

"Really, Mr. Graeme, it was quite thoughtless of you not to have had this carriage reserved. It would be so unpleasant if we were to be disturbed by strangers. Perhaps it isn't yet too late."

But it was too late, for even as she spoke the door was flung open, and a young man sprang in. Another, with the unmistakably smug look of the valet, handed him a small bag and something that appeared to be a travelling writing-case. Then, after a word or two of direction, the door was slammed shut, and the new-comer sat down in the corner of the seat occupied by Mr. Valentine Graeme.

Until that moment I had not observed his face, nor, perhaps, had the others; but now, as he casually glanced across at me, and then at Miss Cade, I easily recognized the original of the photograph Mrs. Rayne had shown me on a certain memorable day, now more than a fortnight ago. Despite the damaging fact that he was past thirty, and no longer had a right to wear the uniform which I admired so heartily, I could not help admitting to myself that he was interesting—might, without much effort, be made the hero of a romance—and that I was extremely glad he had come into my carriage.

Was it only a very curious coincidence, I wondered, or had Mrs. Rayne written him and in some way influenced him to bring about the apparent accident?

The thought, and the effort to look as if he were a complete stranger to me, brought a flush to my cheeks, of which I was uncomfortably conscious.

I tried to absorb myself in the book I had with me, and turn over the pages naturally and easily, while I heard Miss Cade address him, with some impressment, as "Sir Donald," exclaiming over the strangeness of the meeting.

"Are you going all the way to Cumberland?" she inquired. "And do you really mean to stop there for some time?"

Though she spoke with a show of cordiality, and evidently wished to give him the impression that she was delighted at the unexpected chance which had brought him into our carriage, I somehow felt a keen conviction that she would far rather have had him somewhere else.

"You and Mr. Graeme have never happened to meet, I think," she went on. "You have been away so much, and he so seldom leaves London—since he came back from Africa—I mean—er—you have never run across each other."

Why, I asked myself curiously, had Miss Cade thus stumbled over the mention of Africa, and hastily endeavored to cover it up, as if she had made a mistake?

The two men were looking at each other. I could see both faces from under my downcast lashes, as I held up my book, and I puzzled myself over their expression. Either I was morbidly ready to jump to a conclusion, or there was unconcealable scorn written on the countenance of Sir Donald Howard, and a vicious, almost alarmed resentment on that of my stepmother's man of business.

"Unless I'm very much mistaken, Mr. Graeme and I have met before, Miss Cade."

I liked Sir Donald's voice. And I wondered why we were not made known to each other. Would it not be the proper thing to introduce him to me, as evidently he was an acquaintance of Lady Mary's (else he would not have been on speaking terms with her companion), and henceforth I was to be one of his neighbors? Perhaps, I said to myself, an introduction in such circumstances would not come under that mysterious but potent heading, "good form," for I had no knowledge that was not theoretical of the usages of society.

"I haven't," drawled Mr. Valentine Graeme, "so distinct a memory of things in Africa as you appear to have."

Why I could not tell, but I knew that he had said something both cruel and terrible.

I hated the man for the venom he had hidden in his simple-sounding words. Perhaps it was the ominous pause that followed his speech and the little convulsive jump Miss Cade gave (which I could feel as I sat near her), that pieced out my intuition.

I felt a bright color leap to my cheeks, as if someone had struck me across the face, and, glancing involuntarily towards the opposite side of the carriage, I emitted an angry flash of the eyes at Mr. Graeme, and then found that Sir Donald Howard's were fixed upon me.

I think mine must have said to him: "I do not know what wrong you have suffered, but whatever it may be, I sympathize and constitute myself the champion of your cause." He answered me, saying: "I understand you, and I thank you. I meant to be your friend through a sense of duty; I am now, and henceforward, your friend from choice."

But then I had always a vivid imagination. I am only certain of my own thoughts. As to his, I might too easily have been mistaken.

During the passage of this telegraphic, or rather telepathic, message my book had seized the opportunity of sliding to the floor.

The hero of the photograph bent over and picked it up. "Thank you, Sir Donald," I ejaculated before I had stopped to think.

Miss Cade looked at me sharply, and saw me covered with typical schoolgirl blushes. "What—have you, too, met Sir Donald Howard before?" she exclaimed suspiciously.

"No—I—that is—" I had begun to stammer, losing my presence of mind, and forgetting how easily I could excuse myself by saying I had but just now heard her repeat his name. I supposed there must have been something in my manner of pronouncing it which betrayed my former knowledge of him, and I seemed in my own eyes so foolish and so gauche, that I might have been long in regaining self-possession, had not Sir Donald himself come to my rescue.

"May I not be allowed to know Miss Rutland?" he asked. "Lady Mary wrote me she was expecting her, and you see I had only to set my wits to work to guess that this was she. While perhaps you're not aware, Miss Cade, that you have spoken my name at least three times within the last five minutes."

The crisis was tided over. But I knew now that Mrs. Rayne had written, had enlisted his friendship for me, and he was fulfilling a promise to her already.

He was certainly a very handsome man, notwithstanding what I considered his approaching middle age, and if I had not been told, I should have supposed him to be about six or seven-and-twenty. He looked every inch a soldier, and even the bronzed skin, contrasting so oddly with the short, crinkly, fair hair, told of exposure and perhaps adventure. I made up my mind that Mrs. Rayne—or "Nichols," as I knew I must now bring myself to call her—should tell me the story at which she had more than hinted. And then in another instant I was wondering if it would not be something like treachery to listen to a tale which maybe he would not care to have me hear.

"Oh, if Lady Mary has written you," repeated Miss Cade with a certain stiffness, her rabbit-eyes traveling from him to me, and back to him again.

The next time that Sir Donald spoke I ventured rather shyly to answer him. And presently it came to pass that we were actually in conversation together, tacitly, for the moment, leaving the other two out.

"Have you ever been in Cumberland before, Miss Rutland?" he asked.

I shook my head, smiling a little. "I have never been anywhere," I said, "except in imagination. In that way I have done a good deal of traveling."

"I'm not sure it isn't a good way," Sir Donald answered, looking very kindly at me with eyes that prophesied a friendship I longed to have begin.

"One is never disillusioned when one only sees places and things in the imagination. In that world the gloss is never worn off."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]