

THE ANGEL OF THE WHITE FEET

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she had but recently come from abroad to keep house for her father. That much Albert Sims had learned from his garrulous mother and from the gossip of the little village near at hand. She rode and she drove all over the countryside, and she came with some frequency upon the little, timid man in the knickerbocker suit, wandering aimlessly in the lanes. And always she gave him that frank look, and sometimes, when he stood aside for her in a narrow place or opened a gate for her, that frank smile.

Of course, it was all hopeless and impossible; Albert Sims told himself that, bitterly enough, again and again. He told himself so especially one night, when he sat alone before the fire and reviewed all the circumstances. It was a wild and blustering night with the wind and rain pounding at the shutters, and making that country into which he had been plunged seem more desolate and undesirable than usual.

Mrs. Sims had gone to bed; the servants had retired; Albert was left alone. He had been making a pretence of reading; but the book had fallen from his grasp, and he lay back in his chair, looking at the fire, and dreaming the unsatisfactory dreams that had been with him so long.

"On'y suppose at this present moment she was sittin' there—an' smilin' across at me in that way she smiles, with 'er eyes wrinkl'n' up, and the dimples showin'. Suppose she was to lean forward, an' look at me—an' speak; an' I was to know that she was goin' to sit 'ere every night of our lives—just 'er an' me an'—No—not mother. She don't fit in with mother, some'ow. Mother's all right in 'er little way—one o' the best; but she ain't quite there with Miss Olivia 'Artigan. Miss Olivia!"

HE sighed, and got up, and took a turn or two about the room; stood listening for a moment to the howling wind and the driving rain. Coming back to the fireplace again, he stood there, looking down at it with a smile upon his face, and shaking his head at it in a whimsical fashion.

"Not for you, Albert Sims; she ain't of your class. You know you love 'er, you silly fool; an' you'll never so much as touch 'er 'and or 'er voice. If you was to see 'er now, you wouldn't know what to say to 'er; you'd simply blush and stammer—you know you would. What's the good of all the money? She wouldn't look at you if you was made of gold. Ah, well—I'll get to bed."

He had turned round to extinguish the light, when he stopped suddenly, listening. He had a curious feeling that he had heard a faint cry and a knocking at the door—had heard it above the howling of the storm. A little startled, he passed from the room into the hall and listened again; this time he was certain that someone was at the door, beating softly upon it and calling to be let in.

Vague remembrances of stories of lonely houses at night, and of men who came to them for robbery or murder, came into his mind; he hesitated and looked towards the stairs. But the voice crying so insistently and the light knocking on the door were not to be ignored; he swiftly undid the bolts and bars and threw back the door. A figure darted in and leaned for a moment against the wall in the darkness, panting and striving for breath. It was a woman, but he could not see the face.

"You're got caught in the storm," he whispered weakly.

She seemed to nod; she could not speak yet. He threw open the door of the room from which he had come, and motioned towards it; she swayed a little in moving, and he caught her arm and guided her into the room. And then in a moment he saw who the visitor was.

It was Olivia Hartigan. She appeared to be almost wet through; she shuddered as she drew near to the fire and crouched over it. As for Mr. Albert Sims, he stood still, staring at her in perplexity and not saying a word. It was the girl who broke the silence; she began to laugh a little as she spoke.

"Really, I'm very sorry; I hope I didn't startle you. I saw a light—the first—the first I'd seen for an hour or more; and I think I was frightened of the darkness and the storm; I seemed to be all alone in the world. I'm so sorry."

"Not at all, miss," said Albert, in a voice scarcely above a whisper. "I'm sure you're very welcome; it ain't a nice night—is it?"

"It's awful!" she said, looking round at him for a moment. "I've had a terrible experience; smashed up my dog-cart miles from home, and nearly smashed up myself. Then I got assistance from an inn, and they wanted me to stop the night. But it was a low place, with coarse men drinking and smoking in the only room available—and I didn't like the look of the place at all. I got away and set out to walk—and then, of course, lost my way."

"And got round 'ere?" added Albert.

"Yes. What a cheerful room you've got here!" She looked round about with her bright eyes as she spoke. "I am glad I found the place. I was horribly frightened."

"I'm afraid you're 'orribly wet, miss," he said.

She looked down at her dragged skirts; she gave a glance at the windows that rattled under the fury of the storm; and she laughed a little ruefully. "I am wet," she replied.

Now, of course the proper thing for Mr. Albert Sims to have done would have been to rouse his mother and the servants: to have had the lady properly dried and looked after, and in all probability put to bed. But Mr. Albert Sims did nothing of the kind. True, for a moment he glanced upwards, as though remembering the stout, comfortable mother who slept above; but that was all. So far as the young lady was concerned, he might have been utterly alone in the house, for any suggestion he made as to feminine help.

"I think I know who you are," she said, looking at him steadily.

"Indeed, miss?"

"Yes. You're the—the gentleman I've seen so often walking about the lanes here—aren't you?"

"Yes, miss. You see, I ain't quite used to the country yet," went on Albert Sims, "an' I'm takin' 'er gradually. It's only what you might call a noddin' acquaintance at present, miss; but I shall get on better in time. The country takes a lot o' knowin'."

"Yes, indeed, I shouldn't have lost myself to-night, only it happens that I've been away from here since I was a little child. Do you know," she broke off, to add—with another rueful laugh—"I'm really dreadfully wet. Are you all alone here?"

Albert Sims gulped, and spoke. "Quite alone, miss," he said, lowering his voice.

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