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**SISTERS THREE**

The girl was tall and slender too— with a maiden just upon the outer verge of childhood, gazing forth upon the path which she must tread with a certain eagerness, interwoven with shrinking, in her dark velvet-soft eyes.

The face was singularly delicate, with small, distinctive, high-bred features, somewhat overshadowed by the wide brow with its wealth of shadowy hair, so light in texture that the least air—ruffled it—hair that sprang from the face with a crisp, elastic wave that framed it as in a nimbus, and clustered in tendrils around the small ears and round the face delicately fair in colouring, with face delicately fair in colouring, with the texture of fine old ivory, almost colourless at most times, but flushing with a wild-rose tint in moments of excitement or exertion—a face which haunted the memory and which visited in waking dreams those who studied it with doubtful appreciation.

Such was Allardyce Vere as she appeared before Miss Willoughby on this brilliant spring morning, clad in a plain linen dress of a dull indigo-blue, which heightened the peculiar delicacy of her complexion and seemed to awaken in the dark, dreamy eyes some reflection of the deep indigo-blue of the sea. It was only in a strong light or in peculiar circumstances that the slumbering blue fires in the eyes of Allardyce ever came into evidence.

Now she raised her head and looked full at Miss Willoughby.

"Are those the flowers I am to arrange for to-night?"

"Yes; they have arrived just now from Clumbermore." Allardyce knew by now that Miss Willoughby had a country house of that name, with great ranges of glass and wide stretches of garden, whence came the beautiful things for her to deck the fine rooms of her London mansion.

"There are more below for the dining table, but these I had brought up for you to see to. And while you arrange them tell me your news. Do you know, Allardyce, I am not at all disposed to lose you now I have got you or to let you go?"

When Miss Willoughby smiled much of the sternness and sorrowfulness of her aspect vanished, and in these rare moments a sensitive observer became aware of possibilities in her nature which at other times were much obscured.

Allardyce looked up from her examination of the big boxes of flowers with one of her shadowy smiles of grateful appreciation. She had known Miss Willoughby for six months, and was under many small debts of gratitude to her; but only at rare intervals did she come into touch with that hidden self which as a rule the elder woman kept hidden

these girls. They are ladies, good to look at, and not lacking in talents. The youngest is musical and artistic. She is only about eighteen, I believe."

Miss Willoughby preferred youth and immaturity, for she was a born ruler and wanted no will raised in opposition to her own. She wrote for Allardyce to come and see her. The girl came, and had been coming off and on ever since. A certain intimacy had thus arisen between them, compounded of sympathetic tastes and kindred appreciations; but Miss Willoughby had never spoken to Allardyce of her past life, nor had she questioned the girl about her own. That she was rich and well born was self-evident; that she was a woman with a hidden sorrow in her life Allardyce knew before the first month had passed. But of the nature of this sorrow no hint had ever been dropped; and the only fact concerning her past life which the girl had learned during this time was that she had lost her only brother, her only near relative, in the South African War.

"I thought perhaps it was just your music—to give me a chance of being heard; perhaps to get other engagements; an excuse to pay me something—for I know that my music lacks so many things. I am so young, and I never trained for the profession. Of course I had good lessons—once; but mostly, I think I taught myself."

"Exactly; and it is just that for which I value your music—for the self which it brings out. You take us into the woodlands and make us hear the birds carol and see the dance of the daffodils in the spring-tide breezes; and we listen to the murmur and splash of summer along a halcyon shore, or shiver at the wild, whistling wind and the roar and shout of the breakers upon an iron-bound coast. Any of us can command technical skill and training by opening our purses, but the soul that speaks through the wall of strings and bow—that is the gift of genius."

"Genius? Ah, Miss Willoughby, if only I could believe it! But indeed, my only voices—I can make music of so few!"

All the time that Allardyce was speaking her fingers were at work among the flowers. She touched them with a tenderness which was curious to watch. Even and anon she lifted a mass of fragrant blossom and laid it against her cheek in a gentle caress. Each arrangement she made was a harmony in color and form, and seemed to be made with an unerring instinct quite independent of thought or scheme.

Six months ago Miss Willoughby's legal adviser, who was also in the measure a personal friend, had told her of three sisters—ladies—left in poor circumstances through the death of a spendthrift father, whose affairs his firm were settling as best they could, realizing that there would be little, saved from the wreck.

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is dead, and he has left us all his property. There is the house where mother was born—a house overlooking the sea—a house I have dreamed about all my life, so that when I go there I think I shall know it."

The girl's eyes grew dreamy, as though they reflected some inner vision, and the delicate corners of her persuasive mouth took that shadowy outline of a smile which always arrested the notice of the onlooker. It gave to the girl the aspect of one who was holding communings with inner things which to her made the true realities of life.

"And I shall hear the voice of the sea again—day and night, night and day. When it calls I can answer. Oh, I shall be happy, happy, happy! The home our mother used to tell me of, the song of the sea she sang to me! I shall live with that song always now!"

Miss Willoughby a little severely, "that your uncle should have sent for you or come to you when your father died. He was then your natural protector."

"But he was ill himself—helpless, paralysed. He was not able to bear the thought of change. I shall understand that. He is dead, I shall give up all he had—and his house beside the sea."

"And you will be co-heiresses of some great fortune perhaps?"

"Child, I only want to know what you want to tell."

"I do not think that our uncle was rich, as you would use that word. The house is his, and a live one. It is not yours, not more. But think what it means to us! Freedom to stretch our wings and fly away—back to blue skies and a wide sea!—woods and bricketts and mortar, the hoof of motor-horns, the crowds and jostling of the streets! It is more a dream to me still than the truth. To exchange London for Rockhew! Ah, think of it—think of it!"

The girl stretched her arms upwards as though to embrace the shaft of sunlight which darted guttering across the room to her feet. The next instant she started and came quickly towards Miss Willoughby.

"You are ill," she exclaimed. Let me call some one to you!"

But, though her face was curiously drawn and ashen, Miss Willoughby held Allardyce fast and would not let her call or ring.

"It is nothing, child—a little spasm which sometimes catches me for a moment. There—I am better already! What was it you were saying? Did you tell me the name of your house was Rockhaven?"

"That is the name of the place, not the house. Now please lie down on the sofa and rest whilst I finish the flowers. You look just like your own ghost. You must please rest and be quiet."

Lying on the sofa, her eyes fixed sometimes upon the fitting figure of the girl, sometimes upon the sunny sky without, Cordelia Willoughby murmured from time to time one single word, shivering from head to foot as she did so. That one word was—

"Rockhaven! Rockhaven!"

And, when later on Allardyce had gone and the mistress of the sumptuous mansion found herself alone, she sat up with a gesture almost tragic in its despair, and other words forced themselves from her pale lips.

"Oh, that wise old Book, that terrible Book! Where is it that these words stand you out? My sin, my sin! Can I never, never forget?"

Suddenly she raised herself and crossed to the small inner room where the flower-boxes still lay upon the floor, with drooped petals, bits of moss, and that pathetic confusion which Allardyce would fain have cleared away had she been allowed to do so.

She went slowly to a portrait upon an easel over which an embroidered square of silk hung. She pulled this aside, and her eyes met those of a man in military dress from a hand-some manly face which bore a strong resemblance to her own. The eyes fixed and held her own. Miss Willoughby flung up her arms in a tragic gesture.

"Harold! I cannot do it—I cannot—I cannot! Oh, why cannot I learn how to forget?"

CHAPTER III.

"First-class tickets! Oh, Mr. Butterworth, what a terribly extravagant person you are to-day!"

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