My Lady Cinderella

By Mrs. C. N. Williamson

CHAPTER I.

The Day When Something Happened.

To-day I had meant to be a happy day. But after all, I was miserable. I would have given a great deal to be almost anywhere else—yes, even at home in Cousin Sarah East's villa in Peckham.

I had never thought of myself as a vain girl; but I suppose it was a morbid sort of vanity that induced so keen a pang of shamed distress on this glorious June day in the park.

Anne Bryden, who had brought me, and proudly paid for the chairs to which we had found our way through the crowd, looked serenely blissful. She was not one whit depressed by the fact that she and I were the only ugly ducklings in this dazzling array of swans. Forgotten was her rusty black frock, with the cheap, pathetic jet trimming on the bodice; her last year's hat, with its faded pink roses, had practically ceased to exist.

It did not even occur to her that it might be well to give her shabby boots the protection of her skirt. This lack of self-consciousness struck me as scarcely short of greatness in Anne. It was almost above the level of the feminine, and far above the level of the Me.

It was not often that I could get a holiday from Cousin Sarah's babies, to whom I had the honor of being nursery governess—alias nursemaid—with a mingling of "general servant's" duties. There were no regular "days out" for me, but Cousin Sarah considered Anne a "most respectable young woman." (Anne had with unwonted diplomacy praised the house, admired the babies, and deferred to Cousin Sarah's opinion during the one visit I had received from her at Happiholme Villa.) Accordingly this whole long June afternoon in her society had been granted.

I ought to have been radiant, reveling in the pretty faces, the prettier dresses, and the glittering equipages of my betters, but instead I sat wishing that I were not ashamed to ask Anne if she were ready to go away; concealing the mended finger tips of my gloves by curling my hands into fists, and feeling utterly wretched that I, who adored beauty, must be so hopelessly out of the picture.

Carriage after carriage rolled by; well-groomed, clean-limbed men lounged over the railings, and raised their tall, shining hats to the occupants, or chatted with exquisitely dressed girls, who looked like floating flowers under their tinted chiffon and lace parasols. The rhododendrons were a flame of glorious color; the distance was blue with the soft mist that hung, ineffable and pensive, above the Serpentine, and the far, billowy reaches of sweet-smelling, new-cut grass in the park.

"It's a nice world, isn't it?" remarked Anne, apropos of everything — everything but ourselves.

"Yes. And there are lots of nice homes in it. Only we're not in any of them."

Anne looked critically at me.

"You ought to be, Con," she observed, after an interval of reflection. "As for me, I don't count. I'm nobody. I wasn't born to things, and I don't expect them. But you—you are different. You are a beauty. And you are a mystery. A book could be written about you."

I laughed a little.

"It would have to be a book for children. Nothing has ever happened to me since I was a child, and then—they were all sad things."

"But you are the sort of girl that things do happen to. They will yet; you mark my words."

I shook my head.

"Oh, if they only would! I'm so, so tired of Peckham. If something would happen to-day!"

"What would you like best to happen?" queried Anne.

"Am I to have my choice? Are you a fairy godmother in disguise? Well, I should say, Please, fairy godmother, you see that beautious maiden in pink muslin, driving with her mother in the particularly desirable victoria?" (As I sepoke my eyes focused upon a wonderful girl who looked haughtily, lazily conscious that she was one of Fortune's supreme favorites.) "Well, then, dear fairy godmother, wave your magic wand which so sadly resembles a three-and-sixpenny umbrella, and make me, if only for the space of one gorgeous month, like her. Give me as many Paris gowns, as much fun, as wild a whirl of gayety, as she will enjoy this season. It isn't a very noble or exalted wish; but I'm in the mood for that, and nothing else, to-day."

Anne's chair was on my left. On my right, separated by a little distance, I had been conscious for the past half hour of a vague cloudiness of silk and muslin that represented a woman. I had actually glanced in her direction, but the corner of my eye had reflected a pale lavender fluff which was a sunshade. Now, suddenly, it was lifted, and a soft voice addressed me from underneath.

"Do forgive me, won't you? I really can't resist speaking. I don't want to be rude. On the contrary, I wish to be very nice. But—I couldn't help overhearing some of the things that you and your friend have been saying."

I felt the color stealing up, as I racked my brain to recall exactly what we had been saying. Anne was staring in blank surprise; for this was a personage of great magnificance who was endeavoring to draw us into conversation, and no doubt Anne was wondering, even as I was wondering, what could be the motive of such apparently purposeless condescension.

The lady was of middle-age—if women who frame their personal charms with the best can even appear of middle age. She had elaborately undulated brown hair, under a bonnet that was a poem, in one verse; bright, searching brown eyes, and a complexion that could still live up to its past. As for her gown, it was too exquisitely Parisian to have been made out of London.

"Don't look so horrified," she smiled. "I'm not mad, only a little eccentric. That means that some of my friends think me a genius. I wonder what you would think of me if I suggested that you tried me as a fairy godmother?"

She spoke to me, not Anne. She did not even look at Anne after the first courteous, comprehensive glance.

"Why, I—I'm afraid I'd think you were making fun of me," I stammered, since some answer must be given.

"Then you'd be mistaken. I fancied, from some of the expressions which I involuntarily overheard that you were not—well, not quite a conventional girl; that you had an original way of regarding life. If you have, we might cultivate each other's acquaintance with mutual advantage."

"I should find it more interesting to know you than you would to know me," I said meekly, for I felt as if I must have fallen asleep in my chair, and be dreaming.

"That remains to be seen. Your preface looks promising. Let's begin, if you don't mind, to cut each other's leaves. My name is Sophie de Gretton —Lady Sophie de Gretton strangers call me. What is yours?"

"Consuelo Brand," I answered.

I had never talked to a Lady Anybody in my life though her aquiline nose and thin red line of lips might be formidable if she choose, she was easier to talk to than Cousin Sarah's friends in Peckham.

"What a queer name! Why did they call you Consuelo?"

I blushed vividly.

"My mother had had a great deal of trouble. She hoped I would be her consolation."

"Oh, I beg your pardon; I didn't mean to be prying. But it's my turn to impart information now. I live close by, in Park Lane. You can almost see my house from here. I strolled into the park by myself because I wanted to think."

"And our chatter disturbed you."

"On the contrary, it has been most helpful—why, is my secret. But what do you say, you and your friend, to going home with me and having a talk over a cup of tea?"

My heart gave a little jump. Here was an adventure! The shabby nursery governess from Peckham asked to tea with a Personage in Park Lane!

"I should like it immensely, thank you, and so would my friend, Anne Bryden, I'm sure."

I turned to Anne, but her face expressed disapproval. I could read her thoughts, and guessed that she was saying to herself: "Humph! how do we know that this bird of paradise isn't a sham? If she is really what she pretends to be, why on earth should she pick us up and invite us, after ten minutes' conversation, to visit her? There's something pretty queer about this."

CHAPTER II.

The Mysterious Visitor.

Anne, whom I had known ever since my dear dead mother and I had stopped at the boarding house which her mother kept, was now a mixture of typewriter, secretary, and companion to a vulgar, newly rich matron engaged in storming the outworks of society, and it was part of Anne's duty, I remembered, to read aloud endless columns of society gossip, bristling with titles. Probably she was familiar with that of Lady Sophie de Gretton, who lived in Park Lane, and believed that our eccentric new friend was for some nefarious purpose of her own masquerading in borrowed plumage.

"I'm afraid," she replied stiffly to the question in my eyes, "that it's rather late, and we ought to be getting home. We don't live in Park Lane, and we've a long way to go."

"Come alone, Miss Brand, if your friend has no time to spare," suggested the lady in lavender.

It was a temptation. Never would such a chance be thrown in my way again; my future was bounded by Peckham. Yet I could not leave Anne.

"Don't you think we might, dear?" I pleaded. "I won't go without you. But—it would be pleasant."

"I wouldn't dream of letting you go alone," said Anne, with the air of preserving me from a death trap. "If you really wish it so much, I dare say we might manage a few minutes."

Lady Sophie de Gretton rose.

"We won't delay; then, if you haven't much time to spend, for I have several things to say which I think will surprise and interest you."

Anne walked along, keeping those big gray eyes of hers wide open. I hoped Lady Sophie did not realize that she was waiting to see whether we should indeed be led into Park Lane.

But we were led there, and stopped before a quaint, pretty little white house, sandwiched in between two big ones, its windows blossoming with pink and white geraniums, and frothing over with snowy, frilled curtains. So far the adventure seemed genuine; and the footman who opened the door (respectfully addressing our companion as "my lady") was grand enough to convince even Anne.

We passed through a miniature hall, whose walls could not be seen for exquisite engravings, went up half a stairway, and had the door of a fairy bower thrown open to us. Cousin Sarah East would have scorned chintz for her parlor in Peckham, where she had a "suite" of saddlebag, or something else that sounded horsey to the ear; but Lady Sophie de Gretton's drawing-room was all white and green and rosy and ruffly with chintz.

We sat down, I feeling more conscience of my dusty old boots and serge, white round the seams, than ever. Presently the footman brought tea, with strawberries and cream and tiny cake, and quantities of silver that looked imposingly ancestral.

"Now for business!" exclaimed Lady Sophie, when I had grown more and more dazed with the thought that I was dreaming her, and Anne's shrewd little brown face had relaxed into a mingling of curiosity and good nature.

It was to be business, then! I was stabbed with humiliating dread lest Lady Sophie de Gretton were on the committee of a girl's friendly society, and had gathered us in as likely candidates. She had a brusque way of speaking, despite her low, sweet voice, and she went on abruptly:

"You haven't told me yet where you live."

"In another world," I retorted. "They call it Peckham."

"Do you like this better?"

"Yes," entering into the spirit of the catechism.

"How would you like to have that wish of yours granted—as I hinted it might be, if you would trust to my wand—and live here, surrounded by the joys which I heard you cataloguing to your fairy godmother? Now, don't fall into error again, and fancy I'm making fun of you, for I'm not. I'm asking you a serious question, and I want a serious answer."

A curious tingling chill was creeping up from my finger tips.

"I—I don't think I understand you," I heard somebody say, and was dimly aware that the somebody could only be myself.

"Yes, you do. If you are dumfounded it is because you are a singularly modest young woman. Turn round; glance at that mirror on the wall near you, and see whether you can guess why a rather lonely, eccentric person, who is tired of most things and pines for variety, might be seized with a sudden violent desire to have you for—for a new doll to play with?"

I did not take her at her word and glance mirrorward for I was familiar enough with the reflection I should have met there! though, to be sure, I only saw it in small, greenish sections at home. I was not ignorant of the fact that I was pretty, or might be pretty in a decent dress; but I had not suspected that I was pretty enough to triumph over the combined hat (which the youngest East had sat on in a rage this morning), boots, and serge.

"You don't answer. Don't you think your people would let you come for a while?"

"I have no people. Only a cousin, who doesn't like anyone to know she 'keeps me out of charity.' When I answer her back, I say that I more than earn my board. Sometimes she tells me she wishes I were out of her sight forever. I don't know whether she means it or not, but I do not suppose she could force me to stay if I were determined to go."

I made these explanations jerkily, and then, at the end, before Lady Sophie de Gretton could comment upon them, I broke out:

"But why—why do you say such strange things to me, whom you never saw till an hour ago? There are thousands of girls whom you know who would love to come and visit you—poor girls, perhaps yet in your own class of life. Why do you put such ideas in my head when you feel, if you stop to think, that by to-night you will be sorry and have to disappoint the poor 'doll' you wanted to play with?"

"My mind is made up," she quietly returned. "As for the 'why——why' which you fling at me, can't you be satisfied with the explanation I have given? I've set my heart on having you to play with. You are the prettiest doll in the whole shop, and I hope to get you comparatively cheap."

"But what would you do with me?"

"Oh, put you in pretty frocks, take you about with me, and show you off."

"There must be some other reason."

I had not meant to speak aloud, for the words sounded ungracious. But they broke forth without my volition.

Lady Sophie's handsome face flushed, and she bit her lip. For an instant her eyes appeared to flinch from mine, and suspicion, vague, yet sharply pinching, clutched by perturbed spirit.

"Well, if you must have it, my fancy for you arose partly from a resemblance to some one I used to know and admire year ago. I noticed it the instant I saw you in the park, and though you did not guess that I observed you, I hardly took my eyes from your face, peeping under the frills of my sunshade, until I spoke to you. Now that I've exhibited myself as a woman of sentiment—a creature I despise—are you satisfied?"

Perforce, I had to answer falteringly that I was. But suspicion, once roused, would not be put to sleep again so soon. There was a look in Lady Sophie de Gretton's eyes which told me (or I morbidly imagined it) that there was still something concealed under her most unexpected, most astonishing offer. I felt this electrically, yet I would not listen to the subdued whisperings.

What if there was something else? What did it matter? What did anything matter if this transformation of my life could come about? I was intoxicated by the cup that she held out to me, and I would have been ready to drink it down to the dregs—if only I need not taste the dregs quite yet.

"I must be hard to please if I were not satisfied," I said. "But I'm so bewildered, you must forgive me. Only tell me, since you say this is real and serious, what am I to do."

"You are to get leave and come to stop with me, as soon as you can."

"Oh, for how long? A week—a fortnight—if you won't mind my asking?"

"Would it be worth while your offending your Peckham relative and losing a home for a fortnight?"

I drew in my breath. The room swam before my eyes.

"Yes!" I cried recklessly. "It would be worth it all—for that. For a fortnight I should have lived. I should 'have had my day,' and surely something, some sort of work, would turn up later."

"Bravo! you're a girl after my own heart. You are a woman who dares. I was only trying you. I'd keep you longer than a fortnight. Just how long, I'm too honest, Miss Brand, to pretend to settle now. It would depend on many things."

Again her eyes dropped away from mine as if their falling lashes would hide something of mystery. But I was used to mystery. I had had it in my own life, so close, so intimate a companion, that familiarity had bred contempt—or carelessness.

"Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof; and you would have to trust me to see that your future prospects at Peckham or elsewhere were not endangered. Meanwhile I can promise you this: While your visit lasts you shall have everything that the most spoiled and petted girl could ask for—quite as much as the one you took for an example in speaking to your friend in the park. By the way, I know her well, and you shall know her too, if you wish, though I warn you she doesn't easily tolerate rivals, and you will be so dangerous a one that the rose of her acquaintance may have its thorns."

I wonder if a spirit of proprecy had entered into Lady Sophie de Gretton, that she should have made use of just those words?

As she spoke the door opened, and the footman who had brought in tea appeared.

"Sir George Seaforth, my lady—" he had decorously begun, when his mistress sprang up impulsively, her face flushing. Her eyes darted to the doorway, well nigh blocked by the man's padded shoulders, and so doing her features slightly relaxed.

The visitor was, at all events, not close behind the servant, and for some reason she was glad of the respite.

"Where is he?" she questioned, a slight quiver in her voice.

"I showed Sir George into the boudoir, your ladyship, thinking you were engaged."

"Ah!" with a little relieved sigh. "That was right, William. I will see him there in a few minutes."

William vanished; the door closed; Lady Sophie remembered us. But there was a subtle change in her manner.

"It is settled, then?" she asked.

Her tone was almost impatient, and, as soon as I had murmured "Yes," she hurried on:

"Good! Can you get away the day after to-morrow? Ah, I'm very pleased. I will—but no, on second thoughts, for several reasons, perhaps, I'd better not drive to Peckham for you. You shall come here, but don't bother about —er—much packing. It will amuse you to choose a new outfit with me. I may depend on you? Then I won't keep you and Miss—er—Bryden longer now, as she is in haste; and I've an early dinner, for a theatre party, to dress for, too. Good-by, or, rather, au revoir!"

Before we knew what had happened we had been cordially shaken hands with, William had been rung for to show up out, and we were in the warm June sunlight of Parks Lane again, banished from fairyland, humbly waiting for an omnibus.

"Why was she in such a hurry to get rid of us?" queried Anne. "And why was she so pleased because the footman had shown that man into another room?"

My ears tingled with the sting of my conviction.

"She was ashamed to have anyone to see us in our dowdy clothes. And that brute of a William was ashamed, too. That's why."

"Oh, do you think so? I don't. It goes deeper than that. Mark my words, Con, there's a mystery of some sort, and the man who called is mixed up in it. Don't go to stop with that woman dear. It's all too fantastic. No good can come of it, but maybe dreadful harm to you."

No wonder that Annie's words struck coldly on my heart. It was odd that she, as well as I, should have suspected something hidden, for Lady Sophie de Gretton's explanation, though eccentric, had sounded frank enough. I would not have given up my new prospects, chimerical as they still appeared, unwise as it were according to an old proverb to exchange "a bird in the hand for two in the bush," but since the entrance of the footman to announce a visitor, my excitement had been dying down. Now I felt chilled and unhappy, yet obstinate.

"I can't help it," I said sulkily. "It's done now, for good or evil. I wish an omnibus would come."

But at an unseen distance something had happened, and there was a block in the stream of traffic. Not an omnibus was in sight, and none of the carriages packed into Hamilton Place were able to move out into Piccadilly. Anne and I were obliged to stand close by the curbstone waiting, and though I was in too reckless a mood to care whether I were late in arriving at Happiholme Villa or not, I was also too impatient to tolerate waiting. I wanted to be going somewhere, anywhere. Anne and I could only be together in an omnibus for a certain length of time; we must then separate, she proceeding in one direction, I in another.

Only a little while ago I had disliked the idea of parting with her; now I welcomed it, for I did not wish her to continue her conscientious efforts at dissuasion. We might have walked on at this juncture, allowing an omnibus finally to overtake us, and Anne suggested the plan, only to have it vetoed by me. If we walked she would have plenty of opportunity for further argument; in an omnibus, where all our neighbors might hang upon our words, private conversation would be impracticable.

So we stood still, I feverishly discussing the hats and frocks in the carriages packed along the waiting line, and nearly ten minutes must have passed before a movement ahead became perceptible. We were still close to Lady Sophie de Gretton's when at last the omnibus we desired came in sight.

It was rattling along at great speed to make up for lost time, and, as the driver seemed disinclined to see our insignificance, I boldly dashed out to head it off before the more cautious Anne had left the pavement.

I had stretched out my hand to grasp the rail, when an impatient cab horse intercepted me. I sprang back startled, and felt my shoulders come in contact with something just behind.

A woman on top of the omnibus uttered a shrill squeal of alarm, and the sound of her voice, the expression of her eyes, which for a bewildered instant I saw were fixed on me, robbed me of my presence of mind.

I thought that I was going to be run over. In imagination I felt myself knocked down, wheels crunching over my spine. The whole world seemed made of horses—rearing horses, horses with tossing heads and trampling hoofs. The street was a sea of horses.

They were everywhere—in front, behind, coming from both sides; go where I would, I could not escape. I shut my eyes and threw up my hands, conscious in an odd, bewildered way, even at that instant, that I had dropped my umbrella, and should never be able to buy another, if I lived to want it.

People were shouting this and that at me; I only heard their voices, not their words, and they all sounded angry, unsympathetic, as if they were annoyed that I had got in their way, not that they cared what became of me.

It could not have lasted sixty seconds, though I had thought of so many things (even feeling a pang of regret that this had not happened after instead of before my glorious visit to Lady Sophie de Gretton, now to be lost forever under the horses' hoofs), when I was caught up bodily and planted in safety on the pavement. It was a strong man that held me, and until a mist cleared away from my eyes I thought my stammered thanks were due to a big policeman; but though the policeman was there, having arrived the fraction of a second too late, it was not to him that I owed my deliverance.

"'Twas that gentleman there, not me," he explained, with a gruffness born of my reckless conduct, which deserved all the punishment it had received. My impression was that if anyone merited a scolding it was the omnibus driver for not looking, or the first cabman, who had come so near to using me for a ninepin. But they had both contrived to disappear, and I should have been censured by the guardian of the law had not "that gentleman" gallantly interfered.

"Oh, I say, bobby, don't be an idiot," he succinctly remarked; and, having disposed of the policeman, turned to me. "I do hope you're not hurt."

"No, I think not, thanks to you," I faltered. "It was so stupid of me. But you were very good, and—I'm all right now. Come, Anne, we will take this next omnibus."

"Won't you let me call you a cab? You look awfully white and saken," said the man.

I was about to refuse, but Anne seconded his suggestion. Yes, we would have a cab. And in another moment, with a motion of the stick he carried, our new friend had summoned a hansom.

The crowd, which had paused for the excitement of seeing me killed, had passed on, defrauded. All was quiet again in Hamilton Place, and I thought that there were none remaining who cared to stare, as my knight in tall hat and frock coat extended his service by helping me into the vehicle.

But, after all, I was mistaken. Just as he stood, his hat lifted, inquiring with interest in his eyes whither he should direct the cabman to drive, a victoria approached us. By a coincidence which seemed odd to me (and afterwards was to seem far more so), it contained the wonderful girl in pink muslin. She and the woman by her side—her mother, I was certain—were gazing indifferently into space, when the eyes of the former fell upon my champion.

Her features quickened suddenly into life; her gaze travelled from the man standing by the cab to me, at whom she continued to look with keen curiosity, tempered by disapproval. Then she whispered a word to her companion. The elder woman glanced in my direction, and—a strange thing happened.

CHAPTER III.

The Haunting Victoria.

What there could have been in my appearance to cause her emotion I could not guess; but the well-preserved face under the exquisite bonnet seemed actually to shrivel. She stared with widening eyes, her jaw falling in that unattractive yet pathetic way seen when the spirit loses control of the body in sleep.

I observed this queer, unrehearsed dramatic effect in vivid surprise, and forgot to answer the question that had been asked. Anne replied for me; and I heard her giving her own address as the one to which we desired the cabman should drive us—heard it half unconsciously, without room in my mind for more surprise; though afterwards, when it appeared that much was to hang upon such a trifle, I remembered.

The driver was duly informed, and we left my knight standing on the pavement, looking after us with a parting smile. It was a very pleasant smile; and for the first time it struck me that the man was handsome. I had been too dazed, too excited, to notice him before, save to gather an impression that he was a gentleman.

"He's rather nice, I think," I remarked languidly to Anne, sinking back, with a sense of rest after storm, upon the unwonted luxury of cab cushions.

"Rather nice?" she echoed contemptuously. "Where are your eyes? He's splendid. He's my ideal of what a man ought to be. I'll bet anything he's a soldier. Oh, the difference between him and the dreadful men—the Things — who come to Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's!"

Mrs. Leatherby-Smith was the lady with whom she lived; but never before had I known Anne to be so enthusiastic about a mere man.

"I suppose my eyes were otherwise engaged," I excused myself. "There was such a curious thing; just as we were bidding him good-by (I hope I remembered to thank him properly again) a woman in a victoria—we'd seen her in the park, but she didn't see us — stared at me, and behaved in the most extraordinary manner. One would have fancied I was a ghost. She looked awful; I can't think of any other word."

"She probably had a stitch in her side or a twinge of neuralgia," said Anne prosaically. "You wanted things to happen to-day, and they have happened. They've gone to your head a little, my dear. You mustn't expect to find a new excitement wherever you turn your eyes, on the principle of 'It never rains but it pours.'"

"She did look at me strangely—very strangely," I persisted.

"Well, you're not exactly plain."

"There she is again!" I exclaimed eagerly. "I do believe she's following us."

"Nonsense!" retorted Anne. "There are dozens of victorias coming this way. Why not her's?"

There was common sense in Anne's words, but somehow I could not be convinced. The victoria was abreast of our hansom; though its elder occupant wore a surface air of composure, she was alert, watchful, and her cold eyes lighted as they met mine.

I said no more to Anne, for I could not prove my assertion; and I knew that she fancied my experiences of the afternoon had sown the seeds of conceit in my heart.

She was inclined to talk of the man from whom we had just parted, and I encouraged the tendency, since it took her mind from my affairs. At the place where we should have changed into different omnibuses I insisted on getting out, as Anne was to pay for the cab.

We bade each other good-by, and I hailed my omnibus. As I did so, I threw a furtive glance behind. The victoria was still in sight.

For a moment I hesitated, and then ascended to the top of the omnibus. From a coign of vantage on the back seat I could from time to time observe the progress of events. If it were really by chance that the victoria with the two ladies was coming in this direction, it would soon overtake and leave the humble omnibus far behind. If not — and I were right instead of Anne — I might prove my wild theory after all.

I racked my brain for some motive to account for the elder woman's interest in me, taking for granted that it actually existed. The daughter had certainly observed with some eagerness the young man who had been speaking with us; she had whispered to her mother, who had at once exhibited uncontrollable feeling.

Could it be, I wondered, that my knight was this pretty girl's husband? that she was jealous, and, suspecting an acquaintance between him and me, had induced her mother (the typical, suspicious mother-in-law of the flirtatious, farce-comedy husband) to track me to my lair?

He had been as far as possible from resembling this farce-comedy, gay dog of a young man; on the contrary, he had been, as Anne said, soldierly, brown, serious, with gray eyes that looked as if they might be very much in earnest. But I could think of no other solution to the puzzle, and in accepting it I lost the thrill of mystery in the chase. A chase, however, it undoubtedly was. I was not too far away, perched up in my high seat, to observe when I ventured to glance behind me, the expression on the faces of coachman and groom.

It was contemptuous resignation; every weary feature said that never before had they been expected to dance attendance on a vulgar omnibus. I thought they might even go so far as to give a month's notice when they reached home.

Suddenly something impish entered into my breast, and it occurred to me that it would be amusing to try an experiment. I ran down the winding staircase of the omnibus, and, undismayed by my late mishap, jumped off before it stopped.

Another was coming, and was just in the act of turning a corner which would take it in quite a different direction. I was in time to board it. I wondered if "they" had observed the manoeuvre, and whether they would presently be seen pursuing. Yes, there was the victoria! The girl and her mother were talking together with animation, in strong contrast to the langour of their men when first we had met, before they had been waked to this odd interest, which I was not yet sure that I understood.

I had not lingered to ask the destination of this second conveyance, but, when the conductor appeared to demand my fare, I discovered that it was taking me away from, rather than toward, Peckham. I should be late, and Mrs. East would be angry. Nevertheless, I would play the game out now.

My money was running low, and I had only a few pence left, at the end of the route, I might have been tempted further to prolong the hunt. As it was, there remained nothing to do but to repair to Peckham, after stepping into a shop, expending a half-penny for a paper, and remaining inside as long as I could, to account for my visit to this part of the town. Somehow, I was unwilling for the pursuers to know that I had been deliberately misleading them; though why it mattered I could scarcely have explained to myself.

At the corner of Chesley street, where I lived, I beheld the inevitable victoria driving slowly past. I walked through the gate, up the steps to the door, but, changing my mind, ran down again and gazed toward the end of the street. There the carriage had stopped before a bakery and post office. At the moment of my appearance the groom was coming out of the latter with a telegraph form in his hand. His mistress took it, and seemed to write.

I would have lingered at the open gate to see what might be next in the programme, but at this instant I was hailed by a familiar voice. It was that of Jimmy East, my one friend at Happiholme Villa.

"Oh, I say, ain't you goin' to catch it!" he ejaculated, appearing at the front door. "Ma's just savage because you're late. What are you doing out there, anyhow—afraid to come in?"

"No," I replied sedately, ascending the steps with such dignity as I could command.

But my heart was beating somewhat faster than its wont. It was all well enough to tell myself, at a safe distance from Mrs. East, that I could now, for the first time, afford to brave her displeasure. But the habit of years had gripped me again, with my return to the old environment. I would not for a great deal that Jimmy should guess it, but in truth my soul melted within me as I crossed the threshold.

I had a curious feeling that I had come back from another world; or perhaps I experienced the sensations of an opium eater, awakening to dull, headachy realities after a dazzling panorama of dreamland. The smell of the stuffy little passage depressed me more than ever before—that indescribable reminiscence of dinners past, present, and to come. How narrow it was; how hideous the paper on the wall, representing marble! how grim the linoleum on the floor, which masqueraded unsuccessfully as mosaic!

"She's upstairs in our room, puttin' baby to bed," volunteered Jimmy, in an awestruck tone. No need for more particular classification. There was only one omnipresent, reigning She at Happiholme! "She said you were to go right up to her the instant minute you came in, Connie. I was put to wait at the drawin'-room window to watch for you."

"Very well, I'm going," I responded, and set my foot upon the stairs.

There was a bad half hour in store for me, I was aware, and I could have found it in my heart to wish that Mr. East were at home.

Mr. East was only my cousin Sarah's husband, in Peckham; but in wider spheres he was a commercial traveller. When he abode at Happiholme I desired his absence, for his carpet slippers and his dressing gown got upon my nerves. Besides, he had a disagreeable habit of patting me on the shoulder and remarking on the color of my hair or my eyes when his wife was not in the room.

But at least he did his cowardly best to stand between me and Cousin Sarah's wrath; and things undoubtedly went more smoothly during his visits than when he was away inducing provincial firms to order a certain brand of soap.

If he were here to-night — but he wasn't; and so there was no use in wishing.

The room which Jimmy East, Emmy East, Baby East, and I shared as a bedchamber was up under the eaves of the villa, with a ceiling that slanted in unexpected places, and attempted to knock one's brains out of one arose in the darkness to soothe the baby's cries.

Adjoining was the abode of the one servant, whose many tasks it was my part of my daily duty to lighten. I went upstairs heavily, past the floor where Mr. and Mrs. East's domain and the "spare bedroom" did their best to grace a self-respecting Peckham villa. Before the top of the second flight, the voice of Cousin Sarah rang out through the closed door:

"Nasty, ungrateful hussy! She'll know it when she gets an afternoon out again!

This was a challenge, though she was only harranguing Emmy and the baby; and it ought to have spurred my failing courage. But there was something spiritually relaxing to me in the air at Happiholme. It was a white-faced coward who reluctantly opened the door and prepared to "face the music."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. East" (she did not approve of being addressed more familiarly), "that I am late." I said; "I didn't think it would be Mousie's bedtime yet."

She had been sitting by the washhand stand with her back to me, but she flounced her chair round, and turned a flushed, virago face upon me.

"Oh, you deigned to come back, have you? I wonder you didn't stop away a little longer, dine at the Savoy, and go to a box at the Opera. This is what I get for being good-natured and letting you go traipsing about town while I stay at home and look after your business."

Of course, her children were by business; at all events, I should hardly have breath enough to dispute the assertion against her. I therefore quietly took off my hat and gloves, and advanced to retrieve the baby, who had now begun to yell under his mother's jerkings and pullings. But Mrs. East snatched him back against her ample breast.

"Now that I've done all the work, you'd step in and get all the credit, would you?" she snapped. "Let me alone. I'll finish what I've begun. But this day's been a lesson to me. I'm tired of giving away my food and my house room for nothing. You don't get out again, to deny me, in a hurry, my lady."

Her tone, her words, were unbearably insulting. Coward that I was, and had too often been in the presence of this big grenadier of a woman, who looked too large for her own house, my blood leaped now; and my ears tingled as if she had boxed them.

An instant ago I had not meant to speak of what had happened to-day, what was to follow a few days later, until she should be in a more promising temper. But in my anger I lost my shrinking dread of her, and was bitten with the temptation to fling in her fierce face the knowledge that somewhere I was wanted and appreciated, if not here.

CHAPTER IV.

I Fling Down the Gauntlet of Fate.

"I have never wished not attempted to defy you, Mrs. East," I said, trying to speak calmly, though my voice trembled. "But there is a limit even to my endurance. I am not a slave; I am of your own flesh and blood, and by hard work from early morning till late at night I have earned over and over again the food, the shelter, you so grudgingly allow me. Now—"

"Upon my word!" she broke in, beating me down with her loud vituperation. "You'd answer me back, would you? A third cousin, that's all you are—is no cousin at all. For years I've kept you, out of charity, ever since your mother, a poor, useless invalid, no good to herself or anybody else, for all her fine boastings—died in a railway carriage and left you on the world. This is the reward I get for it; but that's life—that's life, I suppose. Of course you've been made to work; you couldn't expect to sit idle all day while I slaved for you. But you've not done half what a hired nursemaid would have done. Henry East's silly kindness has spoiled you. I could get in a girl and pay her four shillings a week, not a quarter as much as your clothes and your pocket money have cost me—yes, I could get her in to-morrow, and she'd do better without any practice than you do after five years."

Fortunately, or unfortunately, I was born with a sense of humor, so that little merriment as was in my heart, I was seized with a sudden hysterical gust of laughter at Mrs. East's boast of generously giving "pocket money." She had been known to deal me out a postage stamp at a time for a letter to Mrs. Bayden or Anne; and she sat sulkily by, talking of her own financial sacrifices for her family's sake, while her husband tossed a shilling into my plate at breakfast. But she had no sense of humor and, not fathoming the cause of my laughter, it infuriated her the more. She glared and swallowed hard, but I did not yet allow her to begin again.

"Wait!" I exclaimed. "I have something to say now, Mrs. East. As it will be easy for you to fill my place, you will be glad to hear that I have made up my mind to relieve you from the burden of my presence at the end of the week. It is only fair to give you so much notice, I think, and for the children's sake——"

"How dare you!" she flung at me. "You go away! You leave a good home like this! Catch you doing it. You know too well which side your b' read's buttered, though I've the best mind in the world to take you at your word——"

"I want nothing else," I asservated. "Indeed, I have wished for long to go. To-day an opportunity has been offered me. I have had a—a most advantageous offer."

She began to look at me sharply, the "boiled gooseberry" eyes, which had such an unpleasant, catty fascination for me, snapping with anger.

(To be Continued.)

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