

A GIRL OF THE PEOPLE

By Mrs. C. N. Williamson.

Somewhat the time passed, and the doctor came. Afterwards, I heard that scarcely twenty minutes had gone by between the moment when Swift left me to take the message downstairs and that when he arrived. But the minutes seemed ten times twenty.

The doctor was an elderly man, with grey hair and keen eyes, and a quick, concise way of speaking that inspired one with confidence. He asked questions as to my mother's previous state of health, smelt the medicine in the unlabelled bottle, and put it aside. Evidently it was not what was needed now.

He sounded the heart with his stethoscope, abruptly ordering Swift to get brandy and bring it to him as quickly as she could. Bending his face down, with his ear at the instrument, I saw his eyes suddenly fall upon the fresh burn on my mother's arm.

For her sake I could have wished to hide it from him, for I knew how sensitive she had been regarding the scar, what anger she had shown when once, as a child, I had tactlessly asked her to tell me what it was and how it came to be there. But I had resisted the impulse to cover up the spot and concealed it from the doctor, thinking that the injury—which must have caused great pain and shock—might partially account for my mother's condition.

"What's that?" the old man brusquely asked, turning with a slight frown to me. "How did she burn herself?"

"I don't know," I stammered. "She has been out, away from me for several hours, and only came in a few minutes before we sent for you."

"Humph!" he muttered, his bushy brows drawing close together. "She has had a shock, and the heart is very weak. You are her daughter?"

"I nodded, for tears choked my voice. "I'm afraid I ought to warn you, then, that she is in great danger. If the action of the heart—"

Swift's return interrupted him. But I knew what he would have said, as well as if he had finished the sentence. "Cut the other sleeve open," he directed the maid. In an instant it was done, and with a tiny hypodermic syringe he injected brandy into the left arm.

This he did again and again, each time raising a slight lump with a tiny dot of red on the skin, while I watched in silence, my heart beating fast in my throat.

At last her lips moved. "The—West Wing," she said again, with a fluttering breath. The words ended in a long sigh. A curious, indescribable change came over her features. Never had she been so beautiful. Never had she looked, since I had known her, so thoroughly at peace.

The doctor's hand was on her breast, his eyes on the wonderful, marble face. For a long moment he did not move. Suddenly, my mother's long lashes quivered, and her eyes opened wide, black as mountain tarns at midnight. Whatever she had seen before, when she had seemed to look through and beyond me, she now saw, or thought she saw, once more.

"Mother!" I cried out sharply. "What is it—oh! what is it?"

"My child," said the old doctor, "your mother has gone to sleep. She will not wake again in this world."

She was dead. And she had died seeing it.

CHAPTER IV.

A Sound at the Door.

Only one thing I recall distinctly in connection with that night, after the moment that brought the knowledge and shock of my mother's death. It seemed a trifle to stand out, while other matters, more important, perhaps, receded into the background of my mind; yet the great events of life are reared on a foundation of trifles.

When my mother's beautiful dead body, in all its bravery of mist-grey crepe and glittering stars of steel, was lifted from the sofa where I had laid her down to die, I noticed something that had passed unobserved before, in the excitement of her coming and her sudden illness.

I had half carried, half dragged her from the door to the lounge, after she had fallen against me, fainting, without removing the cloak that lay loosely over her shoulders, and when I placed her on the sofa, the wrap lay between her and the nest of cushions.

When they took her away it was still there, and as I stood staring dazedly at the place where she had been it was suddenly borne in upon me that this cloak was not the one which she had worn to the theatre; I had never seen it before.

She had gone out in a long, primrose-tinted wrap of satin, brocaded with great marigolds in shining threads of gold. She came home to die in a short wrap of lustrous black silk, lined with a deep shade of purple.

I shuddered at sight of the thing, remembering the black, jetted dress worn by the woman with the scar on her arm, the woman whom I could not help secretly regarding as my mother's murderer. I could not bear to see it lying where mother had lain, and in a sudden passion I seized the black, purple-lined garment and flung it viciously from the sofa into a far corner of the sitting-room, where it lay in a heap on the floor.

Next day my cousin, Roger Cope, came. He had inherited my father's title long ago, and was Sir Roger Cope. An estate which went with the baronetcy had also gone to him; but he had never lived there. The old home by the sea, in Dorsetshire, which I loved, had been my mother's. She and my father were distant cousins, and though Roger had inherited the title, as next-of-kin, after my father's death, he was even more nearly related to my mother.

Very little money had gone to Roger with the title and estates, for my father had been poor, my mother rich, and the new Sir Roger Cope let his place in Dorsetshire, living in town. He was a solicitor, and since mother and I had come to London for my first season, we had been twice invited to tea at his delightful old chambers in the Temple.

When we were ready to leave the Coburg Hotel—Swift and I—for the

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and journey down to Dorsetshire, the maid came to me at the last moment, carrying the black, purple-lined cloak in her hand.

"What is it, miss?" she asked. "I never saw it before. It can't be yours—or my poor lady's. Was it—what she wore home that night—by mistake, perhaps?"

"Yes," I answered. "She wore it that night—"

I was about to add that the thing should be left in the hotel, where perhaps the owner would one day come to inquire for it, when I remembered that I might reproach myself later for letting a possible clue to the woman in black pass out of my hands.

"Give the wrap to me," I said instead. "I should like to look at it."

Swift laid the sombre folds over my arm, and I examined the purple lining for a pocket. There was one on each side, that on the left long and narrow, for the reception of a fan; that on the right only large enough for a purse and a handkerchief.

I plunged my hand into one after the other, and at first thought that both were empty. But into the corner of the purple-pocket was pushed a tiny, crumpled bit of paper. I pulled it out, smoothed it between my fingers, and saw that I had possessed myself of a small slip cut from the column of a newspaper.

"Lady Cope and her only daughter, Miss Sheila Cope," I read, "are spending the season at the Coburg Hotel, in Carlos place."

This gave me a new idea. I rang and sent for the manager. Of him I asked if it would be possible to find out, even now, whether anyone had called to see my mother while we were at the theatre on the evening of her death.

In a few moments word came back that a lady had called. She had seemed greatly disappointed at hearing that Lady Cope was out, and had inquired where she might be found. Our box for the theatre had been ordered by telephone from the hotel, therefore the lady had been informed that we were at the Lyceum.

The lady had been tall, dark, dressed and cloaked in black, and she had come in a cab. She had left no name, and nothing further as known about her. But it was enough to serve as an answer to the question I had asked. The woman in black had gone to the theatre in expectation of seeing my mother, and for that purpose alone.

The meeting had not come about by chance. No one save the doctor who had attended my mother, Swift, and myself, knew that anything mysterious had happened that last night. Though the doctor had asked a question or two, and frowned in a puzzled way at the burn on her arm, he had not hesitated to certify that she had died from an acute attack of the heart disease which had troubled her, menacing her life for years.

Any sudden shock would have aggravated this disorder, and the doctor was certain that some such shock she must have received. Beyond this he knew nothing, save that she had been absent from home for a few hours.

Swift was aware only that her mistress had not come back with me, and had returned later in a dying condition, while my knowledge was not of a kind to establish proof of foul play against any person or persons unknown.

I did not even believe that there had been actual foul play. I thought that there was a mystery; that some news of a disturbing nature had been revealed to my mother; that she had learnt some secret which had come upon her with a great shock. I wished to find the woman in black, not through a hope of bringing her to justice, but because I was sure that my mother had tried to repeat to me the secret she had herself heard. I could think of no way of learning it, except from the woman who had shown the heart-shaped scar; and though I shrank with physical loathing from the thought of seeing her again, with her cat-eyes and wicked smile, still my reason told me that I must endeavor to do so if I could.

My mother had liked Roger Cope, but I did not like him; and I could not bring myself to confide in him, establishing new intimacy between us by relating to him the events of that unhappy night. I resolved to depend upon myself alone, and when I found the newspaper cutting in the pocket of the cloak, discovering, too, that the probable owner had called at the hotel, I would not encourage the impulse to rid myself of the hateful garment.

I determined to take it away with me to the country, and decide later upon a way of using it as a clue to the mystery. Perhaps I ought to have applied to Scotland Yard, calling in the assistance of the police. But I was reluctant to do this, for I felt that such a course would be abhorrent to my mother if she could know. Besides, there was really little to tell which could make the case seem an important one.

So I kept the cloak, already vaguely forming a plan in my mind concerning it.

We went drearily down into the country, taking my mother's body; and Roger Cope went with us and was very kind.

Then came the funeral; and it was on the night which followed that my memory begins again to paint vivid pictures of events.

I was tired out. A pall of desolation had fallen upon my spirits, and I had gone early to my room. Old friends of my mother's had come to me and tried to be kind, but it was a great relief to be alone.

I had thought that when I had sent Swift away and was quite by myself, above all things in the world it would do me good to cry—to cry till I should be spent with crying.

But when I stood by the window, in my long white cashmere dressing-gown, with only the cold glass between me and the funereal darkness outside, I had been looking forward to would not come. I had no longer any desire for tears. I could not even conceal my grief.

Suddenly I thought of the West Wing and the broken words my mother had stammered. Had she meant that I was to do something and find it in the West Wing?

The West Wing was the oldest portion of a very old house; but there was nothing mysterious or secret about it, so far as I knew.

The chapel was there, unused for many a year. There was a great picture gallery, which was also a billiard room, and had a gallery for musicians at one end. There were three or four little wainscoted rooms which had once been sacred to the family priest as long ago as the days of Queen Mary. These connected with the chapel by a private staircase, and my mother had used the prettiest room in the suite, octagon-shaped and moon-windowed, for a study. She had liked writing letters and reading there; and when she had been in the "octagon room" it was tacitly understood that she was "not at home." Nobody was allowed to break in upon her writing or other studies.

To be Continued.

Why the Hens Need Grit.
Fowls swallow their food, broken or not, and it enters the crop, or first stomach, and remains in it until it has become more or less softened, when a small quantity at a time (just as grain runs into a gizzard) is forced into the gizzard among the gravel stones. The gizzard is a strong, muscular organ, and works night and day when there is a grist to grind, contracting and expanding, thus forcing the gravel stones into the grain, breaking it to fragments and getting rid of the whole mass, after which the food is in a suitable condition to be quickly digested.

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An Embarrassing Honor.
A certain head of a government department was invited to dine with others at a table with a cabinet minister. During the dinner the former, who happened to be placed between a door and a window, and had said nothing at all, began to sneeze.

"Are you taking cold, Mr. Brown?" asked the cabinet minister.

"I believe I have that honor and pleasure," answered Mr. Brown, bowing, very respectfully.

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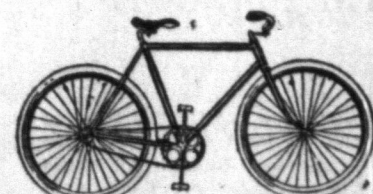
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