

The RED SEAL

By Maurice Gerard



CHAPTER I THE GIRL'S HEART

KATHERINE ALLARDYCE reached up to a half-opened bud of the white rosebush which grew against the wall, and picked it with a caressing touch. She loved all flowers; and these white roses, which luxuriated almost at will right up to the higher windows of the Manor, most of all. Having plucked, she drank deep of its fragrance, and then toyed with it in her hand.

The young man who paced by her side thought the bud a type and illustration of the maid herself. It seemed so shy and modest, so fair and sweet, just expanding to a larger life.

"Won't you give it to me, Katherine?" he asked. "I hoped you picked it for me." Lieutenant Harbin said the last words under his breath, as if almost unintentionally thinking aloud.

Katherine looked at him, a shy and yet amused glance under her full lids. Then she laughed merrily. "Picked it for you, cousin Reginald! Why, I never thought of such a thing. I picked it because I loved it; I picked it for myself." She looked the young man up and down, with a swift glance, from his plumed hat to his spurred boots, which reached to his knees.

The lieutenant was in the full uniform of the corps with which he had been serving of late, that of the King's Dragoons, which had seen active service under Colonel Churchill in Tangier.

"Roses and uniform don't go well together, cousin. Roses bask in the sunshine and nestle against the windows; what have they to do with war?" She made a little *moue*, and half shuddered. "I don't like to think of men fighting and injuring one another. Why should they? Was anyone ever the happier for any of the strife and bloodshed of the world?"

"My father was a soldier," Reginald replied, with a little stiffening of the upper lip, on which the dark hair was already beginning to make a perceptible line. "And I follow in his footsteps." He took off his hat. "I could not follow a better man."

Katherine touched his arm lightly with her slender fingers. "You know, Reginald, I think that too, as much as you do; and I meant no reflection either on him or on you. God forbid!"

"Yes, sweet cousin, I am well assured of that; and as for war, I should be always glad that it was not of my making; but a soldier obeys, and there his responsibility ends—not," he added with a frank gesture, "that I don't like fighting, when I am at it. Then I become another man."

"I wonder whether I should like you so well," she pouted, "if I saw you in that mood?"

"Then you do like me, Katherine—a little—at other times?" The lieutenant bent towards her. Katherine was tall for a girl; but Reginald was well over six feet, knit proportionately.

"Of course," she said. "Why not? Are you not my cousin once removed? Have I not known you since I was a child, and you but little more?" She again glanced at his stalwart proportions, and meeting his earnest gaze looked away again. "Besides, you have always been kind to me—like a brother, Reginald."

He stretched out his hand and took her slender fingers into his big palm. "Could anyone fail to be kind to you, Katherine? Are you not the love and joy of everyone at the Manor, and for miles around? Do you wonder that I, too—" He stopped, and his utterance grew deep as he went on, "that I, too, love you?"

The girl had allowed her hand to rest in his; now she gently, but firmly, withdrew it.

"I have always felt for you as for a brother, Reginald, ever since I was a little child."

"A brother!" he cried impetuously. "Yes, when we were children, then it sufficed. But now—"

"I always wished I had a real brother," Katherine said. "Sometimes I feel as if I had no one."

"Katherine!"

"No one I could really claim as my very own, no one who belonged to me, and to whom I belonged."

Wintern Manor, Colonel Harbin's fine seat, was beautifully placed on a rising slope, with thickly wooded parkland about it, and beyond the silver streak of "Severn Sea." At the back of the mansion the ground was much lower; so that the courtyard, fine entrance hall, kitchens, and other offices were on a level to themselves. In front, where the Manor looked out over the Bristol Channel, at the top of an inclined and gradually rising ground, was a terrace on which Katherine Allardyce and her companion were walking. Opening out on to this beautifully placed promenade were the windows of the principal living-rooms—the dining and drawing rooms, Katherine's boudoir, and Colonel Harbin's sanctum.

As they talked Reginald and the girl had reached the end of the terrace, where a clear view could be obtained of the Severn estuary, with its distant boundary line of the Welsh coast. The trees below this point were kept pollarded, so as not to intercept the lovely view. Amongst them could be seen the winding drive leading to the great iron gates of the park, outside which was the Taunton road. Round Wintern Manor itself the country was fertile, and the landscape homely, yet not more than a mile and a half away Exmoor stretched out one of its spurs, and beyond were vast solitudes, heather-clad and pine-bearing, where the red deer roamed at will, and where you could go twenty miles without meeting any human being except some chance shepherd or peat-digger.

The lieutenant looked into the girl's eyes, as she gazed half dreamily over the distant water. They were of that shade of grey which sometimes deepens into brown, and at other times has the pale transparency of aquamarine. He saw that she was thinking her own thoughts, and he sighed. She was all the world to him, and he—what was he to her? Was it the four years which separated their ages, he three-and-twenty, she nineteen, which made all the difference? He had fixed his future, and knew where he willed to go with all the strenuous purpose of his being. Her feelings he could not read, try as he would. Nay, he was more than half assured she could not, did not, read them herself. Yet girls, he had understood, always matured more rapidly than men. Why was she so backward? Was it that her heart had never been quickened, the pulse of her inmost nature never been stirred? How often had he seen in the morning the waters of "Severn Sea" lying dull and sluggish, unresponsive, leaden. Then the sun had shone full from its bank of clouds, its rays had kissed the waters, and the whole face of nature had changed under the influence of its radiance in response to the entrance of the master. Life had answered to life, love had quickened to the touch of love.

Would this be the case with the beautiful girl by his side, as fair in her way as the "Severn Sea" was in her own niche in the complete handiwork of the Creator? There was a long pause, then he asked her softly:

"Do you think a brother would have contented you always, Katherine?"

"Does anyone content us always?" she answered with another question. "Nay! do we not tire of ourselves? Perhaps that was the origin of those fairy tales my old nurse used to tell me and I loved to hear, when people were suddenly transformed into somebody quite different, and if that did not do they only had to put their feet on a carpet and be immediately transferred to a far-away land or fantastic, mystic Isle of the Sea. I should like that! I should like to see the world, and yet"—she turned and looked back on the grey walls of the Manor, on the giant-rose-bush with its myriad starlike clusters, on the green luxury of the tree-tops stretching away for long distances in the soft June sunlight, on the shining phosphorescence of the Channel beyond—"I love this place beyond everything; no sooner had I left it than I should want to come back. Dear old Wintern!"

The young man's face glowed as he spoke. He, too, loved it with all his heart and he dearly liked to hear her avow the same feeling. This, at any rate, was a link between them.

"I have known what it is to long for Wintern," he said, "as for a jewel beyond price. At Tangier many a night, as I kept watch when all but the sentries under my charge slept, I have thought of you all here—of father, of the servants, of the village, of—you." His voice faltered for a minute. Then he went on with a half smile. "Once or twice in the midst of these memories and longings for home your fairy has waved her wand, and the change has come. We were surprised by the stealthy approach, followed by

the quick onrush, of the Arab hosts which ever hovered about our outposts. Ah! then you should have seen our gallant leader, Colonel Churchill, cool and yet daring, ordering, striking, driving a multitude before him with his own hand, the force of his own personality." The lieutenant had laid his fingers on the handle of his sword as the vivid scene rose up before him. "He is a man, and when his praise, only rarely given, sounds in your ears, you feel that you can do and dare anything for him."

It was Katherine's turn to look at Reginald Harbin; and as she did so, her own figure straightened, and her eyes caught fire from his enthusiasm. It was true that she hated the thought of war and all that war entailed, yet her forebears had been gallant fighters, and the blood of her ancestors flowed through her veins. As Katherine looked she seemed to see her cousin in a new light. The man in him asserted itself. She had known him as a boy. Her parents had died while she was a child, leaving her, the heiress of great estates, to the guardianship of her mother's cousin, Sir Francis Harbin. At Wintern Manor she had found her home. Gradually all the recollection of any other place of abode had been dulled, until it practically faded from her memory. Katherine and Reginald Harbin had grown up together, calling themselves "cousins," a vague term of relationship which had served so far. The girl had been slow to realize that she must focus her view of Reginald afresh as the years brought maturity. Even his absences on military duty in England, and later in Africa, had failed to teach her that he had reached his stature as a man. Now it came to her in a flash, and she was strangely puzzled. Her old conception of the immature boy, now shy, now daring, according to the mood of the moment, had to give way to her reading of the man with settled convictions and fixed determinations. Reginald had assumed in her eyes a new dignity; she felt for him the respect which is born of assured strength.

Katherine did not speak for a minute or two. Then she said: "Now the fairy which watches over your life is about to wave his (or her) wand again. I always think of a fairy as a woman. You are to be transported to London, and you hardly know what will come of it in these troublous times." She said it affirmatively, yet a question was implied, and, somehow, Reginald understood her quickened interest.

"I am a laborer waiting to be hired," as the Reverend Doctor illustrated for our good on Sunday last, and I know not yet who will hire me, or whether there will indeed be a hiring at all. Since our troop was disbanded our swords have rusted in their scabbards."

"I could wish that they might ever remain so," Katherine ejaculated, clasping her hands.

"I must not echo it, since the profession of war is my calling; yet I could wish that it might be my future to fight, if I fight at all, on a foreign strand, as I have done hitherto, and against a foe not of my own kith and kin."

Katherine turned and looked at him, her face blanched, her eyes dilated.

"You think, cousin—"

"What do you think, and yet do not wish to think, Katherine—that this nation is stirred to its depths, that discontent simmers, and sedition comes to a head. The generation which suffered and bled at Worcester and Naseby, and a hundred such fights, has either forgot the lesson, or is giving place to one which only knows it by hearsay as a strange tale. We can hear the mutterings of the storm, the coming tempest, here in our own village, among the shepherds of the moor and the fisherfolk of Minehead and Watchet. The careful tradesmen of Bridgewater and Taunton sell his wool—or his wares by day, but he sharpens his sword by night. You know it as well as I. It is whispered in the market and almost preached from the pulpit."

"It is true," she cried, her fine eyes suffused with tears. "We live in troublous times, and King James if aught be true of what men say, reckes of nothing but bending the necks of his people to the yoke they both fear and hate. Would that someone could guide his Majesty aright, or that God Himself would teach him wisdom!"

"I know one who has striven to turn him and lost favor by it—my old leader, and King James's good friend in his days before the kingship, Colonel Churchill."

"Is it to him that you would go first when you reach London, Reginald?"

"Yes; I shall put up at the 'Rose and Crown,' near Covent Garden, Sir Francis's old hostelry, and early make my way to Churchill's quarters. Although he has not the favor of James as once he had, the king never lets him far distant from him, for he well knows there is no more capable servant or braver soldier in his dominions."

"You will soon know better than we do what is about to happen, cousin; we can only sit still and wait. That is the hardest part—waiting. I feel it that am but a girl. What must it be for a man like your father, Sir Francis?"

"Ah! if it had not been for the loss of his arm at Naseby he would have gone with me to London."

"I am almost thankful for that misfortune if it