

His Little Girl

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CHAPTER X.

THE room was square, small and furnished with the utmost simplicity. In the centre was a table covered with a red cloth, and on the table were an open blotting book, an inkstand and some pens. Round the table six chairs were ranged at regular intervals, and against the dingily papered walls were two armchairs covered with uncompromising horsehair. A deal cupboard stood beside the little fireplace, and on the floor was a most inadequate square of cheap carpet. Beyond these the room had nothing, excepting an American eight-day clock, which stood on the mantelpiece and ticked loudly and aggressively after the manner of its kind. No other sound broke the total stillness of the little apartment; plainly it was at the back of the house, and any noises from the street outside would not penetrate into it. The couple of people who sat there together, sat in such silence that when at last one of them spoke, his voice seemed to awaken scores of slumbering echoes, and the woman, lost in reverie in the armchair, started and uttered a quick exclamation.

"I did not have you brought here to indulge in day dreams," her companion said roughly, though in his well-bred voice there was a singular and penetrating charm, "I sent for you to give you more explicit directions than I was able to do before. Where is Michael?"

"He brought me here, and put me into this room. I do not know where he went. You must remember this house is strange to—"

"Yes, yes, we needn't waste time over explanations. It was necessary that you should come to this house. You know by this time that I make no arrangements that are not necessary. As the great English poet said: 'There is method in my madness.'"

"You wanted me for some definite purpose?" The two spoke rapidly—in French—and it was noticeable that, although there was a look of high courage in the woman's face, she seemed to shrink a little back in her chair when she met her companion's eyes. They were eyes which, once seen, were not easy to forget, eyes vividly blue in colour, and with a most compelling and penetrating glance. Perhaps the woman, who shrank back as her own glance met them, felt, as others had felt before her, that those bright blue eyes could look into her very soul, and even read her thoughts, and she looked away from the strong, masterful face that watched her, and fixed her gaze on the deal cupboard by the fireplace.

"Naturally, I wanted you for a definite purpose," the man answered drily, rising and standing before the fireplace, "I have a special work for you." As he stood there, his dominating personality seemed to fill the whole of the small room, and to overawe still further the woman in the chair. Her eyes came back unwillingly to his face, her gloved hands that had rested quietly in her lap, moved restlessly, and she began to pull off first one glove and then the other, as though the slight movement lessened the sense of strain.

"Then you no longer want me to continue what I have been doing," she said, "am I to play a totally different part?"

"You have often been in England before—you understand that," came the answer, spoken sharply and imperiously, "but, hitherto, you have only stayed in hotels."

"Only stayed in hotels," she repeated mechanically after him, "and—then—"

"THEN—your uncle was anxious," a somewhat sardonic smile crossed his handsome face, "you were anxious yourself—to learn something of English family life, something more than can be learnt in hotels. Your uncle therefore," he spoke more slowly, his eyes fixed significantly upon her face, "your uncle has decided to find a suitable family with whom you could live for a time, from whom you could learn all that is best of the home life of England."

"Yes," she said, interrogatively, "so far I follow you without difficulty. I am to go to live somewhere *en famille*, but where?—and why? May I know why? Or is the reason for this step not to

be explained? You—" she paused, and looked into his masterful face with a smile, "you—are Mr. Muller, and I—your niece, Rosa?"

"I am Mr. Muller, and you my niece Rosa—quite so," he replied, "and I do propose to tell you my reason for sending you to Stockley."

"Stockley? Why, Stockley? It is a suburb, is it not? I thought suburbs were—"

"The invention of the evil one? They are. But at this moment a suburb chances to be the place in which an important piece of work can be done; and I intend to entrust the work to you, my dear Rosa." A smile parted the well-cut but cruel lips that were not hidden by his black moustache, and he bent a little towards her, looking deep into her eyes with his own compelling glance. Her hands stirred uneasily again, she moved her head much as a frightened animal moves when a snake first begins to fascinate it, then with a quick gesture she flung back her cloak, revealing the costly evening dress below it.

"What is the work?" she said, after an almost imperceptible pause, "not—to track—" and her voice died into silence, whilst the colour ebbed out of her cheeks.

"You are far too squeamish, my dear child," Muller laughed easily, "what I am asking you to do will hurt nobody. It is only a question of the proper person getting his rights; and—in this case—I am the proper person."

"Then it is not—work of the Holy—"

"It is work for me," Muller interrupted sharply. "It is a private matter, or—at least it is mainly private—though," he paused, and studied her face with keen scrutiny, "though the matter is not *only* of importance to me," he added, slowly and significantly. The woman's eyes were caught and held by that significant glance, the colour mounted to her face, she turned her head again with that same restless movement which was so like the movement of a frightened creature fascinated by a reptile.

"Then," she said at last, with hesitation, "I suppose—I must do—what you wish."

"CERTAINLY you must do what I wish." The decisive coldness of the words spoken in that musical voice seemed to add to their force, and a shiver ran through Rosa. She drew her wrap closely about her again, and there was a tremulousness in her voice as she answered—

"Tell me what it is I am to do for you. I would rather know quickly what my new business is to be." There was an accent of uneasiness in her tones which did not escape the ear of the listening man; he looked at her more sharply than before.

"You are not getting tired of the work?" Some peculiar note in his voice, some new ring of a sternness that was positively sinister, made her draw herself into an upright position, and the signs of weariness were wiped from her face, as though a sponge had been passed across it. No one, seeing the sudden renewal of vigour and interest that had come over her, would have guessed that a flash of fear had stirred the depths of her soul, that only long habits of self-control saved her from letting the flash of fear look out of her eyes.

"Tired of the work?" she said, her own voice as cool and decisive as his—some rare histrionic power enabling her to punctuate her words with a little laugh—"what an idea! I am tired to-night, because I have been busy all day, first at one social function, then at another, and working all the time. I am simply tired in my body, that is all."

Muller shrugged his shoulders. "Ah, well," he responded, "I suppose one must remember that you are only a woman, in spite of your magnificent physique; and as long as you are only tired in body"—he paused and smiled a strange smile—"there is nothing that need be said. But, for those who tire of the work—" He broke off abruptly, and again their eyes met fully and squarely, but this time there was no shrinking or even a hint of fear in her.

"I understand," she answered, putting out her hands with a gay little gesture, and laughing a gay little laugh, "you need not enter into more minute explanations—Uncle Sebastian," she glanced at him archly, with a repetition of the charming laugh, "and now tell me exactly what you want of me in

this suburb, Stockley, and let me go home to bed."

"You are my niece wishing to know something of English family life. I, in my diplomatic career, especially busy at present, am unable to do as much in the way of taking you about as I should like. You want a home where you can combine town and country life, that is why we search out of London for what we require. You follow me?"

"Perfectly."

"A gentleman I meet in the city, Mr. Stansdale, the last of a good old family, now fallen on evil days, has a home with a sister in Stockley. They will be glad to receive a paying guest. My niece—is glad to be that guest. She goes to them, she makes herself as pleasant and charming as it is in her nature to be, she becomes extremely intimate with the elderly lady, Mr. Stansdale's sister. She learns"—he spoke with increased slowness and emphasis—"she learns every detail about their family, about *every member of that family*."

"Are there many members of it?" Rosa looked a little puzzled.

"Mr. Stansdale and one sister live together. Another sister is taking a post, very much against her brother's wishes, I gather, and he has not confided to me what or where her work will be. That is an unimportant detail. But there was another sister, much younger, who"—his eyes suddenly shifted their gaze from her face—"who is dead; at least, I believe her to be dead. She at one time played a part in my life. She had in her possession a jewel which it is vital I should find. And so far I cannot trace its whereabouts. Circumstances"—he made so long a pause that his companion glanced at him in surprise—"circumstances have made it difficult for me to prosecute searching enquiries about what became of the jewel, and of all the things belonging to the Stansdales' youngest sister. By hook or by crook, you must discover everything you can about her, and about all that was hers. Probe these Stansdales thoroughly, but probe them so delicately that they do not know their family skeletons are being turned out of the cupboard. You understand?"

"I understand, up to a certain point. But do you suppose this jewel you mention is in the Stansdales' care?"

"I don't know where it is," was the irritable reply, "if I *knew* anything definitely, I might be able to lay my hand upon what it is most important I should have. But I know nothing excepting that an interfering, meddlesome fool has put a spoke in my wheel."

"Who is the fool?"

"That ass Tredman, who is by way of being engaged to Miss Cardew. I fancy I may find means to spoke his wheels more effectually than he has done mine. We shall see. He happened to be on the spot when—the youngest of the Stansdales' sisters died. Mind, I only believe she died. I cannot even be sure of that. Circumstances have prevented my discovering the true facts of the case. Possibly you will be able by roundabout means to find out all I wish to know. But the chief aim of your visit to Stockley is to discover the whereabouts of the jewel, and if possible to get it for me."

"Do you want it stolen?" A faintly ironical tone crept into her voice.

"If necessary—yes. Chance led me to stumble across Mr. Stansdale, of whom I had only known before by hearsay, and that chance I intend to use to the best advantage. Therefore I send you to be an inmate of their house, and to ferret out for me all that can be ferreted."

"And this jewel? How shall I know it? What is it like? Is it very valuable?"

Again came that shrug of the shoulders, accompanied by a deprecating gesture of the hands.

"OH! it is worth a little something, nothing very tremendous, because the stones are not genuine. It consists of a pendant with an emerald (an imitation emerald) in its centre. The colouring is particularly bright, and it is surrounded by diamonds. Hanging from them by a fine chain of brilliants is a locket of emeralds and diamonds, and the locket when opened— However, that is a detail of no importance whatever, for neither you nor any other human being who did not know its secret, could open that locket. The description I have given you should make it quite easy for you to recognize the jewel."

"Oh! quite easy," Rosa got up from her chair, "and I gather that you do not only wish me to get this bauble for you. You also want me to find out exactly what has happened to the Stansdales' youngest sister. Is her name Stansdale too, by the way? Or was she married?"

"Her name is not Stansdale, but I have no idea

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