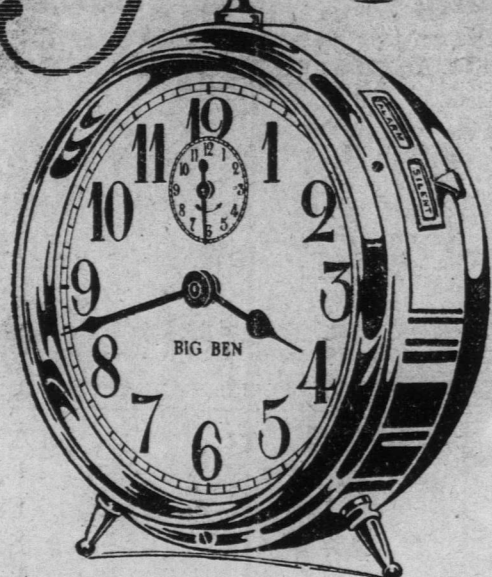


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CHAPTER XVI.
(To be Continued.)

"Well?"

"Well—where was I?" she laughed softly. "Oh, coming in the train. Well, I got to London, and oh, how frightened I was! I felt as if all the houses were going to fall on top of me, or come crushing in on me. It is a dreadful place to see for the first time, and to be alone in; and she caught her breath. "The horses and the big carriages, and the crowds and crowds of people. Yes, it was all true that you told me. I wonder—I do wonder how people can live and breathe, and why they don't go to some place where there is more room. Yes, I was so amazed at first that I walked into the wrong part of the town. I might have known that, because the streets were so ugly, and the houses and the people were so dirty and noisy; and I might have been sure that, though you were poor, you wouldn't live in such a place as that, or among such people."

She paused a moment and looked round the room, then turned her lovely eyes on him.

"Are you so poor? This room is such a beautiful one, and all the things must have cost a great deal of money."

Vane laughed uneasily.

"Well, they're not really mine," he said—"not all of them, at least. I only rent them. And I'm not so poor now, Nora."

"I'm glad of that," she said, simply. "Not that it would matter, because I've got plenty of money."

"Oh!" he said.

"Yes," she went on, gravely; "my aunt gave me some—quite a lot. See," she drew out a new leather purse, and

opening it, displayed the contents. "It's all my own—my very own; she said so. So that you need not be poor any longer. Will you take it?"

He forced back the smile; it did not cost him much of an effort, for Heaven knows he felt very, very far from smiles or laughter.

"You'd better keep it for the present, against a rainy day, Nora," he said. "Besides, I've got some money left."

He took the shilling from its warm hiding-place and held it up.

Her eyes glowed, and she drew a long breath.

"Yes," she murmured. "I knew you would keep it."

She watched him put it back with an exquisite satisfaction, and then went on with her recital.

"I found the way at last, after I'd thought that I should never get here; then I was afraid to knock. The houses seemed in such a grand street, and it was so late; and I was just thinking of walking about for the rest of the night—"

"Great Heaven!" he murmured, as he thought of the dangers of the London streets at midnight.

It was difficult for him to realize, even now, that she was playing a man's part, and that every one would have taken her for a boy tramp.

"But just as I was turning away a gentleman opened the door. He was dressed like those other gentlemen who went away just now, but he was smoking a short clay pipe—"

Vane laughed. It must have been Porter, snatching a few whiffs of his favorite pipe in the open air.

"And I plucked up courage and asked him if he knew you. He stared at me first—stared at me so hard that I was afraid that he saw that I was only a girl; but presently he asked me to come up here—and she drew another long breath—and here I am at last—at last!"

"Yes; here you are at last," said Vane, idiotically, as he felt. He got up and poured her out another glass of wine, and got her some biscuits and cake. "Now you must eat and drink, while I think a minute or two, Nora," he said.

Then, while she made a pretense of eating and sipping the wine, he said:

"And are you not sorry you came?"

It was a dangerous, a cruel question, and he would have recalled it when he saw the sudden pallor of her face and the startled look in her eyes.

"Sorry!" she echoed. "Are—are you?" She set the wine-glass down as she spoke.

"No, no, no!" he made haste to answer. "I was thinking of your aunt, and whether—whether you won't want to go back to her after—after a time."

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She shook her head and looked at him with frank sadness.

"No. Why should I? She never cared for me—never."

"No?" said Vane, "not cared—?"

"No," she said, almost inaudibly. "I was always like a burden to her. When I left I wanted to kiss her—"

She stopped. "No; she never cared for me. I think she is glad I am gone. Not that I'm dead; I don't say that." She paused a moment.

"I can't go back," she went on. "I am dead—dead. Don't you understand? Everybody thinks that the boat upset and that I was drowned."

"I see," said Vane, suppressing a sigh and a groan. He had thought that she might have expressed some sorrow and regret on her aunt's account—some faint desire to return to her; and if she had done so, he had been prepared to jump up, call a cab, whirl her to the station, and take her back. "Well, then, it's settled that you won't—can't—go back; and—there's an end of it. And now I must think out the whole business."

"Yes," she said, placidly. "No. I couldn't go back; and even if I were still alive, why should I go back—that is, if you still want to have me with you?" she let her eyes rest upon him with sweet gravity and perfect innocence.

"Yes, yes; of course," said Vane. "But look here, you must be tired to death. You must go and get some rest; and to-morrow—that is, later in to-day"—and he laughed—"while we are at breakfast, you and I will plan it all out. Yes, that's the best thing to do."

He lighted a candle and nodded toward the door of the smaller bedroom—it was divided from his by a lobby—and tossed her the key. "You get a good night's sleep. I'll call them not to call you till—oh, till midday. Good-night, or rather, 'good-morning.'"

"Good-night," she said. "I shall sleep—oh, I shall sleep for days if some one does not wake me!"

CHAPTER XVII.

Nora went into her room and locked the door. She was very tired, but filled with a peaceful happiness which she neither understood nor tried to understand—only felt.

She looked round the small apartment, with pleased astonishment at its daintiness. It was prettier even than the room she had just left; and never had she even imagined anything so luxurious as the furniture of satinwood, and the delicate china and glass, the gracefully draped bed.



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