

with the unknown stepmother, who had never tried to win my love. Only an hour ago I had been wishing for any change, so that it took me away from the monotonous routine of Wellington House, with its eleven years of dull, grey memories. Now that the change had really come, or was about to come, I found myself shrinking from it, and telling myself that this one thing of all others was what I would least have chosen. If only my father had lived, and I could have made him care for me, everything would have been different; but at the Dark House it seemed to me that presently I should be oppressed with the same sense of monotony I had rebelled against, while I should also have to bear a loneliness I had never known at school. Only Lady Mary and myself! that prospect did not spell happiness for me, and I thought more graciously of poor Mrs. Rayne, the faded singing teacher, than I had ever thought before.

Certainly I should have preferred Rose as a companion, if I could have had her, and, perhaps, if all went well, when she had left school something of the sort might be arranged, rather than the governessing to which the girl looked forward with so much distaste; but that consummation devoutly to be wished could not come until next summer—and the months between stretched drearily long in anticipation. Mrs. Rayne would be better than no one, poor dear; but, I could not fathom the mystery of her wanting to go, and I was not used to mysteries. There had been none in my 20 years of life, so far as I knew the history of those years.

"I'm not sure that it wouldn't be sheer selfishness to have you with me in Cumberland," I said doubtfully, feeling still as if I were in a dream from which I could not wake. "My maid! why, it would never do, Mrs. Rayne. I couldn't let you wait on me—do things for me that maids are supposed to do; though, if I didn't, and you were there, there'd be gossip, of course, and the truth might come out. I needn't mind that, for myself, perhaps, but you appear anxious to have it kept secret. I should like to have a friend with me—and I do believe now that you are a friend—but for many reasons—"

"Ah, there are no reasons if really you would care to have me," she implored; and the tremour in her sweet, low voice began to seem oddly pathetic to me, I scarcely realized why. "Would you care, Eve—would you?"

She reached out to take my hands, and I let her have them, though they lay but passively in her warm, eager grasp. This curious, unexpected manifestation of her affection touched me, and I felt my nerves vibrate with the magnetism of it, yet I would not commit myself—I would not let myself go, for fear, after all, I should be proven foolish for turning to her with an answering regard, as the sunflower turns to the sun—for fear some day I should find that I had been cheated, and this mysterious, white-haired woman's protestations had been merest froth and moonshine.

"Yes, I would care," I replied conservatively. "But I would care more if I could understand. I am not conceited enough to believe that anyone could find life tolerable in a remote country house, living in a subordinate position, disguised, entirely for the pleasure of my society. Tell me the other reason why you wish so much to go, and if it seems to me a good one, somehow the thing may be managed."

"There is nothing to tell," she persisted, "except that which is connected with you. You would have Sir Donald to advise you, if you needed advice, I hope, but if you wanted a friend by your side—I should love to be that friend. Oh, I don't wonder that you can't understand, for you are not old and lonely, with all your life behind you, and only one interest left alive in it, like a solitary plant that thrives in a neglected garden run to waste. But so it is with me, and you are the sole interest what remains for me. Love can't be measured and explained—it wouldn't be worth much if it could, perhaps—and I can't tell in just so many words why I feel towards you as I do.

"I can only say to you that the love is there; and I can show it, if you will accept my plan, and let me go away with

you into the new life. It would be a joy to wait on you—to be your maid, dear. I have often wished to lay my hand upon your hair—to touch you—to mend your dress if you tore it, to do a hundred little things for you, which would be my duty as well as my happiness then."

I stared at her, the hardness in my heart melting away like snow in the warmth of noon. I had never thought so very much about this pale, earnest woman with the winning voice before. She had been only a fitting shadow in my life, no more—mentally relegated among the outsiders, those who were old and dull and ugly and not particularly interesting in themselves; but now my curiosity was pricked regarding her. I wondered what her career had been, and what sorrows had brought her to the present pass of desolation, when the love of a stranger was a boon to crave and make many a sacrifice to win and hold.

"Haven't you any relatives of your own?" I questioned.

She started and shivered a little, as if I had inadvertently touched a sore spot, then shook her head, with a catch in her throat that kept her from answering for an instant. "None to whom I am of any importance," she murmured.

"What a pity," I said, "because"—I stammered slightly for fear of "gushing," a schoolgirl fault for which my long experience of Wellington House had taught me to feel a certain shy scorn—"because you seem so kind and loving, you know. You ought to have had a daughter to care for, Mrs. Rayne."

She turned half away from me, but I saw her bosom heave. "So I ought, so I ought," she repeated. "But many joys are denied to us in life—for some wise purpose, I have no doubt."

"Had you never any children?" I went on, half-frightened at myself for the question, yet prompted to ask it by a not unkindly curiosity.

"Only one, my dear. If she had been—spared, she would have been very nearly of your age now. Perhaps—that is the reason I have been so drawn to you."

"And did she die a long time ago?"

"I lost her when she was a very little child." She had been making a strong effort to control her voice, but it broke at last, and, at the sound of the stifled sob, I ran to her and caught the frail hands, which, a few moments before, had so wistfully held mine. All the old doubts of Mrs. Rayne were gone.

"I understood her now, or thought I did, and I was moved to do something which it had never occurred to me to do before. I stood on tip-toe and voluntarily kissed her.

"I will trust you—I do trust you," I said. "And, if there is no other way for us to be together but the one you propose, let us try that, and I will make it as light and pleasant a life as I can. You've made me feel I need you."

She returned my kiss with a species of fervid earnestness.

"Thank God!" I thought I heard her murmur beneath her breath.

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT HAPPENED BY THE WAY.

It was hard to make the girls, and Rose in particular, believe that I was actually going away. But the day after the arrival of the telegram which had told me that I was fatherless, Mr. Valentine Graeme, Lady Mary's nephew, appeared upon the scene.

He brought with him, to act as my chaperon and attendant, a person who answered to the name of "Miss Cade," and who was, he informed Mrs. Goring-Anderson, his aunt's confidential woman or companion, several grades above the ordinary lady's-maid.

Mourning had been hastily ordered for me, and a ready-made frock and coat had been procured (needing only a little alteration) at a shop which Mrs. Goring-Anderson considered not only the most reliable but the "smartest" in London.

I was sent for to see Mr. Graeme in the drawing-room, and as the principal of the school murmured a few words of introduction, I looked up to see that my stepmother's nephew was