

A Ring of Rubies

**By
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Freeditorial 

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Chapter One

Storming the Citadel

I have often been asked to tell the story of the Ruby Ring, and I now do so for the sake of my children. It may instruct them a little; it will certainly amuse and interest them.

I am nearly thirty now, but when the story of the ring happened, I was between nineteen and twenty. It is not so long ago, therefore, and all the events stand out quite clear and strong in my memory.

We lived in the country, about thirty miles away from London. There were plenty of quick trains, even ten years ago, and my father and brothers used to go to town every morning, and return in time for a sort of mixed meal between dinner and supper, at night.

My mother and I had rather a dull life; the only event of any moment in the twenty-four hours being the evening meal when the men of the family were at home.

I was the only girl, and the youngest of the family. I was not petted nor made much of in any way; ten years ago girls were not fussed over as they are now. My father had none of the advanced ideas with regard to women; he thought the less girls were heard of outside their homes, the better. He was a very good, honourable man, but a great autocrat. What he said and thought was echoed both by my mother and brothers. They all preached to me from morning till night the doctrine of staying quietly at home, of doing nothing, and of waiting until your fortune dropped into your lap.

Of course, we were horribly poor; not in the exciting sort of way of wanting food, and a covering for our heads, or anything dramatic of that sort; but poor in the way which takes the courage out of a young life more than anything else—a penny had always to be looked at twice, a dress had always to be turned twice, meals had to be scanty, fires small, and my mother's whole time was spent contriving and planning how to make two ends meet, consequently life was very narrow and dull.

One day, on a certain sunshiny morning, a few months after I was nineteen, I awoke early, lay for an hour thinking hard, then jumped up and dressed myself. As I arranged my thick hair before the glass, I looked attentively at my face. I had a rather square face; the lower part of it in particular was somewhat heavily moulded; my mouth had very firm lines; my eyes were dark and deeply

set. Certainly I was not beautiful, but my face had lots of character; I could see that for myself.

“The present state of things cannot go on any longer,” I mentally soliloquised. “I’ll make a break in the dulness this very day. The fact of my being born a woman shall not shut me out from all joy in life; I’ll have the whole subject out with mother after breakfast.”

“Rosamund,” said my mother that morning, when my father and the boys had gone to London, “will you put on your hat, and come with me into the orchard to pick the late damsons? I want to preserve them this afternoon.”

“Oh, wait until to-morrow, mother. I have something important to talk about; the damsons can keep.”

My mother was very gentle. Now she raised her brows a little, and looked at me anxiously.

“It seems a pity to waste the time,” she said. “I know what you are going to say, and I can’t grant it. I spoke to your father last night. He says he cannot raise your quarter’s allowance, so the new trimmings must be dispensed with, poor Rose.”

These were for my winter dress. I was turning it, and mother and I had planned how some new velvet would improve it.

“My dear mother,” I said, going over to her, “yesterday I should have been fretted about a trifle like this, but to-day it does not even seem like a pin-prick. I made a resolve this morning, mother, and I want to talk it out with you now.”

Every one in the house knew that my resolves were not to be trifled with. I did not often make them, but when I did, I metaphorically put down my foot, and kept it down. Even my father listened good-humouredly when I had one of my great determinations on.

Now my mother gently sighed, gave up the damson jam on the spot, and began to unroll her knitting.

“Be as quick as you can, Rosamund,” she said, in a rather weary voice.

“I can say what I want to say in a very few words, mother, only please don’t interrupt me. I am tired of my present life. I want to do something. I want to go to town every morning, and come back at night.”

My mother held up her hands.

“I want to earn money.”

A look of agony came into my mother’s gentle blue eyes. I turned slightly away.

“I have one talent, and I wish to cultivate it.” Here my mother would interrupt.

“You have many gifts, my dear child,” she said proudly. “In particular you have a great faculty for turning and contriving. Most invaluable under our circumstances.”

“I hate turning and contriving,” I burst out, “and I have only got one real talent, and that is, for art. I could be an artist.”

“You are an artist, Rosamund; you paint beautifully.”

“Dreadfully, you mean, mother. I have no knowledge of perspective. I have no true ideas of colour; but I could paint.”

I felt sparkles of hope coming into my eyes, and I knew my cheeks were flaming.

My mother glanced up at me admiringly. “You look quite handsome, dear,” she said. “Oh, if I could dress you properly! Rose, when I was your age I had nice clothes.”

“Never mind that, mother dear; I shall have money to buy nice clothes presently. I want to cultivate what I feel is within me, I want to cultivate the love which ought to become a power. I love pictures; I love dabbling with paints; my brush ought to be able to tell stories, and it shall when once I have mastered the technical difficulties. I want to go to a school of art in London, to begin at the beginning, and work my way up. I should like best to go to the Slade School.”

My mother opened her lips to speak. I interrupted her.

“I know what you are going to say. There is no money. I have thought that part out very carefully. Mother, you must consent! Just for a little bit of pride my whole life must not be spoiled. Mother dear, it is dull at home, and I do so long for this. Let me go and see Cousin Geoffrey.”

My mother started when I said this. I knew she would, for Cousin Geoffrey’s name had always a potent, curious charm in our home. It was a name both of awe and admiration, and I felt quite sure when I spoke it that I should secure

immediate and profound attention. Not that I had ever seen Cousin Geoffrey. I had heard of him all my life, but I had never yet laid eyes on him.

No one who was at all intimate with my mother could be long in her presence without hearing about Cousin Geoffrey.

She had the sweetest, most contented face in the world, but it generally took an expression of melancholy mixed with envy and profound awe when she spoke of this relative.

“Talk of riches!” she would say. “Ah, you ought to know Geoffrey! My dears,” she would constantly remark, “if I were your Cousin Geoffrey I could give you so-and-so, but as it is,—” then she would sigh, and her eyes would sometimes fill with tears.

Of course, my brothers and I were intensely curious about Cousin Geoffrey; all the more so because we had never seen him—beyond knowing that he lived somewhere in London, we were not even aware of his address. We never dared speak of him in my father’s presence. Once I, impelled by an irresistible longing to break the overpowering dulness, had whispered his name. My mother had turned pale, my brothers had instantly kicked me violently under the table, and my father left the room, not to return again that night.

Of course, I did not mention Cousin Geoffrey’s name any more when my father was present, but not the less did I think of him. He began to assume to me more and more the character of a deliverer, and when I made my resolution I decided that he should be my weapon with which I would fight my way to success.

We never do know how our dreams are going to be fulfilled. Certainly nothing happened as I expected it.

It took me exactly a week to talk my mother round. I may mention, in passing, that there was no damson jam that year. We spent all our mornings in the little parlour; I talked very hard, my mother listened very sorrowfully.

At the end of the third day she revealed to me the name of the street in which Cousin Geoffrey lived, but a whole week passed before I had sufficient particulars to act upon. These were all I wanted. I would do the rest myself.

On a certain bright morning early in October, the beginning of a lovely day, I kissed my mother, and accompanied my father and brothers to town. They were under the impression that I wanted to buy a new winter hat. They thought me extravagant to come so far for the purpose; they expressed

disapproval by their looks, if not by their words. They were all three of them men who thought it waste of breath to argue with a woman.

I offered no explanations. They read their papers and took no notice of me. When we got to Paddington, George, my youngest brother, offered to put me in an omnibus which would, he said, set me down at Whiteley's door.

"I am not going to Whiteley's," I said.

George stared.

"It is quite the cheapest place for what you want," he replied. "But as you are so absolutely demoralised, here is another omnibus which will take you to Regent Circus."

I got into this omnibus, bade George good-bye, and, as I drove away, felt that I had now really my fate in my own hands.

I had never been in London alone before, but I was glad to feel that my heart beat quite evenly, and that I was in no way unduly excited.

"It is quite plain to my mind, Rosamund Lindley," I said, addressing myself, "that you were meant to be a man. You have the nerve, the calm which is generally reserved for the male sex. Here you are in great London, and your pulse doesn't even flutter. Keep up your courage, Rosamund, and you will build the fortunes of your family."

We reached the Circus; the omnibus conductor gave me some directions, and I walked up Oxford Street, stepping lightly, as the young and hopeful should.

I did not know my way beyond a certain point, but policemen directed me, and presently I found myself in an old square, and standing on the steps of a house whose windows were grimy with dust, and the old knocker of the ponderous hall-door rusty from want of use.

"My mother must be mistaken—Cousin Geoffrey must have moved from this house," I said to myself.

Nevertheless, I raised the knocker, and made it sound sharply. In the course of a minute footsteps were heard in the tiled hall within. Some chains were withdrawn from the door, and a dreary-looking old man put his head out.

"Is Mr Rutherford at home?"

The old man opened the door an inch wider.

“Eh? What? I’m a trifle deaf,” he said.

I repeated my question more distinctly.

“Is Mr Rutherford within?”

“And what may you want with him?”

“My name is Rosamund Lindley. I am his relative. I want to see him.”

“Eh, my dear,” said the old man; “Geoffrey Rutherford has many relatives, many, and they all want to see him. It’s wonderful how he’s appreciated! Quite extraordinary, for he does nothing to deserve it. I’ll inquire if you can be admitted, Miss—Miss Lindley.”

The old man shambled away. He was so inhospitable that he absolutely left the chain on the door.

He was absent for nearly ten minutes. I thought he had forgotten all about me, and was about to knock again, when he reappeared. Without saying a word he removed the chain from the hall-door and flung it wide open.

He was about the shabbiest-looking servant I ever saw.

“Come this way,” he said, when I had stepped into the hall.

He took me down a long passage, and into a room which was only lighted from the roof. The furniture of the room was handsome, but covered everywhere with dust. The leather of the high-backed chairs was worm-eaten.

“Sit down, Miss Lindley,” he said, motioning to one of them.

And then, to my astonishment, he placed himself before a high desk, and began to write.

I am sure I must always have had a quick temper. I thought this old servant’s manners intolerable.

“Go and tell your master, at once, that his relative, Rosamund Lindley, is here,” I said. “Go, I am in a hurry.”

He dropped his pen, and looked at me with the dawning of a smile playing round his thin lips.

“And pray, who is my master?”

“My cousin, Mr Geoffrey Rutherford.”

“I happen to be that individual myself.”

I was really startled into jumping out of my seat. I flopped back again with a very red face, said “Oh!” and felt extremely foolish.

“What is your candid opinion of your Cousin Geoffrey, young lady?” said the little man, jumping up and walking over to the fireplace. “He is the ideal sort of rich cousin, is he not?”

I laughed. My laugh seemed to please the owner of the dirty house. He smiled again faintly, looking hard into my face, and said:—“I forget your name, tell it to me again.”

“Rosamund Lindley.”

“Ah, Lindley!” He started slightly. “I have put down no Lindleys in my list of relatives. Rosamund Lindley! Are you my seventh, eighth, or tenth cousin, child? I have cousins, I assure you, twenty degrees removed, most affectionate people. Extraordinary! I can’t make out what they see in me.”

“My mother was your first cousin,” I said boldly. “Her name was the same as yours—Rutherford. Before she was married she was known to her friends as Mary Rutherford.”

I expected this remark to make a sensation. It did. The little man turned his back on me, gazed for a couple of minutes into the empty grate, then flashed round, and pointed to one of the worm-eaten chairs.

“Sit down, Rosamund Lindley, you—you have astonished me. You have given me a shock. In short you have mentioned the only relative who is not—not very affectionate. So you are Mary Rutherford’s daughter? You are not like her. I can’t compliment you by saying that you are. Did—did Mary Rutherford send you to me?”

“Most assuredly she did not. I have come entirely of my own free will. I had to coax my mother for a whole week before she would even give me your address.”

“But she gave it at last?”

“I made her.”

“She knows you have come then.”

“It is impossible for her not to know that I have come. But she is angry—grieved—even frightened. You could not have been at all kind to my mother long ago, Cousin Geoffrey.”

“Hush—chit! Let your mother’s name drop out of our conversation. Now, I will sit down near you, and we can talk. You have come to see me of your own free will? Granted. You are my relative—not twenty degrees removed? Granted. Now, what can I do for you. Rosamund Lindley?”

“I want you to help me,” I said.

I spoke out quite boldly.

“You are rich, and I am poor. It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

“Ha, ha! You want me to be one of the blessed ones? Very neatly put. Upon my word, you’re a brave girl. You quite entertain me. Go on.”

My cheeks were very red now, but I was not going to be beaten.

“Cousin Geoffrey,” I said, “we are all very poor at home, and I hate being poor. We have all to pinch and contrive, and I loathe pinching and contriving. I have a talent, and I want to cultivate it. I want to be an artist. I can’t be an artist without money. I wish to go to one of the good schools of art, here in London, and study hard, and work my way up from the very beginning. I have no money to do this, but you have lots of money. As you are my cousin, I think you ought to give me enough money to learn art at one of the great schools here. I think you ought. You are my relative—you ought to help me.”

I had flung my words out almost defiantly, but now something seemed to catch my voice; it broke.

“Oh, Cousin Geoffrey, this means so much to me,” I said, half sobbing. “How happy you can make me, and I will love you for it. There, I will love you!”

I knew I was offering him something greater than he could give me. I felt we were equals. I ceased to sob, I stood up, and looked him full in the face.

He returned my gaze with great solemnity. A queer change came over his very old face; his eyes were lit by an inward fire. It was impossible for me to tell whether he was pleased or not, but unquestionably he was moved, even agitated. After a brief pause he came up and took my hand in his.

“You are a brave girl, Rosamund Lindley,” he said. “You are like your mother, but you have more spirit than she ever had. You are very young—very, very young, or you would not offer an old man like me—an old miser, a person whose own heart is withered—such a gift as love. What can a withered heart want with love? You are very young, Rosamund, so I forgive your rash words. I will talk to you, however. Sit near me. You may open that fresh heart to me if you feel inclined.”

Cousin Geoffrey and I talked together for over an hour. At the end of that time he told me he was hungry, and that if I had no objection he would go out and bring in some lunch for us both.

He was now quite confidential and friendly. I made him laugh several times, and although he had apparently turned a deaf ear to my request, I fancied that I was getting on very well with him.

He made me chain the hall-door after him when he went out, and he promised that he would not be longer away than he could help. He brought in two mutton-chops for our lunch, which he fried himself in the most perfect manner, over a gas-jet in his sitting-room. We had bread with our chops, and some very rare wine, which was poured into tall Venetian glasses of great beauty.

“I don’t open this wine for my distant relatives,” he said, with a chuckle. “But you, Rosamund—your courage deserves the best I can do for you.”

After lunch he took me all over his large house. It was full of the most valuable and costly furniture, but all worm-eaten and going to decay from dirt and neglect.

He had some paintings of immense value in his drawing-rooms, and in his library were several rare editions of costly books.

“I refused three thousand pounds for that Paul Veronese,” he said, pointing to a picture which I was too ignorant to appreciate.

“Then you, too, love art,” I said. “Of course you will help me.”

“I love the great in art,” he answered. “But I despise the little. And of all things, what I most despise is the wild talk of the aspirant. Rosamund, you are a good girl, a plucky honest girl, but you will never be an artist. Tut, tut! There have not been more than a dozen real artists in the world, and is it likely that you will be the thirteenth? Go and darn your stockings quietly at home, Rosamund, and forget this silly little dream.”

I stamped my foot.

“If there have hitherto been only twelve artists I will make the thirteenth,” I said. “There! I am not afraid. I go and darn stockings! No, I won’t, not while you are alive, Cousin Geoffrey.”

I was angry, and I knew my eyes flashed angrily. I had often been told that my eyes could flash in a very brilliant and even alarming manner, and I was well aware that they had now bestowed a lightning glance of scorn on Cousin Geoffrey.

He was not displeased.

“Oh, what utter nonsense you talk!” he said. “But you are a brave girl, very brave. Why, you are not a bit afraid of me!”

“Afraid?” I said. “What do you mean?”

“Most of my relatives are afraid of me, child. They choose their words carefully; they always call me ‘dear Geoffrey,’ or ‘dear Cousin Geoffrey,’ and they agree with every word I say. It’s awfully monotonous being agreed with, I can tell you. A daring chit like you is a wonderful change for the better. Now, come downstairs with me. You and I will have tea together. Rosamund, I wish you had a contented soul.”

By this time we had returned to the ugly sitting-room with the sky-light. Cousin Geoffrey had lit a fire with his own hands. He was now on his knees toasting some bread. He would not allow me to help him in the smallest particular.

“Rosamund,” he repeated, “I wish you were contented. Your ambition will undo you; your pride will have a fall.”

“Very well, Cousin Geoffrey, let it. I would rather ride my high-horse for a day, and have a fall in the evening, than never mount it at all.”

“Oh, folly, child, stuff and folly! There, the kettle boils. No, you need not help me, I don’t want young misses with grand ideas like you to touch my china. Rosamund, do you know—that I am looking out for an heir, or an heiress, to inherit my riches?”

“All right, Cousin Geoffrey, only pray don’t choose me!”

“You, you saucy chit! I want some one who’s contented, who won’t squander my gold. You!—really, Rosamund, your words are a little too bold to be always agreeable.”

“Please forgive me, Cousin Geoffrey. I just came here to-day to ask you for a little help—just a trifle out of all your wealth, and I don’t want you to think to think.”

“That you have come prying round like the other relatives? Why, child, your eyes have got tears in them. They look soft now—they were fierce enough a few moments ago. I don’t think anything bad of you, Rosamund; you are a brave girl. You shall come and see me again.”

“I will, with pleasure, when I come to London, to study art.”

“Oh—pooh!—Now drink your tea.”

After the meal was over, Cousin Geoffrey rose, and held out his hand.

“Good-bye, Rosamund,” he said. “I am glad you came to see me. You are your mother’s daughter, although you have not got her face. You may tell her so if you like, and and— But no; I won’t send any other message. Good-bye, Rosamund.”

“Cousin Geoffrey, you have not told me—Cousin Geoffrey—you won’t, oh, you won’t disappoint me?”

“Child, if I grant your request it will be against my will. As a rule, I never do anything against my will. I disapprove of your scheme. You are just a nice girl, but you are no artist, Rosamund.”

“Cousin Geoffrey, let me prove to you that I am.”

“I don’t want you to prove it to me. There, if I think twice of this matter you shall hear from me in a week.”

“And if I don’t hear?”

“Take my silence for what it means. I respect art—only true votaries must approach her shrine.”

Chapter Two

Cousin Geoffrey

I went home and waited for the week. I was excited, I even felt nervous. I was not a particularly pleasant companion for my mother during these days of waiting. I felt irritable, and the merest trifle made me speak crossly. The boys (we always called my big grown-up brothers "the boys") twitted me on my London visit. They said my new hat had not improved my temper, and, by the way, where was my new hat?

I said, if it came home it would be in a week. I threw great mystery into my voice when I made this remark, but the boys were essentially matter-of-fact, and did not pursue the inquiry.

During this week my mother talked a great deal about Cousin Geoffrey.

At first she seemed almost afraid to ask me what had taken place during the time I spent with him, but soon she got over her reluctance, and then she was only too desirous to learn even the most remote particulars that I could give her.

She both laughed and cried over my account of my interview.

"Just like Geoffrey!" she exclaimed, when I quoted his remarks about art and artists. "Just like Geoffrey," she said again, when I told her about the mutton-chop cooked by his own hands, and the delicate and rare wine served in the tall Venetian glasses.

My mother seemed to know his home well; she asked about the position of certain pieces of furniture, and in particular she spoke about the Paul Veronese. She knew its value well enough—she was no artist, but she could appreciate its merits. Her cheeks glowed, and her eyes grew bright as she spoke of it.

"Ah, Rosamund," she said, "I helped him to unpack it—long ago—long, long ago."

When I told my mother how Cousin Geoffrey said she was the only relative who was not kind, she turned her head away.

I knew why she did this—she did not want me to see the tears in her eyes.

The week passed.

I got up early on the morning which saw its completion, and went down-stairs myself to answer the postman's ring.

There was no letter for me. I did not cry, nor show disappointment in any way. On the contrary I was particularly cheerful, only that day I would not talk at all about Cousin Geoffrey.

In the evening my father returned by an earlier train than usual; my brothers had not come back with him. He came straight into our little drawing-room without removing his muddy boots, as his usual custom was. My mother and I had just lighted the lamp; the curtains were drawn. My mother was bending over her eternal mending and darning.

When my father entered the room my mother scarcely raised her head. I did—I was about to remark that he was home in specially good time, when I noticed something strange in his face. He raised his eyebrows, and glanced significantly towards the door.

I knew he wanted me to leave the room; he had something to say to my mother.

I went away. My father and mother remained alone together for about a quarter of an hour. Then he came out of the drawing-room, called to me to get supper ready at once, and went up to his own room.

I helped our one maid to put the dishes on the table, and then rushed into the drawing-room to my mother.

She was sitting gazing into the fire. A stocking she had been darning lay on her lap. Her face was very pale, and when she turned round at my step, I saw by her eyes that she had just wiped tears away from them.

"Rosamund," she said, in her gentle, somewhat monotonous voice, "my child, you will be disappointed—disappointed of your hope. Cousin Geoffrey is dead."

I uttered a loud exclamation.

"Hush," said my mother. "We must not talk about it before your father. Hush, Rosamund. Why, Rosamund, my dear, why should you cry?"

"No, I won't cry," I said, "only I am stunned, and—shocked."

"Come in to supper," said my mother. "We will talk of this presently. Your father must not notice anything unusual. Keep all your feelings to yourself, my darling."

Then she got up and kissed me. She was not a woman to kiss any one, even her own child, often. She was the sweetest woman in the world, but she found it difficult to give expression to her feelings. Her tender caress now did much to make up for the sore and absolutely certain fall of all my castles in the air.

The next day, I learned from one of my brothers that Cousin Geoffrey Rutherford had been found seated by his desk, quite dead. A policeman had found him. He had seen that hall-door, which was practically never off its chain, a little ajar, and had gone in and found Cousin Geoffrey.

The day but one after the news reached us, my mother got a letter from Cousin Geoffrey's lawyer.

"As you are one of the nearest of kin of the deceased, it would be advisable that you should be present at the reading of the will."

"I think, Andrew," said my mother, handing this letter across the table to my father, "that I will go, and take Rosamund with me; I am quite sure Geoffrey cannot have left me anything," she continued, a vivid pink coming into her cheek. "Indeed, I may add," she continued, "that under the circumstances I should not wish him to leave me anything, but it would give me gratification to show him the slight respect of attending his funeral—and I own that it would also give me pleasure to see the old house and the furniture again."

I had never heard my mother make such a long speech before, and I fully expected my father to interrupt it with a torrent of angry words. Even the boys turned pale as they listened to my mother.

To our great astonishment her words were followed by half a moment of absolute silence. Then my father said in a quiet voice:—

"You will please yourself, of course, Mary. I have not a word of advice to give on this matter."

We buried Cousin Geoffrey in Kensal Green. After the funeral was over we all returned to the old house.

When I say "we all," I include a very goodly company. I am almost sure that fifty people came home in mourning-coaches to Cousin Geoffrey's desolate house.

It presented, however, anything but a desolate appearance on the day of his funeral. No one who saw that long train of mourning relatives could have said that Cousin Geoffrey had gone unsorrowsed to his grave. Now, these sorrowing relatives wandered over his house, and after a cold collation, provided by the

lawyers out of some of Cousin Geoffrey's riches, they assembled to hear the will read in the magnificent drawing-room, where the Paul Veronese hung.

Mr Gray was the name of Cousin Geoffrey's lawyer. He was a most judicious man, and extremely polite to all the relatives. Of course he knew the secret which they were most of them burning to find out, but not by voice, gesture, or expression did he betray even an inkling of the truth. He was scrupulously polite to every one, and if he said a nice thing to an excitable old lady on his right, he was careful to say quite as nice a thing to an anxious-faced gentleman on his left. Nevertheless I felt sure that he could be irascible if he liked, and I soon saw that his politeness was only skin-deep.

My mother and I did not join the group who sat round an enormous centre table. My mother looked terribly pale and sad, and she would keep me by her side, and stay herself quite in the background, rather to the disgust of some of the more distant relatives, who could not make out who my mother was, nor what brought her there.

At last Mr Gray cleared his throat, put on his glasses, and looked down at an imposing-looking parchment which lay on the table at his side.

Instead of opening the parchment, however, as every one expected, he suddenly took off his glasses again, and made a little speech to all the relatives.

"I may as well premise," he said, "that my good friend who has passed away was extremely eccentric."

"Ah, yes, that he was, poor dear! Undoubtedly eccentric, but none the worse for that," murmured the red-faced old lady at Mr Gray's right.

He turned and frowned at her.

"I should feel obliged to you not to interrupt me, madam," he said.

"Quite right, too," said the testy old man on the left.

He got a deeper frown from the lawyer, who, after a moment's pause, resumed his speech.

"Our friend was eccentric. I make this remark with a reason. I am about to communicate some news which will astonish—and disappoint—every individual in this room."

This short speech made a profound sensation. All the relatives began muttering, and I cannot say that I once heard poor Cousin Geoffrey spoken of as "dear."

"I repeat for the third time," continued the lawyer, "the remarks I have already made. Our friend Geoffrey Rutherford was extremely eccentric. He was not the least out of his mind, his brain was as sound, his reason as clear as any man could desire. Nevertheless he was a very uncommon character. He lived a queer, lonely, inhospitable life. As regards money he was miserly. And yet, and yet," continued the lawyer, "I have known him generous—generous to a fault."

"Perhaps you will oblige us by coming to the point, sir," here interrupted the testy old man.

Mr Gray favoured him with a short, impatient glance.

"I will," he said. "Yes, I will come to the point without further delay. The point is the will. I am about now to speak of my friend's will."

Here all the company settled down into a hushed, expectant state. Their interest was so keen that the proverbial pin might have been heard to drop.

"If Geoffrey Rutherford was more eccentric in one particular than another," continued Mr Gray, clearing his voice, "it was on the subject of wills. In the course of his long life he made several—to each of these wills he added codicils. The wills and the codicils were all peculiar, but none, none so peculiar as the last. It is with regard to the last will and testament of my esteemed friend that I am now going to speak."

"You will read us the will, perhaps, Mr Gray," interposed an anxious-looking relative.

Mr Gray gave her a long glance.

"Under the circumstances, no," he said. "My friend's last will is long, and full of technicalities. It is without a flaw anywhere; but to hear it read would be tedious, and you must excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, if I refuse to gratify what can only, at the present moment at least, be regarded as idle curiosity. For the will as it now stands affects no one present."

"It is scarcely fair not to read it, however," said the red-faced lady. "After a funeral the will is always read. This is, I think, ordained by law, and ought to be enforced."

“I am sorry,” repeated Mr Gray, taking no notice of the old lady’s remark, which made her frightfully irate. “It would be tedious to read the will, so I decline to do so. I have, however, a letter from my late client, which embodies the principal provisions in it, and that I shall be happy to read aloud for the benefit of every one present.”

Here Mr Gray cleared his throat, and putting on his glasses, began to read.

Cousin Geoffrey’s letter ran as follows:—

“My dear Gray:

“The more I think over our interview to-day the better pleased I am at the arrangement we have arrived at. You know how particular I am about my wills. I regard them from a serious and even an artistic point of view. I look upon a will as the crowning stone of a man’s life, a crown to be placed on the shrine of his memory, a monument to hand down his name to the ages. My last will pleases me much. It is finished in all its details. It is, I may venture to say, truly original. I do not think it has a flaw in its construction, and, when carried into force, it will be a means of diffusing happiness and adding to the benefit of the human race.

“As you are well aware, Gray, I am a rich man; the rich have many trials: they are the envied of the poor, and that in itself is disagreeable; they are also much worried by relations. I have never married; there is, literally, not a soul in the world belonging to me who bears my name, and yet I have relatives—many relatives. All my relations are kind, and solicitous for my welfare. When I am dead they will one and all express sorrow at my departure. There will be a goodly gathering of them at my funeral, and they will congregate afterwards at my house to hear my will read. I don’t wish my will to be read. You, as my only trustee, are to take the necessary legal steps with regard to it, but I don’t wish it to be read aloud to my relatives. As, however, they will be naturally curious to know in what way I dispose of my property, you may mention to them, in any manner you think fit, the following particulars:

“I have appointed in my will heirs to all my worldly estates, my property in lands and houses, in stocks and shares. The names of my heirs I have not thought fit to disclose; they may turn up at any time between the date of my death and five years after, and whenever they do appear on the scene, prepared to fulfil a condition which I have named, my property goes to them as appointed in my will.

“If, five years having gone by, the true heirs do not come to claim the property, one-half of it is to go to different charities named at full length in my will, and the other half is to be divided in equal shares among all my blood relations.

“Until the end of the five years, or until the true heirs appear, my property is to accumulate; my furniture, plate, valuable china, and jewels are to remain unsold.

“I have, however, given directions in my will that a certain small legacy is to be given without any delay to a young girl, the daughter of a relative.

“This girl came to me a week ago with a request that I should give her sufficient money to enable her to attend a school of art. I hate art schools; the word art, as applied to them, is a misnomer. I have my own views with regard to art—she is a mistress who must be wooed in a very different manner. This girl, Rosamund Lindley is her name, trod severely on my most cherished prejudices when she made her daring request.

“To show, however, that I bear her good-will, I leave her, and request that it may be given to her at once, the valuable ruby ring which belonged to my mother, and which for many years I wore myself. You will find the ring in my mother’s jewel-case, in drawer fifty, room eight, in the second story of this house.

“Rosamund Lindley and her mother may possibly attend my funeral. I hope they will. In that case, please give Rosamund the ruby ring in the presence of my other relatives, and, although I lay no command upon her in the matter, tell her, if she values the memory of old Geoffrey Rutherford, not to sell the ring.

“I am, my dear Gray,—

“Yours faithfully,—

“Geoffrey Rutherford.”

Immediately after reading the letter Mr Gray put his hand into his waistcoat pocket, and drew out a small, old-fashioned morocco case.

“You will like, ladies and gentlemen, to see the ruby ring,” he said, in his blandest tones.

Chapter Three

The Octagon Room

There was immediately a great buzz and clatter in the room. All the relatives rose in a body, and pressed round the table near which Mr Gray stood. My mother and I, surely the most interested persons present, were thus pushed quite into the background.

We had not a chance of seeing the ring until the other relatives had first gazed at it.

It was taken out of its velvet bed, and handed solemnly from one to another. I don't think an individual praised it. The comments which reached my ears were somewhat as follows:

"What an old-fashioned shape!"

"Dear, dear, how clumsy!"

"The centre stone is large, but is it real?—I doubt it."

A very morose-looking Scotchman pronounced the ring "no canny." A lady near immediately took up the sentiment, and said that the gem had an evil look about it, and she was truly thankful that the ring was not left to her.

A gentleman, who I was told afterwards was a poet and wrote verses for the magazines, said that the ruby itself had an eye of fire, and if it were his he feared it would haunt him.

In short, one and all of the relatives expressed their scorn of the ring, and their utter contempt for Cousin Geoffrey. Not a woman in the room now spoke of him as a poor dear, nor a man as an eccentric but decidedly jolly sort of old boy. There were several muttered exclamations with regard to Cousin Geoffrey's sanity, but no expression of affection came from a single pair of lips.

At last Mr Gray's voice was distinguished, rising above the general din.

"If you will permit me, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I should be glad to show Miss Rosamund Lindley her property. Allow me, madam." And he took the ring out of a sour-faced lady's hand. Immediately all eyes were turned on me. I heard the stout person who had spoken of Cousin Geoffrey as a "poor dear," pronounce me nothing but a chit of a girl. Notwithstanding this withering comment, I had, however, the strength of mind to come forward, and with outward calmness receive my property.

“Take all possible care of this ring, Miss Lindley,” said the lawyer. “If it has no other value, it is worth something as a curiosity. The setting of the gem is most uncommon.” Then he put the case containing the ring into my hand.

One by one the relatives now left the room, and my mother, the lawyer, and I found ourselves alone.

“If you will permit me,” said my mother in her gentle, charming sort of manner to Mr Gray, “I should like to go over Cousin Geoffrey’s house, and to look once again at the old furniture. You are not perhaps aware of the fact that I lived here for many years when I was a young girl.”

Mr Gray smiled slightly.

“I happen to know some of Mr Rutherford’s history,” he said.

My mother blushed quite prettily, as if she were a young girl. She turned aside and took my hand in hers.

“We may go, then,” she said.

“Undoubtedly you may go, Mrs Lindley, and pray do not hurry; take your own time. I am going to put a caretaker into this house, and until he arrives shall stay in charge myself, so you and Miss Rosamund need not hasten away.”

My mother thanked Mr Gray, and then she and I began our pilgrimage. I don’t think I ever before spent such an interesting afternoon. Cousin Geoffrey’s death had cast me down and destroyed all the hopes on which I had been building, still—perhaps it was the effect of the ring—I felt a curious sense of elation. The task of looking over the old house was the reverse of depressing to me. I never had been in such an antique, curious, rambling old mansion before. It was not like an ordinary London house; it had unexpected nooks, and queer alcoves, and marvellously carved and painted ceilings, and quaint balustrades and galleries. It must have been built a long time ago, and when the precious London ground was comparatively cheap, for the building went back a long way, and was added to here and there, so that it presented quite an irregular pile, and I don’t believe another house in London in the least resembled it. It towered above all its fellows in the square, and looked something like a great king who owned but a shabby kingdom. For the neighbouring houses were fifth-rate, and most of them let out in tenements.

But Cousin Geoffrey’s house was not only curious in itself—its contents were even more wonderful. I never saw a house so packed with furniture, and I don’t believe there was an article in it which had not seen at least a hundred years.

The quaintest bureaus and chests of drawers inlaid with brass and ivory and mother-of-pearl were to be found in all directions. There were great heavy glass cupboards full of rare and wonderful china; there were spindle-legged tables and chairs of the most approved last-century pattern; there were Chippendale book-cases, and Queen Anne furniture of all shapes and sizes. At the time I was not a connoisseur of old furniture, but my mother was. She told me the date of the furniture of each room, and said that the house was so full of valuables, that it would make in itself quite an interesting museum. I never saw my mother look younger or prettier.

“Ah, I remember this,” she exclaimed, “and this—and this. It was by this mirror I stood when I was dressed for my first ball, and as a little child I used often to climb on to this carved window-sill.”

We came to a room presently which seemed to have been taken more care of than the rest of the house. Its approach was up a little turret stair, and the room, when we entered it, was an octagon. Each of the octagon windows contained a picture in richly-coloured glass; the pictures represented the same child in various attitudes.

“Oh, how lovely!” I exclaimed. “Even the dirt and the neglect can’t spoil these windows.”

“No,” said my mother, but she turned a little white, and for the first time showed signs of fatigue. “I did not know Geoffrey kept the room in such order,” she said. “Why, look, Rosamund, look, it is fairly clean, and the glass in this great mirror shines. I believe Geoffrey took care of this octagon room himself.”

“This was your room, mother,” I said, flashing round upon her, “and I do believe this was your face when you were a child. Oh, what lovely, quaint, uncomfortable chairs, and what a brass fender to the old grate, and what a wonderful bit of tapestry hangs across that alcove! This was your room, your own, wasn’t it, mother dear?”

“I used to sit here a good deal,” answered my mother. “And Geoffrey’s father had the windows representing childhood put in specially for me. Poor Geoffrey! I think he drew all the designs himself.”

“Then Cousin Geoffrey was an artist?”

“Oh, my dear, did I never mention that?”

“No. How could you have kept such an interesting secret to yourself? And I talked art to him, and fancied myself so wise?”

“Rosamund dear, I am glad you have got the ruby ring. From a man like Geoffrey it means much. Cousin Geoffrey must have taken a great fancy to you, Rosamund.”

“Well, mother, I wish he had left me some of his money.”

My mother’s face turned still paler. She made no reply, but, walking across the octagon room, she spent some little time examining the old furniture, and touching it with reverent fingers.

“Rosamund,” she said suddenly, “I am tired. This day has been too much for me. We will go home now.”

I took the ring home in my pocket. This was a dangerous thing to do, and Mr Gray looked somewhat grave as he saw me slip such a precious relic into so insecure a hiding-place.

“Do keep out of crowds,” he said. “Beware of pickpockets when you get to Paddington, and, above all, keep your pocket side next your mother when you get into the train.”

I don’t think I attended to any of these directions, but the little old brown morocco case containing Cousin Geoffrey’s legacy arrived safely at Ivy Lodge, the name of our humble abode.

My mother and I got back in time for supper. My father and the boys arrived home as usual, and we sat down together to our supper.

I felt excited and full of my subject.

Surely on this night the departed relative might be mentioned; the curious scene after the funeral might be detailed for the benefit of those who were not present. But, as we approached the table, my mother held up a warning, finger.

“Not a word about Cousin Geoffrey,” she whispered to me.

The evening meal was even more dull than usual. No one alluded to the events of the day. George read a battered novel as he sipped his tea, and my father perused the evening paper, as was his invariable custom.

After tea, Jack, my youngest brother, came up and asked me a question.

“Any money left to you by the old miser, eh, Rosey?”

“No, Jack, certainly not.”

“Well, miss, you needn’t look so fierce. A pity not, say I. Girls are of very little value nowadays unless they have a good supply of the chink to add to their charms.”

“Jack, you are positively vulgar, I hate you to talk to me like that.”

“All right, my dear. I have no desire to have any further conversation with you. I’m dead tired and have a headache. I shall go to bed.”

Jack mounted the stairs to his own loft in the roof, and, as soon as possible, I followed his example. Having locked my door and lighted the precious inch of candle which was all that was ever allowed me to go to bed with, I took a key out of my pocket, and unfastening the box which contained all my greatest treasures, proceeded to place some wax Christmas tapers in various small sconces, and then to light them one by one. I had quite an illumination, as I sat down by my dressing-table to examine leisurely the legacy which had been left to me that day.

I took the little case out of my pocket, pressed the spring, and gazed at the treasure within. The fire which lay in the heart of the ruby leaped up at once to meet the illumination which I had made for it. I now perceived what I had not noticed before, that the ring contained three rubies. One of unusual size in the centre; one much smaller at each side. I saw at a glance that they had all eyes of fire, that they were beautiful, fantastic, bewitching. I suddenly pressed the little ring to my lips.

“Gift from Fairyland, welcome!” I said. “Open, sesame, and let me into your magical secrets! My life is so prosaic, so commonplace. Comfort me, little ring! Reveal to me the world of romance! Show me dreams, bring to me visions! Speak with those fiery eyes; speak, I listen!”

I suddenly stopped this rhapsody with a laugh.

“If my respected father and brothers heard me now they would think that I had taken leave of my senses,” I soliloquised. “Well, this is a dear little ring, and I am glad Cousin Geoffrey gave it to me. How small it is—it won’t go on my tiniest finger. I wonder what kind of woman wore it last. It is of heavy make to be a woman’s ring. How solid the gold is, and how quaintly carved. I see there is the device of a serpent worked very richly into the gold at each side, and the smaller ruby forms the eye. Really, this looks like witchery, a serpent with a fiery eye. Two serpents, rather, for each is complete in itself. How much to get into so little. No wonder the ring is heavy. Very different from that little slender hoop of mother’s which contains the single small bright diamond, which used to delight me when I was a child.”

Having examined the ring from every point of view I presently blew out the precious Christmas tapers. They were much too valuable to waste, so I put them back into my box, placed the ring in its case by their side, and got into bed.

The next morning I spoke to my mother. "I have been disappointed in my first effort to open the oyster-shell," I said.

"What do you mean, Rosamund?"

"Only that I must seek some other means to secure the necessary money to take me to the Slade School."

"My darling, I wish you would put such a futile idea out of your head."

"Mother dear, I cannot. It is fixed and established there by this time. I must go to the Slade School, and I must find the means for defraying the necessary expenses. Now, if I were to sell my ruby ring—"

"Oh, Rose, you surely are not serious."

My mother's face turned pale with apprehension.

"I don't think I am," I said. "I don't believe I could part with the pretty thing. I love it already. Besides, Cousin Geoffrey did not wish me to sell it."

"Rose, dear, your father doesn't know that Geoffrey left you the ring."

"Very well, mother, I shan't enlighten him."

"I believe that ruby ring is of considerable value," continued my mother. "I know it well. It belonged to Geoffrey's mother, and was left to her by an old ancestress, who brought a good deal of money and considerable misery to the house. Geoffrey's mother would never wear the ring, but he was fond of it, and had a link made at the back to fasten it to his watch-chain. I know the large ruby in the middle is worth a great deal."

All the time my mother was speaking she was going on with that endless darning which always gave me a sore dull feeling in my heart. If there is a dismal employment it is darning, and my mother's little delicate fingers looked as if they were surely never meant for such an ungainly task.

“I wonder who Cousin Geoffrey has left all his money to?” I said suddenly. “I wonder if the rightful heirs will appear within the five years. I certainly should not like any of the relatives to have it.”

“I would not think about it, if I were you, Rosamund. We, of course, are completely out of it.”

“I don’t know why we should be. You are one of the nearest relations.”

“Well, dear, we are out of it, so that ends the matter.”

My mother spoke with quite unwonted irritation.

“It was a very curious will,” I said after a pause; “very eccentric.”

“Geoffrey was always eccentric, Rose, I’ve told you so scores of times.”

“I wish I knew who was the heir,” I repeated, getting up restlessly and standing by the fire. “Mother, have you any messages for me to do in town to-morrow?”

“In town? Surely, Rosamund, you are not going up to London so soon again. You have got no money; how can you pay your fare?”

“Yes, I have half-a-sovereign from my last allowance.”

“Oh, but that is extravagance.”

“I can’t help it, mother. I must go to a jeweller to ask him to value the ring. Oh, no, I shan’t sell it, but I cannot rest until I know its value.”

My mother looked vexed, but she knew it was useless to argue with me when I had fully made up my mind.

“I do not know what girls are made of in these days,” she remarked in a plaintive voice. “They are quite a different order of being from the girl of eighteen whom I used to know, when I was young. They are obstinate, and are quite sure to tell their elders every hour of the day that they know a great deal more about the ways and doings of life than they do, that they are quite capable of guiding their own actions.”

“Mother, you are not angry?” I said suddenly. “Oh no, dear,” she replied at once.

“I cannot help taking my own way, but I love you with all my heart,” I said irrelevantly. “I must take my ring to town and have it valued, but believe me, I shall do nothing really rash.”

“I must trust you, Rose,” she said then. “You are a queer girl, but I have never known you do a really imprudent thing in your life, except on the rare occasion when you would force yourself on Cousin Geoffrey’s notice.”

“Mother dear, was that rash? I have got my beautiful ruby ring.”

My mother smiled and said no more. I left the room, knowing that she would make no opposition to my going to town on the following morning.

When the day broke, I got up early, for I felt too restless to sleep. I wore my best dress when I came down to breakfast; and when my father and brothers were ready to start for London, I accompanied them.

On the way up I noticed how ill Jack looked. He had a much nicer face than George, and I could have been fond of him had he ever shown the slightest desire to win my regard. But from his babyhood he was reserved and morose, and shared my father’s ideas with regard to women. Jack was serving his time to a solicitor in the City. At present he was earning no money, but the happy day when he could add to the family purse, and so relieve some of the dreadful burden of penury and scanty living, was not far distant. In two months’ time he was to earn sufficient to pay his weekly mite to the household exchequer.

George, who was three years older than Jack, was doing quite comfortably as a clerk at Lloyd’s, and already spoke of taking a wife, and having a home of his own. I used to wonder what sort of a girl George would marry. I must frankly say I did not envy her her husband.

This morning I found myself seated by Jack’s side in the railway carriage.

“How is your headache?” I whispered to him.

He looked round and favoured me with an almost glassy stare. He knew I spoke to him, but had not heard my question. I repeated it.

“Oh, better, better,” he said hurriedly. “Don’t speak of it, there’s a good girl,” and he lay back against the cushions and closed his eyes.

I felt sure at once it was not better, but it was like Jack to shut himself out from all sympathy.

We got to Paddington in good time, and I once more found myself in an omnibus which would convey me to Regent Circus. Presently I got there. I had made all my plans beforehand. I was a curious mixture of the practical and romantic, and I thought it best not to rely entirely on myself in choosing the jeweller who would value my ring. I wanted to get at the real value, and a jeweller who naturally would suppose I wished him to be a purchaser, would think it his province to run the ring down. I knew a girl from our village, who was serving her time now to a dressmaker in Great Portland Street. The girl's name was Susan Ford. She had often helped me to turn my dresses, and was a very sensible, matter-of-fact, honest sort of girl. I knew she would do anything for me, and as she had been over a year in London, she must have a tolerably wide experience to guide her.

Regent Circus was only a few steps from Madame Leroy's address. The house bore the customary brass plate on its door. I pulled the bell, and a boy in buttons answered my summons.

"Is Susan Ford in?" I asked.

The boy stared at me from head to foot, and made a supercilious and irrelevant reply.

I saw at once that people who called to see the apprentices must not expect politeness from the buttons. Nevertheless I held my ground, and said firmly that I wished to see Susan Ford if she could be spared to speak to me.

"I'll take up your name, and inquire," Buttons finally condescended to say.

I said I was Miss Lindley, from Thorpdale. I was then requested to wait in the hall, where I sat and shivered for quite five minutes. At the end of that time Susan, jubilant with smiles, joined me.

"Oh, Miss Rosamund, how kind of you! How very kind—I am delighted!"

"Susan, I particularly want to ask your advice. Would it be possible for you to come out with me for a little?"

"Oh, miss, I'd like to, awfully, but I'm afraid it's against the rules. Still, it would be a treat to take a walk with you, miss, and Madame Leroy is very good-natured. I have a good mind to try if she'd spare me for an hour; we are not particularly full of orders just now."

"All right, Susan, do your best, for I really want your help," I answered.

Susan nodded and disappeared. In an incredibly short space of time she returned, wearing a very smart jacket and stylish hat. Oh, how dowdy I looked by her side!

“I’m just given an hour, Miss Rosamund,” she said.

The moment we got into the street I told her what I wanted.

“I have got a curious old ring with me,” I said, “very old-fashioned; I want to find out what it really is worth. Do you know an honest jeweller who will tell me the truth, Susan?”

Susan’s eyes sparkled.

“There’s lots of jewellers in Oxford Street, miss,” she said.

“I don’t wish to go to one of them. They will fancy I want to sell, and will run my ring down.”

“Then,” proceeded Susan, “there are men, Jews, most of them, who lend ornaments to my missis, which she hires out to her ladies.”

Susan’s eyes shone very brightly when she revealed this little secret to her country friend.

“Another time you shall tell me more about these jewellers,” I replied. “But they surely would be the least honest of all, and could not help us to-day. Susan, you must think again.”

“I know an apprentice,” said Susan. “And he’s very clever, and—and—wonderful on stones, Miss Rosamund.”

“Ah, I thought you were the girl for me to come to, Susan. This apprentice is just the person whom we want. Where does he live?”

“Well, miss, if you’ll come with me now we’ll catch him just before he goes to his dinner. Sam is honest, if you like, miss, blunt I call him.”

“Take me to Sam without a moment’s delay,” I said.

We walked quickly, and presently found ourselves in Hanway Street. We turned into a small shop. A lad of about twenty was selling a china cup and saucer to an old lady.

The shop was full of all kinds of dirty, quaint, curious things. It reminded me a little bit of Cousin Geoffrey's house. The lad had red hair; he winked at Susan, and I saw at once that I was in the presence of Sam.

Presently the lady customer left the shop in a considerable huff, and without the cup and saucer.

"She'll come back fast enough, I've hooked her," said Sam. "The old 'un'll be pleased. I most times hook a couple of customers in the morning, and the old 'un is always delighted. Your pleasure, ladies? How do, Susan?"

All the favourable opinion I had formed of Susan Ford was abundantly verified by her conduct during this interview. Sam examined the ruby ring from every possible point of view, he squinted frightfully over it. He turned on the gas, and caused its rays to pierce through the heart of the gems. They leaped up as if with living fire.

Presently he said that it was his bounden duty to consult the old 'un. Before I could expostulate he had vanished with the ring into an inner sanctum. He came back in the course of ten minutes.

"How will you take it, miss?" he said. "In notes or gold?"

For a moment I felt too petrified to speak.

"What do you mean?" I presently gasped. "I don't want to sell the ring."

"Oh, come now, miss, that's a good 'un! You know better than that. Don't she, Miss Ford?"

Susan bridled and got very red when she was addressed as Miss Ford. But, being my staunch friend, she came quickly to the rescue.

"Miss Lindley knows her own mind, Sam," she said severely. "She don't want to sell the ring, only to value it."

Sam, looking intensely mysterious and amused, darted once more into the back room.

"I wish he would give me back my ring," I said to Susan.

"Oh, it's all right, you let Sam manage it his own way," retorted Susan.

After what seemed an interminable five minutes, Sam returned. His face was now quite pale, and his voice had an awe-struck sound about it.

“I never knew anything like it,” he said, “never in all my life, but it’s true for all that. The old ’un’ll give you one hundred and fifty pounds for the ring, miss.”

I was nineteen years old, and I had never in the whole course of my life possessed ten pounds at a time. The idea, therefore, of walking out of that shop with one hundred and fifty pounds in notes and gold, all my own, my very own, was something of a temptation. Nevertheless I stood firm.

“I don’t mean to sell the ring,” I said, “whatever it is valued at. I know now that it is worth not only one hundred and fifty pounds, but a considerable sum more. I cannot, however, get the exact value out of your master, as he wants to become the purchaser. I will, therefore, say good-morning. Come, Susan.” Susan, casting a somewhat withering glance at Sam, followed me into Hanway Street, and we presently found ourselves back again at the large house in Great Portland Street.

“Good-bye, miss,” said Susan. “I wish with all my heart I could ask you in, but I can’t, and there’s an end. I’d be delighted to help you in any other way, miss, about the ring, and if ever you do want to sell, I have no doubt Sam and his master will still hold to their offer.”

“Yes, but I shall never want to sell my ring,” I replied somewhat proudly. Then I bade Susan a hearty good-bye and returned to Oxford Street.

I had some idea of calling on Mr Gray, of taking him into my confidence, of asking him to advise me as to the best means of becoming a pupil at the Slade School. But I abandoned this idea for the present, and decided to take the next train home to my mother. Before doing this I went into Peter Robinson’s, and purchased two yards of delicate pearl-grey ribbon to put in her best cap.

“Sweet, pretty mother!” I said to myself. “How I should like to buy real Honiton lace to trim that cap, and a pearl-grey silk dress to match this ribbon; and how I should love to give her the daintiest food and the most beautiful luxurious home, and to take away that coarse darning, and that rough horrid mending, and that grinding poverty for ever.”

I could do a great deal if I sold Cousin Geoffrey’s ring. A great deal, but not all, and I must not part in a hurry with a legacy which was not only beautiful, but had such a substantial money-value.

I popped my bit of ribbon, therefore, into my pocket, looked sadly at the few remaining shillings in my purse, and took the next train back to Thorpdale.

I arrived at Ivy Lodge in time for an afternoon cup of tea with my mother. I was very hungry, for I had not ventured on the extravagance of lunch in town, and while I ate, I regaled her with the account of my morning's adventures. She was by no means astonished when she heard that the old Jew dealer had offered me one hundred and fifty pounds for the ring.

"It is worth a good deal more than that," she said. "I know the centre ruby has been priced at a very high figure by more than one connoisseur. Nevertheless, you are not going to sell the ring, are you, Rosamund?"

"It would pay my expenses at the Slade," I said somewhat mischievously.

My mother was about to reply when we were both startled by hearing the sound of a latch-key in the hall-door lock. I opened the door of the little drawing-room and peeped out.

"Jack!" I exclaimed. "What has brought you back at this hour?"

"My headache is worse," he replied, "I could not stay in town, so I came home."

"Oh, I am sorry," I said. "Mother, Jack has come home with a bad headache."

My mother stepped into the hall.

"You are looking very ill indeed," she exclaimed.

Jack growled in that peculiarly ungracious way which always drove me wild when it was addressed to our mother.

"I am not ill," he said. "What a fuss women make! I have just got a beastly headache."

"Come into the drawing-room, and have a cup of tea, my dear boy."

"I could not sit up, thank you, mother. I'll go to my room, and see what a stretch on the bed and a nap will do for me. If Rosamund likes to be good-natured, she can bring me up some tea in half an hour."

I did not particularly wish to be good-natured; nevertheless, at the time specified I took the tea to Jack. He sat up when I entered the room; there were feverish spots on his cheeks.

"Bother that tea!" he exclaimed. "Put it down, and shut the door, Rosamund. Now come over, and sit near me. If I don't tell you what is the matter, I shall go mad."

Chapter Four

Borrowed!

I sat down at once by Jack's bedside.

"What are you going to tell me?" I asked.

"How prosaic you are, Rose."

"Well, you never like me to make a fuss."

"That is true, and no doubt you will act sensibly in the present emergency. It is nice to be pitied, and affection is of value, but sense, oh yes, unquestionably common sense comes first of all." I could not help gazing at Jack with wide-open round eyes while he was speaking.

"You never in your whole life asked me to show feeling or affection," I managed to gasp out. "What do you mean by regretting it now? Your head must be wandering."

"Well, well, Rose, perhaps it is. It certainly aches badly enough to account for any vagaries in my speech. But now to business—or rather to the kernel of the matter. Rose, I am going to be very ill, very dangerously ill—do you understand?"

"I hope I don't, Jack. You have a bad headache, which will soon get better."

"I repeat, I am going to be dangerously ill. I have taken fever. I know the symptoms, for I have watched them in another."

"In another? Whom do you mean? When have you been with a fever-stricken patient?"

"You will start when you hear my next words. I have been nursing my wife through fever."

"Jack—your wife! Are you married? Oh, Jack!"

"Well, go on, Rosamund. Get over your astonishment. Say, 'Oh Jack!' as often as you like, only believe in the fact without my having to repeat it to you. I am married. My wife has scarlet fever; I have nursed her till I could hold up no longer, and now I have taken it myself."

I looked full into my brother's face. It was flushed now, and his brown eyes were bright. He was a big fellow, and he looked absolutely handsome as he sat up in bed with the fever gleam shining through his eyes, and a certain sad droop about his still boyish mouth. I own that I never found Jack so interesting before. He had behaved very badly, of course, in marrying any one secretly, but he was the hero of a romance. He had feeling and affection. I quite loved him. I bent forward and kissed him on his cheek.

"Go on," I said. "You want me to help you. Tell me all the story as quickly as you can."

"But you will shrink from me when you know all."

"No, I promise that I won't. Now do go on."

"I believe I must tell you quickly, for this pain rages and rages, and I can scarcely collect my thoughts. Now then, Rosamund, these are the bare facts. Six months ago I fell in love with Hetty. Her other name doesn't matter, and who she was doesn't matter. I used to meet her in the mornings when she walked to a school where she was teaching. We were married and I took her to some lodgings in Putney."

"But you had no money."

"Well, I had scarcely any. I used to make an odd pound now and then by bringing home work to copy, and Hetty did not lose her situation as teacher. She still went to the school, and she told no one of her marriage. I meant to break it to you all when I began to get my salary, for you know my time of apprenticeship will expire at Christmas. Things wouldn't have turned out so badly, for Hetty has the simplest tastes, poor little darling, if she had not somehow or other got this horrible scarlet fever. She was so afraid I'd take her to the hospital; but not I!—the landlady and I nursed her between us."

"But, Jack, where did you get the money?" The heavy flush got deeper on my brother's brow. He turned his head away, and his manner became almost gruff.

"That's the awkward part," he growled. "I—I borrowed the money."

"From whom?"

"Chillingfleet."

"Mr Chillingfleet? He's the head of your firm, isn't he?"

“Yes, yes. I went into his room one day. His private drawer was open; I took four five-pound notes. That was last Monday. He won’t miss them until next Monday—the day he makes up his accounts. I thought Hetty was dying, and the notes stared me in the face, and I—I borrowed them. He has tens of thousands of pounds, and I—I borrowed twenty.”

“Jack—Jack—you stole them!”

I covered my face with my hands; I trembled all over.

“Oh, don’t, Rose! call me by every ugly name you like—there, I know I’m a brute.”

“No, you’re not,” I said. I had recovered myself by this time. I looked at his poor flushed face, at his trembling hands. He was a thief, he had brought disgrace upon our poor but honest name, but at this moment I loved him fifty times better than George.

“Listen to me, Jack,” I said. “I won’t say one other word to abuse you at present. What’s more, I will do what I can to help you.”

“God bless you, Rosamund. You don’t really mean that? Really and truly?”

“I really and truly mean it. Now lie down and let me put these sheets straight. This is Friday. Something can be done between now and Monday. Are you quite sure that Mr Chillingfleet will not find out the loss of the notes before Monday?”

“Yes, he always banks on Monday, and he makes up his accounts then. Rose, you have got no money; you cannot save me.”

“I have certainly got no money, Jack, but I have got woman’s wit. Have you spent all the twenty pounds?”

“Every farthing. I owed a lot to Mrs Ashton, Hetty’s landlady.”

“Now you must give me Hetty’s address.”

“Oh, I say, Rose, you are a brick! Are you going to see her?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Are you going to-day?”

“I’ll go, if I possibly can.”

“You must be very gentle with her, remember.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“And for goodness’ sake don’t frighten her about me.”

“No.”

“You must make up some kind of excuse about me. You must on no account let out that I have caught this horrible thing. Do you understand, Rosamund, if Hetty finds this out it will kill her at once.”

“I’ll do my very best for you, Jack. I won’t do anything to injure Hetty. I don’t know her, but I think I can promise that. Now, please, give me her address.”

“Twenty-four, Peacock Buildings, fourth story, care of Mrs Ashton. When you get to Putney, you turn down Dorset Street, and it’s the fifth turning to the right. Can you remember?”

“Yes, yes. Now lie still. I am going to send mother to you.”

When I reached the door, I turned and looked back. Jack was gazing wistfully after me, his eyes were full of tears.

“Rose, you’re a brick,” said the poor fellow; and then he turned his face to the wall. I closed the door very softly and went down to the drawing-room where mother sat.

I went up to her, and took the mending out of her thin, white hands, and bending down kissed her.

“What is the matter, Rose, my dear?” she said. We were not a family for embraces, and she wondered at this mark of demonstration. When she raised her eyes to my face, she could not restrain a little cry, for with all my efforts I did not absolutely conceal the marks of strong emotion.

“Mother,” I said, “you must put away your mending for the present.”

“Why so, my dear? I am particularly anxious to get on with this invisible darning, for I wish to begin to refront Jack’s shirts to-morrow.”

“The shirts must keep, mother. Jack wants you for something else just now—he is very ill.”

“Ill? Poor fellow, he did look as if he had a bad headache.”

“Yes, I think we ought to send for Mr Ray.”

“What! For the doctor? Because of a headache? Rose, dear, are you getting fanciful?”

“I trust not, mother, but I really think Jack is ill, and I am afraid it is more than a headache that ails him.”

“What do you know about illness, child?”

“Well, mother dear, go up yourself and see.” My mother went softly out of the room. Her light footsteps ascended the creaking stairs. I heard her open Jack’s bedroom door and shut it behind her. In about five minutes she had rejoined me in the drawing-room.

“Rose, will you put on your hat, and go round to Mr Ray, and ask him to call at once.”

My mother now spoke as if the idea of fetching the doctor had originated with herself.

“Jack is very ill, Rose,” she said, looking at me, pathetically.

“Yes, mother, I fear he is. Now, listen to me, please; if you are going to nurse him, you are not to be tired in any way; you are to have no anxieties downstairs. When I go out, mother, I am going to fetch in Jane Fleming as well as Mr Ray.”

Jane Fleming was a very capable woman who lived in the village; she could take the part of housekeeper, nurse, cook, dressmaker, as occasion offered. She was quiet and taciturn, and kept herself, as the neighbours said, “to herself.” I felt that Jane would be a safe person to listen to Jack’s wanderings, and that my mother might safely sleep while Jane watched by the sick man’s side.

Accordingly I said, “I will fetch in Jane Fleming,” and I turned a deaf ear when my mother murmured the word expense.

“If the worst comes I will sell the ruby ring,” I thought to myself, “but I won’t sell it unless all other resources fail me.”

I put on my hat and jacket and went out. The shades of evening were already falling. I was dreadfully afraid that I might meet my father and George. I did

not wish to see them at that moment. I felt that their coldness and want of sympathy would unnerve me. They would have every reason to be cold, for why should they fuss themselves over Jack's bad headache? and yet I, knowing the tragedy which lay beneath that apparently commonplace pain, felt that I could not stand the slight sneer of indifference which would greet my announcement at that moment. Jack, compared to George and my father, was a very black sinner indeed. The cardinal sin of theft could be laid at his door. He was guilty of gross deception; he was weak, he was imprudent, nay more, he was mad, for by what sacred right had he bound his own life to that of another, when it was impossible for him to fulfil the vows he had taken?

And yet, Jack, I loved you better than I had ever done before in my whole life at that moment; now in your pain, your helplessness, your degradation, I would spare you even from a sneer. You trusted me, Jack, and I resolved to prove myself worthy of your trust, and, if possible, if in any way within my power, to save you.

I walked down the village street, and reached Jane Fleming's house. She was ironing some collars in her neat kitchen.

"Jane," I said, "my brother Jack is ill, and mother wants you to go up and help to nurse him."

"Yes, Miss Rosamund," replied Jane, in her quiet, unsurprised way. "Am I likely to be required for the night, miss?"

"Yes, Jane, you certainly are."

"I'll be at Ivy Lodge in ten minutes, miss," replied Jane Fleming.

I left the house without another word. Mr Ray lived a little farther off, but I was lucky in finding him also at home. I asked him to call to see Jack at once, and then I turned off in the direction of the railway station. I must be really wary now, for it would be fatal to Jack's peace of mind were my father and George to see me going to town at that hour. I managed to elude them, however, and going into the ladies' waiting-room scribbled a little note to my mother.

"Dear mother," I said, "you must not be at all anxious. I am going to town on important business for Jack. Don't on any account tell father and George, and expect me home some time to-morrow."

I gave my note to a small boy who was lounging about outside the station. He was to deliver the little note into Jane Fleming's hands. No one else was to get it. I knew Jane sufficiently well to be sure she would give it to my mother unobserved.

Shortly afterwards my train came up, and I found myself being whirled back to London in a second-class compartment. Fares were cheap on our line, and I was relieved to find that I had five shillings still untouched in my purse. I got to Paddington in a little over half an hour,—the train I travelled by was an express,—and then stepping into an omnibus I was carried slowly, and with many provoking delays, to Regent Circus. I had never been in London by night before, and the dazzling lights and pushing crowds would have nonplussed me considerably another time. Under ordinary circumstances I might have felt uncomfortable and even a little afraid. Every idea of strict propriety in which I had been brought up would have protested against the situation in which I had placed myself. I was a lady, a very young lady, and it was not correct for me to perambulate these gaslit streets alone.

As it turned out, however, I had no time for fear, nor was there the smallest cause for alarm. No one noticed the plainly, almost dowdily dressed girl, as with dull apprehension in her eyes, and a queer reserve fund of fortitude in her heart, she hurried along.

I soon reached the house I had visited early in the morning, and almost gave Buttons an electric shock by once more inquiring for Susan Ford. I knew that it was necessary to propitiate Buttons, and poor as I was I expended sixpence on that worthy.

“Go and tell Susan that I must see her without fail, and at once,” I said.

Buttons stuck his tongue into his cheek, very nearly winked at me, but refrained, and promising to do his best, vanished.

Susan was evidently busy at this hour. I sat for nearly a quarter of an hour in that cold stone-flagged hall waiting for her. She came down at last, looking perplexed and even cross.

“My missis is in a temper, Miss Rosamund. Of course I’m delighted to see you, miss, but I can’t stay; I really can’t. We’re all in no end of confusion up-stairs. Oh, Miss Rosamund, you do look cold and white! I wish I could take you up to my room, but I just daren’t. Is there anything I could do for you, miss? Please say it as quick as you can.”

I clutched hold of Susan’s shoulder.

“You know the ring,” I said.

“Oh yes, miss; you don’t want me to go back to Sam with it now, miss?”

“No, no, no! I am not going to sell my precious ruby ring; but, Susan, you said to-day that your mistress sometimes hired out jewels. Fine ladies, who wanted to look extra fine, borrowed jewels. Of course, when they borrowed, they paid. Look at my ring once again, Susan. See! Here under the gas-lamp, does it not sparkle? Would not the gems look well on a small, fair hand?”

While I was speaking Susan remained motionless, but I noticed that she began to breathe hard and quick.

“I do believe that this will set everything right,” she said, “I do most positively believe it. You give me the ring, miss, and stay here. I’ll be back in a minute; don’t you stir till I come back to you, Miss Rosamund.”

“Listen, Susan, I must have money for the ring, money down. The more you can get the better, and I’ll hire it out for one night only. Remember that, Susan, I only hire out the ring for one night.”

“All right, miss, give me the ring at once. This may set matters straight again. There ain’t no saying. I’ll attend to all you want, Miss Rosamund, never you fear.”

Susan almost snatched the old-fashioned little case out of my hand, sprang up the stairs three steps at a time, and vanished.

I waited in the great, cold, empty hall with no other companion than my fast-beating heart.

I had a curious sense of loneliness and even desolation, now that I had parted with the ring. It seemed to me that Cousin Geoffrey was near, and that he was looking at me reproachfully. I almost regretted what I had done; if I had known where to find Susan I would have rushed after her, and asked her for my ring back.

As it was, I had to restrain my impatience as best I could. Perhaps Susan would be unsuccessful; perhaps in a moment or two she would bring me back the ring. She did nothing of the kind. She kept me waiting for a quarter of an hour, then she came back with five pounds in her hand.

“My missis is awfully obliged to you, Miss Rosamund, and—and here’s five sovereigns, miss. I couldn’t get more, I couldn’t really.”

“And my ring, Susan, my ring?”

“You’ll have it back to-morrow, miss.”

“But is my precious ring safe? Is it in the house? Where is it?”

“Where is your ring, Miss Rosamund?” Susan stared at me, and spoke almost pettishly. “Didn’t you say you wanted to hire the ring out, miss? Well, and haven’t I done it? The ring is out—it’s seeing company to-night, that ruby ring; it’s having a fine time; it belongs to grand folk for the night, and it’s seeing life, that’s what it is. Oh, I wish I was it! I think, Miss Rosamund, that ring is going to have a lovely time.”

“And you’re sure I shall have it back by to-morrow?”

“Why, of course, miss. You come here about twelve o’clock. I shouldn’t be surprised if Madame wanted to do another hire with it; she seemed mighty taken with the big ruby, and I dare say the young lady who wears it to-night may want it again. But of course that’s as you please, miss.”

“Of course, Susan. Well, I am very much obliged to you, and I will call to-morrow at noon.” I slipped the five sovereigns into my purse, shook hands with Susan, and left the house. I felt wonderfully independent; the touch of the gold had done this. It was marvellous with what a sense of power I now looked around me. I felt at that instant what a gulf there was between the rich and the poor. With five shillings I could be timid; with five pounds I could be wonderfully calm, collected, and brave.

I walked as composedly down the gaslit streets as if I had done so every evening of my life. I entered a grocer’s shop and bought half a pound of tea, very good tea. I also bought sugar, Brand’s meat jelly, and a pound of paraffin candles. As I was leaving the shop I thought how fond mother was of rusks when she was ill. I turned back and got some. I was now quite laden with parcels, and as I knew I must purchase several more, and could not possibly carry them all in my hands, the next thing was to secure a basket. I was not long in discovering a sort of bazaar, where miscellaneous articles of every description were to be had. I chose a serviceable basket, paid for it, popped my groceries in, and went out. I soon added to the store a chicken, two pounds of beef for beef-tea, a loaf of bread, and some fresh butter. Finally I placed on the top of the basket a bunch of fine hothouse grapes, two or three lemons, some oranges, and, lastly, a great lovely bunch of chrysanthemums.

Now, I felt that I was ready for Putney.

I retraced my steps to Regent Circus, and after a little delay found myself in an omnibus which would finally land me at Victoria.

I need not describe my brief journey to Putney; I had no adventures on the road. No one spoke rudely to me, or stared at me, or molested me in any fashion. The train was punctual, and my fellow-passengers civil.

When I got out at Putney station I did not lose my way, for Jack's directions were explicit, and my head felt wonderfully clear.

It was, however, between nine and ten o'clock at night when I arrived at the lodging-house where my brother's poor young wife lay ill.

I knocked at the door, and the landlady, who had watery eyes and an ugly sodden sort of face, presently answered the summons.

She opened the door about six inches, and stared at me suspiciously from head to foot.

"Does Mrs Lindley live here?" I asked.

"No, there's no one of that name in the house." She prepared to shut the door in my face.

"Stay," I exclaimed, pressing my hand against the panel of the door, "there is a young lady here who is very ill. I am her husband's sister, and I have come with a message from him, and I have brought several things that she wants. I must see her at once."

The landlady looked at the heavy basket in my hand. She glanced at my face, which I am sure was resolved in expression. She listened to my voice, which was firm.

"Oh, you mean Mrs Gray," she exclaimed. "Yes, poor thing, she's as bad as bad can be. I suppose you had better come up and see her, if you have any message from her husband. It's a perfect worry to hear her calling out for him all the time, and maybe you can quiet her down a bit."

The landlady mounted the narrow stairs slowly. They were dirty, as stairs in all such houses are; there were many gaps in the banisters, and many sad rents and signs of wear on the greasy carpets. I could have moralised, as I walked up the stairs behind the broad-backed landlady. I could have stored up materials for an excellent little essay on the shady side of lodging-house life. But my heart was too full just then to think of anything but the girl whom I was about to visit, the girl whom my brother had married without even giving her his rightful name.

Poor people are often the proudest, and we Lindleys had what is commonly called "honest pride." That simply means that we were honest; we had no double dealings; we paid our way not only with coin of the realm, but with promises which were kept, with endeavours which terminated in results. It could not enter into our heads to cheat our brothers; we could do without luxuries, but we could not part with even a hair's-breadth of honour.

The first scapegrace in a family like ours causes, therefore, those anguished blushes, those shrinkings of the soul which are about the worst forms of pain. I felt as if I were being roasted at a slow fire of public condemnation as I followed Mrs Ashton up-stairs. I was almost sorry at that moment that my conscience was so tender.

The landlady did not stop until she reached the attic floor; then she turned and pointed to the door of a room which was slightly open.

"Mrs Gray's in there," she said; "you can go in."

She did not offer to come with me. On the contrary she turned her broad back and descended the stairs with many bumps and bangs. I walked softly into the small low attic which had been thrown open for my entrance.

My steps were light, and the room was almost entirely in shadow, for the fire had gone out, and one solitary candle was already dying in its socket.

Light as my footfall was, however, it was heard, for a high-pitched, querulous, weak voice said instantly:—

"Is that you, Jack? Is that really you at last?"

"No," I replied to the voice, "I am not Jack, but I am the next best thing, I am Jack's sister. I have brought you a great many messages from him. Now lie quite still, until I light a candle, and then I will tell you everything."

The figure in the bed gave utterance to a queer kind of astonished groan, but no further sound of any kind came from the lips. I fumbled in my basket until I found the pound of candles; I lit one at the expiring embers in the socket, found two showy candlesticks on the mantelpiece, filled both, and lighted them, and then, going over to the bed, bent down to take a good look at my sister.

I saw a small dark face; two big beautiful eyes looked up at me; a weak little peevish mouth trembled; the lips were drawn down; I saw that tears, and perhaps hysterics, were close at hand. I touched the girl's forehead with my hand, it was damp from weakness, but there was no fever.

“Before I tell you any of my story I must make you comfortable, Hetty,” I said.

“Hetty?” she whispered, in a kind of terror. “How do you know anything about me?”

“Jack has told me, of course; it’s all right, I assure you. He is prevented coming to-night, so I am going to be your nurse. Oh, yes, I will talk to you presently, but not yet, not until you have had some food, and I have made you comfortable.”

I now observed that the girl’s face was ghastly pale. Yes, the fever was gone, but she was in almost the last extremity of weakness. I rushed again to my basket, took out the tin of Brand’s jelly, opened it, and gave her a spoonful. It acted as a stimulant at once, and I felt that I might leave her while I ran down-stairs to interview the landlady.

Oh, the wonders that a purse full of money can effect! With the chink of that gold I softened Mrs Ashton’s obdurate heart. Jack’s wife became “Poor dear!” and an object of the deepest interest in her eyes. She bundled up-stairs herself, to re-light the fire in the miserable attic. She supplied me with unlimited warm water, clean towels, and clean sheets, and when I asked her if she could roast a fowl, and send it up hot in about an hour’s time, she readily promised to do what I required.

In her absence I affected wonders in the attic room. I made it cheerful with fire-light and candle-light. I opened the window and let in some purer air. Having fed my patient, I proceeded to comb out her beautiful curly dark hair. I then washed her face and hands, and made the bed over again with the clean sheets.

When the landlady brought up the fowl nicely done to a turn, we were both ready for it. The good food, the care, the cheerful light, the purer atmosphere had already done wonders for Hetty. She lost the nervous, frightened manner which at first had made it almost distressing to speak to her. Her eyes shone; the colour dawned faintly in her white cheeks, and when I fed her with tender bits of chicken, she even smiled up into my face with a world of love and gratitude in her eyes.

“You are good to me, miss,” she whispered.

“You must not call me miss, my name is Rosamund. I am your husband’s sister.”

But this allusion made her blush painfully, and she drew once more into her shell.

When Hetty and I had finished our chicken, I set what was left carefully away, and putting out one of the candles sat down by the bedside, and told my new sister that she must go to sleep.

“But you, miss?—oh! I beg your pardon,”—she stopped, confusion in her tone.

“Never mind,” I said, soothingly. I saw this was not the time to commence her education. “Go to sleep,” I said, and bending forward I touched her forehead lightly with my lips. Her eyes looked full back into mine. I had never seen such a wealth of love in any eyes. The lids fell languidly over them. She obeyed me with a happy, satisfied sigh.

Chapter Five

Lady Ursula

Hetty slept fairly well. I sat broad awake by her bedside. I was too young, too fresh, too strong to be exhausted by this evening's excitement and hurry. I was not tired enough to drop asleep in the hard chair by my sister's bedside. My pulses were beating high. I sat all through the long night, excited, anxious, full of a thousand forebodings and troubles. I gave my patient Brand's jelly and grapes when she woke in the night, and early in the morning I boiled an egg, made some crisp toast, and a teapot of fragrant tea, and gave Hetty her breakfast. Afterwards I washed and dressed her; I combed out her hair, and tied it into a soft mass. I straightened the bed, and made it look as tidy as such a miserable bed could be, and then putting some grapes within reach, and the flowers on a little table, where she could look at them, I ran down-stairs to interview the landlady.

"I am glad to tell you," I said, "that my sister seems much better this morning."

"Oh, ay, miss, I'm sure I'm pleased to hear it." The landlady was all beams and curtsies. "I always said, pore dear, that it was care she wanted—and all I could I give her, as Mr Gray can testify; but when a woman has got to 'arn her living 'ard, she has no power to spend much time a-cookin', and a-cleanin', and a-nursin', and a-messin'. It's always a-nursin' and a-messin' with the sick, and I han't got the time, so I'm glad you has come in, miss."

"Yes, but I must go away for some hours," I said, "and I want my sister to be taken all possible care of in my absence. Will you do that for me, Mrs Ashton? I will come back as early in the afternoon as I can."

"To be sure I will, my dear."

"Here is a piece of paper on which I have written what she is to eat, and how often she is to be fed."

"Well, dear, I'll do my 'umble best. I'm not good at readin' and writin', but Mary Ann in the kitchen can spell out what you has writ down, miss, I make no doubt."

I left the paper in Mrs Ashton's hands, and went back again to Hetty.

"Hetty," I said, "I must go away for a few hours. Mrs Ashton will take all possible care of you." I stopped, distressed by the piteous, helpless expression on her face.

“Mrs Ashton doesn’t take any care of me,” said Hetty. “She leaves me all day long, and never, never comes near the room. Yesterday the fire went out, and I got so hungry, so dreadfully hungry. Then the hunger went off, and I felt only cold and very faint. I thought perhaps I was dying. Don’t leave me with Mrs Ashton, miss.”

“You must call me Rosamund, Hetty. Now listen. Don’t tremble, dear. I am obliged to leave you. I have a mother and father, and—and—brothers. Your Jack is one of my brothers. I will come back again as soon as ever I can; and when I come I shall probably bring you a message from Jack.”

“Won’t Jack come to see me himself to-day?”

“I’m afraid not. Jack does not forget you, Hetty, but the fact is, he is ill. He has a bad headache, and has to be nursed.”

“Oh,” she said gently, and without any of the alarm I had anticipated. “Sometimes his head aches fearfully, I know; I have seen it. I have sat up all night nursing his headache. Who is taking care of him now?”

“His mother and mine, the tenderest and best of human beings.”

I felt a break in my voice as I said this. I knew my mother was no longer first in Jack’s affections. I felt an unreasonable and ridiculous sense of jealousy on my mother’s account.

“Good-bye, Hetty,” I said hastily; “I will bring you news of Jack; and try and believe one thing—the Mrs Ashton of yesterday and the Mrs Ashton of to-day are two distinctly different people. You will be taken care of, my dear, and remember I expect to see you looking quite bright and well this evening.”

Then I ran down-stairs and out of the house. It was still too early to go to Madame Leroy’s, but the comfortable chink of gold in my purse enabled me to spend my time profitably. I laid in fresh provisions both for Hetty and for Jack. At twelve o’clock exactly I arrived at Madame Leroy’s. To my surprise Susan herself opened the door for me. I think she must have been waiting on the mat inside, for the moment I rang, the door was pulled open, and Susan said breathlessly:

“Oh, come in, Miss Rosamund, come up-stairs.”

“Where is my ring, Susan?” I said, resisting her impetuous push. “Give me back my ring at once and let me go. I have really a great deal to do, and have not time to wait to chat with you.”

“It isn’t me, miss, as wants to keep you, it’s Madame Leroy herself.”

“Madame Leroy? What do you mean?”

“And I haven’t got the ring, miss. When I asked Madagie for it this morning, she said, ‘When the young person calls, show her up to my private room at once.’ She said ‘young person,’ miss, meaning no offence, but the moment she claps her eyes on you she’ll know you are a lady born.”

“I don’t care what she calls me, Susan; if I must see her, I must, I suppose. Show me to her room at once.”

Susan ran on before me, past the first floor, and the second, and on to the third floor of the great house; where she paused, and knocked deliberately at a certain door which wanted paint, and was altogether very shabby.

“Come in,” said a voice, and I found myself in the presence of Madame Leroy.

I suppose this great artiste, as she would term herself, had a certain figure, manner, eye, tone which were capable of not only inspiring awe, but of tickling vanity, of whetting desire, of ministering to the weakest passions of the silliest of her sex. I may as well own at once that her arts were thrown away on me.

She was a handsome dark-eyed woman, full in figure, tall in stature, and with what would be called a commanding presence. I was only a slip of a girl, badly dressed, and with no presence whatever. Nevertheless, I could not fear the fashionable and pompous being.

“Will you kindly return me my ring, Madame Leroy?” I said brusquely.

Madame favoured me with a sweeping curtsey.

“I presume I am addressing Miss Lindley?” she said. “Pray take a seat, Miss Lindley—I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The moment she spoke I perceived that she was not French. She was an English or an Irish woman, probably the latter. Her name was doubtless an assumed one. I did not take the chair she proffered me.

“I have come for my ring,” I said, in a voice which I really managed to make very firm and business-like. “I brought it to you last night, and you very kindly paid me five pounds for the loan of it. I want it back now. Your servant said that if I called at twelve o’clock I should have the ring back.”

"I wish you would take a chair, Miss Lindley; I want particularly to speak to you about the ring. I am pleased to be able to impart to you some good news. I—" Madame Leroy paused, and slightly smacked her lips. "I have found a purchaser for your ruby ring, Miss Lindley."

I felt my cheeks turning very red.

"You are kind," I replied; "I dare say you mean to be good to me when you say you have a purchaser for the ring. But I don't want to sell it."

"Not want to sell it!" Madame Leroy looked me all over from the crown of my hat to the tips of my shabby boots. Then putting on her pince-nez she scrutinised my face. I knew perfectly well the thoughts that were filling her mind. She was saying to herself:—"You are a poor specimen of humanity, but if I, the great artiste, had the dressing of you, I might make you at least presentable. The idea of a chit like you presuming to refuse to sell a trinket!"

"I don't want to sell my ring," I said. "But it is possible that I may lend it to you another evening. Even that I am not sure about. Give it back to me now, please."

I held out my hand. Madame Leroy drew back.

"I am very sorry," she said, reddening; "the fact is, I have not got the ring."

"Not got my ring?"

"No. Lady Ursula Redmayne borrowed the ring last night. She sent me a messenger this morning with a letter, and no ring. Shall I read you her letter?"

"I do not care to hear it," I said. "It is no matter to me what Lady Ursula Redmayne writes to you. I want my ring."

"Well, miss,"—Madame Leroy's tone was now decidedly angry,—“seeing how very anxious you were last night for the immediate loan of five pounds, you have a mighty independent way with you. Lady Ursula Redmayne, indeed! I can tell you it isn't every one as has the privilege of getting letters from Lady Ursula.”

While Madame Leroy was speaking I had a great many flashes of thought. Her first words recalled me to myself. A girl who had come in desperation to hire out a family trinket for what she could get for it, was surely inconsistent when she disdained even the suggestion of a future patron. Lady Ursula, whoever she was, would buy the ring. Of course she must not have it, I must be a great deal harder pressed before I could consent to part with my Talisman, my "Open

Sesame” into the Land of Romance. But I knew that I did want money. I wanted twenty pounds before Monday, if I would help Jack—I wanted further money if I would continue to assist his wife.

All these thoughts, as I say, flashed through me, and by the time Madame Leroy had finished speaking, I had quite altered my tone.

“I am sorry to appear rude,” I said. “I know you were very kind to help me last night. Will you please tell me what Lady Ursula says about my ring?”

“Candidly, my dear, she wants to buy it from you. Here is her letter. She says:—

”Dear Madame Leroy,—You must get me that lovely ruby ring at any price. I refuse to part from it. Name a price, and I will send you a cheque.’

“There’s a chance for you,” said Madame Leroy, flinging down her letter. “You can’t say I have not been a good friend to you after that letter. Name any price in reason for that old ring, and you shall have it—my commission being twenty per cent.”

“But I don’t wish to sell the ring, Madame Leroy.”

“I am sorry, Miss Lindley, I am afraid you have no help for yourself. Lady Ursula Redmayne intends to buy it.”

This was not at all the right kind of thing to say to me. I was very proud, and all my pride flashed into my face.

“You think because I am poor, and Lady Ursula is rich, that she is to have my property?” I said. “You must send a messenger for the ring at once. I will wait here until he returns.”

Poor Madame Leroy looked absolutely stupefied.

“I never met such a queer young lady,” she said. “How can I send a message of that sort? Why, it will offend my best, my very best customer. If you have no pity on yourself, Miss Lindley, you ought to have some on me.”

“What can I do for you, Madame Leroy? I cannot sell the ring.”

“Well, you might go yourself to Lady Ursula. She is eccentric. She might take a fancy to you. You might go to her, and explain your motives, which are more than I can understand. And above all things you might exonerate me; you might explain to her that I did my best to get the ring for her.”

“I could certainly do that.”

“Will you?”

“I will go to Lady Ursula, if it does not take up too much of my time.”

“She lives in Grosvenor Street, not five minutes’ drive from here. You shall go in a hansom at my expense at once.”

Chapter Six

The Aristocrat

The house in Grosvenor Street was the most splendid mansion I had ever seen. It was Cousin Geoffrey's house over again, only there were no cobwebs, no neglect, no dirt anywhere. The household machinery was perfect, and well oiled. I suppose I ought to have felt timid when those ponderous doors were thrown open, and a powdered footman stared at me in the insolent manner which seems specially to belong to these servitors of the great. I had no feeling of abasement, however. The lady, be she young or old, who resided in this palace, wanted a boon from me; I required nothing at her hands except my own property back again.

I said to the footman:

"Is Lady Ursula Redmayne at home?"

He replied in the affirmative.

"I wish to see her," I continued. "Will you have the goodness to let Lady Ursula know at once that I have called at the request of Madame Leroy to speak to her on the subject of a ring."

A sudden flash of intelligence and interest swept over the man's impassive features. Then he resumed his wooden style, and flinging the door yet wider open invited me to enter.

I was shown into a small room to the left of the great entrance hall, and had to consume my own impatience for the next ten minutes as best I might. At the end of that time the servant returned.

"Come this way, madam," he said.

He ushered me up a flight of stairs, down another flight of stairs, along a dimly-lighted gallery hung with many Rembrandts and Gainsboroughs, and suddenly opening a door ushered me into a kind of rose-coloured bower. There was a subtle warmth and perfume about the room, and the coloured light gave me for a moment a giddy and unnerved feeling.

"Miss Lindley, your Ladyship," announced the man. The door was softly closed, indeed it seemed to vanish into a wall of tapestry.

The rose-coloured light had for an instant confused my sight, and I did not see the girl, no older than myself, who was lying back in an easy-chair, and pulling the silken ears of a toy-terrier.

When the man left the room she sprang up, flung the dog on the ground, who gave a squeaking bark of indignation, and came to meet me as if I were a dear old friend.

“Sit down, Miss Lindley. How good of dear old Madame to send you to me! And so you are the owner of that heavenly ring?”

Lady Ursula was very pretty. Her voice was like a flute; her dress was perfection; her manner almost caressing. But even there, in that rose-coloured bower, I recognised her imperiousness, and I felt that if she were crossed her sweet tones would vanish, and I should be permitted to gaze at a new side of her character.

“You have come about the ring,” she said. “Now, what do you want for it? It is a treasure, but you won’t be too extravagant in your demands, will you?”

“I won’t be extravagant at all, Lady Ursula,” I cried. “I have no demand to make, except to ask you to let me have my property back.”

“The ring back? The ruby ring? Oh, my dear good creature you don’t understand. I wrote to Madame Leroy offering to buy it. I will give you a cheque for it, Miss Lindley—or gold, if you prefer it. You shall have a price for the ring. Your own price, if it is not beyond reason. Now do you understand?”

“I understand perfectly,” I replied—I am afraid my tone was nettled—I certainly felt very angry. “I understand,” I said. “You want me to sell the ring—I don’t intend to sell it. It was a legacy left to me by a cousin, and I—I won’t part with it.”

I said these words so decidedly that the fine young lady, who all her life had lived luxuriously, and, perhaps, now for the first time in her existence had her whim refused, stared at me in amazement. Her brows became contracted. Her pleasant, kindly, but insufferably condescending manner changed to one more natural although less amiable. Lady Ursula ceased to be the aristocrat, and became the woman.

“You won’t sell your ring?” she said. “But you did much the same last night. Last night you took money for the ring left to you by your—your cousin. I wore the ruby ring, and I paid you money for the loan.”

“I know you did,” I answered. “I wanted money last night. I was in despair for money. I heard through one of her apprentices that Madame Leroy now and then hired out jewels to some of her rich customers. You wore the ring and paid me for it. Now I want it back. I am in a hurry, so please let me have it at once.” I stood up as I spoke. Lady Ursula did not stir.

“Sit down,” she said. “No, not on that stiff little ottoman, but on the sofa, close to me. Now we can talk cosily. This seems an exciting story, Miss Lindley, and you have an exciting way of putting things. Fancy you, wanting money so badly as to have to hire out your ring. I always knew there were creatures in the world who would do anything to secure money, but I had not an idea that ladies were put to these straits.”

“You know very little indeed about the lives of some ladies,” I answered. “The need of money comes to some who are ladies, and it presses them sore.”

“It must be awfully interesting and exciting,” responded Lady Ursula.

“It is both. At the same time it is cruel; it stabs horribly.”

“Ah.”

Lady Ursula looked me all over from head to foot.

“Then you don’t want money to-day,” she said suddenly.

“Yes, I do.”

“As badly as you did last night?”

“I think so. Yes, I believe I want it quite as badly.”

“Then you will sell your ring; if the want of money stabs and is cruel, you will take what opportunity offers. For the sake of a sentiment you won’t refuse to enrich yourself, and remove the pain which you speak of as so bitter.”

“I won’t sell my ring,” I said. “I am sorry to disoblige you, Lady Ursula, but the question is not one which leaves any room for consideration. I want my ring back. Will you give it to me, please?”

I really don’t know how aristocratic girls are brought up. I suppose they have a totally different training from girls who live in cottages, and are very poor. There is compensation in all things, and no doubt if self-denial is a virtue the cottage girl has a chance of acquiring it which is denied to the maid who inhabits the palace.

If I never performed any other mission, I shall always feel that I was the first person who did for Lady Ursula Redmayne the inestimable service of saying "No" to a strong desire.

It took this beautiful young woman several moments to realise that she absolutely could not have her way; that the humble and poor cottage girl would not part with her legitimate property.

When Lady Ursula realised this, which she did after a considerable and fatiguing discussion, she sat silent for a moment or two. Then she jumped up and looked out of the window. She pulled aside the soft rose-coloured silk curtains to take this peep into the outer world. Her eager dark eyes looked down the street and up the street. For all her languor she was now fully alive and even quick in her movements. With a pettish action she let the rose curtains cover the window again, and going to the fireplace pressed the button of an electric bell.

In a moment an elderly woman dressed in black silk, with a book-muslin apron, and a white cap with long streamers of lace, appeared.

"Nurse," said Lady Ursula, "please give orders that I am not at home to any callers this morning."

"I will attend to the matter, my lady," answered the nurse. "But if Captain Valentine calls?"

"I am not at home—I make no exception."

The nurse respectfully withdrew, and the door, which opened into the tapestry, was noiselessly closed.

"Now," said Lady Ursula, turning to me, "I am going to confide in you, Miss Lindley."

I felt quite cross. I was dying to be home with mother and Jack, and wondering if my poor new sister Hetty was being starved by Mrs Ashton.

Lady Ursula looked at me with an expression which seemed to say—

"Now you are having an honour conferred on you."

In reply to it, I rose to my feet, and I think some of the crossness in my heart got into my face.

“Thank you,” I said, “but I have only a moment to give you. My brother is dangerously ill at home, and I must go back as soon as possible.”

Lady Ursula slightly raised her delicate brows.

I think she scarcely heard what I said about my brother.

“Do sit down,” she said, “I won’t keep you a moment. What a queer girl you are! but very refreshing to meet. Now do sit down. You can’t go, you know, until you get your ring. Miss Lindley, I must confide my story to you. I am engaged.”

I bowed my head very slightly.

“To Captain Rupert Valentine. He is in the Guards. Would you like to see his photograph?”

I murmured something. Lady Ursula stretched out her hand to a table which stood near, took up a morocco case, which she opened, and showed me the dark, slightly supercilious face of a handsome man of about thirty.

“Don’t you admire his expression?” she said. “Isn’t it firm? Doesn’t he look like the sort of hero a girl would be proud to obey?”

“That depends on the girl,” I answered.

“Good gracious, there isn’t a girl in the kingdom who would not be proud to be engaged to Rupert Valentine.”

“I hope you will be very happy, Lady Ursula.”

“There is not the least doubt on that point. We are to be married immediately after Christmas. Now comes the real point of my confidence. Rupert gave me an engagement ring exactly like yours, so like, that only the closest observer could detect a difference. The ring belonged to his mother, and he valued it above all other earthly things.”

“Yes,” I said; I was really interested at last.

“Yesterday I lost the ring. I don’t know how. I was out driving, and I may have pulled it off with my glove when I was shopping. I went to Madame Leroy’s among other places. When I came back my ruby ring was gone. I cannot conceive how it vanished. I went very nearly mad on the spot, I really did. I dared not face Rupert, and tell him his engagement ring was lost. All search was made for its recovery, but in vain. Nurse took the carriage round, and went from shop to shop to try and get some trace of it. In the end she visited

Madame Leroy. I was to meet Rupert at a friend's house last night. While nurse was at Madame Leroy's your ring was brought in. Imagine her astonishment and rapture! Here was a mode of deliverance for me in case my own ring was never recovered. I wore your ruby ring last night, Miss Lindley, and Captain Valentine noticed it, and said that beautiful as he had always known his mother's rubies to be, he had never seen them flash as they did on my finger last night. How relieved I felt, and how certain that you would let me buy the ring from you. You will, now that I have confided my trouble to you, won't you?"

"I am sorry," I said, "but I must repeat the words I have used already so often. I cannot part with the ruby ring. It was left to me by an old cousin of mine, and when I received it I was particularly requested never to part with it. I am sorry for you, Lady Ursula, but I must ask you to give me my ring, and let me go."

Lady Ursula put her hands behind her.

"You are a cruel, selfish girl," she said angrily.

"No, Lady Ursula, I am not cruel. The world, which has been so gentle to you, has blown many hard rough winds on my face, but they have never made me cruel. And as to being selfish, why should I part with my one ewe-lamb?"

"Oh, dear!" said Lady Ursula.

She rose from her seat, and began to pace up and down the room. I noticed that she was a tall, largely-made girl, and could be as vigorous and energetic as any one when she chose. She clenched her dainty hands now and spoke with passion. "I repeat that you are cruel and selfish," she said. "I know that you can plead your cause well; for I suppose you are clever, and have doubtless been educated at one of those detestable High Schools. But let me tell you that however you argue the point you are actuated by cruel motives. What can that ring matter to you? and if I don't get it, most likely my engagement will be broken off. Thus, you see, you will have ruined my life."

"Lady Ursula," I said, "it is you now who are cruel. I have my own reasons for wishing to retain my own trinket, and surely the only right and honourable thing for you to do is to tell Captain Valentine of your loss. If he is the least worthy of your affection, he will, of course, overlook what was only an unfortunate accident."

"No, he never will—he never, never will. You don't know what he thought of that ring. I'd rather never see him again than tell him that his mother's ruby ring was lost."

“Well, I am truly sorry for you. But I don’t see my way to helping you.”

“Listen. Hire me the ring for a week—only for a week, and I will give you thirty pounds.”

I must admit that this proposal staggered me. I thought of Jack, and the stolen twenty pounds. I thought of Monday morning, when the discovery of the theft would be made known. I thought of the agony, the dishonour; I saw my mother’s face as it would look when the news was brought to her that her son was a thief. Yes, thirty pounds could do much good just then; it would save Jack, and it would give me funds to attend to Hetty’s wants.

Lady Ursula saw the hesitation in my face.

“Give me one week’s grace,” she said. “My own ruby ring may be found before the week is up.”

She opened a little exquisitely inlaid secretary, and began to pull out of a secret drawer notes and gold. She made a pile of them on the table—four five-pound notes, ten sovereigns. The yellow of the sovereigns seemed to mix with the rose-coloured tone of the room. I gazed at them as if they fascinated me. I half held out my hand to close over them, and then drew it back again.

“You will take the money—you want it, I know you do,” said Lady Ursula.

“But even if I do you will be no better off at the end of a week. In fact, you will be worse off, for you will have been all that time deliberately deceiving the man you intend to marry.”

“Oh, don’t begin to lecture me! Let the end of the week take care of itself! Here are thirty pounds! Give me the ring for a week!”

“I shall do very wrong.”

“Do wrong then! Take your money! You are looking greedily at it! Take it, you long for it!”

“I do long for it,” I answered. “If I take it, Lady Ursula, it will avert such a storm as girls like you can never even picture. It will save—Oh, have you a mother, Lady Ursula?”

“Of course I have. I don’t see her very often. She is at Cannes now.”

“If I take the money,” I said, “it will be only for a week, remember.”

“Very well. Of course you will take it. Out with your purse. Nay, though, you shall have a new purse, and one of mine. What do you say to this, made of red Russian leather? Here go the notes, and here the gold. Pop the purse into your pocket. Now, don’t you feel nice? We have both got what we want, and we can both be happy for a week.”

“I will come back in a week,” I said. I felt so mean when that thirty pounds lay in my pocket that I could scarcely raise my eyes. For the first time the difference of rank between Lady Ursula and myself oppressed me. For the first time I was conscious of my shabby dress, my rough boots, my worn gloves. “Good-bye, Lady Ursula,” I said.

“Good-bye, good-bye! I cannot tell you how grateful I am! You are not cruel, you are not selfish. By the way, what is your name?”

“Lindley.”

“Your Christian name?”

“I am called Rosamund.”

“How pretty! Good-bye, Rosamund!”

Chapter Seven

Mr Chillingfleet

I left the house, and took the next train home. Jack was very ill indeed. His fever had taken an acute form. My mother looked miserable about him. Even the doctor was anxious.

“I am so glad you have come back, Rose,” said my mother; “you had scarlet fever when you were a little child, so there is no fear for you, and it will be a great comfort having you in the house.”

I did not make any immediate response to this speech of my mother’s. I had Hetty under my charge, and could not stay, and yet how queer my mother would think my absence just then. I wondered if I dared confide to her Jack’s secret. It was told me in great confidence, but still—While I was hesitating, my mother began to speak again.

“Jack has been delirious all the morning. In his delirium he has spoken constantly of a girl called Hetty. Do we know any one of the name, Rose?”

“I know some one of the name,” I responded.

“You!—But what friend have you that I am not acquainted with? I don’t believe there is a single girl called Hetty in this place.”

“I know a girl of the name,” I repeated. “She does not live here. She is a girl who is ill at present, and in—in great trouble, and I think I ought to go and nurse her. She is without the friend who should be with her, and it is right for me to take his place.”

“What do you mean, Rosamund? Right for you to go away, and nurse a complete stranger, when your own brother is so ill?”

“But he has you, and Jane Fleming. Jack won’t suffer for lack of nursing, and the girl has no one.”

“I have old-fashioned ideas,” said my mother. A pink flush covered her face. I had never seen her more disturbed. “I have old-fashioned ideas, and they tell me that charity begins at home.”

At this moment Jane Fleming softly opened the door and came in. She certainly was a model nurse; so quiet, so self-contained, so capable.

“Mr Jack is awake, and conscious,” she said. “He fancied he heard your voice, Miss Rose, and he wants to see you at once.”

I glanced at my mother. She was standing with that bewildered expression on her face which mothers wear when their children are absolutely beyond their control. I made my resolution on the spur of the moment.

“Come with me to Jack, mother,” I said.

I took her hand, and we went softly up-stairs to the attic bedroom. Jack’s great big feverish eyes lighted up with expectancy when he saw me; but when he perceived that my mother accompanied me, their expression changed to one of annoyance. I went up to him at once, and took his hand.

“Hetty is better,” I said, “she has had an excellent night and is doing well. Mother dear, please come here. I shall go back to Hetty, Jack, and take all possible care of her, and nurse her, and make her strong and well again, if you will tell our mother who she is.”

“Yes,” said Jack, at once. “Yes, oh yes; she is my wife.”

My mother uttered an exclamation.

“Tell mother all about her, Jack,” I continued. “I will leave you both together for five minutes, then I will return.”

I slipped out of the room, took Jane aside, and gave her a sovereign.

“Jane,” I said, “you are to make the beef-tea yourself, and you are always to have a supply, fresh and very strong, in the house. Whenever my mother seems tired or fagged you are to give her a cup of beef-tea, and see that she drinks it.”

“Bless you, Miss Rose, of course I will.”

“Buy anything else that is necessary,” I said. “I am going away immediately, but shall be back on Monday afternoon.”

My five minutes were up by this time, and I stole into Jack’s sick-room. He was stretched flat out in bed; his cheeks were wet as if tears had touched them, and one great muscular arm was flung round my mother’s neck. She was kneeling by him, and holding his hand.

The moment I entered she looked round at me.

“My dear love,” she said, “you are perfectly right; Hetty must not be left a moment longer than can be helped. Hush, Jack, you need have no anxiety for your wife. I—I will go to see her myself if it is necessary.”

“No, mother, you must stay with me. You are so pretty and so gentle, and your hand is so soft. Hetty’s hands aren’t as soft as yours.”

Here he began to wander again. My mother followed me out of the room, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Oh, Rose,” she said, “the poor, poor boy. And you thought, both of you, to hide it from your mother?”

“No, mother, I longed for you to know; I am sure that telling you his story has given Jack the greatest relief. And weren’t you a bit angry with him, mother?”

“Angry, Rosamund? Was this a time to be angry? and do mothers as a rule turn away from repentant sons?”

“Not mothers such as you,” I replied. “Mothers worthy of the name would never do such a thing,” she replied. “Why, Rosamund, a mother—I say it in all reverence—stands something in the place of God. When we are truly repentant we never feel nearer to God, and so a boy is never truly nearer to his mother than when he has done something wrong, and is sorry for it. Come up-stairs with me at once, I must help you to make your preparations. You have not an hour to lose in going to Jack’s Hetty.” My mother was so excited, so enthusiastic, that she would scarcely give me breathing-time to put my things together.

“You must not delay,” she kept on saying. “You have told me how careless the landlady is, and that poor child has had no one to do anything for her since early morning. Rose, dear, how is she off for little comforts, and clothes and those sort of things?”

“I should say, very badly off, mother. Hetty is as poor as poor can be.”

“I have one or two night-dresses,” began my mother.

“Now, mother, you are not going to deprive yourself.”

“Don’t talk of it in that light, Rose. Hetty is my daughter, remember.”

I felt a fierce pang of jealousy at this. My mother left the room, and presently returned with a neatly-made-up parcel.

“You will find some small necessaries for the poor child here,” she said. “And now go, my darling, and God bless you. One word first, however. How are you off for money, Rose?”

“I have plenty, mother. Don’t worry yourself on that point.”

“I have a little pearl ring up-stairs, which I could sell, if necessary.”

The tears rushed to my eyes when my mother said this. The pearl ring was her sole adornment, and she had worn it on Sunday ever since we were children.

“You shall never sell your dear ring,” I said.

I rushed up to her, kissed her frantically, and left the house.

Hetty and I spent a quiet Sunday together. She was much better, and she looked very pretty in the warm, softly-coloured dressing-jacket which mother had sent her. She told me her little story, which was simple as story could be. She had no parents, nor any near relatives living. Even a distant cousin, who had paid for her education, had died two years previously. She thought herself very lucky when she secured the post of English teacher at Miss West’s Select Seminary for young ladies. She made Jack’s acquaintance early in the spring; no one else had ever been specially kind to her, and when he asked her to marry him, she said “Yes,” in a burst of delight and gratitude.

“I didn’t know he was so grand as he has turned out to be, miss,” said Hetty, in conclusion.

“Now, Hetty, what did I say about miss?”

“It seems so queer and forward to say Rose,” she answered. “I never had any one to love until Jack married me. Oh, don’t I love him just, and don’t I love you—Rose!”

“I know you do,” I said, “and when you see my mother you will love her. We will try to be good to you, poor little Hetty, and you will try to learn to be a real lady for my mother’s sake.”

“And for Jack’s sake,” she answered, an eager flush coming into her cheeks.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Will you show me how to be a lady, Rose?”

“Oh, Hetty, no one can show you. You must find out the way yourself. You will, too, if you are in earnest, and if you love my mother as she deserves to be loved. Hetty, my mother is the gentlest of women, and yet no queen could be more dignified, more ladylike.”

“Would she frighten me awfully?” whispered Hetty.

“Oh, you poor child! There, I won’t talk any more. Wait until you see her!”

Hetty was rather under than over educated for her station; but there was a certain sweetness, and even refined charm about her, which gave me a sense of almost pain as I looked at her. Was Jack worthy of this passionate, loving heart?

Sunday passed peacefully, but I did not forget what lay before me on Monday morning. The real crucial turn in Jack’s affairs would come then.

I went early to town, and saw Mr Chillingfleet, the head of Jack’s firm, about eleven o’clock. Jack had told me that twelve was the hour when the money was generally collected and sent to the bank. I don’t know how I managed to inveigle a young clerk to coax Mr Chillingfleet to see me, but I did, and at eleven o’clock I stood before him.

I looked into his face. I knew that a great deal hung upon that interview; I knew that my mother’s future happiness in life, that all poor Hetty’s bliss or undoing depended on what sort of face Mr Chillingfleet possessed. I was a good reader of physiognomy, and I studied his with an eager flash.

It was a firm face: the lips thin, the chin both long and square, the cheekbones high; the eyes, however, were kind, honest, straightforward. I looked into Mr Chillingfleet’s eyes, and took courage.

“You want to see me, young lady?” said the chief of the great house.

“I do, sir,” I said, “I have come about my brother Jack.”

“Young Lindley—you are young Lindley’s sister? I am sorry he is ill.”

Mr Chillingfleet’s tone was kind, but not enthusiastic. The young clerk’s services were evidently not greatly missed.

“I have a story to tell you,” I said. And then I began to speak.

My tone was eager, but I saw at once that I did not make a deep impression. Mr Chillingfleet was only languidly attentive. I could read his face, and I was

absolutely certain that the thought expressed on it was the earnest hope that my story would be brief. I felt certain that he considered me a worry, that he felt it truly unreasonable of the sisters of sick clerks to come to worry him before noon on Monday morning.

He was a true gentleman, however, and as such could not bring himself to be rude to a woman.

“I can give you ten minutes,” he said, in a courteous tone.

All this time I had been toying with my subject. I now looked in agony at a boy clerk who was perched on a high stool by a desk at the other end of the room.

“If I could see you by yourself,” I said, almost in a whisper.

“Dawson, you can go,” said Mr Chillingfleet.

The boy glided off the high stool, and vanished. The moment the door was shut I took out my purse, and removing four five-pound notes, laid them on the desk beside the chief of the great house.

“Good gracious, young lady, what do you mean by that?” said Mr Chillingfleet.

“Those four five-pound notes are yours,” I said. “I have brought them back to you.”

“Miss Lindley, you must explain yourself.”

Mr Chillingfleet’s tone was no longer languid in its interest.

Then I gulped down a great lump in my throat, and told the story. It does not matter how I told it. I cannot recall the words I used. I don’t know whether I spoke eloquently or badly. I know I did not cry, but I am firmly convinced that my face was ashy pale, for it felt so queer and stiff and cold.

At last I had finished. The story of the young clerk’s temptation and disgrace was known to his chief. Now I waited for the fiat to go forth. Suppose Mr Chillingfleet refused to receive back the twenty pounds I brought him? Suppose he thought it good for the interests of business that the young thief—the wicked, brazen young thief—should be made an example of?

I gazed into the kind and honourable eyes. I watched with agony the firm, the hard, the almost cruel mouth.

“Oh, sir,” I said, suddenly, “take back the money! Jack’s mother is alive, and perhaps your mother, too, lives, sir. Take back the money, and be merciful, for her sake.”

Mr Chillingfleet shut his eyes twice, very quickly. Then he spoke.

“You must not try to come over me with sentiment,” he said. “This is not the time. A principle is involved, and I must be guided by a sense of duty. I am particularly busy at this moment, but I will give you my decision before you go. Can you wait for half an hour?”

“Yes, sir.”

Mr Chillingfleet sounded an office gong by his side.

“Dawson,” he said, when the boy appeared, “show this lady into the waiting-room.”

The boy preceded me into a dismal little back room, furnished me with a copy of the day’s Times, and left me. I could not read a word. I felt more and more hopeless as the moments went by.

It was nearly one o’clock before I was summoned back into Mr Chillingfleet’s presence.

“Sit down,” he said, in a much more kind tone than he had used when I left him. “You are a good girl, Miss Lindley,” he began. “You have acted in a very straightforward and honourable manner. Your mother must be a good woman, for she has brought up a worthy daughter. However, to the point. I will accept the notes you have just brought me in lieu of those stolen by your brother. I will not prosecute him for theft.”

“Oh, sir, God bless you?”

“Stay, you must hear me out. I don’t forgive absolutely; I should not think it right. Lindley has proved himself unworthy of trust, and he no longer holds a situation in this house. He may redeem his character some day, but the uphill path will be difficult for him, for the simple reason that I shall find it impossible to give him a recommendation which will enable him to obtain another situation.”

“Oh, sir—Mr Chillingfleet—his young wife!”

“Precisely so, Miss Lindley, but society must be protected. When a man does something which destroys his character, he must bear the consequences. There, I am sorry for you, but I can do no more. I must be just. Good-morning.”

Mr Chillingfleet touched my fingers, bowed to me, and I withdrew.

I pulled my veil down over my face; I did not look to right or left as I walked out of the office.

Chapter Eight

I cannot part with my Ring

Jack was going on well, and I spent most of the time with his wife. One day a letter from home was forwarded to me. I opened it, and saw to my astonishment that the signature was Albert Chillingfleet.

“My dear Miss Lindley,” the good man wrote, “your face has made a tolerably strong impression on me. I wish you were a lad; I would give you a berth in my business-house directly. But in the case of your brother, justice must be done, you know. He ought never to be a clerk in a business-house again. Still, there are other openings. When he has quite recovered, ask him to call to see me at my private address—Princes’ Gate. I am generally disengaged and at home between nine and ten in the evening. I enclose a trifle for that young wife.

“Yours sincerely,—
“Albert Chillingfleet.”

The trifle was a ten-pound note. My fingers trembled as I unfolded it. I looked across the room at Hetty. She was better now, and was able to spend a certain portion of each day on a sofa which the landlady had brought into the room for her.

Hetty’s face wore the bright, innocent expression of a child. Her illness seemed to have brought back a kind of pathetic lost youth to her. She was young, undoubtedly, in years, very young, but I felt convinced that before she had been so ill she had not worn this child-expression—her lips could not have been so reposeful in the old days, nor her eyes so unanxious.

She was lying now gazing calmly out of the window. Her hands were folded on her lap. The knitting she had been trying to accomplish had tumbled unheeded to the floor. When the bank-note rustled in my hand Hetty turned and looked at me. I got up and gave it to her.

“This is for you,” I said. “I have had a letter from a friend of ours, and he has sent you this.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed. She clasped the note in both her hands. “Ten pounds!” she repeated. “Rosamund,” she continued, “I never had so much money as this in all my life before.”

“Well, make good use of it, dear child,” I said. “Put it away safely now. You’ll be sure to want it.”

“But ought not I to thank your friend?”

“I’ll do that for you. I’ll be sure to say something very pretty.”

Hetty looked at the ten-pound note as if she loved it. Then she stretched out her hand, and proffered it back to me.

“You had better have it, Rosamund. You buy everything that we want. Take it, and spend it, won’t you? You must need it very badly.”

“No, no, no! This is your own nest-egg, and no one else shall touch it. See, I will put it into your purse; I know where your little empty purse is, Hetty. I will put this nice crisp note into it. Is it not jolly to have so much laid by?”

“Yes,” said Hetty, “I feel delightfully rich.” She closed her eyes, smiling, wearied, happy. In the sleep which followed she smiled again, more than once. She was thinking of Jack, and of the good things she could buy for him out of this purse of Fortunatus.

On the following day I was to go back to Lady Ursula to receive my ruby ring. As I sat and worked by Hetty’s side, I planned how I would take the little excursion in the morning, bring back the ring, and amuse my sister in the afternoon by telling her the story of it.

I carried out the early part of this programme exactly as I had mapped it before my eyes on this peaceful afternoon. The next morning found me at an early hour ringing the ponderous bell under the heavy portico of the great house in Grosvenor Street. The liveried footman once more put in his appearance, and I was taken once again to Lady Ursula’s pretty rose-coloured bower.

It was empty when I entered.

“Her ladyship will be with you in a minute or two,” said the man, as he closed the door behind the tapestry.

I sat back in an easy-chair, and waited. It was very nice to wait in this pretty room. I felt quite easy in my mind, and not at all anxious. Circumstances had improved for me during the last fortnight. Hetty was getting well. Jack was better. Exposure and disgrace were averted. In short, the heavy pressure of expectant calamity was withdrawn, and life smiled at me with its every-day face. I thought how glad I should be to have my little ring again—my pretty romantic treasure should be more prized than ever. Nothing should induce me to part with it again.

As I lay back and reflected peacefully, footsteps approached. The tapestry was pushed aside, and a man entered.

He was tall, with a dark complexion. His appearance was aristocratic. I glanced at him, and recognised him in a flash. I knew him by his likeness to the excellent photograph Lady Ursula possessed—he was her lover.

I was seated rather in the shadow. At first when he came in he did not notice me. He went straight up to Lady Ursula's table, and laid a small morocco case on it. He took up a photograph of the young lady, looked at it steadily—a half smile played round his somewhat austere mouth, his eyes softened. He held the photograph close to his lips, but he did not kiss it; with an almost reverent gesture he replaced it, then turned to leave the room. As he did so he caught sight of me. I had been looking on with a very red face. It was now Captain Valentine's turn to get red. He grew scarlet; he looked intensely angry. I saw at a glance that he was the last man who could bear to be caught in a sentimental attitude, he was the last man who could bear even a shade of ridicule.

He bowed very stiffly to me and vanished.

The next instant Lady Ursula came in.

“Oh, here you are, Rosamund!” she said; “how do you do?”

“I am very well,” I answered. I did not want Lady Ursula to call me Rosamund. She sat down on the sofa with her hands crossed idly in her lap. Her face was full of interrogation; it said as plainly as face could:

“Now, what do you want, Rosamund? Have the goodness to say it, whatever it is, and go away.”

The look in her eyes was replied to steadily by mine. Then I said calmly: “I have come for my ring.”

When I said this Lady Ursula dropped her mask. War to the knife gleamed in her bright eyes.

“Oh! the ring,” she said; “well, you can't have it, so there!”

At that instant Captain Valentine hastily re-entered the room. With a brief apology to me he turned to Lady Ursula and spoke:

“Here is your ring,” he said, taking up the morocco case, touching a spring and opening it. “I have had the central ruby properly fastened in; there is no fear of your losing it now.”

He was leaving the room again when an impulse, which I could not overcome, made me rush forward and lay my hand on the table.

“Don’t, Rosamund, I beseech of you,” said Lady Ursula.

There was entreaty, almost anguish in her bright blue eyes. I paused, the words arrested on my lips.

Captain Valentine stared from one to another of us with a puzzled, amazed glance. Lady Ursula slipped her hand through his arm. She led him towards the door. They passed out together; the door was a little ajar, and I heard him murmur something. Her gentle caressing reply reached my ears:

“My love, there is not the smallest fear, she is only a very excitable, eccentric young person, but I shall soon get rid of her.”

Those words decided me. Lady Ursula was coming back. I had not a second to lose. I was determined that she should see how the excitable, eccentric young person could act. I opened the morocco case, took the ring out, and slipped it on my finger.

The moment she returned to her table I held up my hand, and let her see the glittering treasure. She gave a cry of sharp pain.

“Oh, Rosamund, you are not really going to be so cruel!”

“I am very sorry,” I answered, “but I must have my ring. This is not a case of cruelty. It is simply a case of my requiring my own property back. Under great pressure I lent it to you for a week. Now I must have it back. Good-bye.”

“But, Rosamund, Rosamund!” She caught hold of my dress. “I gave you thirty pounds for the ring last week. You found the money useful; you know you did.”

“Yes,” I said. I blushed as the memory of all that that money meant rushed over me. With some of that thirty pounds I had saved Jack and our family honour. The money had been undoubtedly useful, but I held the glittering ring on my finger, and I loved it better than gold.

“I will give you forty pounds this week,” said Lady Ursula.

“No, no, I cannot accept it,” I replied. I walked towards the door.

“Fifty pounds,” she said, following me. “Oh, Rosamund, Rosamund, you are not going to be so cruel!”

“I must have my ring,” I said. “You have many treasures, and this is my one ewe-lamb. Why should you seek to deprive me of it?”

“Rosamund, please sit down.” She took my hand.

“Come and sit by me on the sofa, dear Rosamund. You know why I want this ruby ring; Captain Valentine knows nothing of the terrible loss I have sustained. If he hears of it—if he knows that his ring is gone, he will break off his engagement.”

“Then I have only one thing to say, Lady Ursula,” I replied; “if that is the nature of the man you are about to marry, you had better find it out before marriage than afterwards. Do you think I would marry a man who loved a trinket more than me? No! I am a poor girl, but I should be too proud for that. Lady Ursula, take your courage in your hands, and tell Captain Valentine the truth. He is not what you think; even I know better than that.”

“You don’t. You don’t know him a bit.”

“I know what a brave and good man ought to be; surely you could marry no one else.”

Lady Ursula got up and stamped her foot.

“Child,” she said, “you sit there and dare to argue with me. You are the cruellest creature I ever came across, the cruellest, the hardest. I hate you! I wish I had never met you.”

Her voice rose high in its petulance and passion. Once more the door was opened, and Captain Rupert Valentine came in.

“What is the matter?” he asked in some alarm. His indignant eyes flashed angry fire at me; I am sure he considered me a young person deprived of the use of her intellect, who was seeking to terrify Lady Ursula, perhaps even to lay violent hands on her.

His glance stung me to the quick. “There is nothing the matter,” I said, taking the words out of Lady Ursula’s mouth. “Lady Ursula Redmayne and I are unfortunate enough to differ on a certain point, but there is really nothing the matter. May I wish you good-morning now, Lady Ursula?”

I bowed to the young lady, bestowed upon the gentleman the faintest possible shade of acknowledgment, and covering the precious ruby ring with a terribly worn silk glove, walked towards the door.

Lady Ursula flung herself back on the sofa, and covered her face with her hands. Captain Valentine seemed to struggle for a moment with his desire to comfort her, and his sense of what his duties as a gentleman required. Finally the latter feeling triumphed, and he reached the door in time to open it, and so assisted my exit.

A moment later I was in the street. I was absolutely outside that detestable mansion, with the beloved little ring pressed in my warm hand.

I felt an almost childish sense of triumph and exultation; the possession of a large sum of money could not have gratified me to anything like the same extent as did this recovery of my rightful legacy. I felt enormously rich; I felt giddy with delight; it seemed to me impossible to walk, I must ride; the owner of such a ruby ring could not pace with draggled skirts those muddy streets. I hailed a hansom and desired the man to drive me to Mr Gray's chambers. I did not exactly know what I wanted to say to the old lawyer, but I was possessed by a sudden intense desire to see him, and I knew when I got into his presence I should have something special to talk about.

Mr Gray had rooms in Bloomsbury, not a great way off from Cousin Geoffrey's old house. He was in, and almost immediately on my arrival I was ushered into his presence.

"Miss Lindley!" he said. He came up and shook hands with me warmly. "Pray sit down," he added. "Sit here, near the fire. What a cold, miserable day we are having. You are all quite well at home, I hope; how is your mother?"

"My mother is well, thank you, Mr Gray. My brother Jack has been ill, but he is better now."

"I am glad of that," replied Mr Gray. "And now, can I do anything for you, Miss Rosamund? You know I shall be delighted."

When Mr Gray said this I suddenly knew what I had come to see him for.

"I want to go over Cousin Geoffrey's house," I said. "Have you the key, and if so, will you entrust it to me? I will promise not to injure anything."

The moment I made this request Mr Gray's face brightened, and an almost eager look came into his eyes.

"Have you any—any particular reason for wishing to see the house?" he asked.

“Oh, no,” I replied. “No very special reason. Just a desire, to see the old place once again.”

The lawyer had deep-set and piercing eyes. They darted a quick glance at me. He sighed impatiently.

“My late client was very eccentric,” said Mr Gray. “Eccentric in life, more eccentric, perhaps, with regard to his last will and testament. Miss Lindley—you have no—no clue for instance—with regard to the heirs?”

“Oh no,” I answered. “How could I possibly have?”

“It is my opinion,” said Mr Gray, with another short, almost angry sigh, “that the heirs in question will never be found. I told my client so. I said as much repeatedly. All that fine fortune will go to endow the hospitals. Well, well, he would not listen to me.”

“May I have the key?” I inquired in a gentle voice.

“Oh, of course, of course! But stay, you won’t want it. You don’t suppose a valuable house like that is left without caretakers. Two policemen take care of it, and one of them is always on the premises. I will give you my card, and whichever of them is in will show you over the place.”

“Oh, please, may I not go over it by myself.”

“Well, child, well! I don’t suppose it makes much matter what you do. I’ll have to write a special letter to Dawson or Drake, whichever of them happens to be in. I’ll write the letter, and you shall take it, and then you can moon about the old place as much as you please. By the way, my dear Miss Rosamund, I hope you have got my client’s valuable ring safe?” For answer I pulled off my shabby silk glove, and flashed the gem in the old lawyer’s face.

“Good gracious, you don’t mean to say you wear that valuable ring every day?”

“Not every day—by any means.”

“But it is very unsafe to wear a ring like that on your finger when you are out alone. My dear child, you have not the faintest idea what that centre ruby is worth.”

“I have some little idea,” I said.

“You had much better leave it at home. Look at it constantly of course, but leave it in a safe place at home.”

“Oh no, I like to wear it on my finger.”

“Well, well!” The lawyer sighed, then sat down and wrote his letter.

Chapter Nine

A Telegram

I took the letter in my hand, and walked to Cousin Geoffrey's house. Drake was the name of the policeman who replied to my summons. He read the contents of Mr Gray's letter with almost lightning speed, then moved aside to let me pass in.

"You would rather I did not show you round, Miss Lindley?" said Drake.

"Yes," I answered, "I know the old house, I have been here before; I should just like to walk quietly over it by myself."

"Very well, miss; but you'll allow the wife to prepare you a cup of tea? We can get it quite handy, in the housekeeper's room next the kitchen, if so be as you object to taking it in the kitchen itself, miss."

"I don't object at all," I answered. "Thank you very much, Mr Drake, I should like to have a cup of tea, and I would prefer having it in the kitchen."

A pleased smile stole slowly over the man's face. He walked down-stairs in the deliberate fashion of a person who has remarkably little to do, and I commenced my tour of investigation. I said to myself—"Drake need not hurry with that tea; I shall not want it for some time." It was delightful to me to be alone in this treasure-house. I could explore, I could examine, I could pause, I could think. The furniture, the carpets, the curtains were all full of story, and alive with associations. I walked from room to room. My mother, had she been with me, could have put speech into all these rare treasures, could have hung a lovely legend or charm over each of those antiquated chairs and tables. Her stories would have been founded on fact, but I, too, helped perhaps by my magical ruby ring, could weave romances as I walked along.

The rooms of the house had one peculiarity, which I had not noticed the last time I walked over it. Set into a panel of the door of each was a kind of sliding slab, which could be pushed aside with the finger, and which, when opened, revealed a name. I found that each room in the house had its own special name. This discovery excited me very much. It was not discernible to the ordinary visitor, for the little white slab was well hidden in the heavy oak door. But a touch, the twist of a button would reveal it. I wondered when Cousin Geoffrey had perpetrated this strange freak. I imagined the queer pleasure he took in naming the different apartments of his lonely mansion.

After I had made this little discovery I ceased to take such a deep interest in the furniture. My desire was, if possible, to read the title of each chamber. I

thought what a delightful story I would have to tell my mother by and by. I knew that she was unacquainted with this vagary of her kinsman's.

I began at the attics, and turning slab after slab concealed so cleverly in the doors, read the names rapidly off. Some were commonplace, some fantastic; most of the rooms were called after the colour of the decoration, or the style of the furniture. Thus there was the Oak room, the Walnut room, the Blue room, the Gray room, the Rose room; there were also the North room and the South room. At last I reached the beautiful octagon room which contained the painted windows, and which had so excited my mother's emotions.

The title of this room gave me a good deal to ponder over. It was called the Chamber of Myths. I stayed for a long time here. I examined all the furniture. I studied the subjects of the painted windows. I stood on the raised dais, and leant against the old four-poster, and pressed my hand against the moth-eaten counterpane. How dusty, and dreary, and haunty it looked!

The light was fading fast, now, and the room displeased me. I left the Chamber of Myths in a hurry, and went down to the kitchen to have tea with Drake and his wife. I said nothing to them about the discovery I had made, but when I left the house I was firmly convinced that Cousin Geoffrey's eccentricity must have bordered on madness. What did he mean by the "Chamber of Myths"? What were the myths? Perhaps my mother could tell me. I would question her the first moment I had an opportunity.

It was rather late when I went back to Hetty. I thought how pleased she would be to see the ruby ring, how pretty she would look when she opened her eyes wide to gaze at it. How charmed and bewildered she would be if I let her wear it for a moment on her slim third finger. Hetty had lovely little hands. Her wedding finger would look dainty, circled with this ruby ring. I too had small hands, but I could only get it on my smallest finger.

The moment I got in Hetty pointed with excitement to a telegram which lay upon the little table at her side.

"It has been here for two hours, Rose," she said. "Do open it quickly. I am so anxious to know what is in it. Perhaps it is about Jack. Perhaps he is worse."

"You poor little thing," I replied. "Why did you not open the envelope yourself, if you are so upset with nervous terrors? Now let me see what this precious yellow envelope contains."

"Well?" said Hetty.

I was reading the telegram to myself. My face showed heightened colour and annoyance.

“Well?” she said again. “Do speak, please, Rose.”

“It is nothing about Jack,” I said then.

“Nothing at all?”

“Nothing at all; the telegram is from my home, but it is about—about another matter.”

This was the other matter—these were the contents of the telegram.

“Lady Ursula Redmayne and Captain Rupert Valentine have just been here, asking to see you. Will call at your lodgings in Putney, to-morrow, before eleven. Lady U. in great distress. Gave your address under pressure.”

This long telegram from my mother showed most reckless extravagance. I could imagine how Lady Ursula had worked upon her feelings.

“But I am not going to give you up, little ring,” I said, kissing it.

Chapter Ten

Relations

I parried Hetty's curious remarks with regard to the telegram, putting her off at first with vague replies, then speaking decidedly.

"I have had a message from my mother, dear Hetty," I said; "nothing at all about Jack, nothing that will interest you."

"Oh, of course, Rosamund—" Hetty's pale face flushed vividly. She took up some knitting she was trying to get through, a sock for Jack, of course. I saw her poor little fingers trembling. She was the most sensitive little creature. A touch, a word, sent her into herself. She felt so unsure of her position, so unsure of everything, except that she had a great hungry wealth of love to give away to those who would receive it of her.

As I saw her making these futile, pathetic little attempts to get on with her knitting, I felt some of the experiences one might feel if one had set one's foot on a little wild-flower and crushed it. I watched her timid, downcast eyes for a moment, then I spoke.

"After all, Hetty," I said, "I should not be in the least surprised if the contents of my mother's telegram interested you amazingly. I don't see why you shouldn't know. It is a most exciting story. We'll have tea together, and then I'll tell it to you."

Hetty's little face came quickly out of the shadow in which it had looked so pathetic. She was all smiles and sunshine once more. She even laughed with glee when I arranged our evening meal. Her impatience to know the mystery was absolutely childish, but I was determined not to be cross with her, nor to blame her in any way again.

After we had finished eating, I drew a chair up to her sofa, and began my story. I told everything from the beginning—I mean from the time of my visit to Cousin Geoffrey. Really, Hetty was a most delightful listener; she was all sympathy, her interest was absorbing, she interrupted the narrative with no questions, but her beautiful eyes spoke volumes for her. They expressed wonder, sorrow, joy. I had quite a pleasant time as I told my little romance. I could not have desired a prettier sight than Hetty's eyes with the soul looking out of them as they gazed at me.

What a benefit to the possessor those speaking eyes are! In some cases I could imagine them to be the best of all good fairies' gifts, for what can they not do? Wheedle, coax, command, subdue. Hetty was not a particularly brilliant

personage in any way. She was a very loving, dear, true little creature, but she was neither clever, nor particularly heroic. Yet with her eyes she could command a kingdom. Now some people speak of me as clever, and I know I have plenty of presence of mind, but I can do nothing at all with my eyes.

Well, Hetty heard the story, and then she examined the ring, and then we had a long consultation over Lady Ursula's visit of the morrow.

"Won't you write and tell her not to come?" said Hetty.

"Oh dear, no," I said, "I am not afraid of Lady Ursula Redmayne,—she can come if she wishes to."

Hetty sighed.

"You are courageous, Rose," she answered. The next morning my brother's wife took upon herself to show great anxiety with regard to my wardrobe.

"I want you to look beautiful," she said. "Don't you think you might wear your hair not quite—not quite so flat on your forehead?"

I laughed.

"Oh, my dear," I answered, "you are not going to induce me to adopt a fringe. That would be quite the last come-down to my pride. I have not got wavy, fuzzy hair like you, Hetty, and I am not beautiful, so nothing can make me look it."

"But your face is very beautiful to me," said Hetty, looking at me with a great glow of love beaming over hers. "It is full of strength, and I think you have such a sweet expression, Rose, and you look so dignified. Sometimes I think you are grand."

"Oh, hush, hush, you foolish child!" I said.

"Well, but do fasten that little pink bow at your throat, and do puff up your hair a little, to show your nice forehead. Now isn't that a great improvement?"

She made me kneel by her while she tried to manipulate my heavy, thick, straight hair. My private opinion is that I never looked more uncouth, but Hetty was pleased, so where was the use of worrying her?

I heard a carriage stop in the street below, and flew to the window to look out.

"They arrive," I said, "my foes arrive! Now I go forth to conquer! Farewell, Hetty."

“Oh, I shall be so excited to know what is going to happen!” called Hetty after me.

I blew a kiss to her and ran down-stairs. I had arranged with Mrs Ashton to give me the use of a private sitting-room for the all-important interview. It was a truly dingy apartment—a back parlour in every sense of that odious-sounding word. It was here I had for the first time the pleasure of seeing Lady Ursula Redmayne without any rose-coloured glamour thrown over her. Unsupported by the background which her luxurious boudoir in Grosvenor Street afforded, she looked what she was, a most ordinary young woman.

Ordinary—yes,—I made up my mind on the spot that Lady Ursula was not at all good-looking. But she was something else. She appeared better, far better in my eyes. At that moment she looked what she was, an every-day, happy, healthy English girl. Yes, a happy girl, and her happiness took all her little affectations away.

“Oh, here you are, my benefactress?” she said, rushing up and kissing me. “May I introduce Captain Valentine? I don’t think I did it properly yesterday. Now, Rupert, let’s sit one at each side of her, and tell her everything, and get her to tell us everything.”

I was very much astonished, and I showed my astonishment in my face.

“Would you not rather speak to Miss Lindley alone, Ursula?” said Captain Valentine. “I can go out for a walk, or to—to buy something—I might return in a quarter of an hour.”

“No, Rupert, you will sit on that chair, just there, please, and listen.”

Captain Valentine sat down at the imperious bidding of Lady Ursula’s voice. I was sure he must have a sensitive nature, he got red so often. His whole face was scarlet now.

“Now I will begin,” said Lady Ursula. She turned towards me. “You know, Rosamund, you treated me very badly yesterday—very badly, and very shabbily, and very cruelly. Oh, my dear, I’m not going to reproach you now—it all turned out for the best, as the good little books say. Listen, Rosamund, please, to my story. After you left us yesterday, I told Rupert that I was distracted, that something had happened which I could not possibly tell him, but that I must instantly go to my dressmaker, and that it would be best for me to go alone. ‘By no means,’ answered Rupert, ‘I will accompany you.’ ‘Oh, don’t,’ I said. ‘I am determined,’ he replied. So the carriage was ordered, and we drove to Madame Leroy’s together. When I got there, I said, ‘I shall be some little time

engaged.' 'Very well,' Rupert answered, 'I will wait for you in the carriage.' 'Oh, don't,' I said again. But he shook his head.

"I saw Madame Leroy, and got your home address from her, Rosamund. I wanted to follow you home, and I wanted Rupert not to come. He did not mind me; he would come. We took the train, and reached your pretty cottage in the country. We were shown into the drawing-room, and presently your mother came into the room. The moment I saw her I burst out crying. Somehow her face made me feel that I was the most miserable girl in the world, and that I was just about to lose everything, and that Rupert never, never had been half so dear to me. Your mother behaved perfectly to me; she took me out of the room, and said nice, kind, comforting sort of words, and soon I stopped crying, and told her that I wanted to see you, and she gave me your present address, and said she would send you a telegram. She was very sorry for me, but she wasn't curious; she was too much of a lady to be curious, only she was just so sweet that the mere fact of my being in trouble made her kind to me.

"Rupert and I came away. We went back again to Grosvenor Street, and I felt more sure than ever that all must be up between us. I could not help it, Rosamund—when I got into the house I began to cry again. Then Rupert spoke—oh, dear, I can't tell you how—but somehow I suddenly lost all my terror, and I told him the whole story from the beginning. You dreadful, but dear little benefactress, I took your advice. And what was the consequence? Rupert did just say one word of reproof. He said, 'Don't you suppose, Ursula, that I care more for you than for a ruby ring?' So, of course, after that it was all right, and I have never, never been half so happy before in all my life."

Captain Valentine, who had fidgeted on his chair, and seemed more or less on thorns during the recital of Lady Ursula's story, now jumped up, and went over to the window to look out. He had only a view of Mrs Ashton's back-yard, and surely the sight could not have been inspiriting. Lady Ursula, whose eyes were full of tears, bent forward to kiss me. I put my two arms around her neck and gave her a hug. I could not help it. I forgot all about her title and her grandeur—she was just a girl, like any other girl, to me at that moment.

"Now I have something to say," she continued in a changed voice. "Neither Rupert nor I want your ruby ring, but we are very curious to see it again, for Rupert has a story to tell you about it."

"A story to tell me about my own ring," I inquired.

"Well, yes," said Captain Valentine, returning, and speaking slowly. "It so happened that during the week, when Ursula lived in such terror of me, that she was obliged to hire a ring to prevent my righteous vengeance falling on her head,"—he laughed merrily as he spoke, and Lady Ursula gave his hand a

vicious pinch,—“during that week,” he continued, “I noticed that the central ruby of the ring was a little loose. I took it to my jeweller’s to have it more firmly riveted. I therefore had full opportunity of carefully examining your ring, Miss Lindley, and I can declare that it is in every particular precisely similar to the one Lady Ursula has lost.”

“Similar, perhaps, but a different ring,” I retorted.

“Precisely, a different ring, but one of a pair. I think I can tell you some of the early history of your own ring, Miss Lindley.”

“Please, Rosamund, admit that you are very much excited and thrilled with interest,” interrupted Lady Ursula.

“I am interested, undoubtedly,” I replied. “Please tell me the story, Captain Valentine.”

“My great-great-grandmother,” he began at once, “came from the West Indies, and brought with her, amongst much valuable gold, some rubies of great price. Two of the largest and most precious of the rubies were set in rings of very curious workmanship. I believe the rest of the gems, with the exception of a few smaller rubies which were used in perfecting the rings, were sold to meet a financial difficulty in our family. These rings were given by my great-grandmother to her sons, with the request that they should be handed down as heirlooms, and worn as betrothal rings by the girls who should marry their direct descendants. The rings were made in a very unique fashion, and had a certain spring which could open at the back, and contain hair or some other tiny relic. Do you mind fetching your ruby ring and letting me look at it once again, Miss Lindley?”

“I will fetch it of course,” I replied.

I ran off at once, my heart beating fast with wonder and curiosity.

Hetty’s eyes devoured my face when I rushed into our bedroom.

“I am having a delightful time,” I said, “everything is going on splendidly.”

“Oh, do, do tell me?” said Hetty, sitting up on her sofa, and letting her work tumble to the ground.

“Yes, presently I will; but my visitors have not gone yet.”

“Haven’t they? They are staying a long time.”

“Yes, and they will probably remain a little longer. I have come now to fetch the ring.”

“Oh, Rosamund, you have not given way? You are not going to part with the ring?”

“Not a bit of it,” I answered, as I unlocked my small bag, and taking the ring from its hiding-place slipped it on my finger. “Goodbye for the present, Hetty,” I said; “think of all pleasant and improbable things till I return to you.”

I flew down-stairs to the two who were now my friends. Lady Ursula made me seat myself next to her on the sofa, and Captain Valentine, taking the ring from me, turned it round and round in the light. How that central ruby did flash—how blinding and bewildering were the rays which it shot from the depths of its heart. I had an uncomfortable feeling, as if the costly gem was going to mesmerise me.

Suddenly I uttered an exclamation. By some deft movement, done so quickly that I could not follow it, Captain Valentine had touched a spring, and the ring had altered. The massive gold of the setting moved aside like tiny doors; the central ruby shot up a fiercer ray of almost triumph; it revolved slowly from its position, and left the inner mechanism or skeleton of the ring bare to view.

“There,” said Captain Valentine, “behold the most cunning device ever invented for holding a few threads of hair, or any other invaluable treasure. Yes, this ring is the companion one to yours, Ursula. No doubt on the subject, no doubt whatever, for it was my great-grandmother, or her double, who invented this unique little hiding-place in the back of a ring.”

“But this hiding-place, this secret treasure-house contains no hair, no delightful discovery of any kind,” said Lady Ursula.

“That is true; the space is empty,” said Captain Valentine. “Nevertheless, I identify the ring.” He touched the secret spring again. The central ruby seemed to flash a wicked intelligent look into my eyes; the embossed gold doors revolved back into their places; the magnificent middle ruby resumed its position as keeper of the doors, and the little ring looked as it had done before.

Captain Valentine handed the ruby ring back to me.

“You must explain to me the secret of those magical doors,” I said to him. “Where did you touch the spring which set that clever, enchanting little machinery in motion?”

He took the ring again in his hand, and began to explain the cunning little secret to me.

“Do you see that nick in the side of the gold?” he said. “Just at the left of the serpent’s eye. Press it: not too hard. A light touch is sufficient—a heavy one might break the delicate machinery.”

“I see,” I answered, “thank you. No, I won’t disturb my rubies again now. It might break the charm if I got my ring to tell its secrets too often.”

“Rosamund,” said Lady Ursula, suddenly, “it strikes me that you and Rupert must be some kind of relations; that is, if that ring were left to you by a relation.”

“My mother’s cousin left me the ring,” I said.

“Your mother’s cousin?” said Captain Valentine. “Do you mind giving me some particulars? It is interesting to trace relationships; in this case especially so.”

I mentioned Cousin Geoffrey’s name, and then added:

“My mother can tell you all about him. I only saw him once in my whole life; but my mother and I attended his funeral, and afterwards I found he had left me this ring.”

Captain Valentine uttered an exclamation.

“So old Geoffrey Rutherford was your cousin?” he said. “Of course I knew him,—he was also my cousin,—the queerest and the richest old man of my acquaintance.”

“Were you at the funeral?” I asked suddenly.

“No; why do you ask?”

“I thought all the relations were,” I answered, demurely.

Captain Valentine smiled.

“Ah,” he said, “a good many people had expectations from poor old Geoffrey. Who did he leave his wealth to, by the way?”

“I don’t know,” I replied.

“You don’t know? But wasn’t the will read after the funeral?”

“Something was read. I don’t think it was a will; and the only thing given away was my ruby ring.”

“Just like Geoffrey,” exclaimed Captain Valentine. “Then I presume all the wealth of his miserly old life went to endow a hospital.”

“Even though you are a relation, you must not abuse Cousin Geoffrey,” I said. “His wealth has not gone to endow any hospital, but is waiting.”

“Waiting—for whom?”

“For the heir.”

Lady Ursula suddenly broke in. “The longer I know you, Rosamund,” she said, “the more mysterious you grow. Who in the world is the heir? Why is not the wealth divided? Is not that poor relation,” she pointed with a comical finger at Captain Valentine, “to share in any of the spoil?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “You had better go and ask Mr Gray; he will tell you everything.”

Chapter Eleven

A Bear's Hug

About a fortnight after the events mentioned in the last chapter, my quiet time in the queer little lodgings at Putney came to an end. Jack was declared free from infection, Hetty was quite well again, and with some difficulty we managed to get them both admitted to a Convalescent Home at Broadstairs.

It was quite affecting to see the meeting between Jack and Hetty. Jack's illness had both improved and refined him. He was always the best-looking of the family, and he really looked quite handsome as he took that little confiding gentle wife of his into his arms and kissed her three or four times. Poor Jack,—he kissed me too with a fervour he had never hitherto shown. He murmured something I could not quite catch about never being able to show sufficient gratitude to me, and then he and Hetty went away.

I saw them off from the railway station. The last glimpse I got of Hetty, she was sitting very close to her husband, and looking into his face. That poor young face of his looked worn and anxious enough, but Hetty knew nothing of the anxiety, and nothing of Jack's fall from the paths of honour;—to her he was a prince—the first of men.

I sighed as I left the railway station. "Poor Jack!" I said to myself, "the path that lies before him will not be too easy to climb. Fancy having a little wife like Hetty to look after and support, and no means whatever to earn money for either of them. His character and chance of success practically gone. What is to be done with them both after their fortnight at Broadstairs is over?"

I returned home that afternoon to my dear mother. It was mid-winter and bitterly cold. Christmas was come and gone, we were well into January; snow rested on the ground, and as I entered the cottage, I saw by the look of the sky that more was likely to fall.

My mother welcomed me with just that degree of warmth which seemed to me the perfection of greeting. It consisted of very little in the way of embraces, scarcely anything in the shape of endearing words, but the expression in my mother's eyes told me all I wanted to know. She was very, very happy to have me back again; and as to me, I felt for the time being rested and satisfied. Why not? I was with the human being I loved best on earth.

We had tea together, and then my mother began to speak.

"You saw Jack off, poor fellow?"

“Yes, mother,” I answered; “I saw Jack and Hetty off.”

“Oh, Hetty,” repeated my mother, with the faintest perceptible toss of her head. She had been very good about Hetty at first, but to have her coupled with Jack in this cool and easy manner gave her something of a shock.

“Mother,” I said with enthusiasm, “Jack had no right to marry any girl secretly, but as he did so we cannot be too thankful that he has taken this sweet little creature. She is as good as gold, mother, and as innocent as a little flower, and she thinks Jack perfection.”

“My dear,” said my mother, “that’s the right way; that’s as it should be. Though every one, I fear,” she added with a sigh, “cannot live up to it.”

“Hetty will,” I said quickly, for I did not want my mother to have time to make unhappy comparisons even in her heart.

“She has got an excellent husband,” proceeded my mother. “Rose, I did not know there was half as much in Jack as I find there is. He surprised me wonderfully during his illness; he really is a very fine fellow.”

I was silent.

“It was a great comfort to be alone with him,” proceeded my mother; “I got really to know my boy at last. Yes, his wife is a lucky woman. I trust she will prove worthy of him.” This time I was spared making any further remarks, for my father’s latch-key was heard in the front-door. The next moment he and George entered the little drawing-room together. “Bitterly cold night,” said my father, walking up to the fire, and monopolising the whole of it. “A sharp frost has set in already. Ha! is that you, Rosamund? Home again? How do you do? My dear,” turning to his wife, “did you register the thermometer as I told you to do this afternoon?”

“Yes, George. There were five degrees of frost then.”

“Ha! there’ll be fifteen by nine o’clock to-night. Why do you women keep such miserable fires? This thimbleful is enough to freeze any one.”

My father turned, and seizing the coal-scuttle, dashed a quantity of loose coal into the grate. It raised a dust, and almost extinguished the fire, but we none of us expostulated, for my father was unquestionably master in his own house.

George meanwhile flung himself into a deep easy-chair, crossed one muddy boot over the other, and seizing my mother’s favourite tabby cat, began to stroke it the wrong way, and otherwise to worry it. He laughed once or twice,

when pussy resisted his endearments. He suddenly flung her on the ground almost roughly.

“Do turn that ugly thing out of the room, Rosamund,” he said.

I did not stir. I thought the time had come when I would cease to allow George to bully me.

“By the way,” said my father suddenly, in his harsh voice, “what’s this I hear, that Chillingfleet has given Jack the sack? You gave me the information, didn’t you, George?”

“Yes, sir, and it’s correct,” replied George. “I suppose Jack was playing the fool in some way, and Chillingfleet took advantage of his illness to get rid of him.”

“Monstrous, I call it,” interrupted my father; “an unprecedented sort of thing to do. I shall call on Chillingfleet to-morrow morning, and sift this matter to the very bottom.”

My mother looked up in alarm when my father spoke in this tone.

“I understand,” she said in her gentle voice, “that Jack has had a particularly kind letter from Mr Chillingfleet. He did not show it to me, but he told me of it.”

“Then you knew of this?” said my father, angrily.

“Yes, George, Jack told me that he was going about a fortnight ago.”

“H’m—ha! The young cub doesn’t choose to confide in me. Did he give you any reason for his dismissal?”

“No, I did not think any necessary. Jack has been ill for weeks, and unable to attend to his work. Mr Chillingfleet had naturally to get some one to take his place.”

“Naturally, indeed! That’s all you women know!”

My father began to pace the floor in his indignation.

“Much chance a poor young clerk would have, if just because he was unlucky enough to take fever, he was dismissed from his post. But, of course, people who know nothing jump to conclusions. Now if I had been consulted at the time, as I ought to have been, I might have talked Chillingfleet round, and shown him the enormity of his own proceeding.”

“I don’t think your talking would have had the least effect,” suddenly interrupted George. “If there is a hard old flint in this world, its Chillingfleet. Every one knows his character.” My father frowned at George’s presuming to doubt his powers of eloquence. After a pause, he said, emphatically:

“Your mother has acted in a very foolish way, keeping this affair to herself; but even now it is not too late, and notwithstanding your opinion, George, for which I am much obliged, I shall tackle Chillingfleet in the morning.”

With these last words my father left the room, banging the door noisily after him. My mother looked disturbed, George cross. How little they knew what revelations might reach them, what agony and distress might be theirs through my father’s untimely interference! I felt that I must prevent his having an interview with Mr Chillingfleet at any cost.

It was easier, however, to make this resolve than to act upon it.

“Rose, you don’t look at all well,” said my father, as we sat over our evening meal. “You have knocked yourself up nursing that common place young woman. I might have told you that would be the case. If you go on in this erratic fashion you will be old before your time.”

Even this rather gruff notice from my father was so unusual that I quite blushed with pleasure.

“I will not let him be humiliated,” I said to myself. “After all he is my father. Hard he is—sometimes cruel—but always, always the very soul of honour. I must—I will save him from what would bring his grey hairs with sorrow to the grave.”

My eyes travelled slowly from my father’s face to George’s.

George was also hard. George could also be cruel, but he at least was young. George might share my burden. If George knew, it would be his interest to keep the thing quiet, and I felt sure that where I was powerless to keep my father from turning even a hair’s-breadth from his own way, George might have many means of influencing him.

After dinner I came up to where George was idly reading the newspaper.

“Can I speak to you before you go to bed?” I said, in a low voice.

“What about?” he asked, crossly.

“I can’t tell you in this room. Will you come to my bedroom before you go to sleep?”

“Very well,” he answered, still very gruffly.

“Now what is it?” he asked, when he came to my room between ten and eleven that night. “What girl’s confidence am I to be worried, with?”

“No girl’s confidence, as you are pleased to call it, George. Now listen. Our father must not see Mr Chillingfleet in the morning. He must not—he shall not. You, George, must prevent it.”

“I must prevent it! Is that what you have kept me out of my bed to say? Upon my word, Rose, you are unreasonable. Pray tell me how I am to keep my father from doing what he wishes.”

“Oh! George, you are very clever, and you can find a way when I—I can’t, although I’d give all the world to. George, George! he must not see Mr Chillingfleet, and this is the reason.”

Then I told my story. I told it quite calmly and without any outward show of shame. I found as I talked that I had grown accustomed to this tragedy, that the first edge of its agony was blunted to me.

I was not prepared, however, for the effect it had on my brother. As my story proceeded I saw all the colour leave George’s large, healthily-tinted face; drops of perspiration stood on his forehead. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the moisture from his lips and brow.

When I ceased speaking he sank down on the nearest chair. I had expected a perfect storm of angry and bitter words. George did not utter one.

“Well?” I could not help saying at last.

“Well,” he answered, “there’s an end of everything, that’s all. I meant to ask an honest girl with a nice little bit of money to be my wife. I thought I’d ask her next Sunday. I love her, too, ’t isn’t on account of the money; that’s at an end. She shan’t ever say she married the brother of a thief!”

“Oh! George, don’t be too hard on him. He was sorely tempted, and he is so young.”

“Am I hard on him, Rose? Am I saying anything?”

“George, dear brother, I wish I could help you.”

“You can’t; I’m off to bed now.”

“George, you will keep this from my father?”

“Rather!”

“You will manage that he shall not see Mr Chillingfleet?”

“I will manage that he never hears the story you have told me to-night. Good-night, Rose.”

“Kiss me, George. Oh! George, I’m bitterly sorry for you.”

I ran after him and flung my arms round his neck, and gave him what we used in the old childish days to call a bear’s hug.

When I pressed my lips to his cheek I saw tears in his eyes.

Chapter Twelve

My Brother's Sin

When George left my room I sat down near my dressing-table, and to comfort myself after all the worries of the day, took out my ruby ring to feast my eyes on its beauty. I had a vision of George's face with the queer pallor on it. I heard again his voice as he spoke of the girl who had a little money, and whom he loved—the girl, however, who would never now be asked to be his wife. My brother George was a hard man, but he was righteous, he was honourable. I respected him for his words; and at that moment I pitied the girl who would lose him because of Jack's sin.

“Oh, Jack, Jack, what have you done to us all?” I cried aloud.

How pitiable is weakness; how mean is cowardice; and of all things, how dreadful is that moral cowardice which leads men into crooked ways. Oh, Jack, if only you had told us about Hetty, and not stooped to theft for her sake.

I wiped some slow tears from my eyes. I was determined that my regrets should not overmaster me. I looked down at the ruby ring on my finger; it had the usual effect upon me; banishing my anxieties, lifting my mind from the sordidness of my surroundings, and taking me with it into a land of dreams, loveliness, and hope.

I said to myself, “Now I will touch the secret spring. Now, little ring, you shall open your heart and show me the very depths of your secret life. First, however, I shall make an illumination in your honour.” I opened my trunk; took out my bits of candles and lighted them; turned the key in the lock of my door, and sat down again by the dressing-table. It did not take me long to discover the slight nick by the serpent's eye. I pressed my finger lightly on the spring, and to my joy the central splendid ruby revolved aside on its hidden hinge, and the serpents with their brilliant flashing eyes moved apart like doors. The inner mechanism of the ring was bare; the tiny, hidden chamber was open.

“What a secret I could put in here!” I said to myself. “Some hairs from a beloved head might be buried here along with thousands of brilliant hopes. Love itself could lie hidden here to leap into life and fulness when the right moment came.” I wondered if love, with his thousand hopes and fears, could ever in such a sense come to me. Scarcely likely. I was one of the women who, in all probability, would never marry. I should have a strong life and plenty to do. I should have a courageous life and many battles to fight; but it was scarcely likely that my portion in the book of fate could also include the passionate

lover, the tender and devoted husband, and the clinging, soft love which would come from baby lips, and enter into my heart through sweet child voices.

I expected none of these things, and yet the trembling desire to grasp them all, to claim them all, to cry to fortune, "Give, give, give fully, give abundantly; don't starve me, but feed me until my whole nature is satisfied," swept over me as I looked into the heart of the ruby ring.

As I did so I noticed for the first time that the little recess, which appeared at the first glance to be quite empty, contained a tiny piece of paper, which might have been placed there as a bed on which to lay a treasure. The paper was white, of the finest texture, exquisitely cut to fit the exact shape of the chamber. There was nothing whatever written on the paper. I touched it with the point of my small finger, it did not move; I pressed it, it did not stir.

I was about to close the ring, but something induced me to look again more narrowly at the paper. Why was it put there? Why did it take up space so minute, so valuable?

I put my hand into my pocket, and taking out a penknife, opened the smallest blade and inserted the point delicately under the paper. After a very slight resistance, I detached it from the base of the little secret chamber. I took it out of the ring, and laid it on the palm of my hand. There was no writing on the upper surface of the paper. I looked underneath and saw, to my amazement, that something was faintly ciphered there. The writing was perfect, but so minute that I could not possibly read it with my naked eye. My mother possessed amongst her treasures an old microscope.

I guessed shrewdly, although she never told me so, that this microscope had been given to her by Cousin Geoffrey. My mother kept her microscope on her own little work-table in the drawing-room.

The house was quiet now; all its inhabitants, with the exception of myself, asleep and in bed. I knew there was little chance of sleep for me that night.

Placing the treasured morsel of paper under a glass on my dressing-table, I slipped off my shoes, softly unlocked my door, and ran down-stairs. I felt provoked with the small and poor cottage stairs for creaking so desperately. I reached the drawing-room, however, without disturbing any one, found the microscope, and brought it back in triumph to my room.

Again I locked my door, and opening the microscope, took out the strongest lens it possessed. I arranged the lens as I had seen my mother do; steadied the candles until I managed to secure a powerful ray of direct light; placed the morsel of paper under the magnifier, and applied my eye to the glass.

The minute writing was now magnified some hundreds of times. So largely was it increased that I could not see the whole of the writing at once. In large type I read, however, the following words:

“Look in the—”

I felt myself trembling all over. Where was I to look? Why was I to look? Was the ruby ring going to tell me a secret? Was it going to confide to me—to me, the mystery of Cousin Geoffrey’s unknown heir?

With great difficulty, and with fingers that trembled, I moved the morsel of paper until I got the microscope to bear on the remaining words of the sentence. They came out clear at last. Clear and large they flashed upon my vision.

The conclusion of the sentence was as follows:

“Chamber of Myths.”

The ruby ring had given up its secret; it had brought me a message.

“Look in the Chamber of Myths.”

“Yes,” I said, “I will look there to-morrow.”

Chapter Thirteen

Geoffrey Rutherford's Keys

It is scarcely to be wondered at when I say that I did not close my eyes that night. I arose early the following morning, determined to lose no time in seeking Mr Gray, and receiving a renewed order to visit Cousin Geoffrey's house. I rose long before dawn, dressed myself neatly, and went down-stairs. I felt far too excited to remain in bed any longer. It was still dark when I entered our tiny drawing-room, but I busied myself in helping our one servant to clean and tidy the little sitting-room. She polished the grate and laid the fire, and I put a match to it and caused it to blaze up merrily.

"Oh, Miss Rosamund, you are wasteful," exclaimed Sally. "And there ain't any too much coal left in the cellar," she continued. "My missus, she never has the fire lit in the droring-room afore dinner-time, and you knows that well, Miss Rosamund."

"Never mind, Sally, I must have a fire this morning," I replied.

I felt reckless and extravagant. What if we never needed to economise more! What if—? My brain seemed to reel; I almost shook myself in my anger. "How silly you are, Rosamund Lindley!" I said under my breath. "What if you have got the secret which will lead to the discovery of Cousin Geoffrey's will? is it likely that that will can affect you? Oh, what a conceited, foolish girl you are!"

Nevertheless, I toasted myself before a warm fire, and dreamed my dreams until breakfast time.

At that meal I called forth angry words both from my father and George. I calmly announced my intention of going up to town with them. When I said this, George's face grew red with indignation. His eyes looked full at me. They said as plainly as eyes could speak: "Now what whim have you taken into your head? Are you going to interfere still further in this wretched, disgraceful affair of Jack's?"

My own eyes danced as they replied to him with a gay and confident smile. He almost turned his back on me, and upset half a cup of coffee in disgust.

I jumped up to fetch a cloth to wipe up the mess he had made. My father said:

"Rosamund, it is out of my power to gratify all your restless whims; you are scarcely at home when you are off again. You will turn into one of those gadding women, those busy-bodies who are a disgrace to their sex. Mary," turning to my mother, "I wonder you allow it."

“Could not you stay at home to-day, Rose, dear?” she asked, gently, looking at me with a sweet piteous sort of smile.

“I’ll stay at home to-morrow, mother darling,” I answered. “I am ever so sorry to leave you to-day, but it is absolutely necessary for me to go to town.”

“Stuff and nonsense,” said my father. “I shan’t pay for your ticket, miss.”

“I’ve enough money to do that for myself,” I replied.

The sorrow in my mother’s eyes deepened. She could never bear any of us to oppose our father. I followed her into the little drawing-room.

“A fire already!” she exclaimed. “What can Sally have been thinking of?”

“It was my fault, mother. I lit the fire.”

“Rosamund, dear, how very wasteful! And we have scarcely any coal in the cellar, and your father says he will not be able to order a fresh supply before Monday.”

“Mother darling, sit down in your easy-chair and warm yourself by the fire; you look so white and shivery. Mammie dear,” I continued, kneeling down and rubbing my cheek affectionately against hers, “I feel full of hope to-day—I cannot economise to-day—don’t ask me.”

My mother smoothed back my hair, kissed me on my forehead, and gave herself up to the enjoyment of the fire.

“Do you know why I am going to town?” I whispered.

“I wish you would not go at all, Rose. Your father is vexed.”

“I fear I must vex him to-day, mother. I am going to Cousin Geoffrey’s house.”

Two pink roses stole into my mother’s pretty cheeks. She looked at me inquiringly.

“Last night,” I continued, “the ruby ring brought me a message.”

“Rosamund, my darling, what do you mean?”

“What I say. I will explain everything when I return from town. I am going now on the business which the ring told me of.” I sprang to my feet as I spoke, kissed my mother again, and ran out of the room to get ready.

I had a silent journey up to Paddington; neither my father nor George would say a word to me.

When I arrived at the terminus I coolly desired George to hail a hansom for me.

“I think you must be mad,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

“Will you get me a hansom?” I repeated, in a quiet voice. He stared at me again; but the steady look in my eyes quelled him. He held up his umbrella to a hansom driver, and walked unwillingly across the platform with me. My father had long ago left us to our own devices.

“Shall I give you a lift, George?” I said. “I am going towards the City.”

“No, thank you,” he replied. “I at least am too honest to ride in a vehicle I cannot afford.”

“George,” I said, looking earnestly at him, “believe me, I am doing nothing rashly. I am upheld by a hope to-day—a hope which may turn out a mere chimera, but which is yet sufficiently real to induce me to take steps to see Mr Gray with as little delay as possible.”

“Who is Mr Gray?”

“Cousin Geoffrey Rutherford’s lawyer.”

“That crazed old man who died in the autumn?”

“Good-bye, George,” I said, springing into the hansom and waving my hand to him. I shouted Mr Gray’s address to the driver through the little window in the roof. George was so angry that he did not even vouchsafe to take off his hat to me as I drove away.

I arrived at Mr Gray’s in good time. He was within, and I was shown almost directly into his presence.

“How do you do, Miss Lindley?” he said; “please be seated.”

His manner was calm and pleasant, but his eyes said plainly, “Now, what’s up? Have you got any news for me?”

I answered Mr Gray's eyes, not his voice. I did not sit down, but stood close to him, as if I was in haste to be gone.

"I want an order to view Cousin Geoffrey's house," I said.

"What, again?" he asked.

"Yes, and I am in a great hurry."

Mr Gray's eyes grew absolutely eager and hurried in their speech, but his voice was as cool as ever.

"You had better take a chair," he said.

Still replying to his eyes, I continued to stand.

"I want an order to view the house," I said. "I want you to give me a letter to the caretakers asking them to allow me to go where I please alone; and I want you to give me all Cousin Geoffrey's keys."

"All Mr Rutherford's keys! What do you mean?"

"I cannot tell you. Will you trust me? May I have them?"

"You are making a bold and extraordinary request."

"I know it."

"And you won't explain?"

"I can't explain. Oh! Mr Gray, please let me have the keys."

The lawyer looked me all over from head to foot; his searching eyes travelled over my person.

"At least, Rosamund Lindley, you are honest," he said. "If you open drawers, you won't steal."

"No," I said, proudly.

"If you peer into secret places, you won't disturb? I see order written across your forehead, Rosamund, and determination sits comfortably on those firm lips of yours, and courage and honesty dwell in your eyes. There! I'm an old

fool, I suppose; but chit of a girl as you are, I am going to trust you. If you want those keys, you may have them.”

“Thank you, Mr Gray; they shall be all safely returned to you to-night.”

“I should rather think so, indeed. I only meant you to have them for an hour or two.”

“I shall probably want them for the whole of to-day; and if I do not come across what I am looking for, I shall be obliged to ask you to let me have the keys again to-morrow, again the next day, again every day until my search is ended.”

“Pooh, pooh!” he said. “You are intent on a search for the hidden will, I suppose. May you find it! you have my best wishes.”

“Thank you.”

“By the way, Miss Lindley, you have got that ruby ring of yours safe, I hope?”

“Quite safe; it is on my finger.”

“How often have I warned you not to wear a valuable ring of that kind in so careless a manner! Good heavens! it may slip off when you are washing your hands.”

“I will take care of that,” I answered.

The lawyer sighed, favoured me with another keen glance, and then rose deliberately from his chair.

“I had better get you the keys,” he said. “Shall I come with you to the house?”

“No, thank you.”

“But the keys are heavy. I must send a messenger with you to carry them.”

“I will take them myself, please.”

“I warn you that they are heavy.”

“And I am strong.”

Mr Gray smiled.

“Wilful girl,” he said. He ceased to combat any more of my objections, and, walking across his office, opened an iron safe which was let into the wall. He pushed his hand far into the safe and took out a leather bag. There was a label on the bag which I could read.

“Geoffrey Rutherford’s keys” was written in clear type on the white label.

Mr Gray untied the label, placed it in the safe, and brought me over the bag.

“Here they are,” he said, “the precious keys! here they are, one and all—some bright, some rusty; some large, some small. You will have to take pains with these keys, Miss Rosamund. They were made specially for their owner by a skilled locksmith; they are full of curious tricks; some must turn twice before they open, some must lock and unlock and lock again and yet again; some remain immovable until they find the secret spring. Don’t break any of them, for it would be difficult to replace them. Now take the bag; its contents are heavy and more precious than gold.”

Mr Gray placed the leather bag in my hand. Its weight surprised me. I would not show dismay, however, but girding up my courage and all the muscles of my strong right arm, went out into the street.

I had to walk the whole length of this long street before I came across an empty hansom. Both arms ached by this time. From right hand to left I changed that bag; from left hand back again to right. I never carried anything so heavy before. I wished more than once that I had accepted Mr Gray’s offer of sending a trusty messenger with me.

At last, however, my earnestly desired hansom crawled slowly into view. I hailed it, got in, and a few minutes later found myself standing in the hall of Cousin Geoffrey’s house.

The caretaker, Drake, was within. He knew me this time, and smiled a welcome.

“Drake,” I said, “I have come to spend some hours here. Mr Gray says that I am to have full liberty, and am not to be questioned or interfered with in any way.”

“Certainly, miss; whatever Mr Gray wishes must be done.”

“Is Mrs Drake within this morning, Drake?”

“The missus is down in the kitchen, miss; shall I fetch her to you?”

“I don’t think you need do that. I only wanted to say that as I shall probably have to spend the day here, I should like to have something to eat.”

“Yes, Miss Lindley; the missus had better come up and take your orders.”

“No, Drake; I have no time to waste in that way. Go down-stairs and tell her that I will come to her in the kitchen at two o’clock. Ask her to have a cup of tea for me and a boiled egg, if quite convenient. I shall pay, of course.”

“Oh, miss, there ain’t no need. Mr Gray provides us very liberally. I’ll give the wife your orders, Miss Lindley.”

Chapter Fourteen

Keys and Locks

As the saying is, I had my task cut out for me. Never did any one go more nearly mad over the subject of keys than I. Cousin Geoffrey, with all his eccentricities, had in many respects a well-balanced mind. Nothing could have been neater than the queer arrangements of his house. Everywhere there were locked cupboards, locked bureaus, locked chests of drawers, boxes with locks to them, portfolios which could only be opened by fitting a key into a lock. In short, there never was a more thoroughly locked-up house. No wonder the bag which contained Cousin Geoffrey's keys should prove heavy.

It was one thing, however, for the owner of the said keys to know where to apply each—it was quite another thing for me. To my horror when I unfastened the brown leather bag, I found that the great bunches of keys of all sorts and sizes were unlabelled. When I made this discovery I almost gave up my task in despair. I had to look twice at the ruby ring, and think of the voice which spoke so confidently within its secret chamber before I had the courage to commence my search.

I don't believe, however, that my heart was a particularly faint one, and after girding myself to the fray, I toiled up-stairs, carrying the bag of keys with me.

I knew well that my search must be confined to the octagon room.

To reach this room I had to go up-stairs to the first landing of the house. I had then to turn to the left, and to descend some four or five steps; a narrow passage here led me to a spiral staircase which communicated directly with the Chamber of Myths.

This quaint and beautiful room was evidently an afterthought. It was built when the rest of the house was completed. It stood alone, and I found afterwards that it was supported from the ground by massive pillars. No pains and no money had been spared upon it. The middle of London, or at least the middle of Bloomsbury, could scarcely contain a lovely view. Geoffrey Rutherford had clearly apprehended this fact when he built the octagon chamber: he did the next best thing he could for it; he supplied it with painted glass, of modern workmanship it is true, but exquisite in colour and artistic in design. The eight windows which the room contained were narrow, high, and pointed; they were filled in with glass copied from the designs of masters. Geoffrey must have travelled over a great part of Europe to supply himself with these designs. He must have gone with an artist as his companion, for in no other way could these perfectly painted glass pictures from old Flemish Cathedrals and old Roman Council Chambers have been so exquisitely and perfectly reproduced.

“I wonder if he copied the designs himself,” I thought. “I remember that my mother told me what an accomplished artist Cousin Geoffrey was. Oh, what lovely glass! I could sit here and study. I will sit here and study. If I cannot acquire art in any other way, I will learn it from Cousin Geoffrey’s windows.”

The Chamber of Myths had always exercised a fascination over me, but never more so than to-day. I was so excited by what I saw that I forgot for a time the mission on which I had come. The subjects of the different windows represented Woman in various guises and forms: there was the mother with the baby in her arms: there was the maiden crowning herself with spring flowers, there was the wife tending the vines and watching for the return of her absent husband. One window was larger than the rest, and it contained what I supposed was a copy of a well-known masterpiece. The world’s greatest Friend sat in the centre of a group of children. Some had climbed into His arms, some leant against His knees, some knelt at His feet, the tender and gracious hands were raised in blessing, the eyes shone with the highest love. In the background a mother stood, worship in her face; adoration, humility, joy, thanksgiving in her smile. This picture of Christ blessing children made me weep.

“Oh, if I could but see the original,” I murmured.

I did not know then what I afterwards learnt that I was looking at the original; that this painted window was the work, the greatest work, of the eccentric owner of the house. Between each of the pointed windows hung valuable Gobelin tapestries, some the work of the great French artist, Noel Coypel; others by the splendid workman, Jans. I learned the value of these rare tapestries later on; now I scarcely noticed them, so absorbed was I in the fascination of the windows. Each window contained a deep seat, which was approached by oak steps, highly polished and black with age. The floor of the room was also of black oak. The roof was high and pointed, made of oak and exquisitely carved. Behind each of the tapestry curtains I discovered a small locked cupboard. There were four oak bureaus in the room, each of which contained ten separate locked drawers. A work-table of ivory, inlaid with lovely lapis lazuli, was also locked. There was an old-fashioned writing-table, and three or four oak chests. Everything that could be fitted with a key in this chamber had a lock which was securely fastened. I thought it highly probable that each lock would have to be fitted with a separate key. In this case, after making a careful calculation, I found that if I were to acquaint myself with all the secrets contained in the Chamber of Myths, I must be supplied with about sixty separate keys. No wonder the task before me seemed to increase in magnitude as I approached it.

Opening my brown leather bag, I laid the keys which Mr Gray had given me on a slender Queen Anne table, which stood near one of the tapestry recesses. My first task was to arrange them according to size. This occupied me until two o'clock, when a slow, somewhat heavy step on the stairs warned me that Mrs Drake was approaching. I did not want her to see me at my task, and hastened to meet her. She had provided a dainty little lunch for me; not in the kitchen, but in the queer and desolate sitting-room where I had first seen Cousin Geoffrey. I ate my chop off old Sèvres china, and drank a refreshing draught of water out of a tall, rose-coloured Flemish glass. I was far too excited to linger long over the meal. The moment I had satisfied my hunger, I ran back to the octagon room, and continued my task of arranging and sorting the keys. I had provided myself with paper and ink, and as I fitted each key to its lock I fastened a label to it. Night overtook me, however, before my work was a quarter done. I put the keys once more into the brown bag—the unsorted ones at the bottom, those with the labels at the top. I went down-stairs, desired Drake to fetch a cab for me, told him I should return to the house early the next day, and took the precious bag containing the keys back to the lawyer's office. He was within, and evidently expecting me.

“Well, Miss Rosamund,” he said, “and what luck have you had?”

“None up to the present,” I replied. Then I continued: “There must have been a sad want of order in some person's brain not to have had these keys labelled.”

“Ah, you have found that out, have you?”

“Yes, and I am rectifying the omission.”

“Good girl—clever, methodical girl.”

“Here is the bag, Mr Gray; I will come to fetch it early to-morrow.”

“Oh, you will, will you?”

“Certainly; expect me before eleven o'clock.” I bade Mr Gray good-night, and took an omnibus which presently conducted me to the neighbourhood of Paddington Station.

In course of time I got home. My father and George had arrived before me. It was quite contrary to the doctrines of our house for a woman to assert her independence in the way I was doing. My conduct in staying out in this unwarrantable fashion called forth contemptuous glances from my father, sighs of regret from my gentle mother, and sharp speeches from my brother George. I bore all with wonderful patience, and ran up-stairs to take off my things.

As I was arranging my thick hair before the glass, and giving a passing thought to my dear little sister Hetty's curling brown locks, and remembering how deftly she had tried to arrange mine according to modern fashion, a knock came to my door, and George stood outside.

"You don't deserve me to treat you with any confidence. You are the most curious mixture of childishness, folly, and obstinacy that I have ever had the pleasure of meeting," he said in his cold voice; "but, nevertheless, as you were good enough to confide in me last night, and as your communication was of importance, you will be pleased to learn that I was able to persuade my father not to see Chillingfleet."

"I am delighted," I said, running up to George, and kissing him, very much against his will. "How did you manage it, George? Do tell me."

"Dear me, Rosamund, how impulsive you are! What does it matter how I managed the thing, provided it was done? I think it due to you to let you know that I have taken steps to prevent our father ever becoming acquainted with Jack's wickedness; and now let us drop this revolting subject at once and for ever."

"I am more than willing," I replied, "provided we do not drop Jack as well."

"What do you mean? Do you suppose I am going to have anything further to say to the fellow?"

"I cannot say whether you are or not, George, but I am. Jack must live; Hetty must be cared for."

"Hetty! How dare you speak to me of that low-born girl?"

"I know nothing about her birth," I retorted. "I only know that she is a lady at heart; that she is a sweet little thing, and that I love her tenderly."

"I don't want to stand here any longer, Rosamund, to listen to your childishness."

"Just as you please, George."

"One word, however, before I go," continued my brother. "You will have the goodness to give up this gadding into town in future, and will arrange to stay quietly at home with our mother."

“I am sorry I cannot oblige you,” I replied. “It will be necessary for me to go back to town early to-morrow, and to continue to do so for several days.”

“I shall ask my father to forbid you.”

“Very well, George; you can please yourself, only I warn you, you had better not.”

“What do I care for your warnings?” He slammed the door behind him, and went down-stairs in the worst possible humour.

I wondered if George had quite made up his mind to give up the girl whom he loved, and who possessed a little money, and if this was the reason he was even crosser than his wont.

This thought helped me to be patient with him; and I went down-stairs to supper, resolved to show no ill-temper, but to make myself as agreeable as I possibly could.

I had never in my whole life wilfully disobeyed a direct command of my father’s, and I did not want to begin to do so now. I took it upon me, therefore, to make myself agreeable to him. I put his worsted-work slippers before the fire to warm. I pulled forward his favourite arm-chair, and cut the pages of a new magazine and laid it by his side. George was not in the room. My father received these attentions without any outward show of thanks; but when I came close to him for a moment, he bent forward and patted my head.

“It’s a good thing to have you at home again, Rose,” he said.

“Father,” I said, suddenly, “I should always like to do what you wish, of course; but I need not obey George, need I?”

“Obey George!” echoed my father. “I should think not, indeed. The fellow is growing much too hectoring. Obey George! What next, I wonder?”

“He wants me not to go to town to-morrow,” I said; “but if you give me leave, I may, may I not?”

“Of course, child, of course.”

“Then I’ll tell George that I have your leave. It isn’t as if I were a little girl, is it? I shall always wish to please you and mother.”

My father muttered something which might have signified approval or the reverse; but when George came into the room and began, according to my

father's verdict, to hector me once again, he received a sudden and unlooked-for check.

I could not help feeling myself quite double, and even deceitful, when I discovered that I had so easily gained my point.

Chapter Fifteen

Method in this Madness

I came down-stairs the next morning dressed in my best brown cashmere. I had a neat white frill round my throat, and my hair was dressed with attention. I looked smart for me, and I felt certain that George would notice this fact, and begin to make himself disagreeable. The meal that morning was particularly appetising. I myself had seen to this. I had supplemented our inefficient maid-of-all-work's efforts. I had boiled the porridge myself, and took care that it was thick, but not too thick, and that it was smooth in substance and admirably done. I had also made the toast; and that delicate brown toast, crisp and thin, was certain to meet with my somewhat fastidious father's approval. The coffee, too, was strong, and the milk which was to add to its flavour was thoroughly well boiled. While my father drank his fragrant coffee, and munched that thin crisp toast, good humour sat upon his brow, his deep-set and somewhat fierce eyes glanced at me complacently. He made a remark which I was almost certain he would make—

"It is a good thing to have you back again, Rose. I do not need you to tell me, but I am quite certain that we do not owe this breakfast to Bridget."

"Yes," suddenly responded George; "it's always well to have a capable woman in the house. You are staying at home of course to-day, Rosamund—the right place for you too. I am sure, sir, you must agree with me," continued George, glancing at my father, "when I say that young women have no business to spend their time gadding about."

"Much you know about young women," answered my father. He was about to continue, when I suddenly interrupted.

"And I am going to town this morning," I said, in my meekest voice, "and father knows all about it, and he has given me leave."

"Tut! I am not so sure of that," said my father, with a frown.

"I hope, sir, you will once for all forbid Rose to spend her time in this thoroughly unprofitable, not to say extravagant and improper manner," said George, his face turning crimson.

“It is not your place to interfere,” said my father.

“And if you give me leave, I may go, may I not, father? You said last night I need not obey George.”

“Most certainly you need not. George, stop that hectoring.”

My father stamped his foot vehemently. George dropped his eyes on to his plate, and I ate my breakfast feeling that my cause was won.

“Rose,” said my mother, when the meal was over, calling me into the drawing-room as she spoke, “are you really going back to London to-day?”

“I must, mother darling.”

“My dear child, your present strange proceedings agitate me a good deal.”

“Dearest mother! you shall know everything as soon as ever I can tell you. Perhaps to-night you shall know all.”

My mother sighed. “And where is the good of vexing George?” she continued.

“George shall not stand between us and—and happiness,” I said with vehemence. “Mother, it is impossible for me to explain. I shall, I must, I will go to London to-day. Mother darling, you won’t blame me when I tell you everything by and by.”

“I never blame you, Rosamund,” said my mother; “you are the great comfort of my life. How could I possibly find fault with you, my dear, dear daughter?”

She kissed me as she spoke.

I ran up-stairs for my hat and jacket, and as my father was putting on his great-coat in the hall, I tripped up to him, equipped for my little expedition.

“So you are coming, Rosamund?” he said. “Yes, of course,” I replied, “if only to show that George is not to lay down the law to you.”

Oh! how double I felt as I said this. I hated myself. I blushed and fidgeted. It is a most uncomfortable sensation to fall a peg or two in your own estimation. It ruffles the nerves in the most extraordinary manner. As I walked to the station, leaning on my father’s arm, I kept saying to myself, “Rosamund, you are a detestable, double-minded, deceitful girl. You must do penance for this. You must be punished by yourself—by the better part of yourself, Rosamund

Lindley. Some day, Rosamund, you will have to confess your real motives to your father. You must let him know what a low, double sort of a creature he has got for a daughter.”

George did not speak at all during our journey up to town, but my father was quite chatty and confidential with me. He even confided some fears, much to my surprise, which he entertained with regard to my dear mother’s health.

“Your mother ought never to spend her winters in England,” he said. “She has always been fragile; she grows more fragile every year; she ought to winter abroad—in the Riviera, or some other dry and sheltered place.”

He spoke quite kindly, with real anxiety in his voice. I never loved him so well. We parted the best of friends at Paddington, and I went off to Mr Gray’s office, secured my bag of keys, and before ten o’clock that day found myself once again in Cousin Geoffrey’s house, with many long hours before me to spend as I thought fit. I went up to the octagon room, and spent the whole of that long day arranging and sorting those dreary bundles of keys. I had made up my mind that I would not commence my task of examination until each key fitted each lock. I was firmly convinced that if I did not use method I should effect nothing. I was aware that the task before me was one of great difficulty. I would not add to it by any irregularity with regard to my method of search. Methodical work is always more or less successful, and as the day wore on I fitted key after key into the locks they were meant to open. My spirits rose as my work proceeded, and I felt almost sure that I might commence my search in good earnest to-morrow.

The light was beginning to fade, and I was thinking of putting my nicely-sorted keys away and retiring from my hard day’s work, when I heard steps on the deserted stairs, the murmur of voices—several voices, one of them high and sweet, the others low and deep in tone, evidently proceeding from men’s throats.

The sounds approached nearer and nearer, and a moment afterwards the door of the octagon room was opened, and Drake, accompanied by three people, entered. In this dark room, which, with all its beauty, never admitted the uninterrupted light of day, it was difficult for me at first to recognise the people who so suddenly invaded my solitude. But the clear, high voice was familiar, and when an eager figure ran across the room, and two hands clasped mine, and a fervent kiss was implanted on my somewhat dusty forehead, I did not need to look again to be quite sure that Lady Ursula Redmayne stood before me.

“Here I am, Rosamund. Whether welcome or not, I am here once more. Ursula, the impetuous, comes to visit Rosamund, the mysterious. Now, my dear, what

are you doing? and have you no word of greeting for me, your real friend, and for your cousin, for he is your cousin, Rupert Valentine? Have you no word of affectionate greeting, Rosamund?"

I stammered and blushed. I was not very glad to see Lady Ursula Redmayne. At this moment her presence confused me. I avoided looking at Captain Valentine, and wondered quickly what he must think of my present very remarkable occupation.

"How do you do?" I said, not returning her kiss, but trying hard to seem pleased; "how do you do, Captain Valentine? I won't shake hands with you because my hands are very, very dirty."

"And why are they dirty, Rose?" asked Lady Ursula, her merry eyes twinkling. "A lady should never have dirty hands. Oh, fie! Rose; I am shocked at you. I will only forgive you on one condition—that you tell me what you are doing here."

"Nothing wrong," I replied; "but Mr Gray knows. You had better ask Mr Gray."

"Don't worry her, Ursula," said Captain Valentine. "Miss Lindley has a perfect right to employ her time as she pleases. You remember, Miss Lindley, the last time I had the pleasure of meeting you, how we established a sort of cousinship. I believe we are undoubtedly cousins. May I therefore have the pleasure of introducing to you another relative—my brother Tom?"

Mr Tom Valentine now came forward. He was a little shorter than his brother, broader set, with a good-humoured and kind face.

(Forgive me, Tom, if at that moment I saw nothing more in your face.)

He shook hands with me kindly, said a word or two about being glad to meet a relative, and then began to examine the curious room for himself with much interest.

"But what are you doing here?" said the irrepressible Lady Ursula; "and oh! Rupert, do look at these keys. Fancy our methodical Rose arranging these keys in bunches, and labelling them. Oh! what a model of neatness you are, Rose! What a housewife you would make!"

"Don't worry her, Ursula," said Captain Valentine again. Then he added, turning to me: "The fact is, my brother Tom and I are very much interested in this old house. Tom is my eldest brother, Miss Lindley. He is a great traveller—a sort of lion in his way. You must get him at some propitious moment to tell you all about his many adventures. He has met the savages face to face. He

has been through the heart of darkest Africa. He has fought with wild beasts. Oh, yes! Tom, you need not blush.”

“Who would suppose you could blush, Tom?” said his future sister-in-law, patting him familiarly on his shoulder. “I should imagine that swarthy skin of yours too dark to show a blush.”

“I hate making myself out a hero,” said Tom Valentine in his gruff voice. “Do stop chaffing, Rupert, and let us tell Miss Lindley why we have come here.”

“Curiosity,” said Captain Valentine; “curiosity has brought us. I told Tom last night about Cousin Geoffrey Rutherford’s death, and about the curious will he had made. Tom and I spent many happy months in this old house; long, long, long ago, Miss Lindley. I told Tom last night the story of your ruby ring. Altogether I excited his curiosity to an enormous extent; and he said he himself would like to have a search for the missing document. May I ask you a blunt question, Miss Lindley? Are you looking for it now?”

I hesitated for a moment. I felt my face turning white; then raising my eyes, I said, steadily, “I am.”

As I uttered these words I encountered the direct and full gaze of my new cousin, the bearded and bronzed traveller, Tom Valentine. If ever there were honest eyes in the world they dwelt in Tom’s rather plain face. They looked straight into mine as I uttered these words, and I read approval in their glance.

“Yes, I am looking for the will,” I said, encouraged by the glance Tom had given me.

“I may never find it; but I am not without a clue. Look here!” I added, suddenly, “I will confide in you all. Two of you are cousins, the other is, I am sure, my true friend. Look at my ruby ring.” I held up my hand—my dirty hand. I pulled the ring off my third finger. “You know the secret of the ring,” I said to Rupert Valentine. “Open it carefully; let it show its secret chamber. You thought that secret chamber revealed nothing; that it was empty and without its secret. You were mistaken. Look again, but carefully—very carefully.”

I was so excited that I absolutely forgot that I was addressing my words to three comparative strangers. I gave the ring back to Captain Valentine.

“Be very, very careful,” I repeated.

He looked at me gravely, took the ring over to the light, motioned to his brother to follow him, and touched the spring. The central ruby revolved out of its

place, the serpents' heads opened wide their doors, and the little chamber inside the ring was once more visible.

"Raise that white paper," I said; "there is writing under it."

"Rosamund, you shake all over," said Lady Ursula.

I flashed an impatient glance at her.

"Can you wonder?" I said. "Yes, perhaps you can. It is impossible for you to understand. If you wanted money as badly as I do, and saw the bare possibility of getting it, you too would shake—you would find it impossible to control your emotion."

Again Tom Valentine's eyes met mine. Now they were less approving. Their glance expressed a sense of being puzzled, of being disappointed.

Meanwhile, Captain Valentine, lifting the tiny portion of paper, was trying to decipher the very minute writing on the other side.

"You cannot read that with the naked eye," I remarked. "Has any one here got a magnifying glass?"

"I have," said my cousin Tom.

He took a tiny little lens, exquisitely mounted, out of his pocket, and handed it gravely to his brother. Captain Valentine applied the lens to his eye, looked at the ring, and uttered an exclamation.

"Look in the Chamber of Myths," he read aloud.

"'Look in the Chamber of Myths!' What does this mean? I always thought Geoffrey Rutherford was off his head. Dear Miss Lindley, are you allowing wild words of this sort to guide you?"

"There is method in this madness," I returned, "for this is the Chamber of Myths."

"This room, this lovely room?" exclaimed Lady Ursula.

"Yes; it was one of Cousin Geoffrey's fancies to name each room in his house. This was called by him the 'Chamber of Myths'—why, I cannot tell you. The fact I can verify. Go to the door and look."

I brought them all to the door of the room, pushed aside the sliding panel, and showed the name in white letters on a dark ground.

Chapter Sixteen

Vanity

I returned home late that night, but by this time my people were accustomed to my eccentricities. My father and mother made no comment when I came in looking tired and yet excited. Even George was silent. He evidently thought it useless to continue to torment me. I scarcely slept at all that night. I had fitted all the keys into their locks, and to-morrow my search would begin.

Lady Ursula Redmayne, Captain Valentine, and his brother had all arranged to come and see me on the morrow in the Chamber of Myths.

“We will none of us disturb your search,” Lady Ursula had said, “but the result we must—we really must know.”

I could not forbid them to come, for the Valentines were also Cousin Geoffrey’s relations; but I was sorry. The secret had been in a measure confided to me alone, and I had an unreasonable feeling of jealousy in sharing it with any one.

I was early at Cousin Geoffrey’s house the following day, and everything being arranged now according to the most approved method, I began my search without a moment’s delay. Oh! the pathos of the task. Oh! the strange, dreary, undefined sense of loneliness which came over me as one by one I opened those drawers, and looked into the secrets of the dead man’s life. The drawers of the different cabinets in the Chamber of Myths were filled, not with rubbish, but with strange, foreign curiosities. A sweet scent came from them which brought me a waft of another and richer world. Sandal-wood and spices, old-fashioned silks, gorgeous brocades, boxes full of exquisite dyes, shawls from Cashmere, coloured beads from Japan, piles of embroidery, Indian muslins of the softest and finest texture, all lay neatly folded and put away in the drawers of the cabinets in the Chamber of Myths.

Were these things myths? Were they myths in the life of a man who had gone down to his grave leaving the world no whit better for his presence? He had hoarded his wealth instead of using it. He, living in the richest of homes, had yet been practically homeless; he, with a long rent-roll and a heavy banker’s account, had yet been poorest of the poor. He had never known children to love him or a wife to render his existence beautiful. On his tombstone only one word could be written—Vanity.

I felt all these thoughts. They coursed through my brain as I opened the sacred drawers where the delicate riches from Eastern lands lay treasured up. No clue had I yet obtained to guide me in my search—no papers, no memoranda of any sort. The Eastern perfume began presently to intoxicate me—it seemed to get

into my head, to put a light into my eyes and a flush of roses on my cheeks. I felt under a spell. I should not have been the least surprised if Cousin Geoffrey himself had opened the door of the Chamber of Myths and come up to my side and asked me what I did opening coffins. For in one sense these closed drawers were coffins. They held, I made no doubt, many buried hopes.

At one o'clock the rattling of gay, light laughter was heard on the stairs, and Lady Ursula, accompanied by my two relatives—for by these names I was pleased to designate the Valentines—entered.

“We have brought lunch,” said Lady Ursula; “a delicious basketful—containing all kinds of good things. Rupert must open it. Well, Rosamund, what rosy cheeks! Have you found the will?”

“No,” I said. “Please, Lady Ursula—”

“Well, what does this most pleading of pleases mean?”

“We are not going to lunch in this room,” I said.

“Why not? It is a charming room to lunch in. Oh, what a love of a cloth! I must open it. See the delicacy of this ground, and these fairy stitches, and that embroidery. We will spread it over the centre Queen Anne table, and put our lunch on it.”

“You will not,” I said. “The cloth does not belong to us. We have no right to desecrate it.”

“Desecrate! Honour, you mean, Rosamund. Oh! Rupert, Rupert,” continued Lady Ursula, turning to her future husband, “I do pray and trust that you will be discovered to be Cousin Geoffrey’s heir. I absolutely pine for that cloth. I long for it as intensely as I used to long for Rosamund’s ruby ring.”

Lady Ursula’s volatile spirits had a depressing effect on me. I was determined, however, not to yield to her whims. We had no right to spoil Cousin Geoffrey’s Chamber of Myths by dining in it.

I took my friends down to the great drawing-room, and there we spread our repast; truth to tell, we had a merry time. Afterwards we all returned to the Chamber of Myths.

“You alone have the right to continue the search, Miss Lindley,” said my cousin Tom Valentine.

“I think I had better go on with it,” I said, steadily. “I have a certain plan marked out in my own mind, and if any one interfered with me now I should only feel puzzled.”

“You must certainly continue the search,” said Captain Valentine.

“And we will look at these loves of windows,” said Lady Ursula.

My three visitors—for in one sense I considered them my visitors—went to the far end of the room and left me in comparative peace. With all my heart I wished them away, but I had not the courage to desire them to go. I felt also that I had not the right.

The search, however, was now becoming irksome. The Eastern treasures no longer exercised a spell over me. I was anxious for the daylight to wane—for the time to arrive when I might re-lock the drawers, and return the keys to Mr Gray.

I had now completely examined five of the cabinets. I approached the sixth, which stood exactly under the window which contained the representation of Christ blessing the children. I opened the top drawer of this cabinet with a renewed sense of great weariness, of fatigue of both mind and body. The first thing I saw lying by itself in the little shallow drawer was a thick envelope with my name on the cover—“Miss Rosamund Lindley.” I seized it with trembling fingers. I felt suddenly cold and faint—my heart seemed to stop—my brain to reel. I knew that my search was ended.

“What is the matter?” said Lady Ursula, coming up to me quickly.

“Nothing,” I replied, “except—except this—my search is over.”

I held up the thick packet to her. She half screamed, and called the two Valentines to look. “Read it, Rosamund, read it,” she said. “Read the contents of that letter quickly, dear Rosamund.”

“No,” I answered, “I could not take in the words now, my head aches, my hands shake, I am tired—I am very, very tired. I must read the words written to me inside this thick envelope when I am alone.”

“Oh, but that is too bad. We are consumed with curiosity. Won’t you open the envelope? Won’t you read just a few words to satisfy us that you are really the heir.”

“I may be as little the heir as you, Lady Ursula. The packet with my name on the cover proves nothing. But I am agitated—perhaps it is with hope. I should

be glad to be Cousin Geoffrey's heir, for I am tired of great poverty. I am not a bit ashamed to say this; but I cannot read the letter which either confirms or destroys my hopes in the presence of any one else."

Lady Ursula looked annoyed. Captain Valentine also plainly expressed a sense of disappointment on his face, but my cousin Tom heartily approved my resolution.

"You are right," he said; "we will all go away. You shall read your letter in peace."

"You need not go away," I said. "I am going myself. I will not read this letter until I get home. Now I must lock these drawers and return the keys to Mr Gray."

"And you will be sure to write at once and tell us the news, Rosamund," said Lady Ursula.

"Better still," exclaimed Captain Valentine, "let us meet here to-morrow. Let Miss Lindley tell us the contents of Cousin Geoffrey's letter in person."

After a little consultation this plan was resolved upon. We four were to meet in the Chamber of Myths at noon on the following day.

After this I took my leave, ordered a hansom, and drove to Mr Gray's.

He was in and disengaged. I entered his room without any delay. The moment he saw my face he jumped up, seized my two hands, shook them heartily, and exclaimed—

"You have succeeded, Miss Lindley. I know by your face that you have succeeded."

"I have found this," I answered, holding up the packet.

"Yes, yes; in finding that you have found everything. What a relief this is to me. That eccentric clause of the will was the last straw to try the temper of any man. Now let me congratulate you. I do so most heartily."

"I don't know what for; this solid packet may mean nothing to me."

"Oh! but it does."

"You know its contents then?"

“Perfectly. Sit down, read your letter; know for yourself what a fortunate—what a really fortunate girl you are.”

“I won’t read my letter now,” I answered. “I will take it home and read every word, study each sentence in my own room; but not now. You excite me. I am tired. I cannot bear any more.”

“Poor little girl,” said Mr Gray, in quite a tender voice. “There never was a more plucky creature than you, Rosamund Lindley; but you are a true woman after all. Well, my dear, go home. Early to-morrow I shall see you again.”

“I am to meet Lady Ursula Redmayne and Captain Valentine and his brother in Cousin Geoffrey’s house at twelve o’clock to-morrow,” I replied.

“What!” answered Mr Gray. “Has Tom Valentine returned? Do you know the Valentines—your cousins?”

“Are they really my cousins?”

“Yes, three or four times removed; but undoubtedly there was at one time a relationship. Well, Rosamund, what do you think of your cousin Tom Valentine?”

“I scarcely know that I think of him at all,” I replied.

“What! Have you not discovered that he is a traveller—a man who has met with remarkable adventures; a man of the world, a gentleman, a man of culture; also, and above all, an Englishman, with a true and honest heart?”

“I have had no time to find out these many excellent qualities,” I answered back.

“You will soon see them,” responded Mr Gray. “Your eyes will be opened. You will perceive what I mean; all, all that I mean. So you have already met Tom Valentine; and Tom has returned just in time. What an extraordinary coincidence! what a piece of luck!”

“I don’t pretend to understand you,” I answered.

“No, my dear; go home and read your letter. God bless you, Rosamund. Upon my word, this day’s work has taken a load off my mind.”

He again wrung my hand. I had no time to think of his extraordinary rapture, nor of his queer uncalled-for words about Tom Valentine. Everything he said came back to me by and by; but I had no room in my mind to dwell upon his

words at that moment. There was no doubt whatever that the packet held in my hand brought good fortune to me and mine. Ugly Poverty might take to himself wings and fly away—he and I—he and those I loved, would not have even a bowing acquaintance in future. This fact was quite sufficient to fill my mind to the exclusion of all other ideas. I went home early—had tea with my mother—said nothing at all about the packet which lay in my pocket, but listened to a long and miserable letter from Jack, while I held in my hand a little note from Hetty, which I knew must be sad, but which scarcely troubled me at that moment, for I also knew how soon I could relieve my dear little sister's anxieties; how absolutely it now lay in my power to comfort and aid her, and to give to Jack all the good things which would make him a manly fellow once more.

I do not think in my whole life I ever felt happier than I did that evening. My fatigue had vanished—a feeling of absolute rest reigned in my heart; even the annoyances, the vexations, the penury of home brought to me a sense of rejoicing. It was sweet to know that with a touch of my magic wand I could sweep them once and for ever out of sight.

If I was happy, however, this could scarcely be said of any of the rest of the family. My mother had a headache; she had also caught cold, and the cough, which always more or less racked her slender frame, was worse than usual.

My father kept looking at her anxiously. He really did love my beautiful, gentle mother very much. George was disagreeable and morose; and my mother's eyes kept straying in the direction where Jack's photograph stood. She was thinking no doubt of that last letter from the poor fellow. Never mind, these were passing clouds, and knowing how soon I could chase them away, I felt scarcely any pain as I watched them.

At last, one by one, my family bade me good-night. I stayed down-stairs to put the little house in order, and then, going up to my room, locked my door, and prepared to acquaint myself with the contents of that letter, which was to turn all the dross of my life into pure and glittering gold.

Chapter Seventeen

Ugly Poverty and I

Cousin Geoffrey had sealed his letter with red wax. He had stamped the seal with his own signet-ring, which gave the impress of a coat-of-arms with a quaint device. That device became a household word with me by and by, but I was too impatient even to trouble myself to decipher it just then. I spread the thick sheets of paper before me, and gave myself up to the luxury of satisfying the most burning curiosity which surely ever besieged a girl.

Cousin Geoffrey's letter—a letter addressed to myself, well and carefully written—was far too long to make it possible for me to quote it here. I read it once, twice, three times. Then I sat with my hands before me, the open sheets of paper lying on my lap, my eyes fixed on vacancy. Two or three candles were lighted in my room; one by one they burnt low in the socket, and expired. I was in the dark, not mentally but physically. There was no darkness in my mental vision that night; my mind was so active that my body was incapable of feeling either fatigue or cold, and my eyes were incapable of noticing the thick darkness which surrounded them.

This was my position: I was an heiress of Cousin Geoffrey's wealth. On certain conditions I was to inherit exactly one-half of his houses and lands, of his money in stocks and shares, and in the English Funds. I could have for my own, exactly one-half of the marvellous treasures which filled the old house. I could divide those shawls from Cashmere, those sandal-wood boxes from China, those quaint embroideries from Persia. Even the half of those lovely painted windows in the Chamber of Myths would belong to me.

It was very funny. I could not help almost laughing, as I sat in the dark, with Cousin Geoffrey's open letter on my lap, over the persistency with which I would think of the treasures which the Chamber of Myths contained. Which Cashmere shawl might I take? Which piece of embroidery might I clasp to my heart as my very, very own? Above all, which of the painted windows might in future be known as Rosamund Lindley's window—hers and no one else's?

I felt far, far more anxious about these comparatively minor matters than I did about the money in the Funds and the landed possessions, one-half of which also belonged to me.

Alack and alas! the news in the letter had nearly stunned me. I found that I was incapable of clear reasoning. What a fool I was—what an idiotic girl—to plan and consider, and think of Cashmere shawls and Indian embroideries and painted windows, and wonder which would fall to my share—which of the beautiful things I might claim as my own.

My own! Cousin Geoffrey gave me nothing, nothing whatever of all his wealth as my own absolutely.

On a certain condition I might have half. Half of the money, half of the treasures, should be settled on me and on my children for ever, if—ah, here was the rub, here was the astounding discovery which took my breath away and paralysed me, and made me incapable of any consecutive thought beyond a burning sense of shame and anger. I was to have these riches if I fulfilled a condition.

This was the condition. I was to marry the heir of all the other half of the wealth and the beauty. The other half of Cousin Geoffrey's riches was left to my almost unknown cousin, Tom Valentine. He was to possess his half if he married me. I was to take possession of my half on the day I became his wife.

"I like you, Rosamund Lindley," Cousin Geoffrey had said in his letter; "you are no beggar, and no fawner. You are a simple-minded, honest, downright English girl. You have courage, too, and I always respect courage. You have come to me to help you with your art. You have done this with such a ludicrous, belief in yourself and your own powers, with such a simple sort of vanity, that I should probably have tried to cure it by granting your request had you come to me as a stranger. But I cannot look upon you as a stranger, Rosamund; you belong to my own kith and kin, and you are the daughter of the woman I love best on earth. Because you are Mary Rutherford's daughter I give you half my wealth if you fulfil the conditions I require!"

I knew these words of the long letter almost by heart; I said them over to myself many times.

When the first light of morning dawned I rose from my chair, stretched my cramped limbs, pinched my arms to see if I were awake or if I had only been going through a horrid nightmare; opened the window, took in a draught of the cool morning air, and putting Cousin Geoffrey's letter into my pocket went down-stairs.

The place looked as I had left it last night—our maid-of-all-work had not yet come down-stairs. Ugly Poverty surrounded me, and once more it hemmed me tightly around, and made its presence more felt even than of old, I had looked into a land of promise—an ideal and lovely country. I had thought to enter; but alas! iron bars of pride, of maidenly modesty, of right feeling, of even righteousness, kept me out. All the womanhood within me declared wildly and desperately—

"Even to enter into that promised land you shall not sell yourself?"

Ugly Poverty and I must still be close acquaintances—nay more, we must be intimate friends, even comrades, walking the path of life side by side and hand in hand.

Chapter Eighteen

Are the Conditions Impossible?

“Now, my dear young lady,” said Mr Gray; “now, my dear, good Miss Rosamund, let me ask you if you are doing right in flinging the gifts of Providence from you?”

“I am doing perfectly right,” I retorted with spirit.

“Pardon me, please do pardon me; youth is so impulsive and hot-headed; youth is so assertive, so positive, it must be guided by age—it simply must. Now, Miss Rosamund, will you sit down in this easy-chair? Will you sit perfectly still, and allow me to speak for three or four minutes?”

“Yes, you may certainly do that,” I replied.

“Take this chair, then; lean back in it. It is known to have the most soothing effect imaginable on irritable nerves.”

“Thank you very much; but my nerves are not irritable, and I prefer to stand.”

“Good heavens! Rosamund Lindley’s nerves not irritable. Rosamund, who is all fire and impatience; all quicksilver; the most sensitive, the most nervous of mortals.”

“Oh, please, please, Mr Gray, don’t discuss me. If you have anything to say, please say it quickly.”

Mr Gray was not a lawyer for nothing. He saw he had gone too far; his manner altered—he became business-like, grave, polite, and as a matter of course, persuasive.

“You have been left this money, Miss Lindley,” he said, “on, I grant you, very peculiar conditions.”

“On impossible conditions,” I interrupted.

“Now, now, that is the point I am coming to; are the conditions impossible?”

“They are. Mr Gray, if you have nothing more to add I will say good-morning.”

“I have a great deal more to add. This is a very serious matter, and you must not be a child about it.”

“A child?”

“Yes! a baby, if you like. The fact is, Miss Lindley, I have no patience with you.”

“You have not?”

“No, I have none whatever! You are both conceited and selfish. I am ashamed of you.”

Mr Gray spoke in a very angry tone. Strange as it may seem, I quite enjoyed it. At that moment it was positively nice to be scolded.

“I will listen to you,” I said, in a weak voice.

“You are very selfish,” pursued Mr Gray. “Providence intends you to be wealthy, and to help all your relatives. Providence means you to be a blessing and assistance to your family. You prefer to be a hindrance, a clog, a kill-joy, a spoil-all. Your mother is delicate, your father poor, your brothers without any opening in life. You can remove the thorns out of all their paths. You refuse to do this. Why? Because of pride. Providence, in addition to wealth, offers you the best fellow in Christendom for a husband. You won’t even look at him. You refuse to make him happy by becoming his wife, and you leave him in a state of poverty, because he can not inherit the fortune which is offered to him without your assistance. Thousands and tens of thousands of pounds are placed at your feet. What a power they are! what a grand power! But you won’t have anything to say to them, and they go to enrich the Jews, and the Society for Befriending Lambe Cats, or some other preposterous charity, I’m sure I can’t say what.” Mr Gray’s voice rose to a perfect storm of indignation as he spoke of the provisions Cousin Geoffrey had made for the spending of his wealth in case I refused to comply with the conditions of his will.

“Well, what am I to do?” I said, when the angry little man paused again for want of breath. “Am I, influenced by the reasons you have mentioned, to lower myself, to have no regard at all for those natural feelings of pride which all girls ought to have, and go up to my almost unknown cousin and beg and pray of him to take pity on me, and allow me to become his wife?”

“Who said you were to do anything of the kind?”

“Please, Mr Gray, what am I to do?”

The lawyer jumped from his chair, rushed over to me, and seized both my hands.

“Now you are reasonable,” he said; “now you are delightful—now you shall listen to my scheme.”

“Please what is your scheme?”

“Listen, listen. In the first place, Tom knows nothing of the conditions of the will.”

“Of course he does not. How could he know?”

“Listen, Miss Rosamund. Tom Valentine shall fall in love with you in the ordinary and orthodox fashion, and shall propose to you in orthodox fashion. And you shall fall in love with him.”

“How can you bring that about?”

“Never mind. Nothing shall be done to hurt your pride. My part in the matter is simple enough. I give you and Tom Valentine an opportunity of becoming acquainted with each other. I have a place at Putney—a charming place. You shall pay me a visit there.”

“I won’t go,” I said.

“Yes, you will go—you will do what I tell you.”

“No,” I repeated; “you ask me to Putney for an object. You mean to conquer me—I won’t be conquered. I shall be very glad to visit you, if you will be kind enough to invite me on another occasion. But I am not going to meet Mr Valentine; I am not going to meet him, because at last I know the contents of Cousin Geoffrey’s will.”

Mr Gray rubbed his hands with impatience. “You are doing wrong,” he said stoutly. “You are offered a gift which will befriend you and yours, which will help your mother who is ill.”

“How do you know my mother is ill?” I asked testily.

The lawyer gave me a piercing glance, he turned away.

“Your mother is not well,” he said evasively. It was curious, but that tone in his voice broke me down. I said—

“A visit to you, after all, involves nothing. Say no more about it—I will come.”

I went home that day feeling uncommonly weak and small. My excitement had run its course—the re-action had set in; I felt dead tired and languid. I had a slight headache too, which I knew would get worse by and by. In short, I was more or less in a state of collapse, and I felt that tears were not far from my eyes.

It seemed to me that I had just been going through a very severe fight, and that I was in danger of being beaten. I knew this by the fact that in my collapsed condition I did not much care whether I was beaten or not.

I arrived home to find matters a little more dismal even than usual. My mother's cough was so bad that the doctor had been sent for. He had prescribed (in those comfortable, unfaltering words which doctors are so fond of using) the Riviera as the sovereign remedy. My mother must leave the harsh east winds of our English spring, and go into the land of balmy breezes and colour and flowers.

“You must go without delay, Mrs Lindley,” the doctor said, and then he shook hands with her, and pocketed his fee, and went away.

His visit was over when I reached home, and my mother was seated, wrapped up in a white fleecy shawl, by the little fire in the drawing-room. That shawl became her wonderfully. Her beautiful face looked like the rarest old porcelain above it; her clear complexion, the faint winter roses on her cheeks, the soft light in her eyes, the sweetness of her lips, and the fine whiteness of her hair gave her as great a beauty as the loveliness of youth. In some way my mother's picturesque loveliness exceeded that of the innocent freshness of childhood, for all the story, and all the sorrow, and all the love, the courage, the resignation which life rightly used can bring, was reflected on her beloved features.

I bent forward and kissed her, and the tears which were so near welled up in my own eyes.

“Well, Rose, I can't go,” she said; “but I'll tell you what we'll do, we'll bring the Riviera here. With a few flowers, and a nice book, and a little more fire in the grate, we can get these pleasant things around us; and I have no doubt, notwithstanding gloomy Dr Hudson, that I shall soon lose my cough, and be as well as ever.”

“Oh, yes, you will soon lose your cough, mother,” I said. I sat down at her feet, and took her thin hand and pressed it passionately to my lips. Over and over again I kissed it, and each moment a voice kept whispering to me:

“The battle is going against you—you know it—you know it well!”

We were very poor at our home; but I will say this for us, we did not make money the staple subject of conversation. When we met at meals we each of us pushed our penury away under a decent sort of cloak, and although we constantly fought and argued and disagreed, we did not mention our fears with regard to the possibility of meeting the next quarter's rent, and paying the water rates, and filling the coal cellar with fuel.

It seemed to-night, however, as if all my family were in league to break this customary rule. George crossly declared that he could not exist any longer without a new suit of clothes. My father desired him to hush, and said that he might be thankful if he had a roof to cover him, as there were already two quarters owing for rent, and he had not the faintest idea where the necessary cheque was to come from. Then he began to scold about the expenses incurred during Jack's illness, and my mother, weak and low already, put her handkerchief up to her eyes and wept.

In the midst of our tribulation a letter arrived from Hetty, in which she begged and implored me, for the love of Heaven, to send her a postal order for a couple of sovereigns by return of post.

This letter of Hetty's was the last drop. What did it matter about me and my feelings, and my righteous pride, and all the holy instincts of my youth? There was my mother to be saved, my home to be relieved, my poor little new sister to be comforted and made happy. I rushed out of the room and wrote a frantic letter to Hetty. I could not send her the money, but I could send her hope. I did. I sent it flying to her on the wings of her Majesty's post. Then I wrote to Lady Ursula, and apologised for not keeping my appointment at the Chamber of Myths that day. I said that Cousin Geoffrey's letter was of a very startling character, and that it was impossible for me to disclose its contents to any one at present. I spoke to Lady Ursula affectionately and in a sisterly spirit, and I sent my kind regards to her intended husband, Captain Valentine. I paused and even blushed as I considered what message I could forward to my cousin Tom. After careful reflection I felt that I could say nothing about him. He was the thorn in my lot at present, and I felt that I owed him an enormous grudge, and that I should have liked very much to hate him. But when I remembered his extremely honest expression, his bluntness and downrightness, I could not quite manage to get up a feeling of hatred to a man who was really in himself quite innocent.

Finally I wrote to Mr Gray, and told him that I would present myself at his villa in Putney to-morrow.

Chapter Nineteen

My Mother's Wedding-Dress

Never did a girl prepare for a gay visit with a sadder heart. I had not an idea what I was going to. Mr Gray was rich, and I felt certain that his villa was what my father would term "pretentious." By this would be meant that he had large rooms instead of small, good furniture instead of shabby, good meals instead of bad, and in the place of loneliness and gloom, brightness and company.

This I was sure of, for Mr Gray's eyes sparkled as if he lived well and cheerily, and the pleasant sunshine of hospitality shone all over his expressive features.

I was going to a gay house then—a "company" house.

I ran down-stairs early the next morning and told my mother of my invitation, and of my acceptance of it.

She seemed a little surprised, then, after a pause, she said she was pleased.

"Go, and have a good time, Rosamund," she said; "it is quite right that girls should enjoy themselves; but oh! my love," an anxious shadow coming across her face, "what have you got to wear?"

"Plenty of things, mother," I retorted, "lashin's and lavin's, as they say in Ireland."

"But you have no evening dress, Rose. At Mr Gray's the girls are sure to dress for the evening."

"Oh, I can manage," I said.

"But you have not got an evening dress, my darling; all the girls will have evening dresses."

"One girl must do without," I retorted in a stout voice which concealed many qualms of the heart.

"One girl must not do without," replied my mother. "Come with me, Rosamund. Rose, did I ever show you my wedding-dress?"

My mother laughed gaily; her eyes were bright.

"I did not know your wedding-dress was in existence, mother," I said.

“Yes, it is, and well preserved,” she replied. “Come up-stairs with me, and you shall see it.”

I followed my mother into her bedroom. She unlocked a great square wooden trunk, which stood in one of the windows, and laying aside many folds of tissue paper, took from the depths of the trunk a brocaded silk dress of heavy make and rich texture. She laid the dress on the bed, and looked at me with pink spots on each of her cheeks.

“There!” she said; “there! Geoffrey gave me the dress, and he saw me in it. You may suppose that Geoffrey knew how to choose good things. You could not buy silk like that now. Geoffrey pinned a rosebud just here. Do you notice the tiny, yellow stain? And then he kissed me on my forehead. We were good friends that day, although Geoffrey, dear Geoffrey, had a strange look in his eyes. I remembered the look afterwards; but we were good friends, very great and affectionate friends. I never saw him again—never. Well, Rosamund, what do you think of your mother’s wedding-dress?”

I was examining it all over. It was quaint in make, and the silk had the faint yellow tinge which years of lying by always produces. The sleeves were high and puffed. There was a ruffle of very soft and exquisite lace round the V-shaped body. The waist was long, with a pointed stomacher, and the skirt below was full and wide.

Never was there a dress less like the mode in vogue at the time of which I write.

“The dress is out of date, perhaps, but it is very good in itself,” said my mother. “It will fit you, Rosamund, for your figure is small and dainty, like mine used to be. Will you wear your mother’s wedding-dress, even if it is a little out of the fashion?”

“Yes, I will wear it,” I said. “Give it to me, and I will take it away with me.”

“But you must have other things to match,” said my mother. “Wait a moment; you must have other things to suit the dress.”

She rushed again to her trunk; she looked like a girl in her excitement.

“These are my wedding—shoes,” she said, “and these white silk stockings go with the shoes. This petticoat, with the deep embroidery, will have to be worn under the full skirt of the dress. Oh, Rose, how glad I am now that I did not cut this petticoat up! Rose, I should like to see you dressed for your first dinner-party!”

I kissed my mother, gathered up the poor old-world mementoes of lost youth and love, and ran away to my own room. I took with me on my visit a larger trunk than I had at first intended, for my mother's wedding silk must not be crushed or injured.

I arrived at the Grays' house about an hour before dinner.

The villa was less of a villa and more of a mansion than even I had imagined. There was a wide entrance hall, and an open roof overhead, and a square well-staircase, which opened on to galleries which led to the bedrooms. The spring light had nearly faded when I arrived at the house, but the soft and cheerful blaze of coloured lamps gave the brightest and most picturesque effect. There were flowers everywhere, and vistas of pretty things from open doorways, and little peeps of wide conservatories, and a distant faint clatter of glasses and silver in the far-off dining-room.

Mr Gray came out himself to bid me welcome. He was followed by his wife and two daughters, Nettie and Tottie. Nettie and Tottie were round and fat and fair and insignificant-looking. Mrs Gray was also round and fat, but she had a matronly dignity about her, and a comfortable, homely manner which made me take to her at once.

After Mr Gray had shaken me warmly by both my hands, Mrs Gray kissed me, and Nettie and Tottie came up, each to one side of me, and in this manner I was conveyed across the hall, and into a cheerful little boudoir, where three anxious women's voices pressed hot tea and buttered cakes on my notice.

I drank my tea and ate hot muffins, and felt that the pleasant and luxurious surroundings of my present habitation suited me uncommonly well. After staring at me for half a minute Tottie made an abrupt observation.

"Two or three people are coming to dinner," she said; "only gentlemen, however, friends of papa's."

"Oh, Tottie!" exclaimed Nettie, giving her sister a knowing look. "Friends of papa's indeed! What next? Are they all only papa's friend's?"

Tottie shrugged her shoulders—she looked pleased and conscious—perhaps she expected me to quiz her; but that was not at all the kind of thing I felt capable of doing.

"Some gentlemen are coming to dinner," resumed Tottie, after an expectant pause, "so perhaps you would like to come up to your room in good time to dress, Miss Lindley?"

I assented at once.

“I shall be very glad to go to my room,” I said.

Tottie preceded me up the shallow stairs. She ushered me into a large bedroom supplied with every modern comfort. It was getting well on into April now, but a bright fire burnt in the grate, and the room was further rendered cheerful with electric light. I had the key of my old-fashioned trunk in my pocket, so it was not yet unpacked; but to my surprise two dinner dresses lay on the bed. One was of soft creamy silk; the other pink, a kind of almost transparent muslin. Both were simple in outline and graceful. Even a brief glance showed me that they were exquisitely finished, and must have cost a large sum. Beside the dresses lay gloves, a fan, small shoes, and delicate openwork stockings. In a box were some beautiful freshly-arranged flowers, a spray for the hair, and another for the front of the dress.

“Oh dear, dear!” exclaimed Tottie. She rushed to the bed and stood silent, the colour mounting high into her cheeks. “That accounts for it,” she said, when she could find her astonished breath. “That accounts for the mysterious box, and for papa’s manner. Does papa take you to the dressmaker, Miss Lindley? How very, very odd that he should superintend your toilet!”

Tottie looked at me with intense curiosity as she spoke. I knew that my cheeks were burning, and that a burst of angry words was crowding to my lips. With a violent effort I restrained them.

“Your father is very civil,” I said, after a pause. “He has evidently fetched this box home. I am much obliged to him for his trouble. Now perhaps, Miss Gray, you will let me get ready for dinner?”

Tottie blushed and stepped away from the bed as if my manner half frightened her.

“Of course,” she said. “I forgot how time was flying. But can I do nothing to help you? Shall I send Dawson, our maid, to you presently to help you to put on one of your pretty dresses?”

“No, thank you,” I replied. “I always prefer to dress myself.”

With some difficulty I saw Tottie out of the room. Then I locked the door, and with a violent effort kept my hands from tearing those pretty and dainty robes. My heart was full of the most ungovernable anger. I felt that kind-hearted Mr Gray had offered me an insult. I must be sacrificed, and Mr Gray must deck me for the altar. No, no, not quite that; not this lowest depth of all. How thankful I was that I had my mother’s wedding-dress in my trunk.

I dressed myself slowly and with care. I was determined to look well. I was determined to show Mr Gray that Rosamund Lindley was not altogether dependent on him for her chance of looking nice—for looking what she was, on her mother's side at least, a lady of old family and proud descent.

Remembering Hetty's advice, I piled my dark hair high on my head; then I put on the dainty silk stockings and shoes with their funny pointed toes; the rich embroidered petticoat came next; over all, the dress. The skirt was very full, but the silk was so soft and rich that it fell gracefully. It showed a peep of my shoes, with their seed pearl ornaments, as I walked. Behind, it was cut away in a pointed train. My mother's wedding-dress fitted me to perfection. The old ruffles of lovely lace lay softly against my young throat. More ruffles of lace half concealed half showed my arms. I did not need bracelets, and I clasped no ornament of any kind round my neck.

As I was completing my toilet the dinner gong sounded solemn and loud through the house. I had heard the hall-door bell ring two or three times. I knew that the guests had arrived. Still I lingered, putting final touches. At the last moment I pinned a bunch of the softest blush roses, which must have come straight from the Riviera, in the front of my dress. There was no need to add anything further. A glance in the mirror revealed to me that the roses which lay near my heart matched in hue those which tinted my cheeks. For the time being I was beautiful—I was a picture, a walking picture out of long ago. I was glad to be the last to enter the drawing-room. I wanted to startle Mr Gray; to show him that he had presumed. I had no thought to give to any one else at that moment.

Chapter Twenty

Like an Old Picture

Tottie was right when she said that several young men were coming to dinner. They were all more or less at home however; they were accustomed to the house and its ways. I saw when I entered the drawing-room that I was the greatest stranger present. Captain Valentine and his brother were both in the room, but Lady Ursula Redmayne was not one of Mr Gray's guests. I had thought to startle Mr Gray by the magnificence and quaintness of my toilet; but I must own that I forgot all about him when I glanced up and encountered an earnest, puzzled, respectful look from the wide-open eyes of my cousin Tom. Like a flash my mind reverted to a memory which a moment ago I had forgotten. I was back again in my room reading Cousin Geoffrey's will. I blushed all over as the hateful remembrance of the conditions of that will filled my brain.

"I cannot see this visit out," I said, under my breath; "I cannot even spend a second night under this roof. I must go away, I must return home, for never, never can I fulfil the conditions of Cousin Geoffrey's will."

At this moment Captain Valentine came up and offered me his arm. I was relieved to find that my other cousin was not to take me in to dinner; but matters were scarcely improved for me when I discovered that he sat exactly at the opposite side of the table, and that I could scarcely raise my eyes without encountering his.

"We were greatly disappointed not to meet you in the Chamber of Myths," said Captain Valentine. "I think Lady Ursula very nearly cried. The fact is, you have roused her profoundest interest, Miss Lindley."

"I am very much obliged to Lady Ursula," I answered.

"It was cruel to disappoint us all," pursued Captain Valentine, "particularly when you gave no adequate reason."

"That was just it," I retorted. "Had I come I should not have been entertaining. I had no news to bring—I had nothing to say."

"But you promised to tell us something of the contents of the letter."

"I found I could not keep my promise. That letter, as far as we, any of us, are concerned, might as well never have been written."

“Indeed!” Captain Valentine looked at me long and curiously. I kept my eyes fixed on my plate.

When he spoke next it was on matters of indifference.

Presently there fell a silence over most of the company. Captain Valentine bent towards me, and said in a low voice, almost a whisper:

“No one can tell a better story than my brother Tom; you must listen to him.”

After this whisper there was a kind of hush, and then the one voice, deep and musical, began to speak. It held every one under its spell. I forget the story now, but I shall always remember how the voice of the speaker affected me; how the turmoil and irritation in my breast first subsided, then vanished; how Cousin Geoffrey’s will sank out of sight; how his odious conditions ceased to be. By degrees the enthusiasm of the narrator communicated itself to at least one of his listeners. Tom Valentine was relating a personal experience, and step by step in that journey of peril which he so ably described I went with him. I shared his physical hunger and thirst; I surmounted his difficulties; I lived in the brave spirit which animated his breast. In the end his triumph was mine.

I suppose there was something in my face which showed a certain amount of the feeling within me, for by degrees Tom Valentine ceased to look at any one but me.

There was quite a little applause in the room when his story came to an end, but I think he sought and found his reward in the flashing and enthusiastic verdict which came from my eyes, although my lips said nothing.

After dinner, in the conservatory, my cousin came up and spoke to me.

“You liked my story?” he asked.

“I did not tell you so,” I answered.

“Not with your lips. Sit down here. I have another adventure to relate, and it is not often that a man’s vanity is soothed by such a listener as you are.”

He began to speak at once, and again I forgot Cousin Geoffrey under the spell of my cousin’s voice. He told me two or three more of his adventures that evening. I made very few comments, but the hours flew on wings as I listened. No one interrupted us as we sat together in the conservatory; but although I

remembered this fact with burning cheeks, later on, it passed unnoticed by me at the time. Suddenly my cousin stopped speaking.

“You have been a very kind listener,” he said. “I did not know a girl could care so much just for a man’s mere adventures. I’m going back to Africa next week. I shall think of you in my next moments of peril.”

Then I remembered Cousin Geoffrey’s will, and all that Tom Valentine’s going away meant to my family and me.

“Must you go in a week? must you really go in a week?” I said excitedly.

“I have made my arrangements to go in about a week,” he replied, starting back a little and looking at me in astonishment. I knew why he looked like that. The regret in my tone had been unmistakable.

Before I could reply Tottie rushed in.

“You two,” she exclaimed; “you really must come to make up the number we want in our round game.”

Laughter filled her eyes and bubbled round her lips.

“Come, come,” she said; “we can’t do without you, or rather the game can’t.”

Chapter Twenty One

She was Everything

Notwithstanding the ardent vow which I had made before dinner, I did spend that night under the Grays' roof. I not only spent it there, but I slept profoundly in the luxurious bed in my large and luxurious chamber. In my sleep I dreamt of Tom Valentine. I was with him in Africa; I was going through adventures by his side. After the extraordinary fashion of dreams, there seemed nothing at all remarkable to me in the fact that Tom and I were going through peril together. It seemed to me, in my dream, that we were following a somewhat forlorn hope, and that the same spirit animated us both. I dreamt nothing at all about Cousin Geoffrey's will.

When the morning broke I thought over the visions of the night and determined to banish them. Tom Valentine was going to Africa in a week. I should probably never see him more. Well, never mind, he was a brave and interesting man. I was glad to think he liked to talk to me; that he, the hero of many an adventure, thought me a good listener—thought it worth his while to thrill my ears and heart with stories both of peril and of sadness. I was glad to know that in a very distant degree I could claim cousinship with Tom Valentine. I determined not to associate him with Cousin Geoffrey's odious will. This will degraded my cousin. I would think of him apart from it in future. I believed myself quite strong enough to carry out the resolve.

Soon after breakfast that day a pretty little victoria, drawn by a pair of ponies, stopped at the Grays' house. I was in my room at the moment and had a good view of the carriage sweep. I bent from my window to see who had arrived. Lady Ursula Redmayne sat in the victoria.

A moment or two later I was summoned to see this capricious young woman. I felt certain that she was devoured with curiosity, but I was determined to parry all her questions.

Lady Ursula was alone in the drawing-room when I entered.

"How do you do, Rosamund?" she said. "You did not expect me to find you out here: but of course Rupert and Tom told me all about you. Sit down there, where I can take a good look at you. Rosamund, what a remarkably wicked young woman you are."

"I don't understand you, Lady Ursula."

"Please call me Ursula. We shall be cousins when I am Rupert Valentine's wife. Do you know, Rosamund, that I have taken an immense fancy to you!"

“What! you have taken a fancy to a wicked young woman!”

“Yes, yes; particularly as she is in reality more naughty than wicked. Rosamund, why did you not come to the Chamber of Myths at the appointed day and hour?”

“I gave Captain Valentine my reason.”

“Pardon me, you did not give him any adequate reason; but it is so easy to deceive a man. Now, I want the truth. Come, Rosamund, confide in me. You know that letter contains news of the deepest interest to you, perhaps to me, perhaps to others. Ah, you blush! I have hit upon the truth.”

I had been sitting when Lady Ursula began to speak, now I stood up.

“As far as any one can predict the future, Lady Ursula,” I said, “the contents of my Cousin Geoffrey Rutherford’s letter will never be known except to the two people who are already in possession of the secret.”

“Who are they?”

“I am one, Mr Gray is the other. Think what you like about the letter, Lady Ursula, you are never, never likely to know more of its contents than you do at this moment.”

Lady Ursula was a person largely blessed with the bump of curiosity, but she was also a lady, and she knew when to stop.

Her face wore a blank, half-amused, half-indignant expression. Then coming up to me she bent forward and kissed my forehead.

“I might have guessed I should have my drive for nothing,” she said. “Now then, to change the subject. Where did you get that fascinating dress you wore last night?”

“The dress I wore last night was my mother’s wedding-gown.”

“Delicious! Who but Rosamund Lindley would have dared to appear in an antiquated robe of that sort! My dear, your daring deserved its success. Rupert declares that he thought his great-grandmother had suddenly come into the room. His great-grandmother young and—and beautiful.”

I scarcely heard Lady Ursula’s last words. I was standing by the window watching a boy who was approaching the house. He was a telegraph boy, and

as he walked up the steps I saw him take a yellow envelope out of the little bag fastened to his side. I knew even before the servant brought it in, that that telegram was for me. I also knew that it contained bad tidings. My heart sank low in my breast.

Lady Ursula's gay, high voice kept rambling on. I ceased to hear a word she was saying. The drawing-room door was opened. The neat parlour-maid walked up the long apartment. She held out a silver salver, with the telegram lying on it.

"For you, miss," she said. "And the boy is waiting to know if there is any answer."

The contents of the telegram were brief and emphatic.

"Your mother is very ill; come home at once."

My father had dictated that telegram. I raised a cold, white face to Lady Ursula's.

"Good-bye," I said. "This explains why I must leave you." I put the telegram into her hand and rushed out of the room. I am not quite sure to this day whether I bid the kind Grays good-bye. I know that somehow or other I found myself in a cab, and in some fashion I caught an early train, and reached home in the bright spring sunshine before the day had half travelled through its course.

Even our ugly garden showed faint traces of the resurrection of all things. A stunted lilac-tree was putting out buds. An almond-tree was adorning itself in a hazy pink robe. There was a faint, tender perfume of violets in the air. I turned the handle of the shabby little front-door and went in.

If spring had given tokens of its presence outside, however, it had printed no fairy footfall inside our ugly and desolate little home. Inside there was close air, confusion, untidiness; but there was also something else—supreme terror, a dark fear. The shadow of this fear sat on my father's brow. He hurried to meet me the moment I set foot inside the threshold; his face was unkempt, unwashed, his eyes bloodshot; he held out a trembling hand, and grasped my shoulder.

"Thank heaven you have come, Rose," he said.

"How is mother?" I managed to gasp.

My father's painful clutch on my shoulder grew harder and firmer.

“Come in here,” he said. He dragged me into the drawing-room, and softly closed the door. “Listen,” he said; “yesterday night your mother’s cough grew worse; this morning she broke a blood-vessel.”

“Then she is dying,” I said in a voice of terror.

“No, she shan’t die—you have got to save her!”

“I? Father—father—how can I?”

“Don’t prevaricate—don’t look me in the face, and tell lies at this moment. Dr Johnson and Dr Keith, from London, are both up-stairs. They will tell you what you have to do. Go to them; obey their directions. There is not a moment to be lost.”

My father’s trembling hand still held my shoulder; he emphasised his words with cruel pinches. I wrenched myself away with a sudden effort.

“You hurt me when you hold me like that,” I said.

“Who cares whether I hurt you or not, child? it’s your mother’s life that hangs in the balance. What matter about you—what are you? Go up-stairs to the doctors. Listen to their directions and obey them.”

I was sobbing feebly. My father’s manner had unnerved me.

“I hate women who cry,” he said, turning away. “You have always made a great profession of caring for your mother. Go up-stairs now, and act on it.”

“How can I?” I repeated. “Father, why do you speak to me as you are doing? My mother wants money, peace, rest.”

“Exactly, Rosamund. Penury and a hard life are killing your mother. Go up-stairs. Don’t talk any more humbug. Get your mother what she wants. Gray, the lawyer, has been here this morning.”

“Oh,” I said, “and he has told you?”

“He has told me that you can be rich if you please. He has told me also the source from which the wealth can come. You think that I will shrink from that source. I shrink from nothing that will save your mother. Gray thinks it highly probable that you will act like a weak idiot.”

“Father, did Mr Gray tell you what I had to do?”

“He did not. I did not ask him. Whatever it is, do it. Go up-stairs now and see the doctors.”

My father opened the drawing-room door and pushed me out. He locked the door behind me. I heard him pacing the little room, and his groans of agony reached me through the thin panels of the locked door. I stumbled up-stairs. On the landing I met George. His hair was ruffled; his eyes red and sunk into his head. He had evidently been crying—crying, hard man that he was, until his eyelids were swelled and blistered.

“So you have come, Rose,” he said; “that is well. You will put everything right, of course?”

“You have seen Mr Gray, too,” I whispered. “Yes, yes; for God’s sake don’t lose a minute in putting things straight.”

“But can I?” I whispered back. “Even money cannot always, always save.”

“You can but try,” retorted George. “Go and speak to the doctors. Our mother’s life depends on your actions I am firmly convinced. Here is Dr Johnson. Will you talk to my sister, doctor?”

The family physician motioned me into a spare bedroom. He introduced me to the London doctor, and they began a semi-technical explanation of my mother’s case.

“Things are bad, but not hopeless,” said Dr Keith. “If certain measures are taken directly, there is no reason why Mrs Lindley may not revive and gain strength, and have many years of life before her. Her lungs are undoubtedly affected, but the worst mischief is in connection with the heart. Listen, Miss Lindley. I have one emphatic direction to give. Your mother must have no more worries.”

“No more worries,” I repeated under my breath. “Yes, yes, I understand.”

“You are looking very ill yourself, my dear child,” said Dr Johnson.

“Never mind me,” I said, turning away impatiently.

“But I must and will mind you,” retorted our fussy little family doctor. “Dr Keith, there is not a more admirable girl in the land than Rosamund Lindley.”

Dr Keith bowed an acknowledgment of my merits. Then he took his watch out of his pocket.

“I really must catch the next train,” he said. “Good-bye, Miss Lindley. Johnson will go into the particulars of our proposed treatment with you; but remember above all things, no worry. As much cheerfulness as you can possibly manage; a generous diet, the best champagne—I have ordered a special brand—and—and—I think we’ll do. In all probability in about a fortnight Mrs Lindley will be well enough to be moved by easy stages to Cannes. Good-bye, Miss Lindley; keep up a brave heart.”

Dr Keith went cheerfully out of the room. Perhaps he imagined that he had given me excellent advice. Perhaps he had, if I could only have acted on it. I rushed away to my room, bathed my face and hands, put on slippers which made no sound, and my prettiest afternoon dress. Then on tip-toe I went across the landing to my mother’s room; on tip-toe my father was coming up the stairs.

“Well, Rosamund, you have seen the doctors?”

“Yes, father.”

“You know what they wish?”

“Yes, father.”

“You will do it?”

“Yes—I will do it.”

“Good girl. Kiss me. God bless you. George, George,—come here!”

George’s red face had been peeping round his bedroom door.

“George, your sister will do what is required. By God’s blessing we may keep your mother with us yet.”

“Thank you, Rosamund,” said George. He bent his big sulky head and kissed me lightly on my forehead. He, too, in his fashion, was blessing me. I felt as if my heart would break.

I turned the handle of my mother’s door and went in. There was no confusion in this room. A bright little fire burned in the grate. One of the windows was open about an inch. The room was sweet with the perfume of violets. Somebody—my father probably—had picked a few from the garden and brought them in. My mother herself was lying high up in bed supported by pillows. There was a faint pink on each of her cheeks, but the rest of her sweet

and lovely face was white as death. Her gentle eyes looked too bright, her lips wore too sweet a smile.

The moment I saw her the whole attitude of my mind changed. I ceased to feel that I was about to do any sacrifice. I became eager—excited to set the seal to that which would open wide the fairy doors of peace and health and ease and luxury for my mother. I absolutely lived in her life at that moment. I was nothing—she was everything. I rejoiced; my heart even danced at the thought that it was in my power to bestow a great gift upon her. I went up and kissed her.

“You look well, Rose,” she whispered, reading the joy which filled my eyes.

“Oh, yes, I am very well,” I replied. “I am so glad to be back with you, mother. I am going to stay with you night and day until you are as strong as you ever were.”

While I spoke I held her hand, which I softly stroked. In a few minutes I stole out of the room. George was still lingering about on the landing.

“Well, well?” he whispered.

“Don’t whisper, George, but come down-stairs with me at once; I want to write a letter, and I want you to take it for me.”

I sat down at my mother’s desk in the drawing-room and scribbled a hasty line:

“Dear Mr Gray,—

“I will fulfil the conditions of Cousin Geoffrey’s will. Please give George a hundred pounds to bring back with him.

“Yours very truly,—

“Rosamund Lindley.”

George was looking over my shoulder as I wrote.

“You must get some of that money in small change,” I said, looking up at him. “And then you are to buy all the things I have mentioned in this list. Don’t forget one of them, and come back by the first possible train.”

While I was speaking to George my father came into the room.

“It’s all right,” I said; “and George is going to town to get the things we shall immediately require. Now go, George, and be quick. Father, I want to speak to you.”

“What is it, Rose?”

“Will you please go out and ascertain if the Priory is still to let?”

“The Priory! Are you mad, child?”

“No, I assure you I am quite sane. The Priory is a very pleasant sunny house, beautifully furnished. The Ashtons only left it a week ago. If it is still to let, please take it without a moment’s delay. It is not the least matter about the price. It faces due south, and has a lovely garden. I think we may be able to remove my mother there to-morrow.”

Chapter Twenty Two

Tell him to come to see me

The Priory was taken, and in less than twenty-four hours, my mother found herself the occupant of a large, luxuriously-furnished chamber. Her windows commanded an extensive and most lovely view. She had a glimpse of the winding river which made our little village a favourite summer resort for anglers. It meandered away like a narrow silver thread in the midst of the peaceful landscape. Already there was a faint tinge of soft, pale green on the trees, and an added brightness was making the grass beautiful with a fresh growth. The Priory had sloping lawns, flower-beds carefully tended and gay with all the early spring flowers. There were greenhouses in abundance; there were gravel-walks and tennis-courts; in short, the usual pleasure-grounds which surround a country home of some pretension.

Inside the appointments were perfect. An able staff of servants attended to our every want. There were suites of beautiful rooms, bright, and gay, and clean. Fresh air and sweetness pervaded everything. In short, there could scarcely have been found a greater contrast than Myrtle Cottage, where the Lindley family had resided for so many years, and the Priory, where that same family now enjoyed the pleasures of refined existence.

It is surprising how soon one gets accustomed to luxury. My father and brother, who began by accepting the good things of life with a humility almost painful to witness, before a week was out grumbled about the quality of the soup served at dinner, and expressed in plaintive tones their dislike to turbot appearing too often on the board.

“You must see to this, Rosamund,” George would say, shaking his head, and my father would descant on the menage of that West End club to which he belonged a great many years ago, before he married my mother.

Meanwhile I lived in a sort of dream. I was not unhappy, for my mother was better. The new life suited her. My father’s cheerful tones were more stimulating and strengthening than the best champagne or the strongest beef-tea.

At the end of the first week she expressed a desire to see Jack and his wife again.

“I will write and ask them to come here,” I said. I went down-stairs prepared to do this. I was thinking of the pleasure my letter would give to Hetty. How she would hurry her own and her husband’s departure—how pretty and surprised she would look when she came to our luxurious new home—how nice it would

be to dress her suitably, and make life sweet and pleasant to her. I was thinking these thoughts and forgetting all about the conditions of Cousin Geoffrey's will, when I went into the drawing-room to fetch my writing portfolio which I had left there on the previous evening.

"Hey-day!" said a voice. I raised my eyes and found myself face to face with Mr Gray. "How do you do, Miss Rosamund?" he said, shaking my hand. "I judge from your own blooming appearance that your mother is much better."

"Yes, she is much better," I replied.

"What a wise girl you are, and were! How much I respect you! Now can you give me a few moments of your time?"

"Yes," I replied. My "Yes" was uttered in a meek voice. The gladness had gone out of my face and manner. "Yes," I repeated, "my time is, of course, at your disposal, Mr Gray."

"Well, let us sit here comfortably on this sofa. Miss Rosamund, I have been very considerate to you, have I not? I have not troubled you with word or message for a whole week."

"I know it," I replied. "I know you have been kind." My eyes filled with tears.

"It is a great wonder to me," began Mr Gray. He stopped abruptly. "I don't understand what girls are made of," he continued under his breath—"the very nicest fellow!—Miss Rosamund, please answer me one question. Do you greatly object to marrying your—your cousin?"

"I am not bound to reply to you," I said. "I knew that I should have to marry my cousin if he were willing to have me when I wrote you that letter a week ago. I did it for my mother's sake." My tears were dropping. I felt dreadfully weak and childish. I hated myself for giving way to emotion in this fashion.

"Yes, yes," said Mr Gray, patting my arm, "and you were a very plucky girl, Miss Rosamund, and you are going to have a happy—most happy life. Your cousin is a first-class fellow—first-class. I had the pleasure of communicating to him the contents of the will a few days ago, and he sends you a message now."

"What—what is it?" I stammered.

"He says you are to take your own time. He won't even come to see you unless you wish it. He had made all arrangements to go back to Africa, and he will go

all the same unless you wish him to remain. It all rests with you, he says. Nothing could be more gentlemanly than his conduct.”

I sat very still, my eyes were fixed on the spring landscape outside the window.

“There has been no—no letter, I suppose?” I said.

“There is no letter, but not for want of thought, I assure you. Your cousin felt that you would rather not hear from him. He said I could convey his wishes to you; in short, his wishes are yours. There is just one thing more. If you elect to postpone the—the marriage for a year, I have made arrangements to supply you with funds to live on at the Priory with your family.”

I sat very still.

I don't know why, but my silence and almost apathy began to irritate Mr Gray very much. I felt that he was looking at me impatiently. I even heard him sigh. Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

“What answer am I to take to Tom Valentine?” he asked.

Then I raised my head.

“Tell him to come to see me,” I said.

“Good gracious! Do you mean it?”

“I do mean it.”

“When is he to come?”

“To-night, if he likes—the sooner the better.”

I rushed away, I flew up the wide stairs. My one desire was to take refuge in my mother's room. A wide bay-window faced the sofa where she lay. The sun had set more than half an hour ago, but faint rose tints still lingered in the sky, and a full moon was showing her cold but brilliant face. The weather was turning quite genial and spring-like. Under ordinary circumstances I should not have cared to sit so near the fire. Now I huddled up to it, glad of its warmth, for I was shivering slightly, with the queerest mixture of suppressed excitement, despair, and yet gladness. Now and then I glanced at my mother. From where she lay I could only see a dim outline of her figure. She was lying very still; her hands were peacefully folded by her side; her breathing came gently; there was repose about her attitude.

Her voice, very sweet and clear, soon broke the silence.

“Rose, come here, darling.”

I sprang up, ran to her, and knelt by her side. My mother often called me in this way, not because she had anything special to say, but because she liked to feel my firm young hand clasping hers.

She laid her fingers in mine now, and turned her soft brown eyes to catch the outline of my face.

“Mother!” I exclaimed with sudden passion, “in all the wide world you are to me the very sweetest, the dearest, the best.” Tears trembled in my voice, and almost choked me. I hated myself for giving way. My mother kept on looking at me. She softly patted the hand which held one of hers. It was not in her to express her feelings except by that gentlest of touches.

“And if you die, I shall die,” I continued. “Mother, you must get better—you must live, you must!”

“It is as God wills, my darling.”

“That is just it, mother. He would not have made us rich if He did not will that you are to live. Poverty and care were killing you. Now they have folded their wings, and gone away. You will always be rich in the future; you will always have the most nourishing food, the softest care, the tenderest love. Don’t you think you can nestle down into the love and the care, mother? Don’t you think you can try?”

“I do try, Rose. But poverty—poverty and trouble have left their mark. That mark has sunk deep, very deep. Still, I will try to live for your sake—indeed, for all your sakes. Don’t cry, my dear daughter.”

I wiped my tears softly away. After a time, I said in a voice which I tried hard not to be tremulous:

“Are you strong enough, mother, for me to say something?”

“Yes, my darling, certainly.”

“Are you not a little surprised, mother, at this sudden change? Are you not a little curious to know by what means poverty has folded her wings and flown away from us?” My mother was silent for nearly a full moment, then she said slowly:

“I know you have a story to tell me whenever I am ready to hear it. But I am too weak to listen to it to-night. Weakness keeps us from being very curious, Rose. I don’t think, even in health, I was ever inordinately curious about anything. I was always able to take things on trust from those I loved. I can take riches on trust for the present, Rose.”

“You are just the sweetest mother in the world,” I said, kissing her on her forehead.

Just then the peal of the front-door bell penetrated into my mother’s room. I started back at the sound.

“What is the matter, dear?” she asked. “Did that bell startle you?”

“It did, mother, because—because I know who has come.”

“Some friend of yours, darling?”

“Yes, a—a friend of mine. I must go down-stairs to see him. Mother, give me your two hands for a moment.”

She gave them without a word. I bent low, and placed my mother’s hands on my head.

“Mother, say these words over me, ‘God bless you, Rosamund; your mother’s God bless you!’”

“Your mother’s God abundantly bless you, my precious daughter?” said my mother.

I kissed her thin hands passionately, and ran out of the room.

A footman in livery was coming up the stairs. He bore a card on a silver salver.

“The gentleman is in the drawing-room, miss,” he said.

I took the card, rushed past the astonished servant, and untidy and discomposed, tears scarcely dried on my cheeks, entered the drawing-room.

My cousin Tom was standing by one of the windows. When he heard my step he turned quickly round, advanced a pace or two, then stood still, a crimson wave of colour dyeing his darkly-bronzed cheeks, and his white brow. He looked confused, awkward, uncertain. I, on the contrary, had no room in my over-full heart for embarrassment.

“I have sent for you, Cousin Tom,” I said, “to say that I will marry you as soon as ever you will have me.” I looked him full in the face as I spoke, and when I had finished I held out one of my hands for him to take.

He stared at me for a moment in absolute astonishment. Then a queer change came over his whole face. It became irradiated with the sweetest and most joyful light. He took my slim fingers between his two great hands, and almost crushed them.

“And I would marry you to-morrow, Rosamund,” he said, “not because of Cousin Geoffrey’s will, but because I love you for yourself. I love you, Rosamund; I have loved you since—”

There came an interruption. The drawing-room door was banged noisily open. Jack’s voice was heard on the threshold. Hetty’s gay, agitated little treble followed it.

Tom Valentine dropped my hands.

Chapter Twenty Three

The Dearest Bond

My cousin, Tom Valentine, stayed to supper. We had a very merry, rapturous sort of evening. There was an unexplained mystery that no one spoke of; but that did not make our spirits the lower, or our laughter the less frequent. We laughed a good deal; we made witty remarks; we joked each other; we criticised each other; we even alluded, lightly and gracefully, to the old days of poverty.

We were all present at the board—all except my mother. Her room was overhead. Our gay voices must have floated up to her through the big windows which were partly open. My father took the foot of the table; his face looked quite handsome; his brow was smooth; he made the wittiest remarks of any one present.

Looking down the long table—for I poured out coffee at the farthest end—I perceived at a glance that poverty had all his life acted as a sort of umbrella over my father's head, shutting away the genial rays of the sun, and causing his nature to wither as a plant does when removed from the light and air. Now the umbrella was shut, and my father's nature was expanding genially.

George too was very much the better for his good food, cheerful home, and well-made clothes. (I had sent him to a West End tailor a week ago, and when he returned home in the suit of clothes which that tailor had given him, I discovered for the first time that George was a remarkably well-made man.)

As to Jack and Hetty, this was their first taste of the good things of life. They were still poorly clad, their faces were thin, and in each pair of eyes anxiety was not dead, but only lulled to sleep.

Notwithstanding this, however, these two—the brother who had fallen a victim to temptation, and the little new sister who had loved him and suffered for his sake—were to me more interesting, more powerful to move me, more capable of filling my heart with rejoicing, than were any other people in the room.

As to Cousin Tom—it is very strange, but I scarcely thought of Cousin Tom during that jovial meal. He was there—he was one of us; he was a most important factor in all the happiness; without him there would have been no happiness, no delightful sunshine of prosperity.

It seemed to me, however, as I shared the merry meal, and saw the faces of my own people looking their best and brightest, either that there was no room for Cousin Tom in my heart, or that his footing in it was so well-established that he was part of me already. I have thought of that happy evening often since,

and I am quite sure now that the reason I gave so little separate thought to my cousin was, because I knew him so well.

After supper my father, George, Hetty, and Jack went off to explore the house. George was very polite to his new sister Hetty, and my father was glad to renew his intercourse with Jack.

“You will come with us, won’t you, Valentine?” asked George of my cousin.

“I will follow you in a few moments,” he answered.

George went away, and Tom and I were alone. He came up to me at once.

“I wish you quite to understand,” he said, speaking in a very composed and guarded sort of fashion, “that I don’t intend to take advantage of anything you may say on impulse. I love you; I loved you before I knew a word of that strange will of our old kinsman’s. The first day I saw you I felt that you were different from other women. Well, that is all. I think you believe me. I don’t want to say anything more on this matter at present. If Cousin Geoffrey had not made his queer will, I should have pressed my suit. As it is, I cannot.

“What I want to tell you now, however, is this, that you are absolutely free to choose your own time to marry me. There is to be no hurry, and no constraint is to be put upon you. I understand from Gray that you have yielded to the conditions of our cousin’s will for your mother’s sake. Gray is a right good fellow, and he appreciates your spirit of self-sacrifice. He has made it possible for us two to delay our marriage, and yet for your mother and your people not to suffer.”

“I know,” I answered, “I know. Mr Gray told me himself. But I—I don’t wish that.”

“You don’t wish to delay our marriage?”

“No; come up-stairs and see mother.”

I took his hand before he could prevent me. I ran up the wide stairs holding it. Still clasping it in mine, I entered my mother’s room.

She looked up at the sound of our feet. Her eyes rested on our faces—Cousin Tom’s pale, mine flushed. Then the pink glow deepened on her cheeks. She held out her hands to us both.

“Come,” I said to my cousin. He followed me, and my mother laid her little hand in his.

“Mother,” I said, “this is my cousin, Tom Valentine; we are going to marry each other.”

“My dear Rose, my child!”

“There is no hurry,” murmured Tom.

“There is every hurry,” I repeated; “we—we love each other.”

“Rosamund!” interrupted my cousin.

“We love each other,” I continued, steadily, “as much as any two people could. There is no reason why we should delay our marriage.”

“As that is the case, there is no reason what ever,” Tom Valentine said now. And he put his arm quite boldly round my waist.

I think my mother said something more, but I am not quite sure. The queerest thing happened at that moment; the queerest, most incomprehensible thing. I had forgotten Cousin Tom down-stairs because my father and brothers and sister were present. Now up-stairs I forgot my mother, who had hitherto been the first being in the world to me, because Cousin Tom was by; because I suddenly knew that my heart was his, my life his, my future his; because I realised that if every other part of Cousin Geoffrey’s will crumbled into dust and ceased to bind me, the clause which gave me to Tom Valentine would remain in force, and be the sweetest and dearest of all bonds to me.

Cousin Tom’s arm held me still firmer to his side. I turned and laid my head on his shoulder.

The End

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