

A GIRL OF THE PEOPLE

By Mrs. C. N. Williamson

"I must forgive you, since I am sure you meant to be so kind," I said more gently. "At least, I will, if you'll tell me one thing."

"I can almost promise, for such a bribe, that I will."

"Why are you suddenly so different from what you were a few nights ago, when you came to me at the bridge? You are more like what I remember of you the first time."

"Thank you for remembering at all. But that is another thing I must ask you to forgive me for; the way I behaved to you at Waterloo Bridge. It was the only thing to do, you know—to be firm and stern. But it was not what was in my heart. I wonder if I dare tell you what was really there?"

I looked up at him half-startled. But I said: "Yes, tell me." And I made a sign that he should sit down in the chair left not far from my side by Mrs. Jennett.

"It may be presumptuous for a man like me to pity a woman like you," he began, slowly, even shyly. "But I did pity you then, with an infinite pity. If I had been your brother I could not have felt greater sorrow and tenderness. I thought how you must have suffered, and it seemed cruel that you should have to suffer. You are almost a child still, you see, and I had thought of you so many times after that first meeting at the theatre, as a girl born to happiness and good fortune. I shall never forget how I felt when you turned your face as—as I held you back from that plunge, and saw—it was you. I could not believe my eyes for a moment."

"Nor I mine," I said, softly. "It seemed very strange that you should come to my rescue for the second time."

"Do you forgive me for what must have seemed like harshness and lack of sympathy?" he asked.

"There's nothing to forgive. Only everything to thank you for."

"Then you do thank me?" he questioned, eagerly. "You aren't sorry now that I forced you back to life?"

"I ought to be sorry," I said. "Nothing is changed. I have as little to live for as I had then, as little chance of redeeming miserable failures. Yet—I suppose because I'm young and the love of life is instinctive, now that—that there's sunshine, and I'm not faint with hunger and dropping with weariness—I can't feel all sorry."

"Good heavens! You were hungry!" he ejaculated in an odd voice. "How terrible—how unbelievable!"

I could not help laughing, though I really did not feel like laughing at all. "Not so very terrible to be hungry," I returned. "But now, looking back upon that night, the blackest I ever knew, I think, perhaps, if I hadn't been physically so weak I might have been morally stronger. Of course, it was cowardly to do what I meant to do, though I'd just persuaded myself that it wasn't—when you came. I hope that I shall never be so wicked again. And I shall not even think of it, if only I can get work. I did try so hard before, but I had no luck. Maybe you will give me a little good advice how to find it."

He looked me earnestly in the face. "I didn't dream it was that kind of trouble," he said. And I thought that, for some reason, his eyes expressed relief.

"I suppose not," I rejoined, with a smile that was not very gay. "When you saw me first I didn't appear exactly a candidate for the workhouse, but I was, even then, though I didn't know it myself. And the other night—well, that frock and hat were made before I realized that I was a beggar."

Suddenly, when I had gone so far, I was overcome with an irresistible desire to tell him my whole story—that part of it which concerned myself alone. I had not intended, even a moment beforehand, to confide in John Bourke or anyone else, but his eyes dwelt on me with a yearning look, and the words spoke themselves.

I told him my name, which he had not known before; then I had thought myself Sheila Cope, and found that I was Jenny Harland, for Harland, I had learnt, was my own father's name. I told John Bourke that Lady Cope had died on the very night when I had seen him first. That I had lost my home, and the money which would have come to me if I had really been Lady Cope's daughter. I even went faltering on, and to my own surprise was presently describing Easel street, my mother, Pan and Totsey, and Tom Stephens, Pan's lover. I said little of Sir Roger Cope or his attitude towards me, save that he had inherited everything; but when my companion spoke at last, it was to begin with Roger Cope.

"Don't think me very impatient," he said, having heard me to the end without interruption. "I don't speak out of idle curiosity. But—didn't Sir Roger Cope want you to keep your old home—only in a way to which you couldn't consent?"

"Yes," I rather reluctantly admitted. "And you ran away from him, and from everything? And he didn't write to you, or come to see you though he knew your address?"

"He came the very day I left Easel street. I suppose you'll think I'm always running away." I said this, laughing, and no prophetic instinct brought the tears instead.

"He came to make the same offer again?" I nodded.

"Do you like Sir Roger Cope?" abruptly.

"No-o. I never did. Though I could not have explained why till lately."

"Well, then, perhaps you won't mind my telling you what has struck me. I don't know Sir Roger Cope personally, but I know of him. He is popular, in his own set, and he is called clever in his profession. But he has shown the iron hand under the velvet in his treatment of you. I heard that he had come into a fortune through the death of a relative, and that a girl who had believed herself the heiress had gone abroad to live, on an allowance made by him. No doubt that's the version which has been given out, for the benefit of those who knew you. And I, not knowing the name of the ladies I had very impudently fol-

lowed from the Lyceum, didn't for an instant associate the story with you. Now I believe that Roger Cope is even a more unscrupulous man than you have thought him. Did you connect your failure at the employment agencies in any way with him?"

"No," I responded in surprise. "Well, I do. I think it is not at all unlikely that he paid some person to watch your movements, report to him, and prejudice the minds of the agents you had applied to against you with some falsehood."

"What object could he have had for being so gratuitously cruel?" I cried.

"I may be doing the man a hideous injustice," said John Bourke, "but the object which he might have had is easy enough for anyone except an unassuming young girl to see. He wanted you to marry him; you refused. He, indirectly, sent you away to a place where he knew you would meet with humiliations and deprivations beyond anything you had experienced. Then he might have resolved to turn the screw tighter and prevent your escaping to more endurable surroundings."

"I did suspect that he had waited before coming to see me until I should have grown nearly desperate. But I never thought of the other part. Even now it sounds too horrid to be possible."

"I hope it is not possible," said Mr. Bourke. "Surely you don't suggest that he hired the woman to pick my pocket and add almost the last feather to my burden?"

"No, I stopped short at that in my accusations. But it isn't beyond believing if he paid certain persons to keep an eye on you."

"If that be true, thank heaven he must have lost sight of me now," I said.

"He shall not find you again if I can help it. Not while you desire to keep out of his way. And as for me, you shall have it, I promise you, as soon as you are strong enough. Already, if you will forgive me again, I've thought of a plan, and I'll risk offending you by proposing it."

"I shall be grateful, not offended, whatever it may be. Don't keep me in suspense."

"Well, how should you like to learn typewriting, and, after a while, if you fancied it, shorthand, too?"

"Like and 'fancy' are inappropriate words in my desperate case," I said. "But, as it happens, I should do both."

"Very well, then, I'll teach you typewriting when you are stronger—in a few days, perhaps."

"But I can't go on staying here—in your house."

"It isn't my house. It is Mrs. Jennett's. But as you are so anxious to get away you will be able to, say, ten days or a fortnight's time (if you are quick at learning), to earn enough money for lodgings of your own."

"Who would give a wretched arrangement like that?"

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