

Meade L. T.

A Ring of Rubies



L. Meade

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Chapter One

Storming the Citadel

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

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

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

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

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

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

One day, on a certain sunshiny morning, a few months after I was nineteen, I awoke early, lay for an hour thinking hard, then jumped up and dressed myself. As I arranged my thick hair before the glass, I looked attentively at my face. I had a rather square face; the lower part of it in particular was somewhat heavily moulded; my mouth had very firm lines; my eyes were dark and deeply set. Certainly I was not beautiful, but my face had lots of character; I could see that for myself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My mother held up her hands.

“I want to earn money.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My mother started when I said this. I knew she would, for Cousin Geoffrey’s name had always a potent, curious charm in our home. It was a name both of awe and admiration, and I felt quite sure when I spoke it that I should secure immediate and profound attention. Not that I had ever seen Cousin Geoffrey. I had heard of him all my life, but I had never yet laid eyes on him.

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

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

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

Of course, my brothers and I were intensely curious about Cousin Geoffrey; all the more so because we had never seen him – beyond knowing that he lived somewhere in London, we were not even aware of his address. We never dared speak of him in my father’s presence. Once I, impelled

by an irresistible longing to break the overpowering dulness, had whispered his name. My mother had turned pale, my brothers had instantly kicked me violently under the table, and my father left the room, not to return again that night.

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

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

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

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

On a certain bright morning early in October, the beginning of a lovely day, I kissed my mother, and accompanied my father and brothers to town. They were under the impression that I wanted to buy a new winter hat. They thought me extravagant to come so far for the purpose; they expressed disapproval by their looks, if not by their words. They were all three of them men who thought it waste of breath to argue with a woman.

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

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

George stared.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is Mr Rutherford at home?"

The old man opened the door an inch wider.

"Eh? What? I'm a trifle deaf," he said.

I repeated my question more distinctly.

“Is Mr Rutherford within?”

“And what may you want with him?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And pray, who is my master?”

“My cousin, Mr Geoffrey Rutherford.”

“I happen to be that individual myself.”

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

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

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

“Rosamund Lindley.”

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

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

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

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

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

“But she gave it at last?”

“I made her.”

“She knows you have come then.”

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

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

“I want you to help me,” I said.

I spoke out quite boldly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I stamped my foot.

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

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

He was not displeased.

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

“Afraid?” I said. “What do you mean?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh – pooh! – Now drink your tea.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And if I don’t hear?”

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

Chapter Two

Cousin Geoffrey

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah, Rosamund,” she said, “I helped him to unpack it – long ago – long, long ago.”

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

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

The week passed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I uttered a loud exclamation.

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

“No, I won’t cry,” I said, “only I am stunned, and – shocked.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It presented, however, anything but a desolate appearance on the day of his funeral. No one who saw that long train of mourning relatives could have said that Cousin Geoffrey had gone unsorrowsed to his grave. Now, these sorrowing relatives wandered over his house, and after a cold collation, provided by the lawyers out of some of Cousin Geoffrey’s riches, they assembled to hear the will read in the magnificent drawing-room, where the Paul Veronese hung.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He turned and frowned at her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr Gray favoured him with a short, impatient glance.

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

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

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

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

Mr Gray gave her a long glance.

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

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

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

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

Cousin Geoffrey’s letter ran as follows: —

“My dear Gray:

“The more I think over our interview to-day the better pleased I am at the arrangement we have arrived at. You know how particular I am about my wills. I

regard them from a serious and even an artistic point of view. I look upon a will as the crowning stone of a man's life, a crown to be placed on the shrine of his memory, a monument to hand down his name to the ages. My last will pleases me much. It is finished in all its details. It is, I may venture to say, truly original. I do not think it has a flaw in its construction, and, when carried into force, it will be a means of diffusing happiness and adding to the benefit of the human race.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I am, my dear Gray, —

"Yours faithfully, —

"Geoffrey Rutherford."

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

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

Chapter Three

The Octagon Room

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

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

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

"What an old-fashioned shape!"

"Dear, dear, how clumsy!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr Gray smiled slightly.

"I happen to know some of Mr Rutherford's history," he said.

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

"We may go, then," she said.

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

My mother thanked Mr Gray, and then she and I began our pilgrimage. I don't think I ever before spent such an interesting afternoon. Cousin Geoffrey's death had cast me down and destroyed all the hopes on which I had been building, still – perhaps it was the effect of the ring – I felt a curious

sense of elation. The task of looking over the old house was the reverse of depressing to me. I never had been in such an antique, curious, rambling old mansion before. It was not like an ordinary London house; it had unexpected nooks, and queer alcoves, and marvellously carved and painted ceilings, and quaint balustrades and galleries. It must have been built a long time ago, and when the precious London ground was comparatively cheap, for the building went back a long way, and was added to here and there, so that it presented quite an irregular pile, and I don't believe another house in London in the least resembled it. It towered above all its fellows in the square, and looked something like a great king who owned but a shabby kingdom. For the neighbouring houses were fifth-rate, and most of them let out in tenements.

But Cousin Geoffrey's house was not only curious in itself – its contents were even more wonderful. I never saw a house so packed with furniture, and I don't believe there was an article in it which had not seen at least a hundred years. The quaintest bureaux and chests of drawers inlaid with brass and ivory and mother-of-pearl were to be found in all directions. There were great heavy glass cupboards full of rare and wonderful china; there were spindle-legged tables and chairs of the most approved last-century pattern; there were Chippendale book-cases, and Queen Anne furniture of all shapes and sizes. At the time I was not a connoisseur of old furniture, but my mother was. She told me the date of the furniture of each room, and said that the house was so full of valuables, that it would make in itself quite an interesting museum. I never saw my mother look younger or prettier.

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

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

"Oh, how lovely!" I exclaimed. "Even the dirt and the neglect can't spoil these windows."

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

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

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

"Then Cousin Geoffrey was an artist?"

"Oh, my dear, did I never mention that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I felt excited and full of my subject.

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

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

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

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

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

“No, Jack, certainly not.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

I suddenly stopped this rhapsody with a laugh.

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

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

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

"What do you mean, Rosamund?"

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

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

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

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

My mother's face turned pale with apprehension.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't know why we should be. You are one of the nearest relations."

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

My mother spoke with quite unwonted irritation.

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

"Geoffrey was always eccentric, Rose, I've told you so scores of times."

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

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

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

"Oh, but that is extravagance."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is Susan Ford in?” I asked.

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

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

“I’ll take up your name, and inquire,” Buttons finally condescended to say.

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

“Oh, Miss Rosamund, how kind of you! How very kind – I am delighted!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Susan’s eyes sparkled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For a moment I felt too petrified to speak.

“What do you mean?” I presently gasped. “I don’t want to sell the ring.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, it’s all right, you let Sam manage it his own way,” retorted Susan.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My mother stepped into the hall.

“You are looking very ill indeed,” she exclaimed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Four

Borrowed!

I sat down at once by Jack's bedside.

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

"How prosaic you are, Rose."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But you had no money."

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

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

“That’s the awkward part,” he growled. “I – I borrowed the money.”

“From whom?”

“Chillingfleet.”

“Mr Chillingfleet? He’s the head of your firm, isn’t he?”

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

“Jack – Jack – you stole them!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, of course.”

“Are you going to-day?”

“I’ll go, if I possibly can.”

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

“I’ll do my best.”

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

“No.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What do you know about illness, child?”

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

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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