FLORENCE BARCLAY

THE FOLLOWING OF THE STAR: A ROMANCE

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Содержание

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GOLD

CHAPTER I
THE STILL WATERS OF BRAMBLEDENE

David Rivers closed his Bible suddenly, slipped it into the inner pocket of his coat, and, leaning back in his armchair, relaxed the tension at which he had been sitting while he mentally put his thoughts into terse and forcible phraseology.

His evening sermon was ready. The final sentence had silently thrilled into the quiet study, in the very words in which it would presently resound through the half-empty little village church; and David felt as did the young David of old, when he had paused at the brook and chosen five smooth stones for his sling, on his way to meet the mighty champion of the Philistines. David now felt ready to go forward and fight the Goliath of apathy and

inattention; the life-long habit of not listening to the voice of the preacher, or giving any heed to the message he brought.

The congregation, in this little Hampshire village church where, during the last five weeks, David had acted as locum-tenens, consisted entirely of well-to-do farmers and their families; of labourers, who lounged into church from force of habit, or because, since the public-houses had been closed by law during the hours of divine service, it was the only warmed and lighted place to be found on a Sunday evening; of a few devout old men and women, to whom weekly church-going, while on earth, appeared the only possible preparation for an eternity of Sabbaths in the world to come; and of a fair sprinkling of village lads and lassies, who took more interest in themselves and in each other than in the divine worship in which they were supposed to be taking part.

The two churchwardens, stout, florid, and well-to-do, occupied front pews on either side of the centre; Mr. Churchwarden Jones, on the right; Mr. Churchwarden Smith, on the left. Their official position lent them a dignity which they enjoyed to the full, and which overflowed to *Mrs.* Jones and *Mrs.* Smith, seated in state beside them. When, on "collection Sundays," the churchwardens advanced up the chancel together during the final verse of the hymn, and handed the plates to the Rector, their wives experienced a sensation of pride in them which "custom could not stale." They were wont to describe at the Sunday midday dinner or at supper, afterwards, the exact

effect of this "procession" up the church, an oft-told tale for which they could always be sure of at least one interested auditor.

Mr. Churchwarden Jones bowed when he delivered the plate to the Rector. Mr. Churchwarden Smith did not bow, but kept himself more erect than usual; holding that anything in the nature of a bow, while in the House of God, savoured of popery.

This provided the village with a fruitful subject for endless discussion. The congregation was pretty equally divided. One half approved the stately bow of Mr. Churchwarden Jones, and unconsciously bowed themselves, while they disregarded their hymn-books and watched him make it. The other half were for "Smith, and no popery," and also sang of "mystic sweet communion, with those whose rest is won," without giving any thought to the words, while occupied in gazing with approval at Farmer Smith's broad back, and at the uncompromising stiffness of the red neck, appearing above his starched Sunday collar.

Mrs. Smith secretly admired Mr. Jones's bow, and felt that her man was missing his chances for a silly idea; but not for worlds would Mrs. Smith have admitted this; no, not even to her especial crony, Miss Pike the milliner, who had once been to Paris, and knew what was what.

The venerated Rector, father of his people, always bowed as he received the plates from the two churchwardens. But then, that had nothing whatever to do with the question, his *back* being to the Table. Besides, the Rector, who had christened, confirmed, married, and buried them, during the last fifty years, could do no

wrong. They would as soon have thought of trying to understand his sermons, as of questioning his soundness. "The Rector says," constituted a final judgment, from which there was no appeal.

As he slowly and carefully mounted the pulpit stairs, one hand grasping the rail, the other clasping a black silk sermon-case, the hearts of his people went with him.

The hearts of his people were with him, as his silvery hair and benign face appeared above the large red velvet cushion on the pulpit desk; and the minds of his people were with him, until he had safely laid his sermon upon the cushion, opened it, and gently flattened the manuscript with both hands; then placed his pocket-handkerchief in the handy receptacle specially intended to contain it, and a lozenge in a prominent position on the desk. But, this well-known routine safely accomplished, they sang a loud amen to the closing verse of "the hymn before the sermon," and gave their minds a holiday, until, at the first words of the ascription, they rose automatically with a loud and joyous clatter to their feet, to emerge in a few moments into the fresh air and sunshine.

A perplexing contretemps had once occurred. The Rector's gentle voice had paused in its onward flow. It was not the usual lozenge-pause. Their subconscious minds understood and expected that. But, as a matter of fact, the Rector had, on this particular Sunday, required a second lozenge towards the end of the sermon, and the sentence immediately following this unexpected pause chanced to begin with the words: "And now to

enlarge further upon our seventh point." At the first three words the whole congregation rose joyfully to their feet; then had to sit down abashed, while the Rector hurriedly enlarged upon "our seventh point." It was the only point which had as yet penetrated their intelligence.

In all subsequent sermons, the Rector carefully avoided, at the beginning of his sentences, the words which had produced a general rising. He would smile benignly to himself, in the seclusion of his study, as he substituted, for fear of accidents, "Let us, my brethren," or "Therefore, belovèd."

It never struck the good man, content with his own scholarly presentment of deep theological truths, that the accidental rising was an undoubted evidence of non-attention on the part of his congregation. He continued to mount the pulpit steps, as he had mounted them during the last fifty years; attaining thereby an elevation from which he invariably preached completely over the heads of his people.

In this they acquiesced without question. It was their obvious duty to "sit under" a preacher, not to attempt to fathom his meaning; to sit *through* a sermon, not to endeavour to understand it. So they slumbered, fidgeted, or thought of other things, according to their age or inclination, until the ascription brought them to their feet, the benediction bowed them to their knees, and the first strident blasts of the organ sent them gaily trooping out of church and home to their Sunday dinners, virtuous and content.

Into this atmosphere of pious apathy, strode David Rivers; back on sick-leave from the wilds of Central Africa; aflame with zeal for his Lord, certain of the inspiration of his message; accustomed to congregations to whom every thought was news, and every word was life; men, ready and eager to listen and to believe, and willing, when once they had believed, to be buried alive, or tied to a stake, and burned by slow fire, sooner than relinquish or deny the faith he had taught them.

But how came this young prophet of fire into the still waters of our Hampshire village? The wilds of the desert, and the rapid rushings of Jordan, are the only suitable setting for John the Baptists in all ages.

Nevertheless to Hampshire he came; and it happened thus.

Influenza, which is no respecter of persons, attacked the venerated Rector.

In the first stress of need, neighbouring clergy came to the rescue. But when six weeks of rest and change were ordered, as the only means of insuring complete recovery, the Rector advertised for a locum-tenens, offering terms which attracted David, just out of hospital, sailing for Central Africa early in the New Year, and wondering how on earth he should scrape together the funds needed for completing his outfit. He applied immediately; and, within twenty-four hours, received a telegram suggesting an interview, and asking him to spend the night at Brambledene Rectory.

Here a curious friendship began, and was speedily cemented

by mutual attraction. The white-haired old man, overflowing with geniality, punctilious in old-fashioned courtesy, reminded David Rivers of a father, long dead and deeply mourned; while the young enthusiast, with white, worn face, and deep-set shining eyes, struck a long-silent chord in the heart of the easy-going old Rector, seeming to him an embodiment of that which he himself might have been, had he chosen a harder, rougher path, when standing at the cross-roads half a century before.

An ideal of his youth, long vanished, returned, and stood before him in David Rivers. It was too late, now, to sigh after a departed ideal. But, as a tribute to its memory, he doubled the remuneration he had offered, left the keys in every bookcase in the library, and recommended David to the most especial care of his faithful housekeeper, Sarah Dolman, with instructions that, should the young man seem tired on Sunday evenings, after the full day's work, the best old sherry might be produced and offered.

And here let it be recorded, that David undoubtedly did look worn and tired after the full day's work; but the best old sherry was declined with thanks. The fact that your heart has remained among the wild tribes of Central Africa has a way of making your body very abstemious, and careless of all ordinary creature comforts.

Nevertheless, David enjoyed the Rector's large armchair, upholstered in maroon leather, and delighted in the oak-panelled study, with its wealth of valuable books and its atmosphere of

scholarly calm and meditation.

This last Sunday of his ministry at Brambledene chanced to fall on Christmas-eve. Also, for once, it was true Christmas weather.

As David walked to church that morning, every branch and twig, every ivy leaf and holly berry, sparkled in the sunshine; the frosty lanes were white and hard, and paved with countless glittering diamonds. An indescribable exhilaration was in the air. Limbs felt light and supple; movement was a pleasure. Church bells, near and far away, pealed joyously. The Christmas spirit was already here.

"Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given," quoted David, as he swung along the lanes. It was five years since he had had a Christmas in England. Mentally he contrasted this keen frosty brightness, with the mosquito-haunted swamps of the African jungle. This unaccustomed sense of health and vigour brought, by force of contrast, a remembrance of the deathly lassitude and weakness which accompany the malarial fever. But, instantly true to the certainty of his high and holy calling, his soul leapt up crying: "Unto *them* a Child is born! Unto *them* a Son is given! And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?"

The little church, on that morning, was bright with holly and heavy with evergreens. The united efforts of the Smith and the Jones families had, during the week, made hundreds of yards of wreathing. On Saturday, all available young men came to help;

Miss Pike, whose taste was so excellent, to advise; the schoolmistress, a noisy person with more energy than tact, to argue with Miss Pike, and to side with Smiths and Joneses alternately, when any controversial point was under discussion.

So a gay party carried the long evergreen wreaths from the parish-room to the church, where already were collected baskets of holly and ivy, yards of scarlet flannel and white cotton-wool; an abundance of tin tacks and hammers; and last, but not least, the Christmas scrolls and banners, which were annually produced from their place of dusty concealment behind the organ; and of which Mrs. Smith remarked, each year, that they were "every bit as good as new, if you put 'em up in a fresh place."

During the whole of Saturday afternoon and evening the decorative process had been carried on with so much energy, that when David came out from the vestry, on Sunday morning, he found himself in a scene which was decidedly what the old women from the alms-houses called "Christmassy."

His surplice rasped against the holly-leaves, as he made his way into the reading-desk. The homely face of the old gilt clock, on the gallery facing him, was wreathed in yew and holly, and the wreath had slipped slightly on one side, giving the sober old clock an unwontedly rakish appearance, which belied its steady and measured "tick-tick." Also into the bottom of this wreath, beneath which the whole congregation had to pass in and out, Tom Brigg, the doctor's son, a handsome fellow and noted wag, had surreptitiously inserted a piece of mistletoe. This prank of

Tom's, known to all the younger members of the congregation, caused so much nudging and whispering and amused glancing at the inebrious-looking clock, that David produced his own watch, wondering if there were any mistake in the hour.

His sermon, on this Sunday morning, had seemed to him a failure.

His text confronted him in letters of gold on crimson flock: "Emmanuel – God with us"; but not a mind seemed with him as he gave it out, read it twice, slowly and clearly, and then proceeded to explain that this wonderful name, Emmanuel, was never intended to be the world's name for Christ, nor even His people's name for Him. However, at this statement, Mrs. Smith raised her eyebrows and began turning over the leaves of her Bible.

Encouraged by this unusual sign of attention, David Rivers leaned over the pulpit and tried to drive into one mind, at least, a thought which had been a discovery to himself the evening before, and was beginning to mean much to him, as every Spirit-given new light on a well-known theme always must mean to the earnest Bible student.

"The name Emmanuel," he said, "so freely used in our church decorations at this season, occurs three times only in the Bible; twice in the Old Testament, once in the New; and the New merely quotes the more important of the two passages in the Old.

"We can dismiss at once the allusion in Isaiah viii., 8, which merely speaks of Palestine as 'Thy land, O Immanuel,' and

confine our attention to the great prophecy of Isaiah vii., 14, quoted in Matthew i., 23: 'Behold a Virgin shall bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel.' The Hebrew of this passage reads: 'Thou, O Virgin, shalt call His name Immanuel'; and the Greek of Matthew i. bears the same meaning. I want you to realise that this was His mother's name for the new-born King, for the Babe of Bethlehem, for the little son in the village home at Nazareth. His Presence there meant to that humble pondering heart: '*God* with us.'

"If you want to find *our* name for Him," continued David, noting that Mrs. Smith, ignoring his two references, still turned the pages of her Bible, "look at the angel's message to Joseph in the 21st verse of Matthew i.: 'Thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins.' That name is mentioned nine hundred and six times in the Bible. We cannot attempt to look them all out now," – with an appealing glance at Mrs. Smith's rustling pages – "but let us make sure that we have appropriated to the full the gifts and blessings of that name, 'which is above every name.' It was the watchword of the early church. It is the secret of our peace and power. It will be our password into heaven.

"But Emmanuel was His mother's name for Him. As she laid him in the manger, round which the patient cattle snuffed in silent wonder at this new use for the place where heretofore they munched their fodder, it was '*God* with us' in the stable.

"As, seated on the ass, she clasped the infant to her breast

through the long hours of that night ride into Egypt, she whispered: 'Emmanuel, Emmanuel! God *with* us, in our flight and peril.'

"In the carpenter's home at Nazareth, where, in the midst of the many trials and vexations of a village life of poverty, He was ever patient, gentle, understanding; subject to His parents, yet giving His mother much cause for pondering, many things to treasure in her heart – often, in adoring tenderness, she would whisper: 'Emmanuel, God with *us*.'"

David paused and looked earnestly down the church, longing for some response to the thrill in his own soul.

"Ah," he said, slowly and impressively, "if only the boys in your village could be *this* to their mothers! If their loyal obedience, their gentle, loving chivalry, their thoughtful tenderness, could make it possible for their own mothers to say: 'I see the Christ-life in my little boy. When he is at home, the love of God is here. Truly it is Emmanuel, God with us.'"

"What did that young man mean," remarked Mrs. Smith at the dinner-table at Appledore Farm, "by trying to take from us the name 'Emmanuel'? Seems to me, if he stays here much longer we shall have no Bible left!"

Mr. Churchwarden Smith had been carving the Sunday beef for his numerous family. He had only, that moment, fallen to, upon his own portion. Otherwise Mrs. Smith would not have been allowed to complete her sentence.

"I've no patience with these young chaps!" he burst out, as

soon as speech was possible. "Undermining the faith of their forefathers; putting our good old English Bible into 'Ebrew and Greek, just to parade their own learning, and confuse the minds of simple folk. 'Higher criticism,' they call it! Jolly low-down impudence, say I!"

Mrs. Smith watchfully bided her time. Then: "And popish too," she added, "to talk so much about the mother of our Lord."

"I don't think he mentioned *her*, my dear," said Mr. Churchwarden Smith. "Pass the mustard, Johnny."

Yes, as he thought it over during his lonely luncheon, David felt more and more convinced that his morning sermon had been a failure.

He did not know of a little curly-headed boy, whose young widowed mother was at her wit's end as to how to control his wilfulness; but who ran straight to his garret-room after service, and, kneeling beside his frosty window, looked up to the wintry sky and said: "Please God, make me a Manuel to my mother, like Jesus was to His, for Christ's sake, Amen."

David did not know of this; nor that, ever after, that cottage home was to be transformed, owing to the living power of his message.

So, down in the depths of discouragement, he dubbed his morning sermon a failure.

Notwithstanding, he prepared the evening subject with equal care, a spice of enjoyment added, owing to the fact that he would possibly – probably – almost to a certainty – have in the

evening congregation a mind able to understand and appreciate each point; a mind of a calibre equal to his own; a soul he was bent on winning.

As he closed his Bible, put it into his pocket, and relaxed over the thought that his sermon was complete, he smiled into the glowing wood fire, saying to himself, in glad anticipation: "My Lady of Mystery will undoubtedly be there. Now I wonder if *she* believes that there were three Wise Men!"

CHAPTER II
THE LADY OF MYSTERY

David thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his short coat, well cut, but inclined to be somewhat threadbare. He crossed his knees, and lay back comfortably in the Rector's big chair. An hour and a half remained before he need start out.

It was inexpressibly restful to have his subject, clear cut and complete, safely stowed away in the back of his mind, and to be able to sit quietly in this warmth and comfort, and let his thoughts dwell lightly upon other things, while Christmas snow fell softly, in large flakes, without; and gathering twilight slowly hushed the day to rest.

"Yes, undoubtedly my Lady of Mystery will be there," thought David Rivers, "unless this fall of snow keeps her away."

He let his memory dwell in detail upon the first time he had seen her.

It happened on his second Sunday at Brambledene.

The deadening effect of the mental apathy of the congregation had already somewhat damped his enthusiasm.

It was so many years since he had preached in English, that, on the first Sunday, he had allowed himself the luxury of writing out his whole sermon. This plan, for various reasons, did not prove successful.

Mrs. Churchwarden Jones and Mrs. Churchwarden Smith

– good simple souls both, if you found them in their dairies making butter, or superintending the sturdy maids in the farm kitchens – seemed to consider on Sundays that they magnified their husbands' office by the amount of rustle and jingle they contrived to make with their own portly persons during the church services. They kept it up, duet fashion, on either side of the aisle. If Mrs. Jones rustled, Mrs. Smith promptly tinkled. If Mrs. Smith rustled, Mrs. Jones straightway jingled. The first time this happened in the sermon, David looked round, hesitated, lost his place, and suffered agonies of mortification before he found it again.

Moreover he soon realised that, with his eyes on the manuscript, he had absolutely no chance of holding the attention of his audience.

In the evening he tried notes, but this seemed to him neither one thing nor the other. So on all subsequent Sundays he memorised his sermons as he prepared them, and hardly realised himself how constantly, in their delivery, there flowed from his subconsciousness a depth of thought, clothed in eloquent and appropriate language, which had not as yet been ground in the mill of his conscious mind.

On that second Sunday evening, David had entered the reading-desk depressed and discouraged. In the morning he had fallen out with the choir. It was a mixed choir. Large numbers of young Smiths and Joneses sat on either side of the chancel and vied with one another as to which family could outsing the other.

This rivalry was resulting in a specially loud and joyful noise in the closing verses of the Benedictus.

David, jarred in every nerve, and forgetting for the moment that he was not dealing with his African aborigines, wheeled round in the desk, held up his hand, and said: "Hush!" with the result that he had to declaim the details of John the Baptist's mission, as a tenor solo; and that the organist noisily turned over his music-books during the whole time of the sermon, apparently in a prolonged search for a suitable recessional voluntary.

Wishing himself back in his African forests, David began the service, in a chastened voice, on that second Sunday evening.

During the singing of the first of the evening psalms the baize-covered door, at the further end of the church, was pushed gently open; a tall figure entered, alone; closed the door noiselessly behind her, and stood for a moment, in hesitating uncertainty, beneath the gallery.

Then the old clerk and verger, Jabez Bones, bustled out of his seat, and ushering her up the centre, showed her into a cushioned pew on the pulpit side, rather more than half-way up the church.

The congregation awoke to palpable interest, at her advent. The choir infused a tone of excitement into the chant, which, up to that moment, had been woefully flat. Each pew she passed, in the wake of old Jabez, thereafter contained a nudge or a whisper.

David's first impression of her, was of an embodiment of silence and softness, – so silently she passed up the church and into the empty pew, moving to the further corner, right against

the stout whitewashed pillar. No rustle, no tinkle, marked her progress; only a silent fragrance of violets. And of softness – soft furs, soft velvet, soft hair; and soft grey eyes, beneath the brim of a dark green velvet hat.

But his second impression was other than the first. She was looking at him with an expression of amused scrutiny. Her eyes were keen and penetrating; her lips were set in lines of critical independence of judgment; the beautifully moulded chin was firm and white as marble against the soft brown fur.

She regarded him steadily for some minutes. Then she looked away, and David became aware, by means of that subconscious intuition, which should be as a sixth sense to all ministers and preachers, that nothing in the service reached her in the very least. Her mind was far away. Whatever her object had been, in entering the little whitewashed church of Brambledene on that Sunday night, it certainly was not worship.

But, when he began to preach, he arrested her attention. His opening remark evidently appealed to her. She glanced up at him, quickly, a gleam of amusement and interest in her clear eyes. And afterwards, though she did not lift them again, and partly turned away, leaning against the pillar, so that he could see only the clear-cut whiteness of her perfect profile, he knew that she was listening.

From that hour, David's evening sermons were prepared with the more or less conscious idea of reaching the soul of that calm immovable Lady of Mystery.

She did not attract him as a woman. Her beauty meant nothing to him. He had long ago faced the fact that his call to Central Africa must mean celibacy. No man worthy of the name would, for his own comfort or delight, allow a woman to share such dangers and privations as those through which he had to pass. And, if five years of that climate had undermined his own magnificent constitution and sent him home a wreck of his former self, surely, had he taken out a wife, it would simply have meant a lonely grave, left behind in the African jungle.

So David had faced it out that a missionary's life, in a place where wife and children could not live, must mean celibacy; nor had he the smallest intention of ever swerving from that decision. His devotion to his work filled his heart. His people were his children.

Therefore no ordinary element of romance entered into his thoughts concerning the beautiful woman who, on each Sunday evening, leaned against the stone pillar, and showed by a slight flicker of the eyelids or curve of the proud lips, that she heard and appreciated each point in his sermon.

How far she agreed, he had no means of knowing. Who she was, and whence she came, he did not attempt to find out. He preferred that she should remain the Lady of Mystery. After her first appearance, when old Jabez bustled into the vestry at the close of the service, he abounded in nods and winks, inarticulate exclamations, and chuckings of his thumb over his shoulder backward toward the church. At length, getting no response from

David, he burst forth: "Sakes alive, sir! I'm thinking she ain't bin seen in a place o' wash-up, since she was – "

David, half in and half out of his cassock, turned on the old clerk in sudden indignation.

"Bones," he said, sternly, "no member of the congregation should ever be discussed in the vestry. Not another word, please. Now give me the entry book."

The old man muttered something inaudible about the Rector and young *h*upstarts, and our poor David had made another enemy in Brambledene.

He never chanced to see his Lady of Mystery arrive; but, after that first evening, she never failed to be in her place when he came out of the vestry; nor did he ever see her depart, always resisting the temptation to leave the church hurriedly when service was over.

So she remained the Lady of Mystery; and now – his last Sunday evening had come; and, as he thought of her, he longed to see a look of faith and joy dawn in her cold sad eyes, as ardently as another man might have longed to see a look of love for himself awaken in them.

But David wanted nothing for himself, and a great deal for his Lord. He wanted this beautiful personality, this forceful character, this strong, self-reliant soul; he wanted this obvious wealth, this unmistakable possessor of place and power, for his Master's service, for the Kingdom of his King. No thought of himself came in at all. How should it? He wanted to win her

for her own sake; and he wanted to win her for his Lord. He wanted this more persistently and ardently than he had ever desired anything in his life before. He was almost perplexed at the insistence of the thought, and the way in which it never left him.

And now – the last chance had come.

He rose, and went to the window. Snowflakes were falling gently, few and far between; but the landscape was completely covered by a pure white pall.

"Undoubtedly," said David, "my Lady of Mystery will be there, unless this fall of snow keeps her away."

He paced up and down the study, repeating stray sentences from his sermon, as they came into his mind.

Sarah brought in the lamp, and drew the maroon rep curtains, shutting out the snow and gathering darkness; Sarah, stout, comfortable, and motherly, who – accustomed to the rosy-cheeked plumpness of her easy-going master – looked with undisguised dismay at David's thin worn face, and limbs on which his clothes still hung loosely, giving him an appearance of not belonging to his surroundings, which tried the kind heart and practical mind of the Rector's good housekeeper.

"He do give me the creeps, poor young gentleman," she confided to a friend, who had dropped in for tea and a chat. "To see him all shrunk up, so to speak, in Master's big chair; and just where there would be so much of Master, there's naught of him, which makes the chair seem fair empty. And then he looks up and

speaks, and his voice is like music, and his eyes shine like stars, and he seems more alive than Master, or anybody else one knows; yet not alive in his poor thin body; but alive because of something burning and shining *h*inside of 'im; something stronger than a body, and more alive than life – oh, *I* don't know!" concluded Sarah, suddenly alarmed by her own eloquence.

"Creepy, I call it," said the friend.

"Creepy it is," agreed Sarah.

Nevertheless she watched carefully over David's creature comforts, and he owed it to Sarah's insistence, that he weighed nearly a stone heavier when he left Brambledene than on his arrival there.

She now brought in tea, temptingly arranged on a tray, poured out his first cup, and stood a minute to watch him drink it, and to exhort him to wrap up well, before going out in this snow.

"My last Sunday, Sarah," said David, looking at her with those same deep-set shining eyes. "I sha'n't bother you much longer. I have a service to-morrow – Christmas-day; and must stay over Boxing-day for two weddings. Then I'm off to town; and in a couple of weeks I sail for Central Africa. I wonder how you would like Africa, Sarah. Are you afraid of snakes?"

"Don't mention 'em, Mr. Rivers, sir," replied Sarah, in a stage whisper; "nasty evil things! If Eve had been as fearful of 'em as I am, there'd never 'ave been no Fall. You wouldn't catch me staying to talk theology with a serpent. No, not me, sir! It's take to m' heels and run, would have been my way, if I'd 'a lived in

Genesis three."

David smiled. "A good way, Sarah," he said, "and scriptural. But you forget the attraction of the tree, with its luscious fruit. Poor Eve! The longing of the moment, always seems the great essential. We are apt to forget the long eternity of regret."

Sarah sidled respectfully towards the door.

"Eat your hot-buttered toast, before it grows cold, sir," she counselled; "and give over thinking about snakes. Dear heart, it's Christmas-eve!"

"So it is," said David. "And my sermon is about a star. Right you are, Sarah! I'll 'give over thinking about snakes,' and look higher. There can be no following of the star with our eyes turned earthward… All right! Don't you worry. I'll eat every bit."

CHAPTER III
DAVID STIRS THE STILL WATERS

As David tramped to church the moon was rising. The fir trees stood, dark and stately, beneath their nodding plumes of feathery snow. The little village church, with its white roof, and brightly lighted windows, looked like a Christmas card.

Above its ivy-covered tower, luminous as a lamp in the deep purple sky, shone out one brilliant star.

David smiled as he raised his eyes. He was thinking of Sarah and the snakes. "'If I had lived in Genesis three,'" he quoted. "What a delightful way of putting it; as if Genesis were a terrace, and three the number. Good old Sarah! Would she have been more successful in coping with the tempter? Undoubtedly Eve had the artistic temperament, which is always a snare; also she had a woman's instinctive desire to set others right, and to explain. Adam would have seen through the tempter's wilful distortion of the wording of God's command, and would not have been beguiled into an argument with so crafty and insincere an opponent. Poor Eve, in her desire to prove him wrong, to air her own superior knowledge, and to justify her Maker, hurried at once into the trap, and was speedily undone. Here, at the very outset of our history, we have in a nutshell the whole difference between the mentality of the sexes. Where Eve stood arguing and explaining, – laying herself open to a retort which shook her

own belief, and undermined her obedience, – Adam would have said: "Liar!" and turned on his heel. Yet if Eve lived nowadays she would be quite sure she could set right all mistakes in our legislature, if only Adam could be induced to let her have a finger in every pie. Having lived in Genesis iii., Adam would know better than to try it!"

As David reached the old lich-gate, two brilliant lights shone down the road from the opposite direction, and the next moment a motor glided swiftly to the gate, and stopped.

A footman sprang down from beside the chauffeur, opened the door, touched a button, and the interior of the car flashed into light.

Seated within, half buried in furs, David saw the calm sweet face of his Lady of Mystery. He stood on one side, in the shadow of the gate, and waited.

The footman drew out a white fur rug, and threw it over his left arm; then held the door wide.

She stepped out, tall and silent. David saw the calm whiteness of her features in the moonlight. She took no more notice of her men, than if they had been machines, but passed straight up the churchyard path, between the yew-tree sentinels, and disappeared into the porch.

The footman bundled in the rug, switched off the lights, banged the door, took his place beside the chauffeur, and the large roomy motor glided silently away. Nothing remained save a delicate fragrance of violets under the lich-gate, beneath which

she had passed.

The whole thing had taken twenty seconds. It seemed to David like the swift happenings of a dream. Nothing was left, to prove its reality, but the elusive scent of violets, and the marks of the huge tyres in the snow.

But as David made his way round to the vestry door, he knew his Lady of Mystery was already in her corner beside the stout whitewashed pillar; and he also knew that he had been right, in the surmise which placed her in an environment of luxury and wealth.

Christmas-eve had produced a larger congregation than usual. The service was as cheerful and noisy as the choir and organist could make it. David's quiet voice seemed only to be heard at rare intervals, like the singing of a thrush in the momentary lull of a storm.

The Lady of Mystery looked alternately bored and amused. Her expression was more calmly critical than ever. She had discarded her large velvet hat for a soft toque of silver-grey fur, placed lightly upon her wealth of golden hair. This tended to reveal the classic beauty of her features, yet made her look older, showing up a hardness of expression which had been softened by the green velvet brim. David, who had thought her twenty-five, now began to wonder whether she were not older than himself. Her expression might have credited her with full thirty years' experience of the world.

David mounted the pulpit steps to the inspiriting strains of

"While shepherds watched their flocks by night, all seated on the ground." Already the inhabitants of Brambledene had had it at their front doors, sung, in season and out of season, by the school-children, in every sort of key and tempo. Now the latter returned joyfully to the charge, sure of arriving at the final verse, without any sudden or violent exhortations to go away. They beat the choir's already rapid rendering; ignored the organist, and rushed on without pause, comma, or breathing space.

In the midst of this erratic description of the peaceful scene on Bethlehem's hills on that Christmas night so long ago, David's white earnest face appeared in the pulpit, looking down anxiously upon his congregation.

The words of his opening collect brought a sense of peace, though the silence of his long intentional pause after "Let us pray," had at first accentuated the remembrance of the hubbub which had preceded it. David felt that the weird chanting of his African savages, echoing among the trees of their primeval forests, compared favourably, from the point of view both of reverence and of music, with the singing in this English village church. His very soul was jarred. His nerves were all on edge.

As he stood silent, while the congregation settled into their seats, looking down he met the grey eyes of his Lady of Mystery. They said: "I am waiting. I have come for this."

Instantly the sense of inspiration filled him.

With glad assurance he gave out his text. "The gospel according to St. Matthew, the second chapter, the tenth and

eleventh verses; 'When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy… And when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.'"

As soon as the text of a sermon was given out, Mr. Churchwarden Jones in his corner, and Mr. Churchwarden Smith in his, verified it in their Bibles, made sure it was really there, and had been read correctly. Then they closed their Bibles and placed them on the ledges in front of them; took off their glasses, put them noisily into spectacle-cases, stowed these in inner pockets, leant well back, and proceeded to go very unmistakably and emphatically to sleep.

David had got into the way of reading his text twice over, slowly, while this performance took place.

Now, when he looked up from his Bible, the two churchwardens were in position. Their gold watch-chains, looped upon their ample waistcoats, produced much the same effect as the wreathing with which well-meaning decorators had accentuated the stoutness of the whitewashed pillars.

The attention of the congregation was already wandering. David made a desperate effort to hold it.

"My friends," he said, "although it is Christmas-eve, I speak to you to-night on the Epiphany subject, because, when the great Feast of Epiphany comes, I shall no longer have the privilege of addressing you. I expect to be on the ocean, on my way to carry the Christmas message of 'Peace on earth, good will toward men,'

to the savage tribes of Central Africa."

No one looked responsive. No one seemed to care in the least where David Rivers would be on the great Feast of Epiphany. He tried another tack.

"Our text deals with the experience of those Wise Men of the East, who, guided by the star, journeyed over the desert in quest of the new-born King. Now, if I were to ask this congregation to tell me how many Wise Men there were, I wonder which of you would answer 'three.'"

No one looked in the least interested. What a silly question! What a senseless cause for wonder! Of course they would *all* answer "three." The youngest infant in the Sunday-school knew that there were three Wise Men.

"But why should you say 'three'?" continued David. "We are not told in the Bible how many Wise Men there were. Look and see."

The Smith and Jones families made no move. They knew perfectly well that *their* Bibles said "three." If this young man's Bible omitted to mention the orthodox number, it was only another of many omissions in his new-fangled Bible and unsound preaching. It would be one thing more to report to the Rector, on his return.

But his Lady of Mystery leaned forward, took up a Bible which chanced to be beside her, turned rapidly to Matthew ii., bent over it for a moment, then smiled, and laid it down. David knew she had made sure of finding "three," and had not found

it. He took courage. She was interested.

He launched into his subject. In vivid words, more full of poetry and beauty than he knew, he rapidly painted the scene; the long journey through the eastern desert, with eyes upon the star; the anxious days, when it could not be seen, and the route might so easily be missed; the glad nights when it shone again, luminous, serene, still moving on before. The arrival at Jerusalem, the onward quest to Bethlehem, the finding of the King.

Then, the actual story fully dealt with, David turned to application.

"My friends," he said, "this earthly life of ours is the desert. Your pilgrimage lies across its ofttimes dreary wastes. But if your journey is to be to any purpose, if life is to be a success and not a failure, its main object must be the finding of the King. His guiding Spirit moves before you as the star. His word is also the heavenly lamp which lights your way. But I want, to-night, to give you a third meaning for the Epiphany star. The star stands for your highest Ideal. Pause a moment, and think… Have you in your life to-night a heaven-sent Ideal, to which you are always true; which you follow faithfully, and which, as you follow it, leads to the King?"

David paused. Mrs. Jones rustled, and Mrs. Smith tinkled, but David heard them not. The Lady of Mystery had lifted her eyes to his, and those beautiful sad eyes said: "I *had*."

"They lost sight of the star," said David. "Their hearts were

sad, thinking they had lost it forever. But they found it again at Jerusalem – place of God's holy temple and worship. Here – is your Jerusalem. Lift your eyes to-night, higher than the mere church roof, and find again your lost star; see where shines your Ideal – your faith, your hope, your love, your belief in things eternal. 'And when they saw the star they rejoiced.'"

David paused.

Long lashes veiled the grey eyes. Her hands were folded in her lap, and her eyes were not lifted from them.

"When these desert-travellers found the King," continued David, "they opened their treasures and presented unto Him gifts, – gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. I know this is usually taken in relation to Himself, and as being, in a threefold way, typical of His mission: Gold for the King; frankincense for the great High Priest; myrrh for the suffering, dying Saviour, who was to give His life for the redemption of the world.

"But I want to take it to-night in another sense. Let these three kinds of gifts emphasise the three kinds of things you have in your life to-day, which you may offer to the King, if your guiding star has led you to His feet. They opened *their* treasures. I want you to open *your* treasures, to-night. What are your treasures? Why yourself, and all you possess.

"First let us consider the gold."

The Lady of Mystery lifted her golden head and looked him full in the face. There was challenge in her eyes.

"I do not necessarily mean your money," said David, "though

how much more you might all do with that, for the King and for His service, than you are already doing. Ah, if people could realise how greatly gold is needed for His work, they would soon open their treasures and pour it forth! I have told you of my vast parish, out in the unexplored forests, swamps, and jungles of Central Africa. Do you know what I want for my people, there? Think of all you have here – of all you have had, ever since you can remember. Then listen: I want a church; I want schools; I want books; I want a translation of the Bible, and a printing-press to print it with." David's eyes glowed, and he threw grammar to the winds! "I want a comrade to help me, and a steam-launch with which to navigate great lakes and rivers. I want all these things, and I want them for my Master, and for His work. I can give my own life, but it is all I have to give. I have been taking your Rector's place here for six weeks in order to earn twelve guineas, which will enable me to take out a good medicine-chest with which to doctor my people, and to complete my necessary outfit."

Mr. Churchwarden Jones was awake by now, and fidgeted uncomfortably. This young man should not have mentioned his stipend, from the pulpit. It was decidedly unsuitable.

"Your Rector," continued David, "knowing why I need it, is generously doubling that payment. May God bless him for it, when he takes up again his ministry among you."

They were all listening now. David's eyes glowed like hot coals in his thin face. His voice rang through the church.

"Ah, friends," he said, "those who have all they need for their comfortable spiritual life, cannot realise the awful, desperate want, in those wild places of the earth. We enjoy quoting what we call a 'gospel text': 'Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' But too often we pause there, in self-appropriating complacency, forgetting that the whole point of the passage lies in what follows: 'How then shall they call on Him in Whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of Whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear, without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent?' You must answer all these questions, when you open your treasures at the feet of the King.

"But forgive me for intruding my own interests. This is not a missionary sermon." – Here Mrs. Smith nodded, energetically. That was exactly what she had already whispered to Mr. Smith. – "Also 'gold' stands for much besides money. Think of all the golden things in life. The joys, the brightness, the glory of success; all beauty, all gaiety, all golden mirth and laughter. Let all these golden things be so consecrated that, opening your treasures, you can at any moment bring them as offerings to your King.

"But the second gift was frankincense." David paused, giving each listener – and at last there were many – time to wonder what in his or her life stood for frankincense.

"Frankincense," said David, "is, first of all, your worship. And by worship, I do not necessarily mean public worship in church,

important though that be. I mean the constant worship of an adoring heart. 'O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.' Unless your daily life from Monday to Saturday is a life of worship, there will not be much reality in your public worship on Sunday. And then, frankincense stands for all that appertains to the spirit part of you – your ideals, your noblest loves, your finest aspirations. Open your treasures, friends, and bring these to your King.

"And, lastly, myrrh." David paused, and a look so calm, so holy, so sublime, passed into his face, that to one who watched him then, and who chanced to know the meaning of that look, his face was as the face of an angel.

"The myrrh," he said, "stands for death. Some of us may be called upon definitely to face death, for the King's sake. But *all* who have lived unto Him in life, can glorify Him in death. 'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.' We can all at last bring to Him this gift – a gift which, in the bringing, will indeed bring us into His very presence. But, meanwhile, your present offering of myrrh is the death of self; the daily crucifying of the self-life. 'For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead; and that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him, Who died for them, and rose again.' Your response to that constraining love, your acceptance of that atoning death, your acquiesence in that crucifixion of self, constitute your offering of myrrh.

"But myrrh, in the Bible, stands for other things besides death. We must not pause to do so now, but sometime, at your leisure, look out each mention of myrrh. You will find it stands for love – love of the sweetest, tenderest kind; love so complete, that it must bring with it self-abnegation, and a mingling of pain with its bliss.

"And you will find it stands for sorrow; not bitterness of woe; but sorrow accepted as the Father's will, and therefore touched with reverent joy. Ah, bring your sorrows as gifts to your King. 'Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.' Bring even these, and lay them at His feet."

David closed his Bible, placing it on the cushion, folded his hands upon it, and leaned down from the high pulpit.

"My friends," he said, – and those who looked up responsive never forgot the light in his eyes – "I am leaving this dear home land of ours on the day when we shall be keeping the Feast of the Star. My star leads me to a place from which I do not ever expect to return. My offering of myrrh to my King, is a grave in an African forest, and I offer it gladly.

"But, may I now say to you, whose faces – after to-morrow – I never expect to see again: Do not lose sight of your star, as you travel across life's desert. Look up, look on; ever, in earnest faith, move forward. Then I can leave with each one in this congregation, as a farewell promise" – he looked at all present; but his eyes met the grey eyes, now swimming in tears, of his Lady of Mystery; met, and held them, with searching solemn

gaze, as he uttered his final words —

"Thine eyes shall see the King in His beauty; they shall behold the Land that is very far off."

CHAPTER IV
DIANA RIVERS, OF RIVERSCOURT

Perhaps the greatest tribute to David's sermon, was the quiet way in which the good people of Brambledene rose to their feet at its close.

Lead, Kindly Light was sung with unusual feeling and reverence.

The collection, for Church Expenses, was the largest ever taken in Brambledene Church, within the memory of man. In one of the plates, there was gold. David knew quite well who had put in that sovereign.

He sat at the vestry table and fingered it thoughtfully. He had disrobed while the churchwardens counted the money and commented on the unusual amount of the collection, and the remarkable fact of a sovereign in the plate. They left the money in little piles on the red cloth, for David to carry home and lock up in the Rector's safe.

He had now to enter his text, and the amount of the collection, in the vestry book.

He had glanced down the church as he left the chancel. His Lady of Mystery was still on her knees in the corner near the pillar, her head bowed in her hands. He had seen the top of her grey fur hat, with soft waves of golden hair on either side of it.

He took up the pen and entered his text.

Then he laid the pen down, and glanced at back records of evening collections for Church Expenses. He did not hurry. He could hear very faintly in the distance the throbbing of a motor, waiting at the lich-gate. He knew exactly how it looked, waiting in the snow; two great acetylene lamps in front; delicate electric bulbs lighting the interior, one in each corner of the roof. He knew just how *she* would look, as the footman tucked the white fur rug around her. She would lean back, rather bored and impatient, and take no more notice of the man, than if he were a machine. David hated that kind of behaviour toward those who serve. He held that every service, even the smallest, should receive a kindly acknowledgment.

He turned the pages of the vestry book. Six shillings and eleven pence. Two and four pence halfpenny. Three and six. Four shillings and nine pence three farthings. Seven and ten pence. And now he was about to enter: "two pounds, eight shillings, and seven pence halfpenny." Even without the gold *she* had put in, it was a large increase on former offerings. Truly these good people opened their treasures when at last their hearts were touched.

David was alone in the vestry. He could hear old Jabez Bones bustling about in the church, putting out the lamps, occasionally knocking down books, and picking them up again; doing in appearance three times as much as he accomplished in reality.

David took up the pen. He did not hurry. The rhythmic panting of the engine still reached him, faintly, across the snowy mounds. He did not intend to arrive at the lich-gate until that

dream-motor had glided noiselessly out of sight.

As he bent over the book to make the entry, the vestry door was pushed softly open. He heard no sound; but a subtle fragrance of violets suddenly surrounded him.

David looked up.

Framed in the Gothic arch of the narrow doorway, her large grey eyes fixed upon him in unwonted gentleness, stood his Lady of Mystery.

David was so completely taken by surprise, that he forgot to rise to his feet. He dropped his pen, but still sat on the high vestry stool, and gazed at her in speechless wonderment.

"I have come," said his Lady of Mystery, and her low-pitched voice was full of music; "I have come to bring you my gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

"Not to me," said David. "You must not bring them to me. You must bring them to the King."

"I must bring them to you," she said, "because I know no other way. I have sought the Christ, and found HIM not. I had lost my way in the dreary darkness of the desert. To-night you have cleared my sky. Once more I see the shining of the Star. You have shown me that I have these three gifts to offer. But I must bring them to you, David Rivers, because you are the most Christlike man I have ever known, and you stand to me for your King."

"I cannot stand for my King," said David, unconscious of the light in his own eyes, or the divine radiance reflected on his face. "I am but His messenger; the voice in the wilderness, crying:

'Prepare ye the way of the Lord.'"

The Lady of Mystery moved a step nearer, and laid one hand on the vestry table. She bent toward him. Two wax candles, in brass candle-sticks, stood upon the table, on either side of the vestry book, providing the only illumination. In the light of these, they looked into one another's faces.

"You have certainly prepared His way in my heart to-night," she said, "and I believe you are going to make straight for me the tangle of my life. Only, first of all, you must know who I am. Has anybody told you? Do you know?"

"Nobody has told me," said David, "and I do not know."

"What have you called me, to yourself, all these weeks?"

"My Lady of Mystery," answered David, simply; wondering how she knew he had called her anything.

She smiled, and there seemed to be twenty wax candles in the vestry, rather than two.

"Quite pretty," she said; "but too much like a story-book, to be practically useful." She drew a small purple bag from her muff; took out a card, and laid it on the table in front of him. "You must know who I am," she said, "and where I live; because, you see, I am going to ask you to dinner."

She smiled again; and David bent over the card. She marked his involuntary movement of surprise.

"Yes," she said, "I am Diana Rivers, of Riverscourt. Had you heard of me before? I suppose we are, in some sort, cousins."

But David sat with his eyes bent upon the card before him.

Alas, what was happening? His Lady of Mystery had vanished. This tall girl, in furs and velvet, with her brilliant smile, sweet low voice, and assured manner, was the greatest heiress in the county; Master of the Hounds; patron of four livings; notorious for her advanced views and fearless independence; a power and a terror in the whole neighbourhood. His Lady of Mystery who, under his guidance, was to become a meek and lowly follower of the Star! Poor David!

He looked so thin and forlorn, for the moment, that Diana felt an amused desire to put him into an armchair, and ply him with champagne.

"Of course I have heard of you, Miss Rivers," he said, slowly. "Mr. Goldsworthy told me all about you, during my first evening at the Rectory. He asked me whether we were related."

"Dear old thing!" remarked Diana, lightly. "He is my god-father, you know; and I think his anxiety over my spiritual condition is the one thing which keeps him of a size to pass through the pulpit door!"

"Don't," said David.

She looked at him, with laughter in her eyes.

"All right, Cousin David. I did not mean to be flippant. And we *are* cousins, you know."

"I think not," he answered, gravely. "I am of very humble origin; and I never heard of my people claiming kinship with courts of any kind."

"Oh, don't be silly!" retorted Diana, drumming on the vestry

table, with her firm, gloved fingers; but her tone was so gentle, that it almost held a caress. "Don't be silly, Cousin David. The humblest people live in courts, in London; and all rivers run into the sea! Nothing but the genuine Rivers' pluck could have faced these good folk Sunday after Sunday; and only the fire of the real old Rivers' stock, could have made them sit up and listen to-night. You look just like grandpapa, confounding the Opposition from his seat on the government benches, when you attack Mrs. Smith for turning over the pages of her Bible in that distracting and senseless way. I can fancy myself back in the Ladies' Gallery, longing to cheer. We *must* claim kinship, Cousin David."

"I think not," he repeated firmly. He looked very small, and thin, and miserable, huddled up on the vestry stool. His threadbare clerical jacket seemed several sizes too large for him. "Diana Rivers, of Riverscourt!" Oh, where was his dear Lady of Mystery?

If Diana wanted to shake him, she kept the desire well in hand. Her voice grew even deeper; more full of music, more softly gentle.

"Well, cousin or no cousin," she said, "I want your advice, and I can't do without your help. Where do you take your Christmas dinner, David Rivers?"

"Why, at the Rectory," he answered, looking up. "I have no friends here." Then a gleam of amusement passed over his face: "Sarah says, as it is Christmas, she is 'going to a fowl,'" he said.

"I see. And you are planning to eat your fowl in solitary

grandeur at the Rectory? Well, *I* will 'go to a turkey' and a plum-pudding, and, possibly, mince-pies; and you shall dine with me on Christmas night. The idea of a lonely meal on your last – I mean, your *one* Christmas-day in England!"

"You are very kind," said David; "but is not Riverscourt twelve miles from here?"

"My chauffeur does it in twenty minutes," replied Diana. "It would be as much as his place is worth to take twenty-one. I will send the motor for you at seven, and we will dine at half past. They can run you back whenever you like. Does your household retire early? Or perhaps you are allowed a latch-key."

David smiled. "My household consists of Sarah, Mr. Goldsworthy's faithful housekeeper; and as I usually sit up reading until midnight, she retires early, and trusts me to put out the lamps and to lock up."

"Ah, I know Sarah," said Miss Rivers. "A worthy soul. She and I are excellent friends. We hold the same views on women's rights, and we love discussing them. Mere man – even god-papa – dwindles to nothing, when arraigned at the bar of Sarah's intrepid judgment. Very well, then. The motor at seven."

But David still hesitated. "You are very kind," he said. "But – you see, we don't have dinner-parties in Central Africa. And since I came home, I have mostly been in hospital. I am afraid I haven't" – he looked down at his short jacket. "I don't even possess a long coat," he said, simply.

"Oh don't be tiresome, Cousin David!" cried Miss Rivers.

"If I wanted conventional evening dress, I know a dozen men whom I could invite to dinner. I want *you*, not your clothes. If one is greatly interested in a book, does one bother to consider the binding? Bring your mind along, and come prepared to be helpful; for, God knows" – her eyes grew deep and earnest – "God knows I want helping, more than any of your African savages. Come as you are, Cousin David. Come as the Voice in the Wilderness. It is all I ask. Besides, there will only be myself and Chappie; and Chappie doesn't count."

She drew off a soft grey glove; then held out to him firm white fingers. He took them in his. They clasped hands silently; and, once more, by the light of the two wax candles, looked searchingly into each other's eyes. Each read there a quiet compact of friendship and of trust.

"I will come," said David. She paused with her hand on the door, looking back at him over her shoulder. Her tall head nearly touched the top of the archway.

"If you do," she said, "we must consider the question of your church, your schools, your printing-press, and your steamer. So, *au revoir*, to-morrow."

She threw him a little reassuring smile, and passed out.

The fragrance of violets, the sound of her low voice, the card upon the table, remained.

David took up the pen and made the entry in the vestry book: *two pounds, eight shillings, and seven pence halfpenny*. Then he gathered up all the little piles of silver and copper, and put them

into his coat pockets; but Diana's sovereign he slipped by itself into one waistcoat pocket, and her card into the other.

Then suddenly he realised – poor David – that she had stood beside him during the whole interview, while *he* had sat on the vestry stool.

He sprang to his feet. "Oh I say!" he cried. "Oh – I say!"

But there was nothing to say; and no one to whom to say it.

Poor David!

He sat down again, put his elbows on the table, and dropped his head into his hands.

Diana Rivers of Riverscourt! Patron of four livings! Acknowledged leader of the gayest set in the county; known far and wide for her independence of character and advanced views!

Bones came shuffling up the chancel, rattling the church keys. There was also a sovereign of Diana's in *his* waistcoat pocket, and he showed no irritation as he locked up the vestry book, and returned David's good-night.

"A 'appy Christmas, sir," he said, "an' many of 'em; if they 'ave 'em in them wild parts."

As David plodded home through the snow, his mind dwelt, with curious persistence, on one question: "Now who on earth is 'Chappie'?"

CHAPTER V
THE NOISELESS NAPIER

"I am morally certain 'Chappie' is a poodle," thought David to himself, at breakfast. "It would be just like her to have a large black poodle, abnormally clever, perfectly clipped, tied up with green ribbons to match her hat, and treated in all respects as a human being; excepting that, of course, his opinion on the cut of her guests' clothes would not matter. 'Chappie does not count,' she said; but I'll be bound he counts a lot, in most respects. I hope Chappie will like me. How does one whistle to a poodle?"

David was standing on the hearthrug, practising various seductive ways of whistling to Chappie, when Sarah came in, to clear the breakfast table.

Sarah had put a Christmas card on David's plate that morning, and had kept nervously out of the way, while he opened the envelope. The card had evidently been chosen with great care, and an eye to its suitability. A large bunch of forget-me-nots figured in the centre, tied with a lover's knot of blue ribbon. Above this, two embossed hands – Sarah's and David's of course – were clasped. Above these again, flew two turtle-doves. They carried a scroll between them, depending from either beak, bearing in gold lettering, "The Compliments of the Season." At the bottom of the card were two blank lines beginning with "To – " and "From – ". Sarah had filled in, with much labour, and

rather brown ink:

To *the Reverant David rivers*
From *Yours rispectfully Sarah*

David, delighted, stood the card in the place of honour on the mantel-piece, in front of the clock. When Sarah came in, he stopped whistling to Chappie, went forward at once and shook hands with her, thanking her warmly for the Christmas card.

"The only one I received, Sarah; and I do think it most awfully pretty."

Sarah admitted that it *was* that; explained at great length where she got it, and why she chose it; and described a good many other cards she had nearly bought but eventually rejected in favour of the forget-me-nots, thinking they would "look home-like in them outlandish places," and ensure David's kind remembrance of her.

David protested that, card or no card, he would never forget Sarah, and all her thoughtful care of him; and Sarah wiped her eyes with a corner of her apron, and only wished there was more of him to care for.

David felt this rather embarrassingly personal, and walked over to the window to throw crumbs to a robin. Then he turned, as Sarah, having folded the cloth, was preparing to leave the room.

"Sarah," he said, "I have had an invitation. I am dining out to-night."

Sarah's face fell. "Oh, Mr. Rivers, sir! And me going to a chicking, being as it was Christmas!"

"Well, Sarah, you see my friend thought it was dull that I should dine by myself on Christmas night. And if you had gone to a chicken, I should indeed be left alone."

"Get along, sir!" chuckled Sarah. "You know my meaning. And, if it's Smiths or Joneses, I misdoubt if you'll get so good a dinner – "

"It isn't Smiths or Joneses, Sarah. It is Miss Rivers, of Riverscourt. And she has promised me a turkey, and a plum-pudding, and possibly – only I must not count too much on those – possibly, mince-pies!"

Sarah's face expanded. "Oh, if it's Miss Diana, sir, you can't do better. There's none like Miss Diana, to my thinking. And we can have the chicking on Boxing-day. And, with your leave, if I'm not wanted, I'm asked out to friends this evening, which I hadn't no intention of mentioning. And Mr. Rivers, sir; mark my words. You can't do better than Miss Diana. We've known her from a babe, master an' me. Folks talk, because she don't hold with getting married, and because she don't do much church-going; but, begging your pardon, sir, I don't hold with either, m'self. Marriage means slaving away, with few thanks and fewer ha'pence; and church-going mostly means, for women-folk, a vieing with one another's bonnets. I don't go to feathers, m'self; always having been well-content with beads. And I pay my respects to Almighty God, at home."

"'Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is,'" quoted David. "You forget the injunction

of the writer to the Hebrews, Sarah."

"That don't hold good for now, Mr. Rivers, sir," replied Sarah, with conviction; "any more than many other *h*epistolic remarks."

"They all hold good for now, Sarah," said David, gravely.

"Then what about 'let your women keep silence in the churches'? Hark to them rowdy Miss Joneses in the choir!"

"They *do* make a row," admitted David, off his guard.

"And 'if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home'?" Sarah was evidently well up in her Bible.

"Well, why not?" queried David.

"Why not, Mr. Rivers, sir?" repeated Sarah, scornfully. "Why not? Why because stay-at-home husbands ain't likely to be able to teach go-to-church wives! And, even if they did, how about me an' Miss Diana, as has none?"

This seemed unanswerable, though it had nothing whatever to do with the point at issue. But David had no suggestions to offer concerning the limitations contingent on the spinsterhood of Sarah and of Miss Diana. It therefore gave Sarah the last word; which, to the female mind, means victory; and she bore away the breakfast cloth in triumph.

When she brought in tea that afternoon, she lingered a few minutes, giving the fire a little unnecessary attention, and furtively watching David, as he put salt on his hot-buttered toast.

Then she said tentatively: "Mr. Rivers, sir, there are one or two things about Miss Diana you might as well know, before you go over there."

"No, thank you, Sarah," said David, with decision. "Whatever Miss Rivers wishes me to know, she will tell me herself. Anything she does not herself tell me, I prefer not to hear from others."

Sarah surveyed him; and her look expressed amazement and disapproval.

"Well I never!" she exclaimed. "You *are* different from master! All I hear in the village I tell master while I wait on him at dinner. He says: 'You may as well tell me what you hear, my good Sarah; and then I can judge how to act.'"

David smiled. He had already discovered the good Rector's love of gossip.

"But you see, Sarah," he said, "being only a *locum tenens*, I do not, fortunately, have to act."

"Don't disparage yourself, sir," advised Sarah, still disappointed, almost aggrieved. "And even if folks here *have* called you so, you won't be that to Miss Diana."

"Oh, no," said David, cheerfully. "I do not propose to be a *locum tenens* to Miss Diana!"

The motor glided up to the Rectory gate at seven o'clock, to the minute. David saw the flash of the acetylene lamps on his bedroom blind.

He ran down the stairs, filled with a delightful sense of holiday-making, and adventure.

His one clerical suit was carefully brushed, and Sarah had "pressed it," a mysterious process from which it emerged with a

youthful, unwrinkled air, to which it had for long been a stranger. His linen was immaculate. He had shaved with extreme care. He felt so festive, that his lack of conventional evening clothes troubled him no longer. He slipped Sarah's Christmas card into his pocket. He knew Diana would appreciate the pathos and humour of those clasped hands and forget-me-nots.

Then he went down the garden path, and entered the motor. The footman arranged the fur rug over his knees, showed him how to switch off the electric lights if he preferred darkness, shut the door, took his seat beside the motionless chauffeur, and instantly they glided away down the lane, and turned into the high road leading to Riversmead.

It seemed wonderful to David to be flying along in Diana's sumptuous motor. He had never before been in a powerful noiseless Napier car, and he found it somewhat of an experience. Involuntarily he thought of the time when he had been so deadly weak from African fever, and his people had had somehow to get him to the coast; the rough little cart on wheels they made to hold him and his mattress, and tried to draw him along the apology for a road. But the shaking and bumping had been so absolutely unbearable, that he had eventually had to be slung and carried as far as the river. Even so, there had been the perpetual dread of the agonising jerk if one of his bearers stumbled over a stone, or stepped unexpectedly into a rut. And to all this he was so soon returning. And quite right, too. No man should glide through life on cushioned tyres. For a woman, it was quite

otherwise. Her womanhood constituted a sufficient handicap, without any roughness or hardship being allowed to come her way. He liked to know that Diana would always – literally and metaphorically – glide through life in a noiseless Napier. This method of progression need be no hindrance to her following of the star.

He looked at his watch. In ten minutes they would reach Riverscourt.

He switched off the lights, and at once the flying trees and hedges became visible in the pale moonlight. He enjoyed watching them as they whirled past. The great car bounded silently along the road, sounding a warning note upon the horn, if the distant light of any cart or carriage came in sight ahead of them; but passing it, and speeding on in the snowy darkness, before David had had time to look out and see what manner of vehicle it was.

They rushed through little villages, the cottage windows bright with seasonable festivity. In one of them David caught a glimpse of a Christmas-tree, decked with shining candles, and surrounded by the curly heads of happy little children. It was many years since he had seen a Christmas-tree. It brought wistful thoughts of home and boyhood's days. The first Christmas-tree he could remember had yielded to his enraptured hands a wooden popgun, which expelled a cork with great force and a terrifying sound, sufficiently loud to make all grown-up people jump, if it was done exactly behind their heads, when they were unaware

of its near vicinity. This effect upon grown-ups, produced by his own popgun, had given him a sense of power which was limitless; until the sudden forcible confiscation of the popgun had set thereto an unexpected limit. He then mentioned it as a flute, and asked for it back; pointing out that its popgun propensities were a mere accident; its real nature was to be a flute. He received it back as a flute, upon condition that it should not immediately accidentally develop again into a popgun. He spent the remainder of that day blowing blissfully into the eight holes punched in the strip of red wood gummed to the side of the popgun. The resultant sounds were melancholy and fitful to a degree; and it is doubtful which was the greater trial to the nerves of the grown-ups, the sudden explosion of the popgun, or the long drawn out piping of the flute. Anyway when his treasure suddenly and unaccountably disappeared, they assisted his tearful search in a half-hearted sort of way, and when eventually his unaided efforts discovered it, carefully concealed in one of their own wardrobes, his infantine faith in the sincerity of adult human nature had received its first rude shock.

David lay back in the motor and wondered whether life would ever hold for him a scene so enchanting as that first Christmas-tree, or a gift so priceless as that popgun-flute.

The motor sped through the old-world town of Riversmead, scarcely slacking speed, for the streets were clear; all its inhabitants were indoors, merry-making; and the one policeman they passed, saluted. Diana's car was well-known and respected.

Then in at great iron gates, standing wide, and up an avenue of stately beeches, coming to sudden pause before the portico of a large stone house, gay with lighted windows.

CHAPTER VI
DAVID MAKES FRIENDS WITH "CHAPPIE"

The door into the great hall opened as David stepped out of the motor. A footman took his overcoat, and he found himself following an elderly butler across the spacious hall toward a door, which he flung open, announcing in confidential tones: "The Reverend David Rivers"; then stood aside, that David might enter.

David had already been looking right and left for Chappie; and, even as he walked into the drawing-room, he had a seductive whistle ready in case the poodle came to meet him, before he could reach Diana's friendly hand.

But neither Diana nor the poodle were in the drawing-room.

Instead, on a large sofa, at right angles with the fireplace, in the midst of heaped up cushions, sat a very plump elderly lady, of haughty mien, clad in claret-coloured velvet, a nodding ornament in her white hair, and much jewellery on her fat neck. She raised a lorgnon, on a long tortoiseshell handle, and looked through it at David as he advanced toward her.

There was such awe-inspiring majesty in the action, that David felt certain she must be, at the very least, a duchess.

He seemed to be hours in reaching the sofa. It was like

one of those long walks taken in dreams, covering miles, yet only advancing yards; and as he walked his clerical jacket grew shorter, and his boots more patently *not* patent leather.

When, at last, he reached the hearthrug – nothing happened. The plump lady had, apparently, no disengaged hand; one held the lorgnon; the other, a large feather fan.

"D'y do?" she said, in a rather husky voice. "I conclude you are Diana's missionary."

This was an almost impossible remark to answer. David was *not* Diana's missionary; yet he was, undoubtedly, the missionary Diana had asked to dinner.

In his embarrassment he held his warm hands to the blaze of the log-fire, and said: "What a beautiful Christmas-day!"

The plump lady ignored the remark. She declined to recognise anything in common between her Christmas-day and David's.

"Where is your sphere of work?" she demanded, hoarsely.

"Central Africa," replied David, in a meek voice, devoutly wishing himself back there.

At that moment the door burst open, by reason of a bump against it, and a black poodle trotted in, identical with the dog of David's imagining, excepting that its tufts were tied up with red ribbon.

David whistled joyfully. "Hullo, Chappie!" he said. "Come here, old fellow."

The poodle paused, surprised, and looked at him; one fore-paw uplifted.

The plump lady made an inarticulate sound, and dropped her lorgnon.

But David felt sure of his ground. "Come on, Chappie," he said. "Let's be friends."

The poodle trotted up and shook hands. David bent down and patted his beautiful coat.

Then Diana herself swept into the room. "A thousand pardons, Cousin David!" she cried. "I should have been down to receive you. But Knox broke all records and did the distance in eighteen minutes!" In a moment her hand was in his; her eyes were dancing with pleasure; her smile enveloped him in an atmosphere of welcoming friendliness.

All David's shyness left him. He forgot his terror of the majestic person on the sofa. "Oh, that's all right" he said. "I have been making friends with Chappie."

For a moment even Diana looked nonplussed. Then she laughed gaily. "I ought to have been down to introduce you properly," she said. "Let me do so now. Cousin David, this is Mrs. Marmaduke Vane. Chappie dear, may I present to you my cousin, David Rivers?"

David never knew why the floor did not open and swallow him up! He looked helplessly at Diana, and hopelessly at the plump lady on the sofa, whose wrathful glance withered him.

Diana flew to the rescue. "Now, Chappie dear," she said, "the motor is at the door, and Marie has your fur cloak in the hall. Remember me to the Brackenburys, and don't feel obliged to

come away early if you are enjoying the games after dinner. The brougham will call for you at eleven; but James can put up, and come round when you send for him. If I have gone up when you return, we shall meet at breakfast." She helped the plump lady to her feet, and took her to the door. "Good-bye, dear; and have a good time."

She closed the door, and came back to David, standing petrified on the hearthrug.

"Mrs. Vane is my chaperon," she explained. "That is why I call her 'Chappie.' But – tell me, Cousin David; do you always call elderly ladies by their rather private pet-names, in the first moments of making their acquaintance?"

"Heaven help me!" said poor David, ruefully, "I thought 'Chappie' was the poodle."

Diana's peals of laughter must have reached the irate lady in the hall. She sank on to the sofa, and buried her golden head in the cushions.

"Oh, Cousin David!" she said. "I always knew you were unlike anybody else. Did you see the concentrated fury in Chappie's eye? And shall we improve matters by explaining that you thought she was the poodle? Oh, talk of something else, or I shall suffocate!"

"But you said: 'There will only be myself and Chappie; and Chappie doesn't count,'" explained David. "If that was 'Chappie,' she counts a lot. She looked me up and down, until I felt positively cheap; and she asked me whether I was your missionary. I made

sure she was a duchess, at the very least."

"That only shows how very little experience you have had of duchesses, Cousin David. If Chappie had really been a duchess, she would have made you feel at home in a moment, and I should have found you seated beside her on the sofa talking as happily as if you had known her for years. Chappie has a presence, I admit; and a ducal air; which is partly why I keep her on as chaperon. But she says: 'D'y do,' and looks down her nose at you in that critical manner, because her father was only a doctor in a small provincial town."

"My father was a doctor in a little country village," said David, quickly, "yet I hope I don't look down my nose at people."

"Ah," said Diana, "but then you are a man, and no foolish friends have told you that you look like a duchess, thus turning your poor head. Chappie is a kind old thing, at heart, and must have attractive qualities of sorts, seeing she has been married no less than three times. She was my governess, years ago, before her first marriage. And when Uncle Falcon died, I had her back as chaperon; partly because she is very poor, and couples with that poverty an inordinate love of creature comforts, which is quite pathetic; partly because she makes an imposing figure-head, yet I can do with her exactly as I like. How would you define a chaperon, Cousin David?"

"We don't have them in Central Africa, Miss Rivers."

"Well, a chaperon is a person who should be seen and not heard. And she should be seen by the right people; not by those

she is chaperoning, but by the tiresome people who think they ought to be chaperoned. My good Chappie satisfactorily fulfils these conditions. She is, to all intents, chaperoning you and me, this evening; yet, in reality, she is dining with friends of hers in Riversmead; thus sparing us the unnecessary restraint of her presence, and the undesirable infliction of her quite mindless conversation."

David found himself wondering whether he ought not to have allowed Sarah to tell him "one or two things about Miss Diana," before he adventured over to Riverscourt.

At that moment the staid butler opened wide the door, with a murmured sentence about dinner.

Diana rose, with a gentle grace and dignity which reminded David of his Lady of Mystery's first progress up Brambledene church; and, laying her hand within his arm, guided him to the dining-room.

A small round table stood in the centre of the great oak-panelled room. It gleamed with glass and silver, wax candles and snowy linen. The decoration was Parma violets and lilies of the valley.

David sat at Diana's right hand, and when she leaned toward him and they talked in low voices, the old man at the distant sideboard could not overhear their conversation.

The poodle had followed them to the dining-room, and lay down contentedly in front of the log-fire.

Diana was wearing perfectly plain white satin. A Medici

collar, embroidered with pearls, rose at the back of her shapely head. She wore violets at her bosom, and a dainty wreath of violets in her hair. Her gown in front was cut square and low, and embroidered with pearls. On the whiteness of her skin, below the beautiful firm neck, sparkled a brilliant diamond star. David hated to see it there; he could hardly have explained why. It rose and fell lightly, with her breathing. When she laughed, it scintillated in the light of the wax candles. It fascinated David – the sparkling star, on the soft flesh. He looked at it, and looked away; but again it drew his unwilling eyes.

He tried to master his aversion. Why should not Miss Rivers wear a diamond star? Why should he, David, presume to dislike to see a star so worn?

Before they reached the second course, Diana said to the butler: "Send Marie to me."

In a few moments her French maid, in simple black attire, with softly braided hair, stood at her elbow. Diana, still talking gaily to David, lifted both arms, unclasped the thin gold chain from about her neck, and handed the pendant to her maid.

"*Serrez-moi ça*," she said, carelessly.

Then she turned her clear eyes on David. "You prefer it in the sky," she said. "I quite agree with you. A woman's flesh savours too much of the world and the devil, to be a resting-place for stars. It can have no possible connection with ideals."

She spoke so bitterly, that David's tender heart rose up in arms.

"True, I prefer it in the sky," he said, "and I prefer it not of diamonds. But I do not like to hear you speak so of – of your body. It seems to me too perfectly beautiful to be thus relegated to a lower sphere; not because it is not flesh; but because, though flesh, it clothes a radiant soul. The mortal body is but the garment of the immortal soul. The soul, in mounting, lifts the body with it."

"I do not agree with you," said Diana. "I loathe bodies; my own, no less than other people's. And how little we know of our souls. I am afraid I shall shock you, Cousin David, but a favourite theory of mine is: that only a certain number of people have any souls at all. I have always maintained that the heathen have no souls."

David's deep eyes gleamed.

"The young natives of Uganda," he said, "sooner than give up their new-found faith, sooner than deny the Lord Who had bought them, walked calmly to the stake, and were slowly roasted by fire; their limbs, while they yet lived, being hacked off, one by one, and thrown into the flames. Their holy courage never failed; their last articulate words were utterances of faith and praise. Surely *bodies* would hardly go through so much, unless *souls*– strong immortal souls – dwelt within them."

"True," said Diana, softly. "Cousin David, I apologise. And I wonder how many of us would stand such a soul-test as slow-fire. I can't quite imagine Chappie, seated on a gridiron, singing hymns! Can you?"

"We must not judge another," said David, rather stiffly. "Conditions of martyrdom, produced the noble army of martyrs. Why should not Mrs. Vane, if placed in those conditions, rise to the occasion?"

"I am certain she would," said Diana. "She would rise quite rapidly, – if the occasion were a gridiron."

Much against his will, David burst out laughing.

Diana leaned her chin in her hands; her luminous grey eyes observed him, gravely. Little dimples of enjoyment dented either cheek; but her tone was entirely demure.

"I hope you are not a prig, Cousin David," she said, gravely.

"I have never been considered one," replied David, humbly. "But, if you say so – "

"No, no!" cried Diana. "You are not a prig; and I know I am flippant beyond words. Have you found out that I am flippant, Cousin David?"

"Yes," he said, gently. "But I have found out something besides that."

Her eyes challenged him.

"And that is – ?"

"That you take refuge in flippancy, Miss Rivers, when you want to hide a deeper anxiety and earnestness of soul than you can quite understand, or altogether cope with."

"Really? Then you must explain it to me, and cope with it for me. I hope our Christmas dinner has come up to the dinner of Sarah's intentions. Have another pear; or some more nuts?

I did not order crackers, because we are both grown up, and we should look so foolish in paper caps; and yet, if we had had them, we could not have resisted putting them on. Don't you know, at children's parties, the way in which grown-ups seize upon the most *outré* of the coloured head-gear, don them, in a moment of gay abandonment, and – forget them! I can remember now, the delight, after one of the Christmas parties in my childhood, of seeing Chappie go gravely in to say good-night to grandpapa, completely unconscious of a Glengarry bonnet, tilted waggishly on one side, or, on another occasion, of a tall peaked fool's cap, perched on her frizzled 'transformation'. Oh, to be a little child again, each Christmas-day! Yet here am I – twenty-eight! How old are you, Cousin David?.. Twenty-nine? Well, I am glad you are not *quite* thirty. Being in another decade would have been like being in a cassock… Why a cassock? How dense you are, my reverend cousin! My mildest jokes require explaining. Why because it would have removed you so far away, and I want you quite near this evening, not perched in a distant pulpit! You cannot really help me, unless you fully sympathise and understand. And I am in such sore straits, Cousin David, that I look upon myself as a drowning man – why do we always say 'drowning *man*' as if there never were any drowning women? – about to sink for the third time; and you as the rope, which constitutes my only hope of safety. Let us go to the drawing-room."

CHAPTER VII
THE TOUCH OF POWER

As they passed into the drawing-room, David's eye fell on a grand piano, in black ebony case, to the left of the doorway.

"Oh!" said David, and stopped short.

"Does that tempt you?" asked Diana. "Yes; I might have known you were full of music. Your sufferings, over the performances of the Brambledene choir, were more patent than you realised."

David's fingers were working eagerly.

"I so rarely get the chance of a piano," he said. "Like chaperons, we don't have them in Central Africa. I went without all manner of things to be able to afford one in my rooms at college; but, since then – Is it a Bechstein, or what?"

"I really do not know," laughed Diana. "It is an article of furniture I do not use. Once a quarter, it lifts up its voice, poor dear, when a sleek person with a key of his own, arrives unexpectedly, asking for a duster, and announcing that he has come to tune it. He usually turns up when I have a luncheon party. Occasionally when Chappie is feeling low, and dwelling on the departed Marmaduke, she feels moved to play 'Home, Sweet Home'; but when Chappie plays 'Home, Sweet Home' you instantly discover that 'there's no place like' – being out; and, be it ever so cheerless, you catch up a hat, and flee! You may

carry off the piano to Africa, if you will, Cousin David. And, meanwhile, see how you like it now, while I try to collect my ideas, and consider how best to lay my difficulties before you."

She moved across the long room, to the fireplace, drew forward a low chair, turning it so as to face the distant piano.

David, tingling with anticipation, opened the instrument with reverent care.

"It *is* a Bechstein," he said; then took his seat; pausing a moment, his hands upon his knees, his dark head bent over the keys.

Diana, watching him, laughed in her heart.

"What an infant it is, in some ways," she thought. "I do believe he is saying: 'For what we are about to receive'!" But, in another minute her laughter ceased. She was receiving more than she had expected. David had laid his hands upon the keys; and, straightway, the room was filled with music.

It did not seem to come from the piano. It did not appear to have any special connection with David. It came chiefly from an unseen purple sky overhead; not the murky darkness of an English winter, but the clear over-arching heavens of the Eastern desert – expansive, vast, fathomless.

Beneath it, rode a cavalcade of travellers – anxious, perplexed, uncertain. She could hear the soft thud of the camels' feet upon the sand, and see the slow swaying, back and forth, of the mysterious riders.

Suddenly outshone a star, – clear, luminous, divine; so

brilliant, so unexpected, that the listener by the fireplace said, "Oh!" – then laid her hand over her trembling lips.

But David had forgotten her. His eyes were shining; his thin face, aglow.

Now all was peace and certainty. They travelled on. They reached Jerusalem. The minor key of doubt and disappointment crept in again. Then, once more, shone the star. They arrived at Bethlehem. In chords of royal harmony they found the King. *O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!*

Diana's face sank into her clasped hands. The firelight played upon her golden hair.

She knew, now, just how far she had wandered from the one true Light; just how poor had been her response to the eternal love which brought the Lord of glory to the manger of Bethlehem; to the village home at Nazareth; to the cross of Calvary. The love of Christ had not constrained her. She had lived for self. Her heart had grown hard and unresponsive.

And now, in tenderest, reverent melody, the precious gifts were being offered – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But, what had *she* to offer? Her gold could hardly be accepted while she withheld *herself*. Yet how could love awaken in a heart so dead, so filled with worldly scorn and unbelief?

The music had changed. It no longer came from unseen skies, or ranged back into past scenes, and ancient history. It centred in David, and the piano.

He was playing a theme so simple and so restful, that it stole

into Diana's heart, bringing untold hope and comfort. At length, she lifted her head.

"What are you playing, now, Cousin David?" She asked, gently.

David hushed the air into a whisper, as he answered: "A very simple setting, of my own, to those wonderful words, 'At even, e'er the sun was set.' You know them? The old tune never contented me. It was so apt to drag, and did not lend itself to the crescendo of hope and thankfulness required by the glad certainty that the need of each waiting heart would be fully met, nor to the diminuendo of perfect peace, enfolding each one as they went away. So I composed this simple melody, and I sing it, by myself, out in the African forests most nights, when my day's work is over. But it is a treat to be able to play it here, with full harmonies."

"Sing it to me," said Diana, gently.

And at once David began to sing, to his own setting, the tender words of the old evening hymn. And this was what he sang:

Holy Star

"At even ere the sun was set"

1. At even ere the sun was set,

The sick, O Lord, around Thee lay;
Oh, in what divers pains they met!
Oh, with what joy they went away!

2. Once more 'tis eventide, and we
Oppressed with various ills draw near;
What if Thy Form we cannot see?
We know and feel that Thou art here.

3. O Saviour Christ, our woes dispel;
For some are sick, and some are sad;
And some have never loved Thee well,
And some have lost the love they had;

4. And some have found the world is vain,
Yet from the world they break not free;
And some have friends who give them pain,
Yet have not sought a friend in Thee.

5. And none, O Lord, have perfect rest,
For none are wholly free from sin;
And they who fain would serve Thee best,
Are conscious most of sin within.

6. O Saviour Christ, Thou too art Man;
Thou hast been troubled, tempted, tried;
Thy kind but searching glance can scan
The very wounds that shame would hide.

7. Thy touch has still its ancient power;
No word from Thee can fruitless fall;
Hear in this solemn evening hour,
And in Thy mercy heal us all;
O heal us all!

The pure tenor voice rose and fell, giving full value to each line. As he reached the words: "And some have never loved Thee well, And some have lost the love they had," Diana's tears fell, silently. It was so true – so true. She had never loved Him well; and she had lost what little faith, what little hope, she had.

Presently David's voice arose in glad tones of certainty:

"Thy touch has still its ancient power;
No word from Thee can fruitless fall;
Hear, in this solemn evening hour,
And, in Thy mercy, heal us all;
Oh, heal us all."

The last notes of the quiet Amen, died away.

David closed the piano softly; rose, and walked over to the fireplace. He did not look at Diana; he did not speak to her. He knew, instinctively, that a soul in travail was beside him. He left her to his Lord.

After a while she whispered: "If only one were worthy. If only one's faith were strong enough to realise, and to believe."

"Our worthiness has nothing to do with it," said David,

without looking round. "And we need not worry about our faith, so long as – like the tiny mustard seed – it is, however small, a living, growing thing. The whole point lies in the fact of the power of His touch; the changeless truth of His unfailing word; the fathomless ocean of His love and mercy. Look away from self; fix your eyes on Him; and healing comes."

A long silence followed David's words. He stood with his back to her, watching the great logs as the flames played round them, and they sank slowly, one by one, into the hot ashes.

At last he heard Diana's voice.

"Cousin David," she said, "will you give me your blessing?"

David Rivers turned. He was young; he was humble; he was very simple in his faith; but he realised the value and responsibility of his priestly office. He knew it had been given him as "a service of gift."

He lifted his hands, and as Diana sank to her knees, he laid them reverently upon the golden corona of her hair.

One moment of silence. Then David's voice, vibrant with emotion, yet deep, tender, and unfaltering, pronounced the great Triune blessing, granted to desert wanderers of old.

> "The Lord bless thee and keep thee;
> The Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee;
> The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace."

And the touch of power which Diana felt upon her heart and life, from that moment onward, was not the touch of David Rivers.

CHAPTER VIII
THE TEST OF THE TRUE HERALD

As David sped back through the starry darkness, he was filled with an exultation such as he had never before experienced.

He had always held that every immortal soul was of equal value in the sight of God; and that the bringing into the kingdom of an untutored African savage, was of as much importance, in the Divine estimation, as the conversion of the proudest potentate ruling upon any European throne.

But, somehow, he realised now the greatness of the victory which grace had won, in this surrender of Diana to the constraining touch of his Lord and hers.

It was one thing to see light dawn, where all had hitherto been darkness; but quite another to see the dispersion of clouds of cynical unbelief, and the surrender of a strong personality to the faith which requires the simple loving obedience of a little child: for, "whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein."

David leaned back in the motor, totally unconscious of his surroundings, as he realised how great a conquest for his King was this winning of Diana. Her immense wealth, her influence, her position in the county, her undoubted personal charm, would all now be consecrated, and become a power on the side of right.

He foresaw a beautiful future before her. The very fact that he

himself was so soon leaving England, and would have no personal share in that future, made his joy all the purer because of its absolute selflessness. Like the Baptist of old, standing on the banks of Jordan, he had pointed to the passing Christ, saying: "Behold!" She had beheld; she had followed; she had found Him; and the messenger, who had brought about this meeting, might depart. He was needed no longer. The Voice had done its work. All true heralds of the King rejoice when the souls they have striven to win turn and say: "Now we believe, not because of thy saying; for we have heard Him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world." This test was now David's; and being a true herald, he did not fail before it.

When Diana had risen from her knees, she had turned to him and said, gently: "Cousin David, do you mind if I order the motor now? I could not speak or think to-night of other things; and I just feel I want to be alone."

During the few moments which intervened before the car was announced, they sat in silence, one on either side of the fireplace. There was a radiance of joy on both young faces, which anyone, entering unexpectedly, would doubtless have put down to a very different cause. Diana was not thinking at all of David; and David was thinking less of Diana than of the Lord Whose presence with them, in that evening hour, had made of it a time of healing and of power.

As he rose to go, she put her hand in his.

"Cousin David," she said, "more than ever now, I need your

counsel and your help. If I send over, just before one o'clock, can you come to luncheon to-morrow, and afterwards we might have the talk which I cannot manage to-night?"

David agreed. The weddings at which he had to officiate were at eleven o'clock. "I will be ready," he said, "and I will come. I am afraid my advice is not worth much; but, such as it is, it is altogether at your service."

"Good-night, Cousin David," she said, "and God bless you! Doesn't it say somewhere in the Bible: 'They that turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars for ever and ever'?"

David now remembered this farewell remark of Diana's, as he stood for a moment at the Rectory gate, looking upward to the clear frosty sky. But the idea did not suit his mood.

"Ah, no, my Lord," he said. "Thou art the bright and morning Star. Why should I want, for myself, any glory or shining? I am content forever to be but a follower of the Star."

CHAPTER IX
Uncle Falcon's Will

Luncheon would have been an awkward affair, owing to David's nervous awe of Mrs. Marmaduke Vane and his extreme trepidation in her presence, had it not been for Diana's tact and vivacity.

She took the bull by the horns, explaining David's mistake, and how it was entirely her own fault for being so ambiguous and inconsequent in her speech – "as you have told me from my infancy, dear Chappie"; and she laughed so infectiously over the misunderstanding and over the picture she drew of poor David's dismay and horror, that Mrs. Marmaduke Vane laughed also, and forgave David.

"And to add to poor Cousin David's confusion, he had made sure, at first sight, that you were at least a duchess," added Diana tactfully; "and they don't have them in Central Africa; so Cousin David felt very shy. Didn't you, Cousin David?"

David admitted that he did; and Mrs. Vane began to like "Diana's missionary."

"I have often noticed," pursued Miss Rivers, "that the very people who are the most brazen in the pulpit, who lean over the side and read your thoughts; who make you lift your unwilling eyes to theirs, responsive; who direct the flow of their eloquence full upon any unfortunate person who is venturing at all obviously

to disagree – are the very people who are most apt to be shy in private life. You should see my Cousin David fling challenge and proof positive at a narrow-minded lady, with an indignant rustle, and a red feather in her bonnet. I believe her husband is a tenant-farmer of mine. I intend to call, in order to discuss Cousin David's sermons with her. I shall insist upon her showing me the passage in *her* Bible where it says that there were three Wise Men."

Then Diana drew David on to tell of his African congregations, of the weird experiences in those wild regions; of the perils of the jungle, and the deep mystery of the forest. And he made it all sound so fascinating and delightful, that Mrs. Marmaduke Vane became quite expansive, announcing, as she helped herself liberally to *pâté-de-foie-gras*, that she did not wonder people enjoyed being missionaries.

"You should volunteer, Chappie dear," said Diana. "I daresay the society sends out ladies. Only – fancy, if you came back as thin as Cousin David!"

In the drawing-room, she sent him to the piano; and Mrs. Vane allowed her coffee to grow cold while she listened to David's music, and did not ask Diana to send for more, until David left the music stool.

Then Diana reminded her chaperon of an engagement she had at Eversleigh. "The motor is ordered at half-past two, dear; and be sure you stay to tea. Never mind if they don't ask you. Just remain until tea appears. They can but say: '*Must* you stay? *Can't*

you go?' And they won't do that, because they are inordinately proud of your presence in their abode."

Mrs. Vane rose reluctantly, expressing regret that she had unwittingly made this engagement, and murmuring something about an easy postponement by telegram.

But Diana was firm. Such a disappointment must not be inflicted upon any family on Boxing-day. It could not be contemplated for a moment.

Mrs. Marmaduke Vane took David's hand in both her plump ones, and patted it, kindly.

"Good-bye, my dear Mr. Rivers," she said with *empressement*. "And I hope you will have a quite delightful time in Central Africa. And mind," she added archly, "if Diana decides to come out and see you there, *I* shall accompany her."

Honest dismay leapt into David's eyes.

"It is no place for women," he said, helplessly. Then looked at Diana. "I assure you, Miss Rivers, it is no place for women."

"Never fear, Cousin David," laughed Diana. "You have fired Mrs. Vane with a desire to rough it; but I do not share her ardour, and she could not start without me. Could you, Chappie dear? Good-bye. Have a good time."

She turned to the fire, with an air of dismissal, and pushed a log into place with her toe.

David opened the door, waited patiently while Mrs. Vane hoarsely whispered final farewell pleasantries; then closed it behind her portly back.

When he returned to the hearthrug, Diana was still standing gazing thoughtfully into the fire, one arm on the mantel-piece.

"Oh, the irony of it!" she said, without looking up. "She hopes you will have a quite delightful time; and, as a matter of fact, you are going out to die! Cousin David, do you *really* expect never to return?"

"In all probability," said David, "I shall never see England again. They tell me I cannot possibly live through another five years out there. They think two, or at most three, will see me through. Who can tell? I shall be grateful for three."

"Do you consider it right, deliberately to sacrifice a young life, and a useful life, by returning to a place which you know must cost that life? Why not seek another sphere?"

"Because," said David, quietly, "my call is there. Some one must go; and who better than one who has absolutely no hometies; none to miss or mourn him, but the people for whom he gives his life? It is all I have to give. I give it gladly."

"Let us sit down," said Diana, "just as we sat last night, in those quiet moments before the motor came round. Only now, I can talk – and, oh, Cousin David, I have so much to say! But first I want you to tell me, if you will, all about yourself. Begin at the beginning. Never mind how long it takes. We have the whole afternoon before us, unless you have anything to take you away early."

She motioned him to an easy chair, and herself sat on the couch, leaning forward in her favourite attitude, her elbow on her

knee, her chin resting in the palm of her hand. Her grey eyes searched his face. The firelight played on her soft hair.

"Begin at the beginning, Cousin David," she said.

"There is not much to tell of my beginnings," said David, simply. "My parents married late in life. I was their only child – the son of their old age. My home was always a little heaven upon earth. They were not well off; we only had what my father earned by his practice, and village people are apt to be slack about paying a doctor's bills. But they made great efforts to give me the best possible education; and, a generous friend coming to their assistance, I was able to go to Oxford." His eyes glowed. "I wish you could know all that that means," he said; "being able to go to Oxford."

"I can imagine what it would mean – to you," said Diana.

"While I was at Oxford, I decided to be ordained; and, almost immediately after that decision, the call came. I held a London curacy for one year, but, as soon as I was priested, by special leave from my Bishop, and arrangement with my Vicar, I went out to Africa. During the year I was working in London, I lost both my father and my mother."

"Ah, poor boy!" murmured Diana. "Then you had no one."

David hesitated. "There was Amy," he said.

Diana's eyelids flickered. "Oh, there was 'Amy.' That might mean a good deal. Did 'Amy' want to go out to Central Africa?"

"No," said David; "nor would I have dreamed of taking her there. Amy and I had lived in the same village all our lives. We

had been babies together. Our mothers had wheeled us out in a double pram. We were just brother and sister, until I went to college; and then we thought we were going to be – more. But, when the call came, I knew it must mean celibacy. No man could take a woman to such places. I knew, if I accepted, I must give up Amy. I dreaded telling her. But, when at last I plucked up courage and told her, Amy did not mind very much, because a gentleman-farmer in the neighbourhood was wanting to marry her. Amy was very pretty. They were married just before I sailed. Amy wanted me to marry them. But I could not do that."

Diana looked at the thin sensitive face.

"No," she said; "you could not do that."

"I thought it best not to correspond during the five years," continued David, "considering what we had been to one another. But when I was invalided home, I looked forward, in the eager sort of way you do when you are very weak, to seeing Amy again. I had no one else. As soon as I could manage the journey, I went down – home; and – and called at Amy's house. I asked for Mrs. Robert Carsdale – Amy's married name. A very masculine noisy lady, whom I had never seen before, walked into the room where I stood awaiting Amy. She had just come in from hunting, and flicked her boot with her hunting-crop as she asked me what I wanted. I said: "I have called to see Mrs. Robert Carsdale." She said: "Well? I am Mrs. Robert Carsdale," and stared at me, in astonishment.

"So I asked for Amy. She told me where to – to find Amy, and

opened the hall door. Amy had been dead three years. Robert Carsdale had married again. I found Amy's grave, in our little churchyard, quite near my own parents'. Also the grave of her baby boy. It was all that was left of Amy; and, do you know, she had named her little son 'David.'"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.