

His Little Girl



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SERIAL STORY

CHAPTER I.

THE FINGER OF FATE.

THE white ribbon of road stretched across the landscape in a straight undeviating line, showing no bend or turn—lost far to view at last, not because it had altered its course, but merely because Giles Tredman's eyes could see no further than the point where the road and blue mountain spurs met and mingled in the far distance. On either side of the white ribbon of road, flat meadow spread itself towards the lesser hills that crept down from the mountain spurs—hills that were covered with birch and beech and chestnut, and here and there an oak to remind the traveller of his English home. In the meadows tall poplars lifted their heads to the clear blue of the May sky; low bushes of hawthorn, like brides in their raiment of snowy blossoms, filled the air with their fragrance; belated marsh marigolds gleamed golden amongst the sedges swept by the soft breeze; the sole remaining snow on the Mont Cenis group shone dazzlingly in the sunshine that flooded mountains, vale and meadow land.

Glancing round him at the goodly landscape of Savoy, Giles Tredman smiled, and lifted his hat, with an instinctive feeling of thankfulness for the loveliness of the laughing land—of delight in the fresh green of spring that seemed so especially green and fresh to the eyes of one newly come from the East. There were many things in his life to bring a smile to his lips, Giles reflected, as he sauntered along the white road that passes out from Aix les Bains and leads you at last to Italy—many things for which to lift his hat in thankfulness. For, though he was a reserved man—and chary, very chary of expressing his deepest feelings—a strong poetical vein underlay the young soldier's practical exterior—and behind his bronzed face and quiet grey eyes, was a soul brimming over with beautiful thoughts, and high ideals.

A keen officer, devoted to his profession, and to the native troops, who adored the tall young sahib, whose lightest word was their law, he was, nevertheless, looking forward eagerly to his long leave in England, and a brief sojourn in Italy on his way home had only whetted his appetite for his own land by the northern sea.

"Jolly sunny valley this," he mused, glancing up at the shining snow of Mont Cenis, and round him at meadows with their snowy hawthorns, the hill-sides whose trees showed every tint of soft spring green, "the sort of happy valley into which sorrow and worry have no right to come. And, by jove, I'll get Grace to come here for part of our honeymoon. She'll like the sunshine and the brightness, and the gaiety of this gay little place," and from general thoughts of the fair world about him, the young man's mind wandered to the more particular thoughts of the tall, dark-eyed girl who to his poetic soul seemed the embodiment of all that was most beautiful, most perfect.

LEFT an orphan when scarcely more than a baby, with no relations but a gentle, chivalrous old uncle, who had been responsible for his training, Giles had grown up with almost knightly respect for womanhood, and with a simple faith in woman's innate goodness which not even his years of Indian service had been able to shake.

Grace Cardew, his betrothed, was, in his eyes, the embodiment of all that a woman should be, and the silent meadows to left and right of him rang with the echoes of his vigorous voice, as he sang—

"The stars shall fall, and the angels be weeping,
Ere I cease to love her—my Queen, my Queen."

Along the white ribbon of road no living soul was in sight—he could sing his heart out to the May morning, and no one would hear or heed, and he strolled on, singing lustily, when, in the far distance from the mountain end of the valley a black speck became visible, its headlong speed bringing it rapidly into his line of vision, and showing it to be a powerful motor car, containing only two men.

"What an ungodly pace that chap's driving,"

Tredman muttered, moving from the high road to the grass bank beside it, to avoid the clouds of dust that trailed in the wake of the car, "not even a straight road like this justified such a pace. My God! what was that?"

A terrific crash behind him was responsible for the exclamation—a crash, followed by a shriek of terror, and then no other sound but the ceaseless pant of the motor. Giles jerked himself round, sprang into the road, and peering through the white cloud of dust that still whirled about the highway, tried in vain to discover what had happened. For a few seconds nothing but dust was visible, and in those seconds the young soldier had raced at top speed back along the road, to the place whence had come that terrible crashing sound—that shriek of agonized fear. And, as he ran, he tripped and nearly fell over something that lay in his path against the bank, something that lifted itself slowly with a little pitiful cry.

"Oh! come—please come."

The dust was clearing away, and Giles, stooping down, saw a small white face looking up at him—the face of a little girl, who held out her hands to him repeating her first appealing sentence—

"Oh! come—please come."

"What is it? What has happened?" he answered, kneeling down beside her on the dusty highway, and drawing her shaking hands into his, "were you—"

"I—don't know," she panted out breathlessly, "the car—came—all in a minute—and—mother and I—mother and I—come and find mother—oh! come, please come!"

The small clinging hands drew him forward, and at the same moment a murmur of voices arose, and the dust cloud clearing wholly away, made him aware what a scene of havoc lay before him.

THE great car, still snorting and panting like a beast of prey that has seized its victim and done its worst, stood in the middle of the road, and scattered on either side of the palpitating monster lay the fragments of what had apparently once been a small pony carriage. Wheels, cushions, framework, lay tossed together in inextricable confusion, and close to the bank a little chestnut pony lay gasping its life out, hurt to the death, and only able to turn pitiful questioning eyes upon the mysterious horror which had brought such destruction.

The two occupants of the motor car stood amidst the wreckage, and as Tredman and the child drew near, he heard one of the men say to the other, in French—

"Drive for your life to fetch a doctor. She is badly hurt." And at that juncture the young Englishman realized that there was yet another actor in the strange little drama in which he had so suddenly been called to take part, and, with a sick throb of dismay, he saw lying amongst the fragments of the carriage the form of an unconscious woman.

"Come to mother," cried the child, whose hand still clung to his, "she has fallen on the hard road. It flung me on the bank, but—mother—mother—" and with a stifled sob that was far more heart-rending than an outburst of passionate grief would have been, she flung herself down in the dust beside the inanimate woman.

"Is she—dead?" Giles whispered in French to the tall man who stood looking silently down at the dreadful havoc his own car had made.

"Dead?—no," was the sharp answer in the same language, "my man understands these things; he has felt her heart—he says she lives. He is going to fetch a doctor at once—at once," and so saying, he turned imperiously to his chauffeur, and speaking a few words in a tongue which Giles knew to be Russian, waved the man towards the car. In another moment the huge machine was whirling along the road towards Aix, at a speed which made Giles pray that another disaster might not follow hard on the heels of the first, and he glanced at the tall stranger beside him, saying quickly—

"Your driver drives recklessly, monsieur."

"He is the best chauffeur in Europe," came the curt response, "and we have never had an accident before. But—" he paused, glancing from the Englishman's bronzed face to the form of the

woman and child upon the ground, "but—for some reason, why, I do not know, the car skidded as we were passing the pony carriage. We struck it full on the side—and—" he shrugged his shoulders significantly, "the result—you see."

"I see, indeed," Giles answered drily, his eyes deep with indignation as they met the other's eyes—cold, blue and steely, "and is there nothing we can do for this poor lady until the doctor comes?"

"My man has given her brandy. He has loosened her clothing and done all that is possible," was the response, in a voice which, despite its coldness, struck upon Giles's ears with a peculiar fascination, "it will be well not to move her until we know what her injuries are."

"Move her? No!" Giles exclaimed, "no one in his senses would wish to move her. We might be doing just the very worst thing in the world. But—my God—it seems so callous—so—brutal—to be standing here doing nothing, nothing, when—for all we know the poor soul may be dying."

"Callous? Brutal?" Again came that lift of the shoulders, and a faint smile flickered over the tall man's features, "it is sometimes less brutal to hold one's hand than to use it, less callous to wait than to act precipitately." Again Giles was struck by the combined coldness and fascination of the well modulated voice, and as his clear eyes glanced at the man's features, he found himself reflecting inconsequently that it was just such a face as this that had power to stir women's hearts.

A certain imperiousness marked the stranger's bearing, but Giles felt instinctively that it was the imperiousness of one born to master, not the cultivated hauteur of a lesser personality. The face was very handsome—and if the chiselling of the features showed something of the coldness of marble—Giles nevertheless recognized their undoubted fascination. The eyes—blue and clear—cold as ice, keen as steel—had an oddly compelling power which the young man owned, though he owned it reluctantly. Meeting those eyes he experienced the curious sensation of having gone back to his earliest youth again, and being in the presence of his commanding officer.

He found himself almost unconsciously trying to throw off the influence of the elder man, and his voice took on a curt accent as he said—

"Without any unduly precipitate action, I think I can do something for that poor lady," and leaving the tall stranger's side he bent over the prostrate and still unconscious woman, lifting her head gently from the dust of the road and resting it upon one of the carriage cushions which had been tossed amongst the splinters of wood and iron.

"Won't mother ever open her eyes?" the child's trembling voice whispered in his ear, "why must she lie here in the road—so still and white," and once more the small clinging hands clutched at his. His heart went out in a passion of pity and tenderness towards the frightened little girl, and he drew her towards him with a brotherly gesture.

"A doctor will come soon," he said, "it is safer to let her lie here until we know whether she is—hurt or no. She is not in pain now," he added, looking down at the face that was so terribly white and still, "we will wait patiently, just a few moments, and then—the doctor will come—and help her."

The child drank in his words eagerly, her great wistful eyes riveted on his face whilst his were fixed upon the injured woman. She was young still, certainly not more than two or three and thirty he imagined; and in spite of her deathlike whiteness, the face that lay against the dark green cushion was very lovely. Long, dark lashes swept the cheek, cloudy masses of dark hair, loosened by her fall, fell about her neck, the curves of her mouth were of great sweetness, whilst a certain pathetic droop in their lines gave to the whole face an expression of most pathetic sadness.

WHAT was the life history of the poor soul?

Giles speculated. What tragedy had drawn that sweet mouth into those pathetic lines, and set such a stamp of sorrow upon her loveliness? Why had those fine lines been traced about her eyes, giving him the certainty that she had shed many and bitter tears? Why—

With that word still in his mind, he lifted his head, and glanced up at the tall man who had remained standing in precisely the same attitude as before—and he saw that the stranger's eyes were also fixed upon the unconscious woman's face. But there was no compassion in their glance, it was hard and pitiless, and Giles could almost have sworn that a sardonic smile hovered over the firm, well-cut lips, that something of actual dislike and repugnance showed itself on the handsome features. A little sense of bewilderment clouded the young man's mind. He rose to his feet, and gently