

"Then she dressed herself suitably in Lina's things—they were both so much of a size as to give no difficulty on that score—and put her own plain dress over all. The carriage ordered drew up in the street below. Margaret bent to kiss poor Granny's cold, wrinkled face and passive lips.

"Don't leave me, Lina," the faint voice murmured; and it made Margaret strong.

"Good-bye, Lina," she said, with a kiss. "I will do everything just as you have directed."

She was late at the theatre. They were scolding about Lina, and she hurried into the dressing-room. The attendant there was a stranger. It was curious that it should have happened so; but the regular woman was ill, and for to-night a substitute was provided. She did not know but it was the regular dancer, Lina Du Puy, whom she had to dress. The other girls were ready and had quitted the room, and the woman was a trifle cross at the tardiness of the (among them) chief dancer. So, amid much hurry, Margaret slipped into her cloudy, airy, diaphanous garments, and ran across to the stage, questioning her own identity.

The audience waited; Margaret was indeed late. This creature, Lurline, rising from the sea foam with the cloud of golden lights about her, was more beautiful than ever before. The surging tide of music throbbed on the air, and it touched some wandering chord in Margaret's nature.

Every pulse started into passionate life. The light feet were at home in those graceful poises and whirls, and in that slow, floating, undulating movement, in which the very soul seemed to grow languid with overwhelming grace.

Up and down. Circles widening, narrowing; drooping arms, and shoulders, and eyes; soft lights in rose and violet, gold and purple; a glamour of beauty, a perpetual dazzle, until at last the Naiad disappeared in her sea-green foam.

Then came a prolonged burst of applause. Lina had never danced like this; had never looked the character as Margaret looked it. An eager childish delight seemed to thrill her every nerve.

"You look perfectly marvellous to-night!" declared Mademoiselle Arline, who rarely descended to speak to any of the dancers. "You—Why—are you a witch, child? It is not Lina Du Puy?"

"No, it is not Lina. Her grandmother is dying, and I came to take her place."

"Who are you?"

"Call me Lina. For I am Lina to-night."

Something in the young girl checked further inquiries. And Mademoiselle was in no wise offended, since the dancing had been so vast a success, and it was her own benefit. At Easter she was going abroad to fulfil other engagements.

The piece went on. Now the audience saw a whirling, radiating circle, a haunting crowd of lovely forms and faces; then only this one peerless girl, holding them breathless. It seemed to Margaret that she could dance on those enchanted boards forever.

At last the concluding act came. There was some wonderful dancing, some bewildering fairy scenery; and Margaret, on a cloud, with her own cloud of flimsy golden hair about her, might have been the Peri indeed.

She hardly listened for thanks and compliments, but hurried off her stage trappings, and hurried on her mortal garments with a feeling akin to intoxication. The hired carriage awaited her, and she sprang in, leaving hosts of questions unanswered.

Arrived at Madame Du Puy's she hastened up the stairs, hardly daring to enter. Lina met her on the threshold.

"I am safe, you see. It was royal. Why should I not tell the truth? I am not tired, but full of excitement, and throbbing with a lingering sense of music. It was triumph. And your poor mother, Lina?"

Lina shook her head. Margaret gathered the truth from the room's strange stillness.

"Yes, she is gone," sobbed Lina. "She rallied again after you left, and talked, oh! so sweetly. Margaret, is there a heaven for us poor folks who do the best we can in our hard, thorny path? For she was so good in her simplicity, homely way. And I can never, never thank you. Not for worlds would I have missed this evening with her."

Margaret was weeping too. Changing her things again, she kissed Lina in silence, and ran down stairs, the great sobs in her throat almost choking her. Oh! how strange life was. Sorrow, and death, and gawdity, and carelessness, jostled each other on every side. If she could dare to tell all this to Richard Ashburton, surely he would give her pardon!

The carriage deposited her at home. She shivered a little in the hall. Reaction had set in; all her excitement was gone; how weak and tired she was no one but herself could know.

Richard Ashburton opened the drawing room door. Pale and stern, his lips compressed to a scarlet line, his eyes steady with a relentless light, he stood.

"Oh!" she exclaimed with a crimson flush, which quickly faded to ashes.

She would have glided by him, but he barred her with his arm, and led her into the dimly-lighted room.

"Where have you been, Margaret?" he asked, and his voice was steely and incisive, like the axe of an executioner.

"Don't ask me to-night," she pleaded in pitiful bewilderment, shrinking at every nerve.

"I did not expect you to answer. Unfor-

tunately I know—or I fear I know. Chance took me to the old theatre to-night, and I thought I saw you amid the dancers. I could scarcely be mistaken in that face, in that shining hair. Were you there or not?"

He hoped she would give him an indignant denial. He would believe her against the evidence of his own senses. But Margaret Chantrey would have cut off her right hand sooner than utter an untruth.

"I was there."

A sharp pang, as of a knife's point, pierced Richard Ashburton's heart. Worse than all, he thought she stood there before him bold and defiant. Ah! how our friends misjudge us because a tear sometimes comes too late. It seemed to Margaret that she should fall on the floor at his feet: the room swam round to her tired and excited brain. Bitter anger was aroused within him, bitter scorn lay in his tone.

"So," he said, "the old life that we have striven to lead you to forget has a stronger hold upon you than gratitude. It is as my mother predicted."

There are moments in the lives of some women when a sudden revelation lifts them up to a heaven of perfect love and trust. It plunged Margaret into a gulf of black despair. Child as they had always considered her, she knew not that she loved Richard Ashburton with a woman's enduring passion. But his tone, his stern face, misled her. What was she to him? Nothing. Just the contemptible little waif they had saved, and nothing higher or better. Yes! she might (as she believed) as well lay her soul bare to the crowd, before whom she had danced to-night, as to this man. He and his mother had deemed her a toy, but far beneath them in all the finest relations of life. And she loved him! She knew it now—she loved him; and he despised her as a thing of scorn. Poor Margaret Chantrey's heart seemed breaking then.

"You know you were to give up old associates, to blot out that past life and forget it," he resumed in his coldest tone—for, indeed, this escapade was trying him sorely. "Margaret, it pains me to say it, but there has been a course of duplicity persevered in that no one would hardly credit in a mere child. For this plan must have been in your mind for months, and you must have been waiting for an opportunity to put it into execution. It is not possible that you should dance as you danced to-night without long and continued practice. What can you say to my mother? Is this a fitting reward for her kindness?"

He had already judged and condemned her; and, false though his assumptions were, she could not defend herself. She clasped her small white hands together, and there was a curious flickering of the lines about the mouth. One wild impulse crossed her soul—to fling herself at his feet and plead for a little tenderness. Could she dare to do it?

Hesitating, she raised her eyes. How cold and pitiless he looked; how sternly condemning. No, though she fell on her knees, a penitent, and told the truth, he would not believe her; she could see that. And there rushed over herself a most condemning, exaggerated view of the step she had taken; she saw how false it had been, how impossible that it could ever be recalled. All the intoxication, the triumph, the glamour, and the glitter looked most unreal to her now.

"Let me go!" she exclaimed, with a cry of anguish. "You are cruel!"

"Cruel! What have I done? Have we not both tried to lead you to forget the poverty, and toil, and evil of the past? Have we not cared for you tenderly, surrounded you with luxury?—yet the old life is stronger than it all. But you will have to choose between us; to renounce one or the other."

She flew past him like a wild, hunted thing, up the broad stairs to her own room, and locked the door. He doubted her. He believed she could be base and vile, and full of black deceit! He might forgive, but he could never, never love her. What mad folly in her to think that could ever have been! Mrs. Ashburton wanted him to marry his cousin—that rich girl who was there so constantly. She had fancied that he did not care for that girl; but she must have been mistaken. And to stay there, to see another worshipped with all the trust and confidence of his soul—to stay and be nothing to him; worse than nothing no, she could not bear that. Better that she could go back to the old life.

So reasoned this inexperienced but impassioned girl. And in her foolishness, her resolution, she took a fatal step.

Richard Ashburton sat a long while over late breakfast the following morning, and yet Margaret came not. Mrs. Ashburton, who had come home very late indeed, and felt weary, had not yet risen. He paced the library in tumult and impatience, waiting for Margaret; she, he supposed, was weary too; and he wanted her to come, that he might tell her how harsh he had been the past night. At midday Wilson entered her room. No Margaret was there. On the table lay a brief note, addressed to him.

"I have gone back to the old life."

"I always felt a little afraid," confessed Mrs. Ashburton in her smooth and stately tone. "There was a taint of it in her blood, an alien gipsy element. Poor Paul! What a pity he should have wrecked himself by marrying that Italian singer!"

Three years had come and gone since Margaret Chantrey had left her home of luxury and

beauty. They had not found her. Left it for what? Richard Ashburton often asked himself that question. He had been cold and stern to her that night; pitiless, indeed, for his disappointment in her had proved so deep and bitter. But he knew now that the light in her courageous face, which had turned hardness and duplicity, must have sprung from truth and honour. Foolish, daring, and Quixotic as the step she had taken that night, in dancing, had been, he wished with his whole repentant heart that he had met it differently.

He had been grave before, but now a shadow seemed to hang about him. His mother, with a woman's intuition, guessed that Margaret had been more to him than a bright, winsome child.

"Yes it is best they should be separated," she told herself; but told it with a sigh, for there was some pity in her nature as well as pride. Richard could not be made to understand the wrong it would be to his children to give them such a mother.

In this the third year Richard Ashburton went on the Continent, and made there a long sojourn; now halting at this place, now in that. In the last place he stopped at a little obscure Italian town, fever had broken out, and he took it. The inhabitants had, so many as could, run away in fright, leaving neither women nor nurses for the sick.

Mr. Ashburton had it badly. For a week or two he was quite out of his senses. But his strong constitution had finally conquered the disease, and the balmy April sunshine was doing the rest.

"I owe my life to you, Doctor Biagi," he said thankfully one morning. "My mother will not know how to thank you."

The little, swarthy Italian doctor rubbed his hands together.

"It was a hard fight, signor, but the credit is not all mine—yet the signora bade me never mention it."

"The signora?" exclaimed Richard, with a puzzled expression.

"The women had all run away, you know, signor, and we could get no nurses. It might have gone badly with you, but that a beautiful English lady heard of your case, and came to nurse you yourself. She never left you until the danger was past and you were recovering consciousness. You owe your life to her more than to me."

"Who was this English lady?"

"I forget her name just now. Those English names are puzzling to us Italians. She speaks our language as a native, though, and she is so beautiful: an angel's face with bright golden hair."

A strange idea brought a thrill to Richard Ashburton's weakened frame. Speaking Italian as a native—and with beautiful gold hair!

"Was she young, Doctor?"

"Quite young."

"Do you think the name was Chantrey?"

"Shan-tree? But, yes, it is like that. I did not want her to stay here; she had not the health for it; but she quietly told me she must and should."

"What is the matter with her?" asked Richard quickly.

"The malady that some of you English have," answered the doctor, tapping his chest. "And now she has taken the fever through nursing you. But she has it slightly."

"Taken the fever from me! Good heavens!" added Richard, falling back on his sofa cushions.

"She saved your life," said the little doctor, in his straightforward manner. "And though the fever has not been severe, she has little strength. If you would like to send a message—"

Ashburton feared he knew what that meant.

"Yes," he answered, with a strange hush in his tone, "I would like to send a message. When are you going? Is it far?"

"Half a league, perhaps. I shall go out again at four."

"Call us you pass," was the brief response.

Doctor Biagi was not wrong when he fancied that Mr. Ashburton intended to go himself. He made no objection after examining his pulse.

A little vine embowered cottage, with a sturdy peasant woman for mistress. Within the slender form of a watcher, who came forward with an anxious face. It was Lina Du Puy.

The explanation of the past may be given in a few words.

On the very day following the death of madame Du Puy, Lina received the offer of an engagement in Paris, for which her mother had long hoped. She went to it immediately, taking Margaret with her; and hence the secret of Mr. Ashburton's non-successful inquiries about her. The engagement in Paris at an end, they came on to Italy. Both of them had been most successful in their career since: both had led the most retired and the best of lives. Then Margaret's health began to fail. Symptoms of consumption manifested themselves. Lina remembered the death of Mrs. Chantrey, and shuddered for her friend. Giving up their engagements for a season, they came to this retired town, to see what rest and quiet would do for Margaret. But it did nothing—she grew worse and weaker. Then the fever broke out. They thought they were safe, being so far from the town. And safe they would have been, but that Dr. Biagi told them of his English patient, one Signor Richard Ashburton; and Margaret insisted upon going to nurse him. All this Lina hurriedly told, together with the true history of that long-past night. Margaret had gone to dance in her place that she might stay with her dying mother.

"Let me go in to her," he gasped.

Lina stood aside. Richard Ashburton entered the chamber of death; and there lay Margaret, white and wasted, but with more than mortal beauty.

"Oh, my child! my darling!"

Margaret moved her eyes slowly, and then uttered a low, passionate cry.

He took her in his arms; he kissed the pale, trembling lips and downcast eyelids, still radiant with their beautiful fringe.

"My little wanderer," he said, "my precious darling! you can never know my grief at finding you thus, too late. Oh! why did you leave me? I was cruel that night, unjust; but you need not have been ashamed of the truth. Lina has told me. It was noble, if ill-judged. And if you could understand my soul at this moment, and believe that the old dream of those days has never utterly faded—!" He broke down with emotion.

"A dream?" she murmured.

"The dream that I should win you for my wife. The hope that I should. Margaret, I loved you dearly."

She raised her white, wan face, into which there came something of a glorifying flush, and lay in his arms, softly whispering:

"It was best then that I should go, Richard. Best for your mother's sake; for all our sakes. Let me tell the truth now—death always gives us courage, you know. Some fascination of the old life lured me, and my love for Lina and Madame Du Puy was strong. They once stood between my father and starvation; they tended my mother; and Lina has repaid what I did that night; with the tenderest care; but for her you might never have looked upon the face of your poor little Margaret now. Yes, I went that night to dance in her stead, and fate sent you there."

"Oh, if you had told me all!" he groaned.

"You doubted me—before I had even spoken! Yes, you did, Richard. I thought you were impatiently angry, thought you scorned and despised me; while I—God will forgive it now—loved you with a child's unreasoning, jealous adoration. To be thrust aside because I was not your equal, to be held as pet and plaything, but never aspire to the height of a friend—to see, perhaps, another loved and revered—ah! it was a child's foolish folly."

"I loved you then, Margaret; loved you truly tenderly, passionately. I shall never love another."

She made an entreating gesture with her wasted hands. How bitter all this past misapprehension was!

"I was not worthy of so much love, Richard," she softly whispered. "Perhaps I never should have been. But"—raising the sad, purple eyes, full of their dying light—"I want you to know that poor dancers may be good and pure, in spite of their shortened skirts and the tinsel they must wear. I and Lina have tried to do our duty before God as truly as we could have done it had we had parents to protect us, handsome homes to shelter us. I am going to him with, so far, a clear conscience."

"And you came to save me; you have given your life for mine! Oh, Margaret! is it too late? Can no love, and no repentance bring you back? Ah, heaven! This is bitter."

"It is best, Richard; dear, believe me it is best," she answered; but her voice began to waver strangely, and the dusk of twilight floated before her dreamy eyes. "I thank you for some happy years. I was glad to do it—at the last. Your life is grander and broader than my poor pale years, gone astray among thorns. Ask God to forgive me all—for your sake."

He gathered her into his arms, and the warm tears of passionate regret dropped upon her pure face, slowly turning to sculptured marble. One tender, fluttering kiss, and the old life and the new life were alike ended.

Margaret Chantrey was laid in her quiet grave which Lina Du Puy will often turn aside out of her way to tend.

Whether this bright, impulsive, but grand and tender soul was wasted we cannot decide here. Was it better that she should be taken to her rest thus early, or that she should have stayed decorously at Mrs. Ashburton's, and lived to be Richard's wife? Who can tell? God knows best.

Mrs. Ashburton frets a little amid her state and elegance that Richard does not marry. She has well-nigh forgotten the laughing, wayward girl who once made the house bright.

He will never forget. Is it so strange a thing to be true to the woman a man has loved, and who gave her sweet young life for his? Is it not a fragment of the greater love, left amid the ruins of this gray old world?

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