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The boy's eyes sparkled, and he looked anxiously into his mother's face.

"It is most kind of you, my dear, but I don't know that we ought to accept so much from you."

"Oh, do; it is nothing, only a few francs, and indeed I can afford it quite well. It is nothing in comparison with your kindness to me. Please let me have this little pleasure."

"Very well, my dear, we shall accept it as it is offered; you can see from Dick's face how grateful he is."

CHAPTER VI.

That pleasant Sunday afternoon under the spreading trees of the great Parisian pleasure ground was the beginning of many. From that day Cicely found herself taken into the very innermost circle of the quiet little home whose inmates she grew to love with no common affection. They appealed to the very best that was in the girl's warm-hearted, kindly nature.

Mr. and Mrs. Chester had done their duty by the two girls left in their care, but they had never been able to win their full confidence and affection. For the first time in her life Cicely Chester found herself in an atmosphere where the affections were fully cultivated, and where love was the law of life. Anything more touching than the relations existing between the members of that little family who had so few of the world's good things at their command, it was impossible to imagine.

Cicely learned by accident that Mrs. Endicott occupied her scanty leisure in making fine lace, which had been the industry of the far-off New England village where she had spent her girlhood. This lace she had little difficulty in disposing of to her richer countrywomen in Paris, who were only too pleased to have the opportunity of purchasing it.

"I have learnt a great deal since I came to Paris, Mrs. Endicott," she said one afternoon when she had not felt well enough to go to the studio, but had taken a walk over to the Rue Riche instead. "I often wonder what my life here would have been like if I had not known you."

"Oh, I daresay you would have found other friends, my dear," said Mrs. Endicott brightly; "but we are very grateful to God for the gift of your friendship. It has made life brighter for us all, incomparably so for my poor boy."

"I have been wondering whether I am doing my duty staying here. It is a very pleasant life, and M. Deshayes is good enough to say I am getting on with my painting; but my aunt and uncle are getting old, and perhaps my place is at home with them. What do you think?"

"But your sister is there, is she not?"

"In the meantime, but she is going to be married by-and-by. You remember I told you she is to be married in June, and is going out to India in the autumn. Then aunt and uncle will be left quite alone."

"Oh, then it will be time for you to consider where your duty lies. Meanwhile you must persevere with your work and make the very best of your opportunities."

"I am trying to do so, but, you see, I have not Molly's genius," said Cicely rather dolefully. "Everything she touches seems to succeed. You should see M. Deshayes delight over her; it makes us all just a tiny bit envious at times."

"She has worked hard, poor child, and denied herself much," said Mrs. Endicott with a half sigh. "She has never had any girlhood, but has always been pressed down with a weight of care far beyond her years. If the picture she is engaged upon now is admitted to the Salon, as M. Deshayes seems to think likely, it will be some reward for her self-denial and hard work."

"Oh, I am sure it will be. It is a beautiful thing, and if it is approved by M. Deshayes, we need not trouble about the verdict of the Salon. Well, I must not take up any more of your time. I feel so odd and out of sorts to-day, just as if something were going to happen. I think I must go and have a sharp walk before going home. Just think, to-morrow everybody will be keeping Christmas in London!"

Cicely's thoughts were very much of home as she walked through the cool, crisp air between the leafless trees of the Champs Elysees. For the first time since she had come to Paris, four months ago, she was homesick.

As Cicely walked sharply down the gravel path she saw a tall figure approaching, a figure which she decided to be English before it came near enough to bear recognition. But when she had taken a few steps nearer, her heart began to beat in a most unaccustomed manner, and she could hardly believe the evidence of her own eyes, which told her that the tall and manly figure rapidly approaching was none other than the squire of Errington.

CHAPTER VII.

"Why, Tom," she exclaimed, when she had sufficiently recovered herself to speak, "what are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd write a run over to Paris for Christmas; it's rather slow for the long spending Christmas alone in a big house, and nobody wants to leave their own firesides at this particular season of the year, so I thought I'd come over here. I've just been to Madame Cazelet's."

"Oh, have you? and I suppose she directed you how to come?"

"She tried to, but my French is a bit rusty," said Tom. "Well, I must say you are looking pretty well. They told me you were working fearfully hard, and I quite expected to see you bearing the traces of it."

"Paris suits me very well," said Cicely, and she wondered why she had never realized before how very good-looking Tom Willis was. He seemed the very embodiment of health and strength and manliness.

"When did you see any of them?" asked Cicely eagerly. "I was feeling just a little homesick before we met—the same sort of feeling, I suppose, which makes you dread spending Christmas at Errington alone."

"I went over to Chesterly the day before yesterday to tell them I was coming here, and they sent all sorts of kind messages. Eleanor is looking very well, and delighted, I assure you, at the prospect of going out to India."

"Wasn't it arranged very suddenly at the end?" asked Cicely. "Nobody thought when I was at home that Captain Gerard was paying her particular attention."

"Sometimes a thing comes off like that more successfully when nobody knows anything about it until the last moment," said Tom; and at these suggestive words Cicely's color slightly rose, but Tom did not mean anything particular by them.

"Madame Cazelet was telling me you had met with some very good friends in Paris. What kind of people are they?"

"An American lady and her daughter, who is a pupil with me at the studio," answered Cicely.

"Very clever, isn't she? Eleanor had a lot to say about her, and I had the strictest injunctions to try and see the new friends, so that I could carry back a faithful report about them."

"I daresay they would be pleased to see you, Tom," answered Cicely. "though Mrs. Endicott is rather exclusive. I am dining there to-morrow; you could come and fetch me. I daresay, if you cared to take the trouble."

"Oh, I should be delighted to do that, and I hope you'll let me take you to the theatre, or something of that sort, while I am here, Cicely. I am only going to stop till Monday; then I am going on to Cannes to meet some fellows I know. Where are you going just now, may I ask?"

"Only back to Madame Cazelet's. I didn't feel like going to the studio this morning, and I rather thought I should lie down all the afternoon."

"Oh, don't do that," pleaded Tom. "Let's go and have lunch somewhere, and then spend an hour or two in the Louvre. I haven't been in the Louvre since I came to Paris with my father ten years ago. And now that you are a full-fledged artist, you ought to be willing to chaperon a poor, ignorant creature like me."

"Now you are laughing at me, Tom," said Cicely severely; "and though I should dearly love to go with you, I don't think you deserve it."

"Oh, I was only teasing, Cicely; don't take me seriously. I don't think I answered the question you asked about them all at Chesterly. Your aunt is not looking well, and that's a fact. She does too much, and she is exciting herself tremendously over this marriage of Eleanor's."

"Perhaps I ought to go home, Tom," said Cicely doubtfully. "I have been feeling that I ought for some weeks, and I was only speaking about it to Mrs. Endicott this morning, but she

thought that as long as Eleanor was at home I could not be so much needed. What do you think?"

Tom looked something of the surprise he felt. It was new to him to hear Cicely express the slightest consideration for others.

"Oh, I don't think there is any need for you to go home," he said quickly. "The old lady is not ill, you know, only rather fagged out."

CHAPTER VIII.

About four o'clock on Christmas Day Tom Willis knocked at the door of Mrs. Endicott's modest apartment in the Rue Riche.

Cicely had informed Mrs. Endicott that she had accidentally met a very old friend of her family, and had taken the liberty of asking him to call for her on Christmas Day. Something in the girl's voice and manner as she made this matter-of-fact announcement caused Mrs. Endicott to open her eyes a little wider and to draw certain conclusions which she expected that Mr. Tom Willis' appearance would confirm. She had no doubt whatever in her own mind that he was either the accepted lover of Cicely, or that he would soon become so, and she had learnt to love the bright English girl so dearly that she was prepared to accord to Tom for her sake the warmest welcome.

The dainty little dinner which Cicely had been allowed to provide had just been cleared away by the two girls, and they had gathered around the Christmas fire to wait till the kettle should boil for a cup of tea, when Tom's bold double knock came to the door.

Cicely and Mrs. Endicott went out into the hall simultaneously, and Tom found himself so warmly welcomed that he felt quite a glow at his heart.

"If only you had come to dinner with us, Mr. Willis," said Mrs. Endicott with her rare sweet smile, "our little circle would have been complete. Still, we shall have a happy tea together. This is my daughter and my son."

Molly had just vigorously shaken up poor Dick's cushions, and the exertion had tinged her usually somewhat pale face with a bright flush of color. The gown she wore, which her own clever fingers had fashioned, was peculiarly becoming to her, and Tom Willis was greatly struck by her appearance as she gave him her hand and frankly bade him a merry Christmas.

A very tender and soft expression came on the stalwart young Englishman's face as he stooped over the couch of the invalid boy, an expression which did not escape the mother's eye, and which caused her heart to warm to him as it seldom warmed to any stranger.

"Hullo, old chap," Tom said in true English fashion. "It's rather rough on you lying here on Christmas Day. How long have you been like this?"

"Always," answered the boy, and his expressive face lit up as he felt his hands grasped in Tom's warm, strong clasp. His frail health had shut him out from the companionship of his own sex, and he looked upon the young Englishman's stalwart figure and fresh-colored ruddy face with admiration which had in it a touch of envy.

As for Tom, he had seldom seen anything which had moved him so deeply. He had never had a day's illness in his life, and could conceive of nothing more appalling than to be tied to a sofa like poor Dick Endicott.

These somewhat trying emotions, however, soon passed when the greetings were fully made, and while Tom seated himself on the couch, the two girls buried themselves in getting tea prepared.

While Tom talked to Mrs. Endicott and Dick, he could not help watching the girls as they flitted to and fro between the little salon and the kitchen where the muffins were being toasted. Remembering how Cicely had been reared, how she had never known what it was to help herself even to a glass of water, he was amazed to see how she had fitted herself into this unpretentious little home, where evidently she was not treated as a guest, but as an inmate, familiar and beloved.

"Oh, I must not forget I brought a bag with some Christmas things in it," he said, jumping up at last. "I have always forth rashly last night to the Palais Royal, which I have always heard is a good place to shop in, but I am afraid I have been shamefully taken in."

He brought in the bag he had left in the hall, and opened it at the foot of Dick's sofa, producing from it all sorts of extraordinary purchases which were productive of the greatest amusement.

"Why, Tom, you ought to have asked me to go shopping with you," said Cicely. "Oh, there is something Dick will like, the whole of Hawthorne's works. How ever did you know that he wanted these so badly, Tom?"

"Oh, I didn't know, only I'd heard you say that Mrs. Endicott came from America; and as I know the little chap was not strong, I thought he'd be sure to be fond of reading. I am sure if this is what he wants I am jolly glad."

There could be no doubt of Dick's delight over this unexpected gift. He hugged the handsome volumes tightly in his arms, and tried to utter the gratitude of his heart; but Tom would not listen to a word, and always managed to stop their thanks by some remark of his own which had nothing to do with the case. They had very happy, merry evening together, and when Tom took Cicely away he said what was the honest truth, that he had not enjoyed himself so much for a long time.

"Isn't he a great, splendid fellow, mother?" asked Dick the moment the door closed upon them, and there was the most rapturous adoration in his eyes as he asked the question.

"He is certainly good, and true, and kind, my dear," Mrs. Endicott answered. "What do you think of him, Molly?"

"He is very English," answered Molly rather enigmatically, "but English of the best type."

"Do you think that he and Cicely are engaged?" Mrs. Endicott asked then.

But Molly shook her head.

"No, I don't think so. I think he is only what Cicely told us, a friend of the family. Still, I believe if he were to ask Cicely she would not say no."

"I quite agree with you, my dear," was Mrs. Endicott's emphatic reply.

CHAPTER IX.

The friends who were waiting for Tom Willis at Cannes had their patience somewhat tried for the middle of January saw him still in Paris, nor had he apparently the slightest desire or intention of leaving it. Cicely saw a good deal of him, of course, but she could not flatter herself that his prolonged visit was on her account, since the most of his time was spent in the little apartment on the Rue Riche. He went there ostensibly on Dick's account, and certainly they were the greatest of friends. The advent of the young Englishman, with his cheery good nature and constant flow of high spirits, had marked a new era in the life of the invalid boy, and opened up undreamed-of vistas of enjoyment to him.

One evening soon after this Tom asked, "Do you know what project I have in my head now?"

"Well, the fellows I was to meet at Cannes have got tired waiting for me, I suppose, and they've gone on; but all the same I don't want to be cheated out of my visit to the Riviera, and I don't propose to go alone. Will you let me take Dick with me?"

"Oh, Mr. Willis, you don't know what you are asking. To take the entire charge of one so weak and frail as Dick, it would be a poor holiday for you."

"That may be, but I think I could manage it, and I am certain I should enjoy it. He is not so very bad as you make out. He doesn't want any sitting up with or nursing in the daytime. What he does want is to be out in the sunshine all day long, and that he shall have in plenty, I promise you."

Mrs. Endicott did not for the moment speak. She was indeed too much surprised and touched to give expression to her thoughts. To buy beautiful and dainty things, when the purse is full is easy enough; but how few men in Tom Willis' position would have volunteered to saddle themselves with the sole care of a delicate boy?

"I have spoken to Dick about it, Mrs. Endicott, which I know I'd no business to do without first consulting you; but I thought that would be the surest way to gain my end, because, you see, you would not wish to inflict such a disappointment on him. He is quite set upon it, and I am sure he will get on all right, and I shall take the utmost care of him."

"Does Cicely know that you have this in contemplation?" asked Mrs. Endicott at once, in a sharp, stern tone.

"No, I haven't mentioned it to anybody except Dick, but that won't make any difference. Cicely will quite approve of it; and, anyhow, she is my guardian."

"I was only saying to Molly to something that we had not seen so much of her lately, and Molly says she is working very hard at the studio."

"Yes, I know she is, she will naturally come out with me when I want her to. Don't you think it's nothing but a tad of Cicely Chester to come here to study art, Mrs. Endicott? She would be much better at home, and she had a very good name, although she did not think it."

"I think she fully appreciates her home now," said Mrs. Endicott gently; but she thinks it her duty to make the most of this opportunity, as indeed it is. She is a dear girl, and you can well imagine that we are in no haste for her period of study to come to an end."

"I think I shall go round to the studio and meet them. Can I tell them that it is all settled about Dick?"

"I really don't know what to say about it. If you have spoken to Dick, I suppose I can do nothing but hold my tongue now."

"All right; I'll just tell Dick it's all settled, and then I'll go and meet the young ladies."

As it happened, Cicely had had a particularly trying and disheartening day at the studio. A new study to which M. Deshayes had appointed her was more difficult than she had imagined, and her first attempt at realizing it had been discouraging in the extreme. She put on her things rather hurriedly, and left the studio without waiting for any of the others. When she saw Tom Willis standing on the pavement outside the door her face brightened a little, and she bade him a pleasant good-afternoon. There was always something bright and breezy about Tom. It was impossible to be long dull in his company; but when his first inquiry was for Molly, the momentary brightness receded from her face.

"She left at three, the light was not good enough for the thing she was engaged on," she answered rather curtly.

"At three? Well, I've just come from the Rue Riche, and I didn't meet her."

"No, she had some shopping to do for her mother."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter; it was you I wanted to see. What has become of you lately, Cicely? Mrs. Endicott was remarking that you had not been there so often lately."

"No, they don't need me so much now they have such a devoted visitor in you," she answered with a most unusual touch of bitterness.

"Perhaps I have been going rather often," said Tom somewhat blankly. "I hope I have not given you offence thereby?"

"Why should you give me offence?" asked Cicely loftily. "It's nothing to me."

"Well, when one comes to think of it, they are your friends, of course; but they are such awfully nice people, and I am so sorry for that poor chap, upon my word I feel as if I could never do enough for him."

"Yes, you have been very good to him," said Cicely, and her face softened.

"I am going away to Cannes on Monday, Cicely, and I am taking Dick. Mrs. Endicott has just given me leave."

"To Cannes," repeated Cicely, "and taking Dick with you! Do you mean that you and he are going alone?"

"Yes, I mean that."

"It's awfully good of you, Tom," said Cicely warmly. "There are few young men would take such trouble about a poor ailing boy."

"Oh, quite, and I don't see that there's any special goodness in it. Look at my health and strength, and I have everything else almost that the world can give. If I can't lend a helping hand, where it is so much needed, I don't deserve all my blessings."

"You didn't always feel like that, Tom," said Cicely quietly.

"No; I am somewhat in the same position as you, Cicely—I have learned these things from the Endicotts. They are the best people I have ever met."

"Yes," Cicely answered, "they are very good."

CHAPTER X.

"Don't hurry away, Cicely," said Molly Endicott; "I want you to go for a little stroll with me before five o'clock."

Cicely looked somewhat surprised, but waited until her friend was ready. Of late there had been rather less intimacy between them than of yore.

It was now the end of February, and Dick Endicott was still on the Riviera with Tom, nor was there any talk of their return to Paris.

"Isn't it very mild?" said Molly as they stepped out into the still, soundless air. "Let's go into the Luxembourg Gardens as we did the first day we met; I want to talk to you."

"All right. What a long time it seems since then!"

"It is only nine months. I think you are tired, Cicely, and that you will be glad when Easter comes and you can go home."

"I shall not be sorry," answered Cicely briefly.

"You have quite decided to go home permanently, then?" said Molly inquiringly.

"Quite," answered Cicely, and they said no more until they passed within the Luxembourg gates, and turned to the seat under the spreading chestnut where they had sat together on the first day of their acquaintance.

"We had a letter from San Remo this morning, Cicely," said Molly, after they had sat a moment in silence. "They are coming back next week; and I asked you to come here this afternoon, Cicely, because I want to tell you something. Mother had a letter, I had one also, but mine was from Mr. Willis."

"It is a letter which has surprised me very much; perhaps it will surprise you too, but I feel that I should like to tell you. He wishes me to marry him."

"He is very rich," said Cicely, hating herself for her vulgar remark, and yet unable to withhold its utterance.

"I suppose he must be," answered Molly simply, not taking the offence which was distinctly intended. "I have not thought about that, for after all it is the man one has to live with. He is the first man who has ever done me that honor."

"Then you will marry him?"

"Yes," answered Molly.

"For your mother's sake, perhaps, and Dick's?" pursued Cicely mercilessly.

Molly rose to her feet, and her face flushed rose pink like the apple bloom.

"No," she answered steadily. "I would not make him so poor a return for all his goodness. I love my mother and Dick very dearly, but I would not injure another for their sakes. I will marry him for his own sake, and mine."

"I hope you will be happy, Molly," said Cicely, rising; "and as we shall be near neighbors in England, perhaps we may see something of each other."

"Is that all you will say to me, Cicely?" asked Molly, with a strange wistfulness in her usually self-reliant voice.

"The woman who marries Tom Willis will be blessed among women, Molly. Now I must run home."

Never had the way to the Boulevard Port Royal seemed so long and dreary. Too late her heart had awakened; too late she realized that she had allowed a great gift to pass by her; nay, she had spurned it when offered for her acceptance.

When Cicely reached Madame Cazelet's she found a telegram from home bidding her return at once. Her uncle had died suddenly, having been found sitting lifeless at his desk in his own library at Chesterly. By seven o'clock, Cicely was in the Calais train. As she made that rapid journey she reviewed the past, and looked ahead into the future, and saw herself cut off in a measure from the brighter things of life, and filling the place of a daughter to the lonely and widowed woman who had acted a mother's part to her. The prospect did not appal her, as it would once have done; nay, she could welcome it in a new spirit—the spirit of service. Perhaps another day we may hear how Cicely Chester learned the greatest of all lessons, to do the duty that lies nearest that duty which so many of us wilfully pass by.