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Children's Department

THE GODMOTHER

A Story in Three Parts

PART I.

Young Heathcote was in his usual place on the bus that carried him daily to the bank where he was employed. But on this particular day there was a difference. The driver missed his cheery remarks, even the

nod and smile with which he generally greeted mere acquaintances were missing:

"Something is wrong with our young swell," whispered the old man with the cotton umbrella to the pretty girl clerk beside him; and she blushed and nodded assent. They all looked at him as he got out, crushing a letter in his hand, and with a puzzled, worried look on his handsome face. His fellow clerks nudged one another as he passed through them to his desk and repeated, "There's something wrong with Heathcote to-day."

In the pages of a big ledger the lad smoothed out the letter, and read again and again its anguished phrases. "I am in despair . . . if you don't help, me mother must know. . . . Oh, George, for her sake, try and raise the money," and so on.

"For her sake!" What would he not do to spare her—the widowed mother whom he loved so dearly and whose only hope he was. Two years before he did not know a care; he was going to Oxford, the dream of his life and his father's. Then the blow fell; influenza and its dire effects carried off the Rector, and the poor savings of a lifetime only sufficed to keep the mother and younger children from want. Without a word the son submitted to his fate, thankful to enter a distant cousin's bank and work for his own maintenance. And Betty, sister Betty, as she reckoned herself, though of no kin to him, must also turn out in the world; and this was harder. He hated the vulgar rich people into whose house she had gone as a kind of companion to the gay daughters. Betty's letters had been bright enough until a visit paid to the country, and then trouble came, Betty naively writing that she had lost money at bridge; and the boy had written and given grandfatherly advice, and then there had been a silence. And now!—poor Betty had no one to turn to, so she turned to brother George. "I owe nine pounds, and I haven't ninepence. They wouldn't let me off because I

play well, and used to win at first; but I didn't know, George, indeed, I didn't, how it was mounting up till last night, when Mrs. Merchison told me I must pay, and that I had better write and ask mother for a loan; and when I cried, she said with such a sneering look, 'I would not make a fuss about such a trifle if I were you!' 'Of course, I can't write to mother, but I thought you might know some way to get it. George, dear George, by all our happy days in the past, help me out of this, and I promise you I'll never touch a card again.'"

It was not the happy days of the past that George was thinking of then, but the happy dreams of the future. Betty, the orphan daughter of a cousin, had been received as one of themselves in her infancy, and had never known another home. As George grew older, and her girlish charms grew upon him, he remembered what she had forgotten, how very slight was the relationship between them; and every thought of the future unfolded a thought of his childhood's playmate. But perhaps never till that fateful letter came did he realise how completely he had given her his heart.

It was the luncheon hour, and the young fellow was almost alone in the little suburban bank—only the cashier was at his distant desk. The door opened, and a little old lady came up to the counter and handed in a cheque. "Please give me silver for this at once," she said in an abrupt tone.

Heathcote took the cheque and looked at it. "But," he began—

"Please make haste, I am in a hurry; I will give my coachman an order while you see to it."

"But you—" he ejaculated. But she was gone. The cheque was only for one pound, and was not filled up in letters. The door was swinging again. Then the devil came. One stroke of the pen, and the cheque was in the drawer. Twenty shillings were shovelled into the scoop. The old lady filled her purse and smiled up into the young man's face. What she saw made her pause, for there was something familiar in his appearance; a question trembled on her tongue, but he had already turned away.

"How like, but how ill and sad! and how improbable that any of Gerald's children should be here!"

The coachman had received his instructions and drove rapidly away to an office in Marylebone. On a brass plate ran the legend "Bureau of Home Aid." Lady Sherwell went in and sat down. "Now, Mrs. Brown," she began cheerily to a stately dame in rustling black silk who came forward from an inner office. "I have brought your fee this time. As usual, I started without my purse, but I always carry a cheque book in the carriage in case of accident, so I just drove round to the bank. And now, please, is the young lady here?"

"Yes, your ladyship; she has been waiting some minutes."

"Ah! I was afraid I was late; show her in, please."

Mrs. Brown disappeared, to return followed by a tall, slim girl.

"This is Miss Leigh, Lady Sherwell."

The young lady bowed and remained standing. She had a small childish face, surrounded with chestnut hair and pretty, pathetic brown eyes. Lady Sherwell looked at her intently. "You are very young," she said, meditatively. A shadow passed over the young face, but she answered eagerly, "That will mend."

The old lady laughed. "You're quite right, my dear; that is a fault that is mended all too soon. What I meant was, such youth as yours needs amusement, companionship, gaiety. You will find it dull with one old woman in Eaton-place."

The girl shook her head. "Amusement and companionship are delightful in one's own home, but," she paused—"they are hateful in other people's."

"Oh," said her ladyship to herself, "there is a history here and character, too, if I mistake not." Then aloud: "Mrs. Merchison writes that you are unselfish and good tempered, but very proud and reserved. Is that so?"

(To be continued.)

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