

## RUNNING A GREAT RISK

"And so you are engaged to this clever artist, Miss Curzon? Why, you don't look much more than a baby yourself, child!"

"I am 18," said Miss Curzon, with a pretty shy laugh, bending over the baby she held on her knee—the nurse, having a very bad headache, had gone to lie down, and, as Miss Curzon had nothing particular to do that afternoon, her own charges having gone to spend the day with some cousins, she had offered to look after the baby.

She was seated in a cosy rocking chair near to a comfortable fire, and had an interesting novel close at hand, which she had just been about to take up, when the door opened and Miss Fairfax, a girl about two years older than herself, entered. Miss Fairfax was a ward of the husband of the lady whose children Miss Curzon was engaged to teach, and she spent her time partly with her guardian in the country, partly at the house of another guardian in London, and the remainder in visiting—for Miss Fairfax was rich, beautiful and fascinating, and had more invitations to visit at different houses, country and town, than she could well accept.

It was a freak of hers coming down to spend this Christmas with the Lowndeses, who, though they were fairly rich and held a good position in the country, were anything but a sociable family. Neither Mr. Lowndes nor his wife cared for society; consequently they visited little and received few visitors. Altogether the home of the Lowndeses might have been thought a place unlikely to be chosen by Miss Fairfax to spend Christmas in, especially as, among a dozen invitations she had received for the festive season, there was one from a duchess, while the rest were all from people of note. Miss Fairfax, however, had suddenly made up her mind to write to Mrs. Lowndes, to say she was coming, and, though Christmas was still a week distant, she had already arrived.

Miss Curzon had not seen much of Miss Fairfax since her arrival, and she was considerably astonished at her appearance in the nursery that afternoon; but the beautiful queen of society could be as quietly charming as Miss Curzon herself when she chose. In 10 minutes she had won Miss Curzon's heart, and they sat talking till the younger girl unconsciously let out the secret of her life's happiness. Painting and the pictures of the year had been one of the subjects of conversation, and Miss Fairfax had spoken of a picture by a very clever young artist which had strongly appealed to her imagination. The painter of it turned out to be the betrothed of Miss Curzon.

"I've always wanted to see him," said Miss Fairfax; "but he never goes anywhere in town—of course, not for want of invitations. People say he is unsociable; but I understand now why he doesn't care to go out." Miss Fairfax gave an amused laugh, and looked curiously and interestedly into the flushing pretty face opposite to her. "But just fancy his being engaged!"

There was a note in the exclamation which Miss Curzon did not understand. She looked up quickly.

"Why? Is it so strange?" she asked. "Oh, did I speak as if it were strange?" asked Miss Fairfax. "I don't know why it should be. Artists get married, as well as other men, of course."

"Of course," echoed Miss Curzon, restlessly touching the baby's pink fingers, something she could not define, and of which she was only vaguely conscious, had chilled her.

"Do you know, I was actually thinking of asking him to paint my portrait!" said Miss Fairfax, with an intensely amused laugh. "I was dreadfully anxious to see him, and nothing would ever induce him to come to our house, though we invited him dozens of times. I began to feel a kind of desperate pique, and was determined that he should come. But it was no good. He is very handsome, isn't he?"

"Very," said Miss Curzon, with such gravity that Miss Fairfax laughed again. At that moment, however, Miss Curzon was thinking scarcely so much of the good looks of her lover as of the beauty of her companion. Miss Fairfax, exquisitely and daintily dressed in some soft rich colored winter material, with a knot of ephraimthumens in her belt, lay back, languidly, graceful, in a low chair, her little slippered feet resting on a foot stool. The firelight played on her face, giving its statuesque beauty a warmth and coloring it did not always possess; her eyes, usually more brilliant than soft, were smiling and tender—for she had taken a real, if capricious, liking to the pretty unaffected little girl governess. "Very," repeated Miss Curzon, laughing and coloring a little. "But somehow I never seem to think so much of that; I am always thinking of the other things." She

looked into the fire, a dreamy happy expression on her face. "He is so good and so brave and so clever that!"

"His good looks don't count," exclaimed Miss Fairfax, rising from her seat and an odd look coming into her eyes as she watched the happy loveliness on the face of the little governess. "But that is a great thing. I adore beauty both in men and women. Don't you despise it, my dear; it is a glorious possession, and—softly—" sometimes a fatal one." Then before Miss Curzon could speak, Miss Fairfax broke out in a different tone; "But I have a lovely idea!" Mrs. Lowndes—oh, what a dismally perfect mother she is—was telling me this morning that she could not spare you to go away for your Christmas holidays, especially as I—I am sure I shouldn't have come if I had known that I was to be made the scapegoat of Mrs. Lowndes' dreadful motherly propensities—shall be here. Well, I am going to tell her that she must ask Mr. Strongarm—what a funny name it is—I like it though—here for Christmas. I am sure—looking admiringly into Miss Curzon's startled face—"he will come."

"But—wonder, delight, dismay, incredulity, chasing each other across the governess's expressive face—"Mrs. Lowndes—"Oh, she will be only too happy to gratify a whim of mine!" Miss Fairfax interrupted. "She always dreads having me here"—with a merry laugh—"she will be delighted to have some one to amuse me, and I am sure I shall like Mr. Strongarm."

Again the odd, indefinable, half-amused, half-distrustful feeling stirred Miss Curzon, but it vanished as Miss Fairfax turned the conversation and chattered on brightly and pleasantly about other things.

On Christmas eve the train from London steamed into the little country station of Greenacre, and, in the confusion and bustle of passengers claiming their luggage, Mr. Richard Strongarm had an opportunity of greeting unnoticed the pretty, slender girl awaiting him on the platform.

"Mrs. Lowndes said I might come," Miss Curzon told her lover, when the two young people were able to turn their attention to such subsidiary things as luggage and a waiting brougham; "but I dare say Miss Fairfax suggested it, as she does everything. She is such a jolly girl! Is that all your luggage?"—as Mr. Strongarm pointed out a small Gladstone bag to the porter.

"All! How much did you expect me to bring? Indeed!"—lowering his voice to a whisper—"that small receptacle contains about all my worldly goods! Pictures are a drug in the market, and my wardrobe is rapidly decreasing. It's a good thing I was asked now; for shortly I shall have only a ragged dressing-gown left."

They both laughed. They were both young and very hopeful, and brave, too, and they did their best to be patient. Sometimes, however, it did seem hard to have to live apart, each toiling so strenuously for the means of existence, which, work as they would, were still far from becoming sufficient to enable them to enter into that state of life which both looked forward to with such happy feelings. But at that moment they were much too pleased at meeting each other again to be troubled about the future.

The brougham awaited them in the dark country lane outside the station, and, after a long drive, they reached Ellerslea, where Mrs. Lowndes—who, in spite of her absorption in maternal duties, was lady and knew what was required of a hostess—greeted Strongarm very pleasantly.

Strongarm had been shown to his room, and Mrs. Lowndes and Miss Fairfax were going up stairs to dress for dinner, when the elder lady stopped her capricious companion for a moment, saying, with fretful significance—

"You talked about having Mr. Strongarm here to afford Miss Curzon a pleasant Christmas; but you had better be careful not to make her unhappy instead of happy. I am sure—though it is very awkward for me having Mr. Strongarm here, as it will take Miss Curzon away from the children, and you know I like her to be always with them—I don't want to see the girl miserable."

Miss Fairfax colored with hot anger.

That evening she came down to dinner in the most unbecoming gown she possessed; though she felt very cross at having put it on, for she hated to do anything which she thought would diminish her beauty, even in the smallest degree. She scarcely spoke to Strongarm all the evening, and went to bed in a very bad temper, because she thought he had not even looked at her.

Christmas day broke brightly, cold and frosty. The sun shone brilliantly, the trees with their skeleton branches were white and sparkling with rime, the ground was hard as iron.

Nelly Curzon and Richard Strongarm walked to church. It was too glorious a

morning to drive; besides, they preferred being by themselves. Miss Fairfax and the girls, who drove with Mrs. Lowndes in the family wagonette, would have preferred walking too. The girls grumbled all the way at not being allowed to do so; but Mrs. Lowndes—who, considering she paid for Miss Curzon's services, would not have felt the least compunction about spoiling the lovers' walk—refused them permission to accompany them, simply because she did not think it fitting for her daughters to be in the society of a young man, and especially one so handsome and attractive as Mr. Strongarm undoubtedly was.

There was no room in the Lowndeses' pew for Strongarm, so he accepted a seat offered to him by some friends of Mrs. Lowndes'. Miss Fairfax sat just opposite to him.

The service in the prettily decorated church began, and Miss Fairfax joined in it; but her thoughts would wander. She had always felt a great interest in the clever artist, who till now had been personally unknown to her; his appearance had in no way disappointed her. Once or twice she found herself looking across at him. She could do so with impunity, for he never once looked at her; if he glanced about him at all, it was always toward the other end of the pew where Nelly sat among the girls. Once Nelly looked up at him. Miss Fairfax happened to be gazing at him just as he was looking at Nelly, and she saw such a smile in his eyes, so tender, so proud, that it sent a thrill through her. The next moment she glanced at Nelly. She was kneeling with her head bowed, and something told Miss Fairfax that the girl was thanking heaven for having sent her such a love. Miss Fairfax's face hardened and assumed a cold statuesque look that somewhat marred her beauty.

Christmas day was always given up to the children at Ellerslea. Mr. and Mrs. Lowndes devoted themselves to the amusement of the young people, and the governess was expected to do the same. The occupation was more agreeable than it would have been under ordinary circumstances, for Richard was there to join in the revels. Strongarm was a splendid playfellow, and, before the evening came, he had won Mrs. Lowndes' heart equally with those of the whole family of children, from Fanny, aged 14, down to the baby. Even Mr. Lowndes took a convenient opportunity to congratulate Nelly on having won the heart of a remarkably fine fellow.

"Though he is to be congratulated, too," added Mr. Lowndes with geniality.

And, while all the fun and laughing and chattering were going on, Miss Fairfax was sitting in lonely state in her own room. She hated romps and games of every description.

Nelly, looking flushed and dishevelled, but intensely happy and pretty, went into her room before going to dress for dinner.

"We have had such a nice afternoon," she said, "we have all been a set of babies! I wish you had come down too—I have enjoyed myself so!"

Miss Fairfax's heart was filled with a sudden feeling of envy, for she had had a very dull afternoon. She did not try to conquer her petty jealousy and spiteful vexation; they were still lurking in her heart when her maid came in to dress her, and they bore evil fruit.

Strongarm happened to be the first down to dinner that evening. There were some beautiful water colors on the drawing-room walls, and, as he had the room to himself, he wandered slowly round it looking at them. The room was a blaze of light, for Mr. Lowndes hated shaded lamps. There was an archway leading from the larger room into a smaller one half-way down the apartment. A gilt branch holding a dozen candles, stretched out from either side of this archway. Strongarm, absorbed in the pictures, had reached the archway without noticing anything else. Then he started and gazed for a second as if spell-bound.

In the centre of the archway, in the flood of light, stood Miss Fairfax. Her arms and throat were bare, their white loveliness enhanced by the pale green tint of her silken dinner dress; her hair, drawn up to the top of her perfect head, was caught by a gold arrow, the shaft of which was set with diamonds. She stood looking at Strongarm, a great feathered fan, pale green, like her dress, in her hand. How long she had been standing there waiting for him to see her only she herself knew; but a moment after he had caught sight of her she moved forward. A glance was quite enough for him; she saw that she had succeeded at last in making him acknowledge her beauty.

"Are you looking at my guardian's collection?" she said, coming toward the young artist with a pretty smile. "He prizes them beyond words. Have you visited the picture gallery yet? But I don't suppose you have

had time. How good you have been, romping with those dreadful children!" Miss Fairfax talked on after the manner of a woman of the world, seeing that Strongarm was still too moved to reply.

"I have enjoyed it thoroughly," he said, with a laugh, when he had recovered himself. "You ought to have come and helped us."

"I wish I had"—laughing lightly, with a bewitching glance up into his face—"for I am sure you would have taken all the hard work. I hate being 'blind man' or 'puss in the corner'; I like to have some one to do all the work for me."

"So you ought," Strongarm said impulsively, his eyes full of the admiration of his artist soul.

"I'll remember that next time when I want a service done," Miss Fairfax said, "in fact, I am meditating asking you one now."

"What is it?"—eagerly.

"Oh, I shall have to ask Miss Curzon first," she answered, laughing. "See—here she comes."

Mrs. Lowndes and Nelly came into the room, and Miss Fairfax moved away from Strongarm's side. He then realized that they had been standing very close together, and he colored faintly as he went over to Nelly.

The rest of the evening passed very pleasantly. Miss Fairfax was so bright and agreeable that Mrs. Lowndes was amazed at her husband's ward, and looked rather suspiciously from her to the handsome painter; nevertheless, she did not see how often Strongarm looked at Miss Fairfax even when he was talking to Nelly, Nelly and Miss Fairfax, however, remarked it; and that night, when the two girls reached their respective rooms, Nelly looked very grave, while Miss Fairfax appeared exceedingly elated.

"I can't do her justice! Her beauty is bewildering!" Strongarm, standing before an easel in the picture-gallery at Ellerslea four days after Christmas, flung down his paint-brush with an irritable impatience very unusual to him.

"It is very like her," Nelly, standing by the side of her betrothed, looked at the lovely face on the canvas with a sharp pain at her heart.

"Like her! Look how hard her eyes are, and her mouth! Those scornful lips aren't hers. I can't get her expression at all!"

Nelly thought he had caught the expression perfectly. What was dimming his sight? Why could he not see that the eyes of his subject were cold and cruel—that her mouth, with all its beauty, was hard and proud? Nelly's face grew paler as her heart answered the question; but she was too brave, too proud, to utter aloud what she thought.

"I think you give too much time to it," she said gently. "All day yesterday and all day to-day you have been working at it. Put it away and go out for a walk. See—you are painting out all that you did this morning!"

"I must—it's too bad! Really I'm ashamed of myself, after she has been so good as to give me the sittings! I should be a made man if I could do her justice. I can't fail like this!"—with savage disappointment. "And she's so good and patient, too, and sits as many hours as I have the conscience to let her!"

Nelly thought of those hours. The sittings had begun on the second day after Christmas. The first sitting had been only a short one, and Nelly had been present at it, she and Miss Fairfax talking with and amusing the painter, who thoroughly appreciated the girlish laughter and chatter. The next day the sitting was longer, and toward the end Strongarm's face grew absorbed and serious; he was scarcely even conscious of Nelly's leaving the room to take the children for a walk. On the third day Nelly was not in the room at all. Her lover had seemed so bothered over the painting, as he worked at it the previous afternoon after the morning's sitting, that she was afraid if she went to the picture gallery the next morning she and Miss Fairfax might hinder him by their talking, so Nelly went off with the children to skate, leaving Strongarm at home with Miss Fairfax. They returned for luncheon, at which Strongarm and Miss Fairfax were present, but could scarcely spare time to eat anything, and the moment the meal was finished they went off to the picture gallery again, to get as much of the daylight as possible, Miss Fairfax having kindly offered to give the artist another sitting in the afternoon. He had been so excited over his work, which was not proceeding as he wished, that during luncheon he scarcely spoke a word except to Miss Fairfax. He did not even hear Nelly once when she addressed him, and the look in his eyes as he spoke to Miss Fairfax so impressed Nelly as to pre-