

A GIRL OF THE PEOPLE

By Mrs. C. N. Williamson.

"I was in the West Wing looking through some old papers, and so on of Lady Cope's, from eleven to one," I said. "Perhaps she heard me. I dare say she could in her room; and once I dropped a candlestick."

"It couldn't have been that," objected Swift. "For Mrs. Ewatts looked at her watch the last time she was up, and it was past two o'clock."

"Oh!" I ejaculated, thoughtfully. "But it was nothing, of course. A storm can make strange sounds come about an old house—especially at night."

"I suppose 'twas nothing, really," the maid assented. "Mrs. Ewatts was sure it wasn't burglars, or she'd have given an alarm."

After my own experiences in the night, Swift's words impressed me far more than they would otherwise; and I asked myself if it were possible that the restless spirits of those who had staid on earth did indeed ever come back to the old haunts, allowing themselves to be heard or seen by those who were still earth-bound.

At half-past ten, on the very stroke of the appointed hour, news of Roger's arrival was brought to me. I was in the picture gallery when the word came, for a curious fascination had drawn me back to the West Wing the moment after I had breakfasted; and I had just finished a futile exploration of the downstairs rooms, unvisited last night, when I was told that Sir Roger Cope wished to see me.

I went to a room known as the Indian boudoir, where he awaited me, and in silence we shook hands.

I looked up at him rather timidly, for somehow I was dreading the hour before me—Roger's tone in asking me to spare it him had been so more than usually grave.

It struck me now as our eyes met how exceedingly handsome he was, and I wondered why I did not admire him more than I did.

Roger was thirty-six years old, though he did not look his age by ten years; and he had been only eighteen when he had come into his title at my father's death. He was fair-skinned, with very light hair, which fell in a thick wave over his forehead, like a boy's. His eyebrows were almost black, and might have been carefully pencilled by an artist, in the salient arch which they described. The lashes, too, were black, and as they were long and perfectly straight, they shadowed his curiously pale blue eyes, making them seem much darker than they really were.

It was only when the light streamed full into Roger's eyes that one saw they held scarcely any color save in the violet rim that circled the iris. His oval face was clean-shaven, so that his thin red lips contrasted with his white skin almost as strikingly as the dark brows and lashes with the ashy-blonde hair.

If Roger had been a woman he would have been considered a great beauty, and it seemed strange to think that this remarkable-looking man, who might have sat as model for a picture of Lucifer before his fall, was only a London solicitor, who had to ignore his title and work like an ordinary mortal.

His manner was invariably gentle, his way of speaking slow—"soothing," my mother had called it—"soothing," but it was not so for me.

"Poor little cousin!" he said, kindly, as he released my hand. "You have had bad night, I'm afraid. Your face is very white, and your eyes very big this morning. Was it the storm that kept you from sleeping, or was it your own sad thoughts?"

As he asked the two questions in one his gaze was fixed very keenly upon me, as if he meant my expression to answer him candidly, even if my tongue tried to keep a secret.

"Both, perhaps," I answered, and I was vexed to feel my color rise.

"I was thinking of you a great deal all night," he went on; "for neither was I able to sleep. I even grew superstitious, with that wild storm raging at the windows of the inn; and I wondered if the priest walked at Arrish Mill Court."

"You always made fun of ghost stories," I said.

"Did I? Well, as I grow older I'm not so cock-sure of everything as I used to be. I've begun to realize that there may really be more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy. Last night I don't think I should have denied the priest, if I had been up here instead of at Lull."

I always had the feeling (why, I could not have explained) that Roger had motives for everything he said; that he never spoke on impulse like other people, but skillfully "worked up" subjects with a particular end in view; and now I was curious to know why he had brought in that of the priest. With a spirit of contrivance, which I often felt with Roger, I determined to thwart his design, whatever it might be.

"Let's talk of something else," I exclaimed, abruptly.

"You say that oddly!" he persisted. "I believe, Sheila, that you had a fright last night."

"I'm not at all superstitious," I answered, evasively. "Mother brought me up to think of that sort of thing ridiculous. Nobody seems to have rested very peacefully last night; but I feel quite well enough this morning for that business talk which you said we must have."

Roger's eyes had never left my face, yet I hoped it had not given him much satisfaction. He saw at last that there was one subject which I was resolved not to discuss; and he knew that I could be just as determined as he, when I chose.

"Very well, to business, then," he said. "Aren't you going to sit down, and ask me to sit down? Thanks! Sheila, did your mother ever tell you anything about your birth?"

CHAPTER VI.

A Secret Divulged.

I stared at my cousin, surprised at such a strange beginning.

"I hardly know what you mean," I stammered. "What was there to tell—except that I was born abroad?"

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Roger looked down at a book he had taken up from the table. "I thought that Aunt Ermytrude might have told you some particulars," he said; "perhaps—the night she died. You did not seem to wish me to know what passed between you in that last scene. And I thought she might—"

"She said nothing coherent at all," I broke in. "She only murmured a few strange words which I could not understand. Are you going to tell me anything, Roger?"

"By and by," he said, smiling faintly. His face had brightened as I answered his question. Evidently, if he had anything of importance to tell, he was glad that my mother had not forestalled him. "Before we come to that I have certain things to ask. Sheila, you were eighteen a month ago, weren't you?"

"Yes," I replied. And my mind strayed back to my birthday. How happy I had been then! We had just gone up to London, and the world had seemed like fairyland.

"You are almost a child still, my poor little cousin. Yet Aunt Ermytrude was married before she was many months older. Did she ever speak to you about the time when you would marry?"

"Oh, yes, she spoke of it vaguely sometimes. I suppose all mothers do." I had never seen my own father wishing to hurry away from this subject; but Roger kept me to it.

"And the man you would one day marry? Had she anything to say of him?"

I felt myself grow scarlet. "I don't see that you have any right to ask me such things," I said. "They were between mother and me."

"I think I am answered, Sheila!" he exclaimed. "Well—you know what her wishes were, and you won't be surprised to hear that mine are the same. I have always loved you, and wanted you, dear, since I saw you growing from a bewitching child into a beautiful young woman."

Roger had been sitting in a chair opposite the sofa, where I had taken a seat; but he rose, and coming to me, went down on one knee, not in a theatrical, lover-like way, but as a big brother might do with a little sister. And very gently he laid his hand over my two, that were clasped tightly together in my lap. Altogether his manner was considerate and reassuring. But, then, Roger's manner invariably was perfect in every emergency.

"You are so young, such a child still," he went on, before I could speak, and resisting my efforts to draw my hands from under his, "that you need someone to take care of you. I want to be that one, dear. And she who is gone desired it, as you know. If it were not for that I would not have spoken yet. But she would have wished me to delay. Little girl, what have you?"

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to say to me? You have lost the one you loved best on earth; but here is one who loves you even more than she did. Will you take me for a lover instead of a cousin?"

"O Roger, I can't—I can't!" I exclaimed. "How I wish you hadn't said it! You are very kind, but we must go on being cousins, and—nothing more."

"Why?" he persisted. "You don't dislike me?"

"No-o," I responded, dubiously. "But I don't love you."

"I don't expect love at first—not the sort of love I feel for you," he said. "Why, you are almost too young to know what love means. Trust yourself to me, dear, and trust me to teach you its meaning."

I shook my head, and I was beginning to grow impatient. "You couldn't," I said. "I know enough about love, to know what love means. Trust yourself to me, dear, and trust me to teach you its meaning."

"That's a hard answer," he ejaculated, flushing. "It's your youth that speaks. Perhaps, after all, I ought to have waited. But dear Aunt Ermytrude—"

"It's no use waiting," I interrupted him, with almost fierce decision. "Since you began this, Roger, we must finish it now, and not speak of it again ever—ever, if we are to remain friends. You've always been very good and very nice to me, and I've tried to be fond of you—not in the way you mean, but just as a cousin, because I knew that it was mother's wish. Yet I couldn't make myself do it. I've never been comfortable with you, Roger, happy in your society. It's better to tell you all the truth now, so that you will quite understand that it couldn't be different."

He was still on one knee by my side, though he had released his hands now, and he was looking straight into my eyes with a very strange look.

"I'm thirty-six, Sheila, and you're eighteen," he said, slowly. "I've seen girls change who thought they never could."

"You will not see this one change!" I cried, almost crossly, for I thought that he ought in manliness to take me at my word without attempting further argument. "O Roger, I do think it cruel of you to have brought up this to-day! You said there was business which could not wait, and yet this is all—"

"This is not all," Roger repeated, taking the words out of my mouth. "It is only the beginning. You don't understand yet, but you will by and by, and you will think very differently of me then. Instead of anger there will be, I am sure, a more kindly emotion—pity, heart."

"I told you that I pleaded with you, for the greatest boon that a woman can grant a man, while I might have begun in another way more gratifying perhaps to my own pride, and more likely to prove successful. But I preferred to sue as a subject to his queen, rather than play King Cophetua."

"King Cophetua?" I opened my eyes and gazed at him haughtily. "I do not see the appropriateness of the simile."

"I told you that you did not understand now. But I won't keep you in suspense."

To my relief he rose from his humble posture and stood before me, looking down, veiled excitement in his face.

"Speaking of King Cophetua," he went on, "reminds me of a story—the story of a beggar maid. Once upon a time there was a man who had been poor all his life. And there was a girl who had been rich. Suddenly they changed places, though she was left in ignorance. The man loved the girl, who was very beautiful and so indifferent in her manner to him that he, who was not used to indifference from other women, was piqued into desiring to win her even more ardently than he would otherwise. He had wanted her when he believed himself poor and the girl rich. But when the change came, and he loved her just as much. And to show his love, instead of saying: 'You have lost everything. Come to me, who can give it all back,' he would have consoling the truth, if she would have let him, for a time at least, until she had grown accustomed to the idea that the best happiness of her life must come from him. Do you see that that was a man of honor or a quixotic fool?"

To be Continued.

Laughing in Persia.
In Persia the man who laughs is considered effeminate, but free license is given to female merriment.

Japanese Politeness.
The Japanese Jirikisha man solicits custom by crying: "If the honorable lord does not give himself the trouble of too much illustrious delay, the fare will be only 20 sen. Condescend to make gracious use of this worthless servant."

Two Unhappy Writers.
Dryden ("married discord in a noble wife," and Addison sold himself to a cross-grained old countess who made him pay dearly for all she gave him.

Thoreau's Boast.

Thoreau was once able to boast that he had on his shelves a library of several hundred volumes, the greater part of which he had written himself. His publishers could not dispose of the first edition of his first book, and thinking it useless to keep the volumes longer, had sent them to their author.

The Champion Cheese.
The largest cheese ever made was 8 feet 10 inches in diameter and 21 feet in circumference. It was made at a factory in Canada and weighed 7,000 pounds.

Locomotive Pulls.
A locomotive going at express speed gives 1,050 pulls per mile.

An Armless Artist.
M. Ducornet, who died in France in 1802, was born without arms or hands. He had the eye of an artist and, notwithstanding his great misfortune, actually studied painting and exhibited many fine productions wholly executed with his toes.

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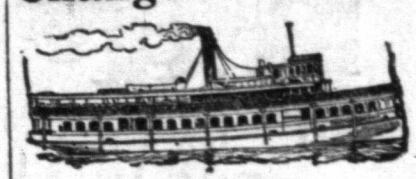
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