

L. MEADE

A SISTER OF THE
RED CROSS: A
TALE OF THE
SOUTH AFRICAN
WAR

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Tale of the South African War**

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A Sister of the Red Cross: A Tale of the South African War

CHAPTER I. CONSECRATION

Sister Mollie Hepworth was twenty-five years of age. She had just completed a long and exhaustive training as a nurse. She had served her time in the London Hospital, entering as a probationer, and finally being promoted to the proud position of a ward sister. She had then undergone a period of six months' probation at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley, as her dream of all dreams was to nurse our soldiers in their hours of danger and death.

Mollie was a bright-looking, handsome girl. Her eyes were brown and well opened; she had a healthy colour in her cheeks; and she held herself as upright as any soldier in Her Majesty's army. No one had ever seen Sister Mollie perturbed or put out – her self-control was proverbial. She had an admirable temper, too, and never allowed an impatient word to cross her lips. She was reticent, and no gossip. Secrets, even important ones, could be intrusted to her without any fear of their being betrayed. Her eyes looked clearly out at life. Her lips were firm; her whole bearing that of one who has made up her mind, whose career is fixed, whose watchword is duty, and whose desire is to benefit her fellow-creatures.

"Put my luggage on the cab, please, porter; there is not a moment to lose, or I shall miss my train," said the clear voice of the Sister on a certain sunny morning early in September 1899.

The man obeyed. A neat trunk, followed by a hat-box, was deposited on the top of a cab, and a moment later Sister Mollie had left Netley. She was going to spend a fortnight with her sister in London.

"A fortnight of absolute rest," she said to herself; "a whole fourteen days with nothing special to do! No necessity to think of my patients; no obligation to rise at a given hour in the morning. To be out of training for a whole fortnight! I can scarcely believe it. I wonder if I shall enjoy it. I know one thing, at least, that I shall enjoy, and that is seeing Kitty. I have not met my darling for nearly two years!"

As this thought came to Mollie Hepworth, dimples visited her cheeks, and her eyes shone so brightly that some of her fellow-passengers turned to look at her.

She was wearing her nurse's uniform, and it set off her clear complexion and graceful figure to the best possible advantage. Sister Mollie arrived at her destination between five and six o'clock that evening. Her cab conveyed her to a large house in Maida Vale.

The moment she entered, a merry voice shouted her name, and a girl, with complexion and eyes very like her own, rushed downstairs and flung herself into her arms.

"O Mollie, this is like heaven! I have been counting the moments until you came. And how are you? Do let me have a good look. Are you altered? No, I declare, not a bit! Come upstairs; you and I are to share the same bedroom. You will have such a hearty welcome from Aunt Louisa; but she is out now with Gavon."

"Do you know, Kitty," replied Mollie, "that I have never yet seen Gavon Keith?"

"He is at home now," replied the other girl. "You will see plenty of him by-and-by. Oh, how I have missed you, and how delightful it is to have you back again!"

"And I have missed you, my darling little Kitty."

The girls had now reached a large and beautifully-furnished bedroom on the first floor.

"This is our room," said Kitty. "Aunt Louisa did not wish us to share it, at first; she thought you would rather have a room to yourself, but I over-persuaded her. We can have such cosy talks. Oh, I have a lot to tell you! There are some things joyful, and some things – well, just a bit worrying. But there is a whole beautiful fortnight when we can talk and talk to our hearts' content."

"And I am a full-blown Sister, absolutely through all my training," said Mollie.

She took off her nurse's bonnet as she spoke, and let her cloak tumble to the floor.

"You look superb, Mollie, in your Sister's dress; but you must not wear it while you are here. You and I are exactly the same height, and one of my pretty dinner dresses will fit you. I have been saying so much to Gavon about you. O Mollie, I don't like to tell you, and yet I think I must."

Here Kitty broke off abruptly. She toyed with the ribbons at her belt; her eyes sought the ground.

"What is it?" asked Mollie, half guessing at the information which Kitty was so anxious and yet so afraid to bestow.

"It is this," said Kitty restlessly: "I am not *quite* engaged, but I am all but."

"To whom, darling? You know you are very precious to me, and I am much older than you. I shall have to look into this matter."

"Oh, you will like him; you will be more than satisfied with him. You cannot help it," replied Kitty. "It is to Gavon – yes, to dear Gavon. I have loved him for so long. He has not quite absolutely spoken, but he will – I know he will. I think he will say something while you are here. The words often seem to me to be trembling on his lips. O Mollie, this is not like ordinary happiness! it is so deep that it frightens me."

Kitty's face grew very pale. She sank down in a chair, clasping her pretty hands together on her knee. Then she looked full up at her sister.

"This is quite splendid!" replied Mollie. "I shall look on Captain Keith with great interest now. Am I to see him to-night?"

"Of course you are. I told him you were coming. He is certain to be in, if not to dinner, very soon afterwards. Here is his photograph."

Kitty sprang up as she spoke, ran to her chest of drawers, took a photograph encased in a neat leather frame from a pile of others, and brought it up to Mollie.

"Here," she said, "look at his face. Is he not splendid?"

Mollie looked. A puzzled expression came into her eyes. It seemed to her that she had seen that face before, she could not recall where.

"What is the matter with you, Mollie?" asked Kitty.

"Nothing; only the face seems familiar."

"Perhaps you have seen him. You must have seen many soldiers at Netley."

"I cannot remember," said Mollie, returning the photograph to Kitty. "Thank you, Kits. He looks very nice, and, I think, even worthy of you. I am glad, after all, you are marrying a soldier, for I mean to devote all my life to them."

"Oh, how splendid of you, Mollie! But I do hope we are not going to have war. It would be too awful to have Gavon away, and his life in danger; and you also, darling Mollie, for of course if we do fight the Boers you will go to South Africa."

"Time enough to think of that," said Mollie. "Come and sit down. It is good to have a chat with you, Kitty. I may as well say it; I hope my chance to do something great will come before I am much older. I am just pining to be doing, and helping, and saving lives. Oh, mine is a grand mission!"

"I suppose it is," answered Kitty. "But, after all," she added, her eyes sparkling, "it is not half so grand as being engaged to the man you love best in the world. Oh, I do hope Gavon will soon speak, for I love him so very, very much!"

The girls chatted a little longer, and then Kitty ran downstairs to tell Mrs. Keith that Mollie had arrived. A young man, with dark hair, a straight moustache, and an otherwise clean-shaven face, was standing in the hall. He turned as she approached.

"Is that you, Kitty?" he said.

She ran up to him. He held out both his hands, and clasped hers. Her face turned first crimson, then pale.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "Have you heard what I was talking about to the mater?"

"You must not be frightened, Kitty," said Mrs. Keith. "After all, nothing may come of it; but Keith says the news from the Transvaal is anything but reassuring."

"War may be declared at any moment," said Keith.

"But your regiment won't be ordered abroad?" cried Kitty, with a catch in her voice.

"I hope it will!" he replied. "I want to get a bit of real fighting. Some stiff active service would suit me down to the ground."

Kitty's pretty lips trembled. She struggled with her emotion. Then raising her eyes, she said in as bright a tone as she could muster, —

"We must not think of dismal things to-night. Our Red Cross Sister has just arrived. I want you both so badly to see Mollie."

"I shall be delighted to make her acquaintance," replied Keith; "but I am not dining at home to-night. Sorry, little girl, but can't help it. I will be in as early as I can. Why, what's the matter, Kit?" for Kitty's eyes had filled with tears.

"I have been so looking forward to your seeing Mollie," she answered; "I am dying to know what you think of her. But there," she added, brightening up the next moment, "if you will come in soon after dinner, all will be right. And I am not going to be disagreeable," she continued, "for, of course, you cannot help it."

"Tell your sister, Kitty, that I will come up to see her in a few moments," said Mrs. Keith.

The girl nodded, and ran out of the room. In the hall she stood still for a moment, wrestling with her emotion.

"I wonder if he really cares, or if I am only imagining it?" was her thought.

"That is a dear little girl, mother," said Gavon, turning to speak to his mother when Kitty had left the room.

Mrs. Keith looked at her son gravely.

"I am very fond of Kitty," she said then. "I am glad that I adopted her. She is a delightful companion and a dear little soul. But how nervous she is, Gavon! I have noticed it often of late in your presence. I cannot help wondering —"

Mrs. Keith broke off abruptly.

"Wonder at nothing, mother," was his answer. "There is nothing between us — nothing at all. Kitty is a dear little sort of cousin — no more."

"You must remember that she is not really your cousin. Kitty is my adopted niece. Just as good as a real one, but in case by —"

"I know, mother; I know all you would say. I like her very much, but I have never yet met the girl I want to marry. I have never yet been in love, although I am twenty-eight years of age. You don't want to hand me over to the tender mercies of a wife too soon, do you, mater?"

"My dearest, as far as I am concerned, I like you best without a wife. But you must marry some day, Gavon; and if it should so happen that you really liked Kitty, why, why —"

"You would like it too? Well, I will think it all out, mother; but at present I fancy my attention will be turned to other matters. We are going to have fighting, and I am rejoiced to know it."

Mrs. Keith laid her hand on her son's arm. Just for a moment that hand trembled. Then she said in a brave voice, —

"Well, and I am the mother of a soldier. I must take the bitter with the sweet."

She turned away as she spoke. Gavon followed her, put his arm round her waist, bent down and kissed her on her forehead, and then left the house.

Meanwhile the girls upstairs talked as fast as a pair of eager tongues could manage. Each had a great deal to say to the other. Mollie and Kitty were orphans. Mollie was six years Kitty's senior. Their parents had died within one week of each other – when Mollie was seventeen years of age, and Kitty eleven. An aunt had left Kitty twenty thousand pounds, which was to accumulate for her until her majority. Mollie, on the contrary, had only fifty pounds a year of her own. Kitty was adopted by Mrs. Keith, who took a fancy to the pretty girl, and afterwards grew so much attached to her that she could scarcely bear her out of her sight. Mollie, at the age of twenty, took up nursing seriously as a profession. From her earliest years Mollie had shown a great aptitude for this noble work. She had that calmness of nature which denotes strength; she was not easily ruffled; and when she made up her mind she stuck to her resolves.

If there was one person in all the world whom Mollie loved better than another, it was her little sister Kitty. Each girl idolized the other; and although for long years now they had been to a considerable extent separated, their early love was still unchanged. Kitty was almost frantic with delight at the thought of a whole fortnight of her sister's society.

"Everything must happen in that time," she kept saying to herself – "everything that is possible and delightful. Gavon shall tell me that he loves me. I know he does – I know it; and he will tell me so while darling Mollie is with us. And auntie will consent, of course. And the wedding shall all be arranged, and Mollie shall advise me as to my trousseau, and Mollie shall see my engagement ring. And Mollie shall talk to Gavon and tell him what a naughty, silly, and yet affectionate little girl he has secured as his future wife. Oh, life is too beautiful, too beautiful! Even though I am in debt, horribly in debt for my clothes, and Aunt Louisa knows nothing about it, the joy of life is almost too much for me!"

Now Kitty poured out a great deal of her heart to Mollie. All her conversation was about Gavon Keith.

"He has not spoken, but I know he will speak," she kept on reiterating; "and I don't mind telling you, Mollie, for I have always told you just everything."

As Mollie listened, she could not help feeling just a little anxious. Suppose by any chance Kitty was mistaken! But then she made up her mind to hope for the best.

"The child would not speak as she does if she were not quite, quite sure. All the same, I wonder she can talk of him as she does until he has told her in so many words that he loves her as she deserves to be loved," was her grave inward comment.

"You shall see him for yourself to-night," said Kitty, at the end of almost every speech. "You shall tell me to-night what you think of him."

Just then a little clock on the mantelpiece struck the hour of seven.

"Who would have supposed it was so late?" said Kitty, starting up suddenly. "Now, Mollie, I will bring in the dress you are to wear. Gavon won't dine, but he is certain to be back about ten o'clock; and even if he keeps us up a little later, it does not matter, does it?"

"Certainly not, dear. I have had a day of perfect rest, and am good for any amount of sitting up to-night."

"You always were a darling! Now, I wonder which of my dresses would best become you?"

"It seems so ridiculous for me to wear anything but this," said Mollie, and she looked at her nurse's uniform with affection.

"Oh, I love you in your nurse's dress!" said Kitty. "You make me quite wish to be ill, in order that you may put me to bed and pet me, and give me my medicines, and tonics, and nice, tempting invalid food. But as I am not ill – as I am, on the contrary, in the most radiant health and strength – I should for the time being like to see my own Mollie in some other guise than that of a Red Cross nurse."

"Well, I would do more than that to please you, Kitty."

"We must be quick, or we shall be late for dinner, and that is just the kind of thing which does disturb Aunt Louisa."

The next half-hour was spent by both girls in getting into their evening finery. When their toilets were complete, they went and stood with their arms round each other in front of a tall mirror which stood in one corner of the room.

"I must say, though I say it who should not," said Kitty, with a laugh, "that we look as presentable as any two girls I have ever come across. Why, Mollie, I did not know until now that you were quite an inch taller than I am. But never mind; your dress looks perfectly sweet, and your feet are so pretty it does not matter whether they are seen or not. And oh, Mollie, what a white neck you have, and such round arms! I do think black lace is the very prettiest evening dress of all. But stay; you must have colour. I will run down to the conservatory and bring up some scarlet geraniums."

Kitty flew away, returning in a few minutes with a bunch of the brilliant flowers. She fastened them into her sister's belt, and stepped back to look at the effect.

"Now you are perfect!" she said. "You are a young lady enjoying one of her first peeps into society. Oh dear, it is too comical! Here am I, almost sick of going out (for Aunt Louisa takes me somewhere nearly every night); and here are you, with just the airs of an *ingénue*. And you are five-and-twenty, are you not, Mollie?"

"Quite old compared with you, Kitty."

"I shall be twenty in a month," said Kitty, "and then in one year my fortune comes in. Oh dear, what a horrible thing money is!"

As she spoke a change came over her face – a wistful, puzzled, distressed expression. Mollie noticed it.

"It is impossible the child can be in money difficulties," she said to herself. "I must speak to her about this later on."

The dinner gong sounded, and the two ran downstairs. Mrs. Keith was in the drawing-room. She gave Mollie a hearty welcome.

"You look very well indeed," she said. "How like Kitty you are, and yet how different!"

This was quite true. Kitty was far and away the prettier sister, and yet no one would look at Kitty when Mollie was present. It was difficult to account for this fact; nevertheless it existed. The very tone of the elder girl's voice was arresting – there was a dignity in everything she said; and yet she never posed, nor had she a trace of affectation in her nature. One secret of her influence may have been that she absolutely, on every possible occasion, forgot herself. Her life was a consecration. To make others happy was the whole aim and object of her existence. When her father and mother died, she had been old enough to feel their deaths intensely. But the greatest sorrow of all had never come into her life; and beautiful and perfect as her character seemed, there were hidden depths yet to be explored, and greater heights to be reached, before Mollie Hepworth would gain the full crown of womanhood. As to love, in the sense in which Kitty loved Gavon Keith, Mollie had never even thought of it. Her feeling, as she sat now at her aunt's luxurious table, was that nothing would induce her to marry.

"A consecrated life shall ever be mine," was her thought.

Nevertheless she was quite healthy enough to fully enjoy the present, and she drew Mrs. Keith out to talk of her son, and asked Kitty many fresh questions with regard to her employments and interests.

CHAPTER II.

MUSIC

"I wish you would scold Kitty," said Mrs. Keith to Mollie in the course of the evening, "she is so very frivolous."

"O auntie, what a perfect shame!" said Kitty. "I frivolous! If frivolous means being intensely affectionate, I am that, but I don't think I am frivolous in any other sense of the word."

"I am not complaining of you, Kitty – you suit me perfectly; but you are just a dear little gay butterfly flitting about from flower to flower, always sipping the sweets and enjoying life to the utmost."

"Oh, I do enjoy life," said Kitty; "it is perfectly heavenly even to be alive!"

"Whereas Mollie," continued Mrs. Keith, "takes life, this very same life, Kitty, in a totally different way."

"Kitty and I were always different," replied Mollie. "What suits one doesn't suit the other. I should be sick of being a butterfly and just sipping the sweets out of the flowers. Such a life would be absolute misery to me. Therefore I cannot consider myself in any way praiseworthy for adopting another."

Mrs. Keith uttered a quick sigh.

"There are moments when life is serious to us all," she said gravely. "Hark! what are they crying in the street?"

Mrs. Keith raised her hand to listen. Both girls held their breath.

"Further trouble in the Transvaal: serious disturbance," repeated Mrs. Keith, her lips turning white. "I am afraid there is no doubt that we shall have to go to war with the Boers."

"It looks like it," replied Mollie, and her eyes kindled.

"You would love to air your knowledge about nursing soldiers," said Kitty. "How horrid of you!"

"Well, Kitty, can you blame me? What is the good of being a soldier's nurse if I am never to enter on the full duties of my profession?"

"Surely it is not necessary to have war just to give you experience?" said Kitty. She turned very white as she spoke, and her brown eyes filled with sudden tears.

Mrs. Keith glanced at her, and then turned away. But as, a moment later, she passed Kitty's side, she took her hand and gave it an affectionate squeeze. Kitty jumped up impatiently.

"Mollie," she cried, "I am going to sing to you. You shall see at least that I have some accomplishments."

She ran to the piano, opened it, crashed out a noisy waltz, and then burst into a rollicking song. Her voice was powerful and beautifully trained. It lacked a certain power of expression, but was finished and very pleasant to listen to. Mollie was standing by the piano, and turning over the pages of her sister's music, when the door was opened, and Gavon Keith in his dinner dress came in. He was a striking-looking and very handsome man. As the girl raised her eyes to look at him she gave a sudden start. She had seen him before; he was not, after all, a stranger. She had seen him, and in such different circumstances that if she were to disclose all she knew this little party would indeed be electrified. When she recognized him, he also recognized her. The colour left his face; he stood still for a moment; then recovering himself, he went up to his mother.

"Introduce me to Miss Hepworth, won't you?"

Kitty, who had been singing, let her voice drop; her hands came down on the keys with a crash. She saw the change on Gavon's face when he looked at Mollie. Her love for him made her intensely jealous. Was it possible? Oh no, it could not be! She danced up to his side as he came up to Mollie and took her hand.

"We must not be strangers," he said. "We are relations of a sort, are we not?"

"I don't know," replied Mollie. "We are friends at least, I hope."

His eyes seemed to convey a warning as he looked at her. She returned his gaze with a full, frank expression on her face, and he knew at once that he had nothing to fear from her. The magnetic influence which she always carried with her wherever she went affected him strangely, however. He sank down on the nearest chair and began to talk to her. Kitty flitted restlessly about. Gavon did not once glance in her direction. After a time he said, —

"What is the matter with you, Kit? Can't you sit still? I am much interested in what your sister is telling me."

"Tell me too, then, Mollie," said Kitty, and there was a note of sadness and entreaty in her voice.

She slipped into a seat close to Mollie, who put her arm round her waist.

Keith continued to ask eager questions. He was interested in Mollie's experiences as a nurse at the Victoria Hospital, Netley. All of a sudden he seemed to recognize a change in her. Her voice at first had been full of enthusiasm, but when she felt the touch of Kitty's small hand her manner changed – it became formal. She rose after a moment.

"I did not know that I was tired, but I find I am," she said. "Will you excuse me, Aunt Louisa? I should like to go to bed."

"Do, my dear, certainly," replied Mrs. Keith.

"Then, Kit, you must give me another song," said Keith.

His words and request immediately chased away every cloud from her face. She took her seat at the piano, and Mollie went out of the room.

CHAPTER III.

KITTY'S DREAM

Several months before the events just related, as Mollie Hepworth was returning late to the hospital at Netley, she was arrested by seeing a figure lying by the roadside. Her professional instincts were at once aroused, and she hurried towards it. She bent down, to discover a gentlemanly-looking, well-dressed man. He was breathing heavily, and was evidently quite unconscious.

She gave a hurried exclamation, and fell on her knees by his side. She took one of his limp hands in hers, and bending low, perceived a smell like that of opium on his breath. Had he been drugged by another? What could have happened? Her first instinct was to shield him from any possible disgrace; her second, to restore him to consciousness. She looked to right and left of her. The road was lonely – there was no one in sight. Exercising all her strength, she pulled the man more to one side. She then applied a vinaigrette, which she happened to have about her, to his nostrils, and finding a little stream of water not far off, took some in the palms of both hands, and flung the liquid over his face. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and looked at her.

"Where am I?" he said. "Who are you? What has happened?"

"I am a nurse," said Mollie – "a Sister of the Red Cross. I am a nurse at the Royal Victoria Hospital. I found you lying here: Let me help you home."

"Oh! what can have happened to me?" he exclaimed heavily, and yet with great consternation in his voice. "Give me your hand," he said then. "I am better; I can walk alone if you will help me to rise."

She got him to his feet with some difficulty, but he tottered, and she had to give him her arm.

"Lean on me," she said. "Where shall I take you?"

"I remember everything now," he replied, speaking more to himself than to her. "I have been drugged: I felt the effects, and came for a walk, hoping to walk them off. Before I knew what I was doing I became unconscious. What would have happened to me if you had not been passing by?"

"Some one else would have found you," said Mollie.

"It would have been reported at barracks, and I should have been disgraced."

"You are one of the officers, then?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will take you back."

"I will walk with you a little way, but I am fast getting better. What a mercy you found me!" he kept on repeating at intervals.

He leaned heavily against her. She was strong and tall. They paused at last just outside the barracks, under a lamp. The light fell full on her face. He looked into her eyes, and the colour mounted into his own forehead.

"To whom am I indebted?" he asked.

"To a Sister of the Red Cross," she replied. "But I don't need thanks," she added hastily; "I am only too glad to have been able to help you."

"As far as I can tell, I owe my life to you," he replied.

He looked at her as if he expected her to say more; but she did not ask his name. There was an expression of relief on his face as she turned away.

"Good-night; God bless you!" he said. "I shall thank you for this in my heart to the longest day I live."

She held out her hand, and he grasped it. Never before had he felt so strong, so cool, so firm, so strength-giving a hand.

Mollie went back to the hospital, and in the rush and excitement of her daily life more or less forgot this incident. But to-night, when Captain Keith entered the room, it all came back to her; for

the handsome, careless face of Gavon Keith was the very same she had seen, pale and under the influence of opium, a short time ago. She had noticed then the upright figure, the straight features, the shape of the eyes, the well-formed lips, and as she recognized him she saw by a light which suddenly rushed into his eyes that he recognized her.

Mollie sat down and thought over this strange circumstance. She had been tired, really tired, when she left the drawing-room; but she was wide awake now, and not at all inclined to go to bed. It was past midnight when Kitty, her cheeks on fire, her eyes dancing, came into the room.

"What!" said the younger sister; "still up, Mollie? I thought you were so sleepy! Do you know, I stayed downstairs on purpose just to give you a chance to get very sound asleep before I disturbed you."

"I shall have plenty of time for sleep later on," replied Mollie.

"Oh, you made me so jealous, my darling Moll, when you talked to Gavon; but I am all right now. I will just slip off my dress, put on my dressing-gown, and we can renew our delightful conversation while we brush our hair."

"No," said Mollie, rising abruptly. "I find that, after all, I am tired. I want to go to bed."

Kitty looked at her in some surprise.

"But what does this mean?" she said. "I have so much to say to you. I cannot rest until you have told me what you think of him."

"Think of whom, Kate?"

"How stiff of you to call me Kate! No one does unless they are displeased. Are you displeased with me, my own Mollie – are you?"

"You must not talk nonsense, Kitty," said Mollie, in a grave voice. "I am tired, and am really determined to go to bed. I shall not utter another word to keep you from your own rest."

Kitty pouted, but Mollie was resolute. She was not a nurse for nothing. She knew that Kitty was already so excited that she might not sleep for some time. The sooner she got to bed, however, the better.

With a discontented pout on her rosy lips Kitty watched her elder sister undress. The little girl was happy, however; the last hour with Gavon had chased all uncomfortable feelings away. He did love her – he must love her. Was there not love in his eyes and tenderness in his voice? The moment, therefore, she laid her head on her pillow she fell asleep, to dream of him.

Not so Mollie. She felt uncomfortable and alarmed. She dreaded she knew not what. An intuition had already taken possession of her that Kitty's love affair was not to end happily. She doubted very much whether Keith really cared for her little sister. If so, what was to become of Kitty's passion? Keith had looked at Mollie as if he wished to confide in her. Would he allude to that circumstance in both their lives which had taken place a few months ago?

It was towards morning when the tired girl sank into slumber, and in consequence it was late before she arose. When she opened her eyes, Kitty was standing over her.

"Gavon has gone out long ago," she said, "and Aunt Louisa too; and it is nearly ten o'clock, and we have all breakfasted. And you, you lazy girl, are to have breakfast all by yourself in the morning-room. Or would you prefer it here?"

"Oh no; I am ashamed of myself," said Mollie. "I will get up at once and join you downstairs within half an hour."

"You are privileged, you know, Mollie dear," said Kitty. "Aunt Louisa says the carriage is to return for us both at eleven o'clock. I want to do some shopping, and I thought perhaps you would come with me."

"With pleasure, dear," replied Mollie.

The moment her sister left the room she rose, dressed in her nurse's uniform, and went downstairs. When she entered the morning-room Kitty was seated at the tea tray, looking as radiant and free from care as girl could look.

"Gavon was in a great state of excitement when he went off this morning," she said to her sister. "He is persuaded there will be war."

"Well, and if there is war," said Mollie, "it will do us a great deal of good. Oh, I know you think me heartless, but our army wants active service again. We need to test our strength."

"You talk just as though you belonged to the army yourself," said Kitty.

"And so I do. If there is fighting, I shall be in the thick of it."

"You don't think of me," cried Kitty, turning pale. "Please remember that if there is fighting Gavon is certain to be sent to the front. You will go as nurse, and he will go as soldier. What is to become of poor Kitty?"

"Kitty will be brave, and help us all she can at home," replied Mollie.

"That is all very fine," said Kitty, "but I must tell you frankly I don't like the rôle."

Mollie looked up as Kitty spoke.

"You are changed," she said slowly. "In some ways I should not know you."

"What do you mean?"

"You have been too much in the world, Kitty. My little Kitty, did I do wrong to leave you? When mother died she left you in my charge. Did I do wrong to let Mrs. Keith adopt you? It seems to me – I scarcely like to say it – that you –"

"Oh, do say it, please – do say it," remarked Kitty.

"You are less unselfish than you used to be, and more – oh, I hate myself even for thinking it – more worldly."

"No, no, I am not; but I am anxious," replied the younger girl. "There are many things to make me – yes, anxious just now. But I hope I shall be the happiest girl on earth soon."

"Kitty, suppose –"

"Suppose what?" asked Kitty. "Oh, what awful thing are you going to say now, Mollie?"

"Nothing. I won't say it," replied Mollie suddenly. "I have finished breakfast. I can go out with you whenever you like."

Kitty gazed in a frightened way at her sister.

"It is nothing, dear," said Mollie tenderly. "I have given you my little lecture, and I will say nothing further at present."

"And I am not all bad, and I love you, and I hope to be the happiest girl on earth before long," was Kitty's rejoinder. And then she flew upstairs to put on her hat and jacket.

The girls drove first to Madame Dupuys, a fashionable dressmaker in Bond Street. Madame received them both in her large showroom. Her face was rather grave.

"I had hoped to have a letter from you before now, Miss Hepworth," she said, in a significant tone, to Kitty.

"It is all right," replied Kitty. "You may expect to hear from me any day."

"Very well, miss."

"And I want to order a dress at once. I am going on Monday evening to the fancy ball at the Countess of Marsden's house on the Thames. I cannot possibly wear any of my old dresses."

"What will you have?" asked the dressmaker.

"Something very, very pretty, and absolutely out of the common. Madame, I should like to introduce my sister to you; she is a Red Cross nurse."

Madame bowed gravely in Mollie's direction. She was a very handsome woman, beautifully dressed.

"We are all interested in the Red Cross Sisters," she said, after a moment's pause. "Have you heard the latest news, miss? They say war will be declared within the week!"

Kitty turned white.

"I am determined not to think of disagreeable things before they occur," she said; "and I want my dress to be white, with silver over it. Now, do show me some designs."

"I will fetch some fashion-books," said madame, "and we can discuss the style."

"Kitty," said Mollie, the moment they were alone, "surely you are not in debt for any of your beautiful clothes?"

Kitty's face looked troubled.

"I am just a wee bit harassed," she said slowly, "but it will be all right by-and-by. Don't worry, Mollie."

"It seems so wrong," replied Mollie.

"You know nothing about it," answered Kitty, tapping her small foot impatiently on the floor. "I go out a great deal, and I have to look my best, because – " she stopped. "You would act as I do if you had the same reasons," she continued. "And you must remember that in about another year I shall have plenty of money."

"Well, it is wrong to go in debt," replied Mollie. "If you are in money difficulties, it would be far better to speak to Mrs. Keith."

"To Aunt Louisa? Never! she would tell Gavon. Ah, here comes madame. – Madame, my sister has been reading me such a lecture," and Kitty smiled her incorrigible smile.

Madame Dupuys made no remark. She opened the fashion-book, and soon Miss Hepworth and the dressmaker were deep in consultation over the material and style of the new dress.

"Don't you think it will be exquisite, Mollie?" said Kitty, as they left the showroom.

"Very pretty indeed, dear," replied Mollie.

They came home to lunch, where Captain Keith awaited them.

"My mother has left you a message," he said. "She is going to see a friend, and will not be back until dinner time. Now, I happen to have a whole afternoon at my own disposal. If I place it at yours, can you make any use of me?"

"O Gavon, how quite too heavenly!" said Kitty. "You shall take us somewhere. This dear Mollie does not know her London a bit. Her education must be attended to, and without any loss of time. And, Gavon, I have been ordering a dress for the Countess of Marsden's dance on Monday."

"Another dress!" said Keith, shrugging his shoulders. "What an extravagant girl!"

"Don't you like me to wear pretty dresses? I thought you did."

"Of course I do; and you look charming in everything you put on, but I did not know you wanted a new dress. You had something soft and furry, like the breast of a rabbit, the last time you went to a dance with me. I remember it quite well, although I cannot describe it; for the fur was always touching my shoulder, and it came off a little. I found the white hairs on my coat the next morning."

Kitty blushed.

"I am glad you liked that dress," she said; "but you will like what I am going to appear in on Monday even better. I want to be a vision – a dream."

Keith looked at her; a thoughtful expression came into his eyes. He noted the colour which came and went on her cheeks, the brightness of her brown eyes, the love light, too, which was all too visible, as those well-opened eyes fixed themselves on his face.

"Poor little girl!" he said to himself. Then he glanced at Mollie, and his heart beat quickly. "If only those two could exchange places!" he thought; "it would be easy then to – "

He checked the unfinished thought with a sigh which was scarcely perceptible.

"Where shall we go?" he said. He took out his watch. "Although it is out of the season, there is a passable concert at St. James's Hall, and you are so fond of music, Kit. What does Sister Mollie say?"

"Oh, please call me Mollie," said the elder girl.

"What would you like, Mollie?" he asked.

"The concert, by all means."

"We can take tickets at the door. We will go there, and afterwards have tea at my club."

"Delicious!" said Kitty. "You don't know, Mollie, what tea at Gavon's club is like. Only I do wish – "

"What, dear?"

"That you would not wear your uniform. I didn't think nurses thought it necessary when they were taking holidays."

"I won't, if you dislike it," said Mollie. "I have brought a dress which I can wear. It is not very fashionable, but I don't suppose that matters."

"Would you not rather, Gavon, that Mollie did not come in her uniform?" asked Kitty, in an eager voice.

"Mollie must do exactly what she pleases," was the reply.

"I see you would both rather not have attention drawn to me," said Mollie. "That is quite enough. I will dress as an ordinary lady."

"And lose a good deal," said Gavon. "But perhaps you are right. There is so much disturbance in the air, that anything even savouring of the military draws attention at the present moment."

"Come upstairs at once, Mollie, and I will help to turn you into a fashionable lady," said Kitty, with a laugh.

CHAPTER IV. THE CONCERT

But this was more easily said than done. Mollie had a certain style about her – the style which accompanies a perfectly-made body and a well-ordered mind. But she had none of that peculiar appearance which constitutes fashion. Her hair was simply knotted at the back of her head, and was without fringe or wave. The only dress she had at her disposal had been made two years ago. The sleeves were too large for the prevailing mode, and the bodice was by no means smart. Mollie, however, put on her unfashionable garment with the best faith in the world, and tripped up to Kitty when her toilet was complete.

"How do you like me?" she said.

Kitty turned to her, and her brown eyes flashed fire.

"Oh, you must not go out looking like that," she was about to say. But she suddenly stopped.

She herself was the very perfection of dainty neatness, of fashionable, yet not too fashionable, attire. Her hair was picturesquely arranged. Her hat was stylish; the very veil which hid and yet revealed the roses on her cheeks and the brightness of her eyes was what the world would call *the mode*. Beside this dainty and perfectly-arrayed little personage Mollie looked almost dowdy.

"And I could change all that in a minute," thought Kitty. "It is just to lend her my brown hat with its plume of feathers, and the jacket which came home last week, and the deed is done. But shall I do it? Gavon already admires her too much. Now is the time for him to see the difference between us. She shall go as she is. I dare not run the risk of losing him; and he likes her – oh, I know he likes her. This day, perhaps, will settle matters; and Mollie, my darling Mollie, for my sake you must not look your best."

Aloud, Kitty said in a careless tone, —

"Very nice, indeed, Mollie. And how do I look? What do you think of your little sister?"

"How pretty your face is," replied Mollie, "and how neat your figure! Do you remember how I used to scold you long ago for not walking upright? You are very upright now."

But as Mollie spoke Kitty perceived that she had never glanced at the fashionable dress. She only saw the soul in the bright eyes and the happy smile round the lips. Gavon's voice calling them was heard from below. They ran downstairs.

When they appeared, Captain Keith glanced from one sister to the other. He was dimly conscious that a change, and that not exactly for the better, had come over Mollie, and that Kitty looked, as she always did, the perfection of charm. Nevertheless, the expression in Mollie's eyes and the tone of her voice continued to arouse that strange, delicious foreign feeling in his breast. He found that he liked to touch her hand, and that he also liked to look into her brown eyes. He was not yet aware of his own sensations. He only thought, —

"I am but tracing the extraordinary likeness and the extraordinary difference between these two girls. Of course I know Kitty's dear little phiz, and Mollie's is almost the same, feature for feature, and yet there never were any two girls who have less in common."

The three arrived at St. James's Hall in good time. Gavon secured seats for his party, and they soon found themselves listening to a fine concert. Mollie had a passion for music, and as she sat now and allowed it to fill both heart and soul, her eyes kindled, and the colour came rich and deep into her cheeks. Gavon continued to watch her almost stealthily. Kitty chatted whenever she could find a moment to give her gay little voice a chance of being heard. Gavon sat between the two; he answered Kitty, and talked with her, scolding her now and then, and desiring her on many occasions to "hush," "not to make so much noise," to "behave herself," and much more to the same effect. As long as he spoke to her at all, poor Kitty was in the seventh heaven of bliss. From her present position she could

not see how often he glanced at Mollie, and fancied that her little stratagem to make her sister not look quite at her best was bringing the most satisfactory results.

The first half of the concert was over, when a man pushed his way along the line of people and dropped into a seat by Kitty's side. She uttered an exclamation, half of annoyance and half of pleasure.

"How do you do, Miss Hepworth?" he said. "I have not seen you for a very long time. – Ah, Keith, how are you?"

"I did not know you were in London, Major Strause," answered the girl.

"London is practically empty; but, all the same, this war news is bringing many of us up," he replied.

Mollie looked round to see what the newcomer was like. She noticed a somewhat thick-set man, with reddish hair and a very long moustache. His eyes were of a light blue. His face was considerably freckled. Mollie voted him at once commonplace and uninteresting, and would not have bestowed any further thought upon him had she not observed a curious change in Keith's appearance. His face turned first white, then stern and sombre. He ceased to talk to Kitty, who was devoting herself now, with all that propensity for flirting which was part of her nature, to Major Strause.

"Do you know him well?" asked Mollie suddenly, in a low tone.

Keith gave a start when she addressed him. He turned and looked full at her.

"You already hold a secret of mine," he said, "and I am about to make you a present of another. The man who drugged me that night six months ago is Major Strause."

Mollie had too much self-control to show the surprise which filled her.

"I have something I want to tell you," continued Keith. "Can I see you somewhere alone?"

"Gavon, the music is going to begin again; do stop talking," cried Kitty, in a restless voice.

A girl who made her name at that concert came to the front of the stage, and her magnificent organ-like notes filled the building. Mollie, however, much as she loved music, scarcely listened. It was not only the tone in Gavon Keith's voice, but the words which he had uttered, which filled her mind. Something was undoubtedly wrong.

The song came to an end, and in the *furor* which followed Keith seized the opportunity to bend again towards Mollie.

"I shall be in the front drawing-room to-night at seven," he said. "Can you come down a few moments before the rest of the party?"

"I ought not," was Mollie's response.

"I ask it as a favour – a great personal favour. Will you refuse me?"

Mollie did not reply for an instant.

"I will come," she said then.

Major Strause did his utmost to make himself agreeable to Kitty, who, after the first moment of excitement, paid him but scant attention. Keith, having received Mollie's promise, was now quite ready to devote himself to the little girl, and his gay remarks and her smart repartees caused considerable laughter on the part of all the young people.

When the concert was over, Major Strause invited the entire party to have tea with him at his club. Mollie looked at Keith, expecting him to reply in the negative; but to her surprise he accepted the invitation with apparent cordiality. They all went to the Carlton, where the major entertained them; and as if thoroughly satisfied with his conversation with Kitty, he now turned his attention to Mollie. She told him she was a Sister of the Red Cross; whereupon he looked her all over, and said, bowing as he spoke, —

"Then we may have the pleasure of meeting again, and under different circumstances."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Why, my dear Miss Hepworth, need you ask? I mean that war is inevitable: my regiment, and that also of my friend Captain Keith, will be among the first ordered to the front. If you are a Sister of the Red Cross – "

"I shall go to South Africa," replied Mollie. She spoke in a low tone, and there was a thrill of enthusiasm in her voice.

"Then we are quite certain to meet again," he said, and he turned from her to Kitty to address a remark on a totally different matter.

It was past six o'clock when the girls got home. Kitty was inclined to dawdle downstairs; but Mollie, remembering her promise to Keith, hurried off to her room. Kitty stayed behind for a moment. She suddenly stretched out her hand to Keith, who took it in some astonishment.

"Well, little girl, what now?" he asked.

"Tell me what you think of her," said Kitty.

"Think of whom?"

"My sister – my Mollie."

"I admire her very much; she reminds me of you."

"Oh, does she?" answered Kitty. She dimpled and smiled. "Is that really why you are so much interested in her, Gavon?"

"It is one of the reasons," he replied, after a pause. "She reminds me most wonderfully of you. But at the same time there is a great gulf between you. Your sister has been trained in one of the finest professions a woman can possibly take up. She has therefore a force of character, an individuality which – "

"Which I lack. Oh, you need not apologize," said Kitty, looking half amused, half sorrowful. "Mollie always, always had just what I lack. But I thought – "

"Let your thoughts run in the old groove, Kitty," replied the young man. "You are the most charming friend a man could possibly possess. But I hear my mother's voice. We shall meet again at dinner."

Kitty mounted the stairs slowly.

"I wonder what Gavon really thinks about me, and about her," she said to herself. "It was to me he spoke whenever he had a chance this afternoon, but it was at her he looked. Did he wonder at her dowdy dress? Darling Mollie was not at her best; and I felt such a wretch, for I could have made her lovely. When once I am engaged to Gavon, my Mollie shall want for nothing."

Kitty hummed a gay air as she entered the large bedroom which the two girls shared. Mollie was arranging her hair before the glass, and the lace evening dress which she had worn on the previous night lay on her bed.

"What a hurry you are in!" cried Kitty. "We have oceans of time. We need not begin to dress until seven o'clock."

"But I must dress at once," replied Mollie.

"Why?"

Mollie did not answer immediately.

"Why?" repeated Kitty, whose nerves were so strained that she could brook no suspense of any sort.

Mollie thought quickly; then she turned and looked at her sister.

"I will tell you," she said. "Captain Keith wants to see me for a minute or two. It is in connection with a matter which I happened to hear about when I was at Netley – a matter of which you know nothing. Dear little girl, if you are worth your salt you will not be jealous."

Kitty's face turned very white.

"But I am jealous," she said then, slowly. "I suppose I am not worth my salt. I am jealous – horribly so. O Mollie, don't go to him; don't, Mollie! Mollie, do stay here, for my sake."

"I am sorry, Kitty. I have promised Captain Keith to give him a few moments, and I cannot break my word. You must trust me, and not be a goose."

Kitty crossed the room slowly. Her very steps trembled. She reached her bed and flung herself on it. When she raised her face after a moment or two, the tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"This is intolerable," thought Mollie. "I never could have guessed that my little sister would be so silly. The best thing I can do is to take no notice." So she checked the impulse to go up to Kitty, take her in her arms, and fuss over her and pet her, and went on with her own toilet.

As the clock was on the stroke of seven she turned to leave the room. She had just reached the door when Kitty gave a cry.

"Mollie," she said.

Mollie went up to her at once.

"Dress yourself like a good child and come down when you are ready," was her remark. "And let me say one thing: *Don't be a little goose.*" Mollie closed the door behind her, and Kitty covered her face with her hands. She shivered.

"Is it true?" she murmured. "Is it possible that after all these months and years, and all these hopes and all these dreams, I am doomed to see him love another, and that other my own sister? Oh, it is too cruel! It will kill me – it will drive me mad!" She clenched her hands till the nails penetrated the tender flesh. Then she opened them wide, and looked at them with self-pity.

"It is too cruel," she said to herself. "Even now he is talking to her, telling her secrets. He never told me a secret in all his life. He has always just been the very dearest of the dear, but he has never yet told me even one secret. He has not known her twenty-four hours, and already he is confiding in her. I won't stand it. I wonder what they are talking about. Why should I not know? I have a right to know – every right. I am all but engaged to him. All my friends think that I shall marry Gavon. His own mother thinks it – I know she does. And Gavon – oh, he must, he must know what I feel for him! He must return my love! Life would be intolerable without him. If he has a grain of honour, he will engage himself to me, and soon, very soon. It is not right, therefore, that he, an almost engaged man, should tell secrets to another woman. Those secrets belong to me. Oh, how I have loved Mollie! but just now I hate her. Mollie darling, it is true – I hate you! I hate that calm face of yours, and that gentle smile, and those cool, comforting hands. And I hate your manner and the way you talk. I hate your very walk, which is so dignified and so full of confidence. You have all that I never had, and in addition you have got my pretty features, my eyes, my lips, my teeth, the same coloured hair, the same colour in your cheeks. It isn't fair, Mollie darling, it isn't fair. Life is too hard on Kitty if you take from her just the one only man she could ever love. I know what I'll do. I'll dress in a jiffy, and I'll go into the back drawing-room. I know how I can slip in – just by that door that is so seldom opened. I will stay there, and I'll hear everything. They won't look for me; but even if they do it doesn't matter, for there is that in me which – oh dear, am I mad?"

Kitty sprang from the bed. She rushed to her washstand, poured out some hot water, laved her face and hands, and then arranging her hair with one or two quick touches she put on her black net evening dress. She was too excited to think of her usual ornaments. Her little round throat had not even a solitary string of pearls encircling it. Her arms were destitute of bracelets. She opened her door softly, and put out her head to listen. There was not a sound. The thickly carpeted passages and the stairs were empty. The first dressing gong had sounded, and there was yet quite a quarter of an hour before dinner. Catching up her skirts to prevent even the rustle of the silk as she flew downstairs, Kitty reached the drawing-room floor. She opened a door which was seldom opened; it led into the small back drawing-room, a room which in its turn opened into the conservatory. The back drawing-room was seldom lighted, except when Mrs. Keith expected company. It was quite dark now, and Kitty, agile and watchful, flung herself on a sofa in a corner, where she knew she could not be seen. She bent a little forward and listened with all her might.

"I have told you all that I can tell you, and you understand?" said Keith.

These were the first words that fell on her ears. Keith's voice sounded a great way off, and Kitty perceived to her consternation that her sister and Captain Keith were standing at the other end of the long drawing-room. In order not to miss a word, she was obliged to leave her first hiding-place and steal more towards the light. The couple, however, were too absorbed to notice her.

"I have told you," repeated Keith; "you know all that is necessary now."

"Yes," answered Mollie. Then she said, "But a half-confidence is worse than none."

"I have good reasons for withholding the rest," was Keith's answer. "I have resolved to keep it a secret."

"On account of – Kitty?" was Mollie's remark.

It was received with a puzzled stare by Captain Keith. He stepped a little away from her, and then said emphatically, —

"Yes, for Kitty's sake, and for my mother's sake. What is the matter? Why do you look at me like that?"

"I don't believe in keeping these sort of things secret," said Mollie. "It would be very much better to make a clean breast of the whole affair. It is never wrong to tell the truth. I have always acted on that motto myself."

"It is easy for a woman to act on it," replied Keith; "with a man things are different."

"They ought not to be," said Mollie, with passion. "It is, I firmly believe, the right and the only right thing to do. Now you to-day –"

"Ah, I understand; you must have thought me inconsistent. I was, doubtless, in your opinion too – cordial."

"You certainly were."

"I could not have done otherwise. Kitty would have been amazed. Whatever one's inclinations, one has to think of the feelings of others."

Before Mollie could reply to this Mrs. Keith entered the room.

"Why has not John lit the lamp in the small drawing-room?" was her first remark.

At these words Kitty softly opened the seldom-used door and fled. She rushed to her room.

"Now I know; now I know!" she panted. "Yes, I know everything. Mollie thought him too cordial, and he said that he did not wish to hurt my feelings, whatever his own inclinations might be. Oh, can it be possible that Mollie is false to me? But there! hearing is believing."

The dinner gong sounded, and Kitty was forced to go downstairs. Her cheeks were bright, and she looked remarkably pretty; but her head ached badly. She sat in her accustomed place, close to Captain Keith. He began to talk to her in the light, bantering, and yet affectionate style he generally adopted when in her presence. She gave him a quick glance and shrugged her shoulders.

"I have a headache," she said abruptly; "I would rather not speak."

"My dear child," exclaimed Mrs. Keith, "I hope you are not going to have influenza!"

"And I trust I am," replied Kitty, in a defiant voice. Then seeing by the astonished pause that she had said something even more *outré* than usual, she looked round the company and gave a ghastly smile. "I mean it," she said; "it would be such a good opportunity for Molly to nurse me."

"But you can have the horrid thing half a dozen times," said Keith. "Come, Kit, do be pleasant. It won't do you any harm, even if you have a headache, to laugh at my jokes."

"You are like all men – horridly selfish," retorted Kitty. And then she added, as if to put the final cap on her rudeness, "And your jokes are never worth laughing at. You descend to puns; could any human being sink lower? Oh, talk to Mollie, if you must talk to any one. I mean what I say – I would rather be silent."

Keith shrugged his shoulders. He was fond of Kitty, and was sorry to see her put out.

"What can be the matter?" he said to himself. He knew her well enough not to place much faith in the headache.

The rest of the dinner was a dismal failure, and when it was over Kitty retired to the back drawing-room. Nothing mattered, she said to herself; Gavon, after all, did not care for her. He was polite, civil, even affectionate, because he did not want to hurt her feelings.

Meanwhile Mrs. Keith, in the other room, was talking to Mollie.

"Gavon tells me that there is not a doubt that war will be declared immediately," she said. "There are moments when all mothers have to crush their feelings; but when it is the case of an only son it is terribly difficult. It is hard to see him go away into danger, and to feel that he may never return!"

"And yet you would be the very last woman on earth to keep him back," replied Mollie.

"That is true," answered Mrs. Keith. "I would not restrain all that is noble and good in him for the world." She looked around her. "Kitty!" she cried. There was no response. "Where can the child be?" she said suddenly; "she seemed ill at dinner."

"She ought to go to bed if she has a headache," said Mollie. "I will go and speak to her. Ah, I see her in the back drawing-room. She is reading something."

"Then don't disturb her," said Mrs. Keith. "Sit near me, Mollie; I like to talk to you. Ah, here comes Gavon. – Gavon, go and have a chat with poor little Kitty; for some reason or other, she is very much put out."

Keith crossed the room and sat down by Kitty.

"How is the head now – any better?" he asked.

His tone was always sympathetic; at this moment it was dangerously so.

Kitty swallowed her tears and looked full up at him.

"It is not my head," she said.

"I thought not," he replied with a laugh, which, in spite of himself, was uneasy. "Something has ruffled the small temper. Is not that so? What is the matter, my dear little coz?"

"Don't call me that."

"Why not? You are my cousin after a fashion."

"I am not, and I don't want to be."

Captain Keith coloured.

"Come," he said, "this is serious. I did not think – I mean when you were – yes, cross at dinner, I did not suppose that it would last. But you use words which it is difficult to understand. What have I done to offend you, Katherine? Have we not always been good friends?"

"What have you done?" she answered. She trembled all over, and in her agitation blurted out words which she had thought never to utter. "You are false, and I thought you true," she said. "Why did you lead me to believe – "

"Hush!" he said sternly. He laid his hand for a moment on hers. "Little girl, you will say something which you will regret all your life. Don't talk to me while you are angry. Recover your self-control; then I will listen as long as ever you please."

"Oh yes, my pain is nothing to you!"

"I beseech you to exercise self-control. Do be silent for the present, I beg, I implore of you."

"What do you mean?" she said. "Your manner frightens me."

He dropped his voice.

"Kitty," he said, "I want you to be courageous and strong, and to help my mother. An hour of sore trial is close to her, and I have not told her yet. I do not want her to hear until the morning. Kit, little Kit, my regiment is under orders to sail for South Africa on Saturday week – just ten days from now. I have just ten more days in the old country, and during these ten days, Kitty – "

"O Gavon!" she cried, "if you go – "

"What?"

"Take me, oh, take me with you!"

"Kitty!" His tone was a shocked exclamation. He stood up also and backed away from her.

"I know what you feel," she said recklessly. "You have shown it all too plainly. I will speak now if I have to be silent all the rest of my life. Were you blind, Gavon, not to see that I – that my heart is breaking?"

"Poor little girl! But the mother would not go to South Africa, and you could not go without her."

"Oh, don't you, *won't* you understand?" she repeated.

He shrugged his shoulders, looked at her as she gazed up at him with all her burning passion shining in her eyes, and then sat down to face the inevitable.

"I cannot pretend to misunderstand you, Kitty," he said then; "I do know what you mean. You ought not to have spoken. No girl should put a man in such a position."

"A man thinks nothing of putting a girl in such a position," she retorted, with spirit.

"I have not done so." He longed to say something more, but checked himself. "Yes, you have made a mistake," he said. Then, endeavouring to calm his voice, "And a man cannot take his wife into the battlefield. War is inevitable. This is no time to think of –"

"You don't love me – that is what you mean," said Kitty.

He hated to give her pain. Perhaps he was weak enough to have said words just then which he might have regretted all his days, but just at that moment a vision of Mollie, as she had looked when he spoke to her before dinner, returned to him.

"It is true that I do not love you in that sort of fashion, Kitty," he said then. "I am fond of you, my dear; but you must know, you must guess, that there is a difference."

"Oh, so wide!" she cried. She stretched out both her arms. "There is a love which fills the heart, which covers the horizon, which colours every single thing one does; and there is also what people call an ordinary friendship or attachment. How dare people speak of the two in the same breath? You, Gavon, give me an ordinary friendship. In return for my pretty speeches, and my songs, and my gaiety, and my fun, you give me an ordinary friendship. And I give you – oh, just everything!" Kitty spread her arms wide. Her face was pale, the tears had partly dried on her cheeks, and her eyes looked larger and more full of soul than he had ever seen them before.

"I am not worthy of it, Kitty," said the young man, and he bowed his head.

She looked at him as he did so, and then one of her queer impulses came over her. He was shocked and yet touched by her words; she would undo everything by her next confession.

"Before dinner," she said, "I was mad with jealousy. You wanted to see Molly – Molly whom you have not known twenty-four hours. I felt that I could not bear it. I came in here, and I overheard –"

"What, what?" he asked. He sprang to his feet and seized her arm.

"I didn't hear everything," she continued, backing away from him. "But you told her a secret. You alluded to something which had happened to you long ago. And she accused you of being too cordial – too – Oh, I know what she meant. What you said to her and what she said to you gave me my headache. But it was not really headache; it was heartache. I won't talk to you any longer now. Good-night."

He caught her hand as she was leaving the room.

"In spite of these painful words on both sides," he said, "may not our old friendship continue?" He looked full at her. She did not speak for a moment; then she said, —

"When do you sail?"

"Saturday week."

She began to count the days on her fingers; then with a broken-hearted smile she left the room.

CHAPTER V. A LEGACY

A year and a half before this story opens Gavon Keith had got his captaincy in the North Essex Light Infantry, and just about the same time he found himself in a serious scrape. In a moment of weakness he had put himself absolutely in the power of Major Strause. Major Strause was his senior officer. There was a young subaltern in the regiment, of the name of Aylmer. Percy Aylmer had conceived a most chivalrous and passionate attachment for Keith. Keith had been good to him when he first joined, had put him up to the ropes, had been on every occasion his warm friend, and the young fellow in consequence gave the deepest devotion of his heart to Keith.

Now Percy Aylmer was second cousin to Major Strause. Both his parents were dead, and he was possessed of large private means. He had no near relations, and often boasted that he could do exactly what he liked with the thousands which belonged to him. Major Strause was always more or less in money difficulties. He was a man who both gambled and drank. His character in the regiment was by no means without reproach. It was whispered that he was quite capable of doing shady actions, and although nothing absolutely to his discredit was known, he inspired little trust, and had few friends. From the moment that Aylmer had joined the North Essex Light Infantry it had been Major Strause's intention to make use of him. His young cousin's money would help him out of his many difficulties. He intended to make use of it, and probably would have done so but for the influence of Gavon Keith. Keith, upright himself, scrupulously honourable, straight as a die in all his words and actions, read through the major, and in his own way counteracted the influence which he tried to exert over Percy Aylmer. Without saying much, Keith contrived that Aylmer should look at Strause somewhat with his own eyes. And the consequence was that on many occasions Strause's endeavours to get large sums of money from his kinsman were foiled.

There came a day when Aylmer hastily appeared in Keith's quarters, flung himself into a chair, and said, —

"Now what's to be done? Strause is evidently up a tree. He wants me to lend him five thousand pounds. I have all but promised, but as you have always been my best friend, I thought I would let you know."

Keith looked annoyed.

"Where is the use of talking?" he said. "You are aware of my opinion. Strause is a confirmed gambler. Whatever you let him have he will lose either on the turf or the Stock Exchange."

Keith had never said as much before, and he bit his lips with annoyance when the words had passed them.

"Do you really think as badly of him as that?" asked Aylmer, in an anxious tone.

"Yes," said Keith stoutly. "As I have spoken, I hold to it; I cannot mince matters. Strause is not an honourable man, and the less you, my dear boy, have to do with him the better. By-the-way, Aylmer, how old are you?"

"I shall be two-and-twenty in a month," was Aylmer's reply.

"And on my next birthday I shall be twenty-nine. You must see what a gulf of experience lies between us. Now, Aylmer, I like you."

"You are the best friend a young fellow ever had," was Aylmer's reply.

"And I don't want to see you going straight to the devil."

Aylmer fidgeted.

"You may or may not be right with regard to Strause," he said, after a pause, "but one doesn't care to see one's kinsman in distress. Strause says he will be obliged to leave the regiment if I don't help him."

"To the extent of five thousand pounds?" remarked Keith.

Aylmer was silent.

"I tell you what it is," remarked the older man suddenly. "You leave me to see Strause over this matter."

"But he hates you, Keith," was Aylmer's naïve reply.

"All the same, I think I'll tackle him," said Keith. "Don't lend him money, Aylmer. For any sake, be firm with him. Strause can be the very devil if he once has a hold over a fellow."

Keith had cause to remember his own words later on, but at the time he thought only of Aylmer and how best he could save him.

That evening Keith called upon Major Strause, and had, as he expressed it, a straight talk with him. What one said to the other was never known, but when Keith left his brother officer's quarters he was under the impression that Aylmer was saved. This appeared to be the case. Strause was still quite friendly to both men, and Aylmer soon afterwards informed his friend that the loan of five thousand was no longer required.

Some weeks went by, and one evening Aylmer casually mentioned that he was making a fresh will.

"I made one soon after I joined," he said, "about three months after, just when you prevented me from making an ass of myself at mess. Do you remember?"

Keith smiled.

"Yes," he said. "I thought you one of the nicest boys I had ever seen afterwards."

"Well, I made a will then, and – Keith, you must not be angry – I put you into it."

"I wish you would make another, and leave me out," said Keith bluntly.

"That is just what Strause wants me to do."

"Oh," said Keith, altering his manner, "has Strause anything to do with this?"

"A great deal. I went up to town yesterday to consult his lawyer."

"Why? have you not your own business man?"

"I have; but Strause thinks a great deal of Mr. Gust."

"And have you made a will and signed it?"

"There is a will being drawn up. I cannot tell you its contents; it would not be fair, as you are one of those who will profit by it."

Keith sprang to his feet.

"Look here, Aylmer, old man," he said, "I have as much money as I need. Don't put me in your will; strike that part out. I don't want a man to leave his money away from his relatives."

"Well, then, Strause gets about everything. I am an only son of an only son, and my mother had neither brothers nor sisters."

"You talk as though you were dropping into the grave," said Keith. "All in good time you will marry and have children of your own. Don't sign that will, if you take my advice. Strause is playing his cards for his own ends. And now I will say no more."

A week after this Aylmer quite unexpectedly fell ill. At first it was reported that he had taken a bad chill when out hunting, and would be all right again in a few days. Then the doctor began to look grave, and said something about sudden developments and possible danger. Keith heard the news in the mess-room, and went straight to Aylmer's quarters. He found the poor fellow tossing about, flushed and miserable, with Strause in close attendance.

"Keith!" he cried, the moment Gavon Keith entered the room. "Oh, I am glad to see you! So you have come at last!"

"At last!" cried Keith; "I only heard of your illness an hour ago."

"But I have been sending you note after note," said the poor young fellow. "I wanted you so badly last night – yes, and the night before too."

"I'll sit up with you to-night, Aylmer," said Strause.

"Oh, it was dreadful last night!" moaned the boy. "I was alone, and I got so giddy, and thought for a moment that I was dying."

"Why has he not a proper nurse?" said Keith, turning sharply round and facing Strause.

"He doesn't wish for a nurse, nor does the doctor think it necessary. I am prepared to give up all my time to him."

"O Keith, do sit down; don't go quite yet," said Aylmer. His voice was low and his breathing rapid.

Keith did sit down by the bedside. He perceived at a glance that Aylmer's blue eyes were full of suppressed trouble, and resolved, if possible, to see him when Strause was absent. Presently Aylmer gave Keith a glance full of meaning, and the next moment looked in his cousin's direction. Keith bit his lips with annoyance. Strause had evidently no intention of leaving the room. To Keith's relief, however, a moment later an orderly arrived with a message desiring Strause to go to see the colonel immediately. Strause was obliged to comply. The moment he did so Aylmer clutched Keith by the hand.

"Don't leave me alone with him," he said; "he frightens me. If I want a nurse, he says he knows a woman who will come, and I shall be more in his power than ever. Do you know, I have not signed the will. I would rather the old will stood – I think I have remembered every one in it – all the old servants, I mean. I made the sort of will when I first joined that my father and mother would have liked had they been alive. Keith, I am afraid of Strause. He is mad about this will. He is never alone with me that he does not talk of it. It has arrived, and I have only to sign it, and he will easily get witnesses. And he will *make me do it*. I feel he will if he is alone with me. When you are ill you get nervous in the middle of the night. Don't you understand, Keith?"

"Yes, I understand," replied Keith, in that sympathetic voice which was one of his greatest charms.

"O Keith," continued the boy, "I did not think I could be such an arrant coward!"

"You are ill, and are therefore not responsible," replied Keith. "Now listen, Aylmer. I mean to look after you to-night. I am off duty, and if I cannot get Strause out of the room I will stay here too; so you need not worry about that will, for you cannot sign it while I am here to prevent you."

"No, that's right. What a relief it will be! God bless you, old chap!"

"Cheer up then, now, and go to sleep."

"You don't know how bad I feel, and what awful attacks of pain I get. I have to be more or less under an opiate all the time. What is the hour? Oh, I ought to have my medicine – not the opiate, but the other. You will find two bottles on that table, Keith. Do you mind giving me a dose of the one which is marked 'To be taken every two hours'?"

Keith crossed the room to a little table where some bottles were neatly arranged. One was a little larger than the other. On one were the simple directions that the medicine within was to be taken, two tablespoonfuls at a time, every two hours. The other medicine was to be taken only at the rate of a teaspoonful when the pain was very bad.

"I wish I might have a dose of the other medicine too," said Aylmer, in his weak voice; "it dulls the pain and makes me drowsy. I hate this stuff."

"The pain is not intolerable now, is it?" asked Keith.

"No; I feel much better – more confident, I mean – now that you have come to me."

"I am going to see you through this bout, Aylmer," said Keith; "so rest comfortable, old man. I won't desert you."

"The sound of your voice makes me feel ever so much better."

Keith arranged the sick boy's pillows. He then put the bottles back on the table, and noticed that two doses had been taken from the larger bottle, and that there was enough of the smaller one to last until the next day.

"I wish the doctor would come," said Aylmer, after a pause. "I know by my feelings that I am going to have another paroxysm of that awful pain."

He had scarcely said the words before the doctor softly opened the room door and entered. He was a clever young man, with all sorts of up-to-date knowledge, he made a careful examination of the patient, and the expression on his face was grave.

"He ought to have a trained nurse," he said.

"You must have one to-morrow, Aylmer," here interrupted Keith. – "Perhaps, Dr. Armstrong, you will choose a nurse and send her in."

"You ought to have a nurse to-night, Aylmer."

"Oh no, no; Keith has promised to look after me to-night."

"Yes, that I have," replied Keith; "and I know something of nursing, too," he added.

"Don't go back on your word, Keith," said Aylmer again. "You will do me more good than fifty nurses."

"I will certainly keep my promise," said Keith. – "But I should like to have a word with you, Armstrong, in the other room."

The doctor and Keith went into the anteroom.

"It is a serious case," said Dr. Armstrong: "there is a good deal of inflammation, and it is just possible that there may be a sudden termination; but he has youth on his side. I am glad you are going to stay with him for a bit. His nerves are very much out of order. I believe there is something worrying him more than this illness."

"I give a guess to what it is," said Keith; "and I don't think at a time like the present anything ought to be hidden from the doctor. Now, Dr. Armstrong, without explaining matters too fully, I want you to give me authority to forbid Major Strause to come to his cousin's rooms. The fact is, Strause worries him – it is a money matter. I dare not say any more. Aylmer ought not to be worried."

"I understood that young Aylmer was very rich," said Armstrong.

"So he is; but Strause is poor. Can you not take a hint?"

The doctor smiled.

"I'll have a talk with Strause," he said. "What you tell me explains much. He must not come near his cousin's rooms until the morning."

"Have I your authority to keep him out?"

"You certainly have."

The doctor went away, and Keith returned to his charge. He was a very tender-hearted, sympathetic fellow, and had much common-sense. He made the sick-room as tidy as any woman would have done, and gave his patient food and medicine at the prescribed intervals. The doctor called again late in the evening, and said that Aylmer was going on quite as well as could be expected. He had scarcely gone before Strause appeared. Keith went to the door of the outer room and spoke to him.

"You are not to come in," he said. "Aylmer must not be worried."

"Worried! I am his cousin," said Strause.

"I have the doctor's authority. I am in charge of the case under Armstrong until the morning." Strause's dull eyes flashed an ominous fire.

"I won't stay if I'm not wished for," he said, after a pause. He raised his voice on purpose. "But I want just to say a word to Aylmer. I shan't be two minutes." As he spoke, with a sudden movement he pushed Keith aside and entered the anteroom. The next instant he was in the sick-room. "I want to say something to my cousin alone," he repeated. "I shan't worry him, and I shan't be long."

"Anything is better than making a fuss," thought Keith, and he went and stood by the window of the sitting-room, trying to stay the impatience which had possession of him. "I must turn Strause out if he stays too long," thought the young man; "but anything would be better than kicking up a row inside Aylmer's sick-room." He noticed, however, that all was quiet in the room. He could not even hear the sound of voices. Strause seemed to be moving about on tiptoe.

After a moment or two he came out.

"Aylmer is asleep," he said. "I didn't disturb him. What I have to say must keep. You need not have been so chuff in your manner just now, Keith. I am glad to hand over the case to you for to-night. You are good-natured, and Aylmer is fond of you. I hope the poor boy will pull through. What does the doctor say?"

"Armstrong says it is a critical case."

Strause's face looked grave.

"He is right," he replied, after a pause. "None of Aylmer's family are sound. The father and mother died young. Well, poor chap, he has an abundance of this world's pelf: it will be a pity if he does not live to enjoy it. I will look round in the morning. Bye-bye for the present."

Strause's manner was friendly, and Keith reproached himself for the marked dislike he felt towards him. Presently he softly entered the sickroom, and sat down. Aylmer was sleeping. He awoke presently, and said in a drowsy tone, —

"My eyes hurt me; can you do without a candle in the room?"

"Certainly," replied Keith. "I will have a light in your sitting-room, and the door between the two rooms can be open."

"I am better, I think," said Aylmer, after a pause. "Is it time for my medicine?"

"Not for half an hour," replied Keith. "Go to sleep; I won't wake you if you happen to be asleep. The doctor says it is not necessary."

Aylmer closed his eyes and lay still. In a few minutes he moved fretfully, and said in a voice full of pain, —

"That horrible torture is beginning again. You must give me some of the opiate."

Keith rose immediately, took the smaller bottle of medicine, went into the anteroom, and poured out very carefully a teaspoonful, which he brought to Aylmer. Aylmer took it and lay still. In about a quarter of an hour he called out, —

"Keith, are you there?"

"Yes; what's up?"

"The pain is no better. It grows intolerable – I cannot endure it. I must have a second dose at once. Make it a little larger – do, like a good fellow – a dessertspoonful."

"I can't possibly do it, Aylmer. The doctor said that you were not to have this special medicine oftener than once an hour, and it is not a quarter of an hour since you had the last dose. You shall have a second after an hour is up. Now stay quite still, and then perhaps the pain will go off!"

Aylmer lay as still as he could, but the dew on his forehead and the pallor of his drawn face showed the agony through which he was living. His restless hands began plucking at the bed-clothes. Keith suddenly took one, and imprisoned it in both his own.

"My mother used to say that I had the hand of a mesmerist," he said. "Let me mesmerize you now. I will that pain goes."

Aylmer smiled. His blue eyes grew full of gratitude.

"There never was any one like you, Keith, old man," he said. "Whatever happens, I'd like you to know – I'd like you to know what I feel – I mean my gratitude to you. Keith, I believe I'd have gone to the dogs but for you, old fellow. But now – "

"Don't talk, Aylmer; you have to live a long life and prove your words."

"Oh, this agony!" cried the poor boy. "Keith, I don't believe I'll ever get better. Will you send for the doctor again? I know I am much worse."

"I will give you your opiate again at the end of an hour," said Keith, "and then, if you are not better, I will send for Armstrong. But, remember, he expected these paroxysms at intervals. He thought you going on nicely when he saw you at nine o'clock."

"I am worse now – much worse."

Keith suddenly rose.

"Why, it is time for your other medicine," he said; "perhaps you will feel easier after you have taken it."

Keith now crossed the room to the little table, took up the larger bottle, and went into the anteroom. He poured out a full dose of two tablespoonfuls, and brought the medicine in a glass to Aylmer. Aylmer drank it off, uttering a sigh as he did so.

"It doesn't taste quite the same," he said, "but – " His voice dropped away into a drowsy monotone. "You were quite right," he remarked in a minute: "the pain is dulled – I am beautifully sleepy. Don't disturb me, please."

"Certainly not. Go to sleep now; I am close to you."

Keith sat for some time motionless by the sick man's side. He knew by the gentle breathing that Aylmer had dropped into profound slumber. Presently he moved into an arm-chair, stretched himself out, and closed his eyes. Without intending it, he dropped off himself into sleep. During that sleep he had terrified dreams that Aylmer was calling him, and that Strause was preventing his going to him. At last he started up, his heart beating very fast.

"Did you call, Aylmer?" he said in a low voice, and yet loud enough to be heard in case the sick man was awake.

There was no reply. Startled by the stillness, Keith rose to his feet and went to the bedside.

"He is sleeping very quietly indeed," thought Keith; "I cannot even hear him breathe."

Then his own heart began to beat in an irregular, nervous fashion; a cold fear took possession of him. He went into the anteroom, struck a match, lit a candle, and brought it to the bedside. One glance showed him that Aylmer was dead.

Such a sudden termination to a young life caused a good deal of excitement in the regiment, and Keith was so knocked up that he was unable to attend to his duties for a day or two. The doctor expressed no surprise, however, at the sudden ending of the disease. A death certificate was duly given, and a few days afterwards Major Strause followed his young relative to his grave. The other officers of the regiment also followed Aylmer to his last resting-place; but Keith was still suffering from a queer, nervous seizure, which had come to him when he had found his charge dead.

"I can never forgive myself for falling asleep as I did," was his thought. "Perhaps if I had been wide awake and on the alert I might have been able to give the poor fellow a stimulant, and so have saved his life."

After his death Aylmer's will was read, and it was found that he had left Gavon Keith ten thousand pounds. The rest of his money went to different charities, with the exception of a few legacies to old servants of his father's. Major Strause's name was not mentioned at all. This was the will made by Aylmer when he had been three months in the regiment. A few of his brother officers expressed surprise when they heard that Keith had got so large a legacy. He was congratulated on all sides, however, for he was a prime favourite.

A fortnight went past, and one afternoon Major Strause went to see Keith. Keith was better, although he still looked pulled down, and his face was white.

"Well," said Strause, "glad to see you looking more like yourself."

"Yes; I am pulling round at last," replied Keith. "I cannot think why I gave way in this beastly fashion."

"It was a shock. No wonder," said Strause. "You know, of course, what a lucky chap you are? Ten thousand pounds to the good! It is worth having a small shock in such a cause."

Keith did not reply.

"Are you dumb, man?" said Strause, in some annoyance. "You have heard of the legacy?"

"I have. I wish in all conscience that he had not done it."

"Gammon!" was Strause's rude remark.

Keith flushed, and walked to the window. He wished that Strause would leave him. Strause, however, had no intention of doing so.

"There's something I want to say to you," he remarked now, pulling a chair forward, dropping into it, and lowering his voice. "I did not like to tell you before. At present the fact is known only to myself. Whether it goes further remains with you."

"What do you mean?"

"I will explain. Keith, an ugly thing happened in connection with Percy Aylmer's death."

Keith drew himself up very stiffly. He looked full at the major.

"I don't understand you," he said.

"You will soon, if you listen. Of course it was an accident, and a deplorable one, but you, Keith, gave that poor lad the wrong medicine."

"Oh, horror!" cried Keith. He sprang to his feet. A terrible weakness seized him; his head seemed to go round; he clutched a chair to keep himself from falling. "What do you mean?" he added.

"What I say," answered Strause, who read these signs of agitation with pleasure. "It happens that I am in a position to prove my words. You know I was nursing Aylmer all day until you arrived and interfered. Your interference was unwarrantable; but I say nothing of that. I had been giving Aylmer his medicines, and happened to know exactly the amount in each bottle. The alterative medicine, as it is called, had just been renewed, but the bottle containing the opiate was more than half full. The opiate was in the smaller bottle, as you know. The alterative medicine was to be given in tablespoonfuls – two tablespoonfuls to a dose. At the time I gave up my charge of Aylmer to you there were in the larger bottle five doses, but the bottle which contained the opiate was a little less than half full. Do you follow me?"

"I hear you, but I cannot imagine what you are driving at."

"You will soon know. On the morning of the death you were terribly agitated. I rushed off to the poor lad's quarters when I heard the news, and found that you had left, saying that you would be round again presently. I went to the table where the medicines stood, and casually took up the bottle which contained the opiate. The moment I saw it I opened my eyes. The bottle was very nearly empty! Even allowing for your giving him a teaspoonful at a time, it was absolutely impossible that he could have taken anything like the amount which was now gone. I then looked at the other bottle, and found that only one teaspoonful had been taken from it since you had charge of the case. You follow me, don't you? In the bottle which contained the alterative medicine there were still *four doses*; in the bottle which contained the opiate there was not more than a *teaspoonful* left. Beyond doubt what happened was this: you gave Aylmer, quite by mistake, two tablespoonfuls of the opiate – a dose which of course caused his death."

"You lie!" said Keith. "How dare you come to this room with that trumped-up story? I did not make a mistake with regard to the medicines. I was most careful, and I am prepared to swear in any court that I took two tablespoonfuls of the alterative medicine, which was in the larger bottle, and brought it to Aylmer between nine and ten o'clock that night."

"Swear it, then," said Strause, in a contemptuous voice, with a sneer on his lips, and a malicious light in his eyes which caused Keith to recoil from him as though he were a serpent – "swear it, and go right through with the whole thing. I have the bottles in my possession, and although there are no witnesses on either side, believe me it will be at best a nasty case for you. You were alone with the sick man – you gave him a fatal dose of the wrong medicine – you were remembered in the poor fellow's will to the somewhat unusual tune of ten thousand pounds. My fine fellow, you are in my power. Even supposing the murder is never brought home to you, your career as an officer in the North Essex Light Infantry is over."

As Strause said the last words he left the room, swaggering out with his usual gait.

Keith sank into a chair and pressed both his hands to his throbbing temples. Was this true?

CHAPTER VI. A TRYING POSITION

When he had first got over his start of dismay, Gavon Keith's impulse was to defy Strause. He fully believed that the story was invented by Strause for his own purpose, and that poor Aylmer had not been given the wrong medicine. For what ends Strause should bring such a horrible accusation against him Keith could not at that moment guess. He thought matters over, however, with all the common-sense of which he was capable; and that evening, although he still felt weak and giddy, he went to see Major Strause at his quarters, and found that officer within.

"Ah," said Strause, "I thought you might call round. Well, what do you intend to do?"

"Nothing," replied Keith.

"You sit down under the accusation?"

Keith turned first red, then white.

"I do nothing of the sort," he said. "I deny your charge absolutely. I did not give the wrong medicine. I was particularly careful with regard to the medicines. It is true that poor Aylmer disliked the light – I therefore kept his sick-room in comparative darkness; but on the two occasions when I gave him medicines on that fatal night I took the bottles into the sitting-room. Between ten and eleven o'clock, as he was in considerable pain, I gave him a teaspoonful of the opiate. I distinctly recall the bottle and the words, 'One teaspoonful per dose.' He took it, and said it did him no good. He wanted me to give him a larger dose. This I refused. Soon afterwards the hour arrived when he was to take the other medicine. I took that bottle also into the sitting-room, and by the light from a gas jet poured out two tablespoonfuls – no more and no less. I brought the medicine back with me, and he drank it off. He seemed to find relief as he did so, and dropped off asleep immediately. What are you sneering at?"

"You give yourself away so splendidly," said Strause. "Aylmer would naturally feel relief from such a powerful opiate as you administered."

"I did not administer the opiate. I gave him two tablespoonfuls from the other bottle. It is, I suppose, within the region of possibility that the medicines may have been shifted into wrong bottles. For that I am not responsible. You will recollect, perhaps, the fact that you visited Aylmer in his room soon after nine o'clock that evening. You were there for a couple of minutes, and came out afterwards, telling me that he was asleep. I noted that you were quite two minutes in the room, by the little clock on the mantelpiece. I also observed that you walked about softly while there. If you bring this charge against me, I can but repeat what happened."

"And who will believe your word? you have no witnesses."

"Nor have you."

"I hold the bottles," said Strause, with another sneer.

Keith was silent for a minute or two.

"I see nothing for it," he said, "but to try and get an order to have the body exhumed, and thus have the case properly sifted."

Strause uttered an uneasy laugh. He walked to the window and looked out. Then he returned to Keith.

"You do not know, perhaps," he said, "that the effects of opium are very short-lived, and that long before now all traces of opium would have left the poor fellow's body."

"Let the case be brought openly to trial," was Keith's next remark.

"What! you would have yourself ruined, if not worse?"

"I would rather risk anything than put myself in your power."

As Keith spoke he rose and left the room without even saying good-bye to Strause. All that night he kept to his resolve to sift the matter thoroughly, and then repeated to himself, —

"Anything would be better than getting myself into Strause's power."

But the following morning he received letters from home which caused him to look upon the affair from a fresh point of view. His mother had been seriously ill; his cousin, as he always called Kitty Hepworth, wrote to him to say how nervous she had become. She also said that Mrs. Keith was troubled about money matters, having lately lost a large sum through the failure of an Australian bank. If there was any one on earth whom Keith worshipped, it was his widowed mother. Without a moment's delay he wrote to her to tell her of his unexpected legacy, and to ask her to put at least two thousand pounds of the money to her own credit. He further resolved not to give her anxiety by allowing the case of poor Aylmer's death to be investigated. In short, he deliberately, and without at all realizing what he was doing, put himself in the major's power.

For the first few weeks his enemy lay low, as the expression is. But soon he began to use the dangerous weapon which Keith had supplied him with. The poor fellow was blackmailed, and to a considerable extent. Strause now informed him that his delay in having the case investigated made it black against him.

"Had you acted when you first heard my suspicions, a jury might have been inclined to look leniently at the matter; but your reticence, and the very fact that you have used some of your legacy, would tell terribly against you."

Keith believed him, and that evening handed him five hundred pounds. From that moment his fate was sealed.

His face lost its youthfulness; he became haggard and worn. He hated himself for what he termed his cowardice. He was convinced in his own mind that if there was foul play in the matter Strause was at the bottom of it.

Meanwhile Strause was dropping hints in the regiment which bore fruit in a coldness towards Keith. Strause hinted that Keith held a secret, and that this secret had something to do with his lucky windfall, as it was termed. No one believed much what Strause said, but the evidence of their senses caused his brother officers to gaze at Keith in some surprise. Aylmer's name, mentioned on purpose, caused the man to start and change colour. The mention of the legacy was like touching a raw place. It was known that Aylmer had died very suddenly, that Keith had been with him at the last, and that there was no nurse. It was also known that Keith's legacy was an unexpectedly big one.

There came an evening when Strause and Keith dined together, and Strause, who wanted a very large sum of money from Keith, introduced a peculiar drug into his wine. This drug had a curious effect on the mind – stimulating it at first into unnatural activity, but weakening the judgment, and altogether causing the moral senses to remain in abeyance. It was an Indian drug, which Major Strause had learned the secret of from a native some time before. Its later effect was very much that of ordinary opium.

Keith was asked to dine with his brother officer in his own quarters. Two other men were present. Wine was handed round, and they all made merry. The other men were, however, on duty at an early hour that evening. Strause knew this, but Keith did not. Strause and Keith found themselves alone, and Strause produced the bottle which had been previously prepared. Keith took a couple of glasses – quite enough for Strause's purpose. Soon the effect which the drug always produced became manifest. Keith lost his self-control without knowing the fact. Strause brought the full power of a clever mind to bear on his victim. In the end he got Keith to sign a cheque for three thousand pounds in his favour.

Strause had now, by large sums and small, secured nearly half the legacy. The present three thousand would stave off immediate difficulties, and he resolved, for a time at least, to leave the young man alone.

Keith went out to return to his own quarters; but the excitement of the drug was still on him, and he resolved to take a walk. He had by this time forgotten that he had signed the cheque; but his

mind kept dwelling on Aylmer, and it seemed to him that at every turn of the road he saw the dead lad, who came to reproach him for being the cause of his early death.

"If this sort of thing goes on," he said to himself, "I shall end by believing that I really did change the medicines."

Suddenly, as is always the case, the effect of the drug which he had imbibed changed. He became sleepy and stupid. His head reeled, and he staggered as though he were drunk. Presently, unable to go another step, he fell down by the roadside. There Mollie Hepworth found him.

By the next morning he was himself again, and he then remembered all that had occurred. He was convinced that he had been drugged the night before. His suspicions with regard to Strause became intensified, and he felt that if this sort of thing continued much longer there was nothing for him but to leave the army, a ruined, and, in the eyes of many, a disgraced man. For he was quite aware of the fact that Strause dropped hints by no means in his favour. In no other way could he account for the coldness that had arisen amongst his old friends. He was thoroughly miserable, and but for his mother, would have left England for ever.

A few days after this Strause met him with the information that he had exchanged into another regiment.

"I am heartily glad to hear it," was Keith's rejoinder.

Strause looked him full in the eyes.

"All the same, we shall meet again," he said; "I have not done with you, my fine fellow."

Keith had a good deal of recuperative power, and after Strause went he began once again to recover. Hope returned to him; the brightness came back to his eyes, and the vigour to his frame. He never ceased to regret that he had not insisted on Strause's ugly suspicions being brought into the light of day; but being relieved from the man's society, he once more began to enjoy existence. He resolved not to let Major Strause ruin his life.

He sincerely hoped that he and his enemy might not meet again. The loss of five thousand pounds of his legacy mattered but little if he had really got rid of Strause. He became once more popular and beloved, and at the time when this story opens he had, to a great extent, got over the shock which Aylmer's death and its subsequent events had caused him.

Several months had passed since that fatal time when Mollie Hepworth had found him, drugged and insensible, by the roadside. He had tried to forget all the incidents of that dreadful night, except one. Over and over, often when he was dropping asleep, often in his busiest and most active moments, the face of Mollie, so kind, so calm, with an indefinable likeness to another face which he knew, and in a great measure loved, came back to him. He felt that Mollie was his guardian angel, and he wondered if he should ever meet her again. When she arrived at his mother's house, and he found that the girl who had helped him in the lowest moment of his life was really Kitty's sister, his surprise and delight were almost indescribable. Before twenty-four hours had gone the inevitable thing had taken place: he had lost his heart to Mollie Hepworth.

He loved her with all a young man's first passion. He had liked girls before, but he had never loved any one till now. Yes, he loved Mollie, and he did not see that there was any obstacle to his winning her. When he stood by her side in the front drawing-room in his mother's house before dinner, when once or twice his hand touched hers, and when many times his eyes looked into hers, he thought of a moment when he might draw her close to him and tell her everything. He had not told her everything yet. All he had told her was that he knew for a fact that Major Strause had drugged him; that he was in the major's power, and did not see any way out. He had told her nothing about Aylmer. He felt that the story, if it were to be kept a secret, ought not to be known even by one so trustworthy as Mollie. And as he talked to her and listened to her grave, sensible replies, he felt that he loved her more and more each moment. How glad he was now that he had never gone too far with pretty, gay, dear little Kitty! His mother had hinted more than once that Kitty would be a desirable wife for him. He had been wise not to listen to his mother's words. He had always been fond of Kitty,

but he had never, he felt, said one word to her which she could justly misinterpret. Yes, he was free – free to woo Mollie, and to win her if he could. He knew that he would woo earnestly and with passion. He had a sudden sense, too, of belief in his own ultimate success. She loved her profession, but there was that in her which would make her love him even better.

He sat down to dinner in the best of spirits, and his eyes often followed the girl who was now occupying all his thoughts. After dinner he was destined to see the other side of the picture; for Kitty, in her despair, had shown him so much of her heart that he could not for an instant mistake her feelings. He was shocked, distressed. Once again he blamed himself.

"I am doomed to be unlucky," he muttered, as he tossed from side to side on his pillow. "Is it possible that Aylmer came by his death by foul means? O my God, I cannot even think on that topic! Is it also possible that at any time I gave poor little Kitty reason to believe that I cared for her other than as a brother? Honestly, I don't think I have done so. Poor little girl! I don't love her in the way she wants me to love her. She would make a dear little sister, but a wife – no. Kitty, I don't love you as a wife ought to be loved, and I do love your sister Mollie. What a position for a man to be in!"

CHAPTER VII. CONFIDENCES

When Mollie went to bed that night, she found her sister seated by the fire. Her cheeks were deeply flushed, and traces of tears were plainly visible round her pretty eyes. When she saw Mollie, she turned her head petulantly aside. Mollie, in some astonishment, went up to her.

"Why are you not in bed, Kit?" she asked.

Mollie's matter-of-fact, almost indifferent words were as the proverbial last straw to the excited girl. She sprang to her feet, flung her arms to her sides, and confronted her sister, her brown eyes flashing, her cheeks on fire.

"You ask me that!" she said – "you! Why did you ever come back? If you meant to devote your life to nursing, why did you not stay with your patients? Why did you come back now of all times to – to destroy my hopes? Oh, I am the most wretched girl in the world!"

"What do you mean, Kitty?" said Mollie, in astonishment. "I do not understand you. Have you lost your senses?"

"My heart is broken," answered Kitty; and now all her fortitude gave way, and she sobbed as though she would weep away her life.

Mollie was very much startled. She thought she knew Kitty, but she did not understand this strange mood. She went on her knees, put her arms round the younger girl, and tried, at first in vain, to comfort her.

"You must save me!" cried Kitty presently, and her voice rose to a high hysterical note. "I shall die if you don't."

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