

Hornung Ernest William

Tiny Luttrell



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CHAPTER I.

THE COMING OF TINY

Swift of Wallandoon was visibly distraught. He had driven over to the township in the heat of the afternoon to meet the coach. The coach was just in sight, which meant that it could not arrive for at least half an hour. Yet nothing would induce Swift to wait quietly in the hotel veranda; he paid no sort of attention to the publican who pressed him to do so. The iron roofs of the little township crackled in the sun with a sound as of distant musketry; their sharp-edged shadows lay on the sand like sheets of zinc that might be lifted up in one piece; and a hot wind in full blast played steadily upon Swift's neck and ears. He had pulled up in the shade, and was leaning forward, with his wide-awake tilted over his nose, and his eyes on a cloud of dust between the bellying sand-hills and the dark blue sky. The cloud advanced, revealing from time to time a growing speck. That speck was the coach which Swift had come to meet.

He was a young man with broad shoulders and good arms, and a general air of smartness and alacrity about which there could be no mistake. He had dark hair and a fair mustache; his eye was brown and alert; and much wind and sun had reddened a face that commonly gave the impression of complete capability with a sufficiency of force. This afternoon, however, Swift lacked the confident look of the thoroughly capable young man. And he was even younger than he looked; he was young enough to fancy that the owner of Wallandoon, who was a passenger by the approaching coach, had traveled five hundred miles expressly to deprive John Swift of the fine position to which recent good luck had promoted him.

He could think of nothing else to bring Mr. Luttrell all the way from Melbourne at the time of year when a sheep station causes least anxiety. The month was April, there had been a fair rainfall since Christmas, and only in his last letter Mr. Luttrell had told Swift that all he need do for the present was to take care of the fences and let the sheep take care of themselves. The next news was a telegram to the effect that Mr. Luttrell was coming up country to see for himself how things were going at Wallandoon. Having stepped into the managership by an accident, and even so merely as a trial man, young Swift at once made sure that his trial was at an end. It did not strike him that in spite of his youth he was the ideal person for the post. Yet this was obvious. He had five years' experience of the station he was to manage. The like merit is not often in the market. Swift seemed to forget that. Neither did he take comfort from the fact that Mr. Luttrell was an old friend of his family in Victoria, and hitherto his own highly satisfied employer. Hitherto, or until the last three months, he had not tried to manage Mr. Luttrell's station. If he had failed in that time to satisfy its owner, then he would at once go elsewhere; but for many things he wished most keenly to stay at Wallandoon; and he was thinking of these things now, while the coach grew before his eyes.

Of his five years on Wallandoon the last two had been infinitely less enjoyable than the three that had gone before. There was a simple reason for the difference. Until two years ago Mr. Luttrell had himself managed the station, and had lived there with his wife and family. That had answered fairly well while the family were young, thanks to a competent governess for the girls. But when the girls grew up it became time to make a change. The squatter was a wealthy man, and he could perfectly well afford the substantial house which he had already built for himself in a Melbourne suburb. The social splashing of his wife and daughters after their long seclusion in the wilderness was also easily within his means, if not entirely to his liking; but he was a mild man married to a weak woman;

and he happened to be bent on a little splash on his own account in politics. Choosing out of many applicants the best possible manager for Wallandoon, the squatter presently entered the Victorian legislature, and embraced the new interests so heartily that he was nearly two years in discovering his best possible manager to be both a failure and a fraud.

It was this discovery that had given Swift an opening whose very splendor accounted for his present doubts and fears. Had his chance been spoiled by Herbert Luttrell, who had lately been on Wallandoon as Swift's overseer, for some ten days only, when the two young fellows had failed to pull together? This was not likely, for Herbert at his worst was an honest ruffian, who had taken the whole blame (indeed it was no more than his share) of that fiasco. Swift, however, could think of nothing else; nor was there time; for now the coach was so close that the crack of the driver's whip was plainly heard, and above the cluster of heads on the box a white handkerchief fluttered against the sky.

The publican whom Swift had snubbed addressed another remark to him from the veranda:

"There's a petticoat on board."

"So I see."

The coach came nearer.

"She's your boss's daughter," affirmed the publican – "the best of 'em."

"So you're cracking!"

"Well, wait a minute. What now?"

Swift prolonged the minute. "You're right," he said, hastily tying his reins to the brake.

"I am so."

"Heaven help me!" muttered Swift as he jumped to the ground. "There's nothing ready for her. They might have told one!"

A moment later five heaving horses stood sweating in the sun, and Swift, reaching up his hand, received from a gray-bearded gentleman on the box seat a grip from which his doubts and fears should have died on the spot. If they did, however, it was only to make way for a new and unlooked-for anxiety, for little Miss Luttrell was smiling down at him through a brown gauze veil, as she poked away the handkerchief she had waved, leaving a corner showing against her dark brown jacket; and how she was to be made comfortable at the homestead, all in a minute, Swift did not know.

"She insisted on coming," said Mr. Luttrell, with a smile. "Is it any good her getting down?"

"Can you take me in?" asked the girl.

"We'll do our best," said Swift, holding the ladder for her descent.

Her shoes made a daintier imprint in the sand than it had known for two whole years. She smiled as she gave her hand to Swift; it was small, too, and Swift had not touched a lady's hand for many months. There was very little of her altogether, but the little was entirely pleasing. Embarrassed though he was, Swift was more than pleased to see the young girl again, and her smiles that struggled through the brown gauze like sunshine through a mist. She had not worn gauze veils two years ago; and two years ago she had been content with fare that would scarcely please her to-day, while naturally the living at the station was rougher now than in the days of the ladies. It was all very well for her to smile. She ought never to have come without a word of warning. Swift felt responsible and aggrieved.

He helped Mr. Luttrell to carry their baggage from the coach to the buggy drawn up in the shade. Miss Luttrell went to the horses' heads and stroked their noses; they were Bushman and Brownlock, the old safe pair she had many a time driven herself. In a moment she was bidden to jump up. There had been very little luggage to transfer. The most cumbersome piece was a hamper, of which Swift formed expectations that were speedily confirmed. For Miss Luttrell remarked, pointing to the hamper as she took her seat:

"At least we have brought our own rations; but I am afraid they will make you horribly uncomfortable behind there?"

Swift was on the back seat. "Not a bit," he answered; "I was much more uncomfortable until I saw the hamper."

"Don't you worry about us, Jack," said Mr. Luttrell as they drove off. "Whatever you do, don't worry about Tiny. Give her travelers' rations and send her to the travelers' hut. That's all she deserves, when she wasn't on the way-bill. She insisted on coming at the last moment; I told her it wasn't fair."

"But it's very jolly," said Swift gallantly.

"It was just like her," Mr. Luttrell chuckled; "she's as unreliable as ever."

The girl had been looking radiantly about her as they drove along the single broad, straggling street of the township. She now turned her head to Swift, and her eyes shot through her veil in a smile. That abominable veil went right over her broad-brimmed hat, and was gathered in and made fast at the neck. Swift could have torn it from her head; he had not seen a lady smile for months. Also, he was beginning to make the astonishing discovery that somehow she was altered, and he was curious to see how much, which was impossible through the gauze.

"Is that true?" he asked her. He had known her for five years.

"I suppose so," she returned carelessly; and immediately her sparkling eyes wandered. "There's old Mackenzie in the post office veranda. He was a detestable old man, but I must wave to him; it's so good to be back!"

"But you own to being unreliable?" persisted Swift.

"I don't know," Miss Luttrell said, tossing the words to him over her shoulder, because her attention was not for the manager. "Is it so very dreadful if I am? What's the good of being reliable? It's much more amusing to take people by surprise. Your face was worth the journey when you saw me on the coach! But you see I haven't surprised Mackenzie; he doesn't look the least impressed; I dare say he thinks it was last week we all went away. I hate him!"

"Here are the police barracks," said Swift, seeing that all her interest was in the old landmarks; "we have a new sergeant since you left."

"If *he's* in *his* veranda I shall shout out to him who I am, and how long I have been away, and how good it is to get back."

"She's quite capable of doing it," Mr. Luttrell chimed in, chuckling afresh; "there's never any knowing what she'll do next."

But the barracks veranda was empty, and it was the last of the township buildings. There was now nothing ahead but the rim of scrub, beyond which, among the sand-hills, sweltered the homestead of Wallandoon.

"I've come back with a nice character, have I not?" the girl now remarked, turning to Swift with another smile.

"You must have earned it; I can quite believe that you have," laughed Swift. He had known her in short dresses.

"Ha! ha! You see he remembers all about you, my dear."

"Do you, Jack?" the girl said.

"Do I not!" said Jack.

And he said no more. He was grateful to her for addressing him, though only once, by his Christian name. He had been intimate with the whole family, and it seemed both sensible and pleasant to resume a friendly footing from the first. He would have called the girl by her Christian name too, only this was so seldom heard among her own people. Tiny she was by nature, and Tiny she had been by name also, from her cradle. Certainly she had been Tiny to Swift two years ago, and already she had called him Jack; but he saw in neither circumstance any reason why she should be Tiny to him still. It was different from a proper name. Her proper name was Christina, but unreliable though she confessedly was, she might perhaps be relied upon to jeer if he came out with that. And he would not call her "Miss Luttrell." He thought about it and grew silent; but this was because his thoughts had glided from the girl's name to the girl herself.

She had surprised him in more ways than one – in so many ways that already he stood almost in awe of the little person whom formerly he had known so well. Christina had changed, as it was

only natural that she should have changed; but because we are prone to picture our friends as last we saw them, no matter how long ago, not less natural was Swift's surprise. It was unreasoning, however, and not the kind of surprise to last. In a few minutes his wonder was that Christina had changed so little. To look at her she had scarcely changed at all. A certain finality of line was perceptible in the figure, but if anything she was thinner than of old. As for her face, what he could see of it through the maddening gauze was the face of Swift's memory. Her voice was a little different; in it was a ring of curiously deliberate irony, charming at first as a mere affectation. A more noteworthy alteration had taken place in her manner: she had acquired the manner of a finished young woman of the world and of society. Already she had shown that she could become considerably excited without forfeiting any of the grace and graciousness and self-possession that were now conspicuously hers; and before the homestead was reached she exhibited such a saintly sweetness in repose as only enhanced the lambent deviltry playing about most of her looks and tones. If Swift was touched with awe in her presence, that can hardly be wondered at in one who went for months together without setting eyes upon a lady.

The drive was a long one – so long that when they sighted the homestead it came between them and the setting sun. The main building with its long, regular roof lay against the red sky like some monstrous ingot. The hot wind had fallen, and the station pines stood motionless, drawn in ink. As they drove through the last gate they could hear the dogs barking; and Christina distinguished the voice of her own old short-haired collie, which she had bequeathed to Swift, who was repaid for the sound with a final smile. He hardly knew why, but this look made the girl's old self live to him as neither look nor word had done yet, though her face was turned away from the light, and the stupid veil still fell before it.

But the less fascinating side of her arrival was presently engaging his attention. He hastily interviewed Mrs. Duncan, an elderly godsend new to the place since the Luttrells had left it, and never so invaluable as now. Into Mrs. Duncan's hands Christina willingly submitted herself, for she was really tired out. Swift did not see her again until supper, which afforded further proofs of Mrs. Duncan's merits in a time of need. Meanwhile, Mr. Luttrell had finally disabused him of the foolish fears he had entertained while waiting for the coach. Swift's youth, which has shown itself in these fears, comes out also in the ease with which he now forgot them. They had made him unhappy for three whole days; yet he dared to feel indignant because his owner, who had confirmed his command instead of dismissing him from it, chose to talk sheep at the supper table. Swift seemed burning to hear of the eldest Miss Luttrell, who was Miss Luttrell no longer, having married a globe-trotting Londoner during her first season and gone home. He asked Christina several questions about Ruth (whose other name he kept forgetting) and her husband. But Mr. Luttrell lost no chance of rounding up the conversation and yarding it in the sheep pens; and Swift had the ingratitude to resent this. Still more did he resent the hour he was forced to spend in the store after supper, examining the books and discussing recent results and future plans with Mr. Luttrell, while his subordinate, the storekeeper, enjoyed the society of Christina. The business in the store was not only absurdly premature and irksome in itself, but it made it perfectly impossible for Swift to hear any more that night of the late Ruth Luttrell, whose present name was not to be remembered. He found it hard to possess his soul in patience and to answer questions satisfactorily under such circumstances. For an hour, indeed, he did both; but the station store faced the main building, and when Tiny Luttrell appeared in the veranda of the latter with a lighted candle in her hand, he could do neither any longer. Saying candidly that he must bid her good-night, he hurried out of the store and across the yard, and was in time to catch Christina at one end of the broad veranda which entirely surrounded the house.

At supper Mr. Luttrell had made him take the head of the table, by virtue of his office, declaring that he himself was merely a visitor. And on the strength of that Swift was perhaps justified now in adding a host's apology to his good-night. "I'm afraid you'll have to rough it most awfully," was what he said.

"Far from it. You have given me my old room, the one we papered with *Australasians*, if you remember; they are only a little more fly-blown than they used to be."

This was Christina's reply, which naturally led to more.

"But it won't be as comfortable as it used to be," said Swift unhappily; "and it won't be what you are accustomed to nowadays."

"Never mind, it's the dearest little den in the colonies!"

"That sounds as if you were glad to get back to Riverina?"

"Glad? No one knows how glad I am."

One person knew now. The measure of her gladness was expressed in her face not less than in her tones, and it was no ordinary measure. Over the candle she held in her hand Swift was enabled for the first time to peer unobstructedly into her face. He found it more winsome than ever, but he noticed some ancient blemishes under the memorable eyes. She had, in fact, some freckles, which he recognized with the keenest joy. She might stoop to a veil – she had not sunk to doctoring her complexion; she had come back to the bush an incomplete worldling after all. Yet there was that in her face which made him feel a stranger to her still.

"Do you know," he said, smiling, "that I'm in a great funk of you? I can't say quite what it is, but somehow you're so grand. I suppose it's Melbourne."

Miss Luttrell thanked him, bowing so low that her candle shed grease upon the boards. "You've altered too," she added in his own manner; "I suppose it's being boss. But I haven't seen enough of you to be sure. You evidently told off your new storekeeper to entertain me for the evening. He is a trying young man; he *will* talk. But of course he is a new chum fresh from home."

"Still he's a very good little chap; but it wasn't my fault that he and I didn't change places. Mr. Luttrell wanted to speak to me about several things, besides glancing through the books; I thought we might have put it off, and I wondered how you were getting on. By the way, it struck me once or twice that your father was coming up to give me the sack; and it's just the reverse, for now I'm permanent manager."

He told her this with a natural exultation, but she did not seem impressed by it. "Do you know why he did come up?" she asked him.

"Yes; for his Easter holidays, chiefly."

"And why I would come with him?"

"No; I'm afraid we never mentioned you. I suppose you came for a holiday too?"

"Shall I tell you why I did come?"

"I wish you would."

"Well, I came to say good-by to Wallandoon," said Christina solemnly.

"You're going to be married!" exclaimed Swift, with conviction, but with perfect nonchalance.

"Not if I know it," cried Christina. "Are you?"

"Not I."

"But there's Miss Trevor of Meringul!"

"I see them once in six months."

"That may be in the bond."

"Well, never mind Miss Trevor of Meringul. You haven't told me how it is you've come to say good-by to the station, Miss Luttrell of Wallandoon."

"Then I'll tell you, seriously: it's because I sail for England on the 4th of May."

"For England!"

"Yes, and I'm not at all keen about it, I can tell you. But I'm not going to see England, I'm going to see Ruth; Australia's worth fifty Englands any day."

Swift had recovered from his astonishment. "I don't know," he said doubtfully; "most of us would like a trip home, you know, just to see what the old country's like; though I dare say it isn't all it's cracked up to be."

"Of course it isn't. I hate it!"

"But if you've never been there?"

"I judge from the people – from the samples they send out. Your new storekeeper is one; you meet worse down in Melbourne. Herbert's going with me; he's going to Cambridge, if they'll have him. Didn't you know that? But he could go alone, and if it wasn't for Ruth I wouldn't cross Hobson's Bay to see their old England!"

The serious bitterness of her tone struck him afterward as nothing less than grotesque; but at the moment he was gazing into her face, thoughtfully yet without thoughts.

"It's good for Herbert," he said presently. "I couldn't do anything with him here; he offered to fight me when I tried to make him work. I suppose he will be three or four years at Cambridge; but how long are you going to stay with Mrs. – Mrs. Ruth?"

"How stupid you are at remembering a simple name! Do try to remember that her name is Holland. I beg your pardon, Jack, but you have been really very forgetful this evening. I think it must be Miss Trevor of Meringul."

"It isn't. I'm very sorry. But you haven't told me how long you think of staying at home."

"How long?" said the young girl lightly. "It may be for years and years, and it may be forever and ever!"

He looked at her strangely, and she darted out her hand.

"Good-night again, Jack."

"Good-night again."

What with the pauses, each of them an excellent opportunity for Christina to depart, it had taken them some ten minutes to say that which ought not to have lasted one. But you must know that this was nothing to their last good-night, on the self-same spot two years before, when she had rested in his arms.

CHAPTER II. SWIFT OF WALLANDOON

Christina was awakened in the morning by the holland blind flapping against her open window. It was a soft, insinuating sound, that awoke one gradually, and to Christina both the cause and the awakening itself seemed incredibly familiar. So had she lain and listened in the past, as each day broke in her brain. When she opened her eyes the shadow of the sash wriggled on the blind as it flapped, a blade of sunshine lay under the door that opened upon the veranda, and neither sight was new to her. The same sheets of the *Australasian* with which her own hands had once lined the room, for want of a conventional wallpaper, lined it still; the same area of printed matter was in focus from the pillow, and she actually remembered an advertisement that caught her eye. It used to catch her eye two years before. Thus it became difficult to believe in those two years; and it was very pleasant to disbelieve in them. More than pleasant Christina found it to lie where she was, hearing the old noises (the horses were run up before she rose), seeing the old things, and dreaming that the last two years were themselves a dream. Her life as it stood was a much less charming composition than several possible arrangements of the same material, impossible now. This is not strange, but it was a little strange that neither sweet impossibilities nor bitter actualities fascinated her much; for so many good girls are morbidly introspective. As for Christina, let it be clearly and early understood that she was neither an introspective girl by nature nor a particularly good one from any point of view. She was not in the habit of looking back; but to look back on the old days here at the station without thinking of later days was like reading an uneven book for the second time, leaving out the poor part.

In making, but still more in closing that gap in her life (as you close a table after taking out a leaf) she was immensely helped by the associations of the present moment. They breathed of the remote past only; their breath was sweet and invigorating. Her affection for Wallandoon was no affectation; she loved it as she loved no other place. And if, as she dressed, her thoughts dwelt more on the young manager of the station than on the station itself, that only illustrates the difference between an association and an associate. There is human interest in the one, but it does not follow that Tiny Luttrell was immoderately interested in Jack Swift. Even to herself she denied that she had ever done more than like him very much. To some "nonsense" in the past she was ready to own. But in the vocabulary of a Tiny Luttrell a little "nonsense" may cover a calendar of mild crimes. It is only the Jack Swifts who treat the nonsense seriously and deny that the crimes are anything of the sort, because for their part they "mean it." Women are not deceived. Besides, it is less shame for them to say they never meant it.

"He must marry Flo Trevor of Meringul," Christina said aloud. "It's what we all expect of him. It's his duty. But she isn't pretty, poor thing!"

The remarks happened to be made to Christina's own reflection in the glass. She, as we know, was very pretty indeed. Her small head was finely turned, and carried with her own natural grace. Her hair was of so dark a brown as to be nearly black, but there was not enough of it to hide the charming contour of her head. If she could have had the altering of one feature, she would probably have shortened her lips; but their red freshness justified their length; and the crux of a woman's beauty, her nose, happened to be Christina's best point. Her eyes were a sweeter one. Their depth of blue is seen only under dark blue skies, and they seemed the darker for her hair. But with all her good features, because she was not an English girl, but an Australian born and bred, she had no complexion to speak of, being pale and slightly freckled. Yet no one held that those blemishes prevented her from being pretty; while some maintained that they did not even detract from her good looks, and a few that they saved her from perfection and were a part of her charm. The chances are that the authorities

quoted were themselves her admirers one and all. She had many such. To most of them her character had the same charm as her face; it, too, was freckled with faults for which they loved her the more.

One of the many she met presently, but one of them now, though in his day the first of all. Swift was hastening along the veranda as she issued forth, a consciously captivating figure in her clean white frock. He had on his wide-awake, a newly filled water-bag dripped as he carried it, the drops drying under their eyes in the sun, and Christina foresaw at once his absence for the day. She was disappointed, perhaps because he was one of the many; certainly it was for this reason she did not let him see her disappointment. He told her that he was going with her father to the out-station. That was fourteen miles away. It meant a lonely day for Christina at the homestead. So she said that a lonely day there was just what she wanted, to overhaul the dear old place all by herself, and to revel in it like a child without feeling that she was being watched. But she told a franker story some hours later, when Swift found her still on the veranda where he had left her, but this was now the shady side, seated in a wicker chair and frowning at a book. For she promptly flung away that crutch of her solitude, and seemed really glad to see him. Her look made him tingle. He sat down on the edge of the veranda and leaned his back against a post. Then he inquired, rather diffidently, how the day had gone with Miss Luttrell.

"I am ashamed to tell you," said Christina graciously, for though his diffidence irritated her, she was quite as glad to see him as she looked, "that I have been bored very nearly to death!"

"I knew you would be," Swift said quite bitterly; but his bitterness was against an absent man, who had gone indoors to rest.

"I don't see how you could know anything," remarked Christina. "I certainly didn't know it myself; and I'm very much ashamed of it, that's another thing! I love every stick about the place. But I never knew a hotter morning; the sand in the yard was like powdered cinders, and you can't go poking about very long when everything you touch is red hot. Then one felt tired. Mrs. Duncan took pity on me and came and talked to me; she must be an acquisition to you, I am sure; but her cooking's better than her conversation. I think she must have sent the new chum to me to take her place; anyway I've had a dose of him, too, I can tell you!"

"Oh, he's been cutting his work, has he?"

"He has been doing the civil; I think he considered that his work."

"And quite right too! Tell me, what do you think of him?"

Christina made a grotesque grimace. "He's such a little Englishman," she simply said.

"Well, he can't help that, you know," said Swift, laughing; "and he's not half a bad little chap, as I told you last night."

"Oh, not a bit bad; only typical. He has told me his history. It seems he missed the army at home, front door and back, in spite of his crammer – I mean his cwammer. He was no use, so they sent him out to us."

"And he is gradually becoming of some use to us, or rather to me; he really is," protested Swift in the interests of fair play, which a man loves. "You laugh, but I like the fellow. He's much more use – forgive my saying so – than Herbert ever would have been – here. At all events he doesn't want to fight! He's willing, I will say that for him. And I think it was rather nice of him to tell you about himself."

"It's nicer of you to think so," said Christina to herself. And her glance softened so that he noticed the difference, for he was becoming sensitive to a slight but constant hardness of eye and tongue distressing to find in one's divinity.

"He went so far as to hint at an affair of the heart," she said aloud, and he saw her eyes turn hard again, so that his own glanced off them and fell. But he forced a chuckle as he looked down.

"Well, you gave him your sympathy there, I hope?"

"Not I, indeed. I urged him to forget all about her; she has forgotten all about him long before now, you may be sure. He only thinks about her still because it's pleasant to have somebody to think

about at a lonely place like this; and if she's thinking about him it's because he's away in the wilderness and there's a glamour about that. It wouldn't prevent her marrying another man to-morrow, and it won't prevent him making up to some other girl when he gets the chance."

"So that's your experience, is it?"

"Never mind whose experience it is. I advised the young man to give up thinking about the young woman, that's all, and it's my advice to every young man situated as he is."

Swift was not amused. Yet he refused to believe that her advice was intended for himself: firstly, because it was so coolly given, which was his ignorance, and secondly, because, literally speaking, he was not himself situated as the young Englishman was, which was merely unimaginative. In his determination, however, not to meet her in generalizations, but to get back to the storekeeper, he was wise enough.

"I know something about his affairs, too," he said quietly; "he's the frankest little fellow in the world; and I have given him very different advice, I must say."

Tiny Luttrell bent down on him a gaze of fiendish innocence.

"And what sort of advice does he give you, pray?"

"You had better ask him," said Swift feebly, but with effect, for he was honestly annoyed, and man enough to show it. As he spoke, indeed, he rose.

"What, are you going?"

"Yes; you go in for being too hard altogether."

"I don't go in for it. I am hard. I'm as hard as nails," said Christina rapidly.

"So I see," he said, and another weak return was strengthened by his firmness; for he was going away as he spoke, and he never looked round.

"I wouldn't lose my temper," she called after him.

Her face was white. He disappeared. She colored angrily.

"Now I hate you," she whispered to herself; but she probably respected him more, and that was as it only should have been long ago.

But Swift was in an awkward position, which indeed he deserved for the unsuspected passages that had once taken place between Tiny Luttrell and himself. It is true that those passages had occurred at the very end of the Luttrells' residence at Wallandoon; they had not been going on for a period preceding the end; but there is no denying that they were reprehensible in themselves, and pardonable only on the plea of exceeding earnestness. Swift would not have made that excuse for himself, for he felt it to be a poor one, though of his own sincerity he was and had been unwaveringly sure. Beyond all doubt he was properly in love, and, being so, it was not until the girl stopped writing to him that he honestly repented the lengths to which he had been encouraged to go. It is easy to be blameless through the post, but they had kept up their perfectly blameless correspondence for a very few weeks when Christina ceased firing; she was to have gone on forever. He was just persistent enough to make it evident that her silence was intentional; then the silence became complete, and it was never again broken. For if Swift's self-control was limited, his self-respect was considerable, and this made him duly regret the limitations of his self-control. His boy's soul bled with a boy's generous regrets. He had kissed her, of course, and I wonder whose fault you think that was? I know which of them regretted and which forgot it. The man would have given one of his fingers to have undone those kisses, that made him think less of himself and less of his darling. Nothing could make him love her less. He heard no more of her, but that made no difference. And now they were together again, and she was hard, and it made this difference: that he wanted her worse than ever, and for her own gain now as much as for his.

But two years had altered him also. In a manner he too was hardened; but he was simply a stronger, not a colder man. The muscles of his mind were set; his soul was now as sinewy as his body. He knew what he wanted, and what would not do for him instead. He wanted a great deal, but he meant having it or nothing. This time she should give him her heart before he took her hand; he swore

it through his teeth; and you will realize how he must have known her of old even to have thought it. The curious thing is that, having shown him what she was, she should have made him love her as he did. But that was Tiny Luttrell.

She was half witch, half coquette, and her superficial cynicism was but a new form of her coquetry. He liked it less than the unsophisticated methods of the old days. Indeed, he liked the girl less, while loving her more. She had given him the jar direct in one conversation, but even on indifferent subjects she spoke with a bitterness which he thoroughly disliked; while some of her prejudices he could not help thinking irredeemably absurd. As a shrill decrier of England, for instance, she may have amused him, but he hardly admired her in that character. In a word, he thought her, and rightly, a good deal spoilt by her town life; but he hated towns, and it was a proof of her worth in his eyes that she was not hopelessly spoilt. He saw hope for her still – if she would marry him. He was a modest man in general, but he did feel this most strongly. She was going to England without caring whether she went or not; she would do much better by marrying him and coming back to her old home in the bush. That home she loved, whether she loved him or not; in it she had grown up simple and credulous and sweet, with a wicked side that only picked out her sweetness; in it he believed that her life and his might yet be beautiful. The feeling made him sometimes rejoice that she had fallen a little out of love with her life, so that he might show her with all the effect of contrast what life and love really were; it thrilled his heart with generous throbs, it brought the moisture to his honest eyes, and it came to him oftener and with growing force as the days went on, by reason of certain signs they brought forth in Christiana. Her voice lost its bitterness in his ears, not because he had grown used to notes that had jarred him in the beginning, but because the discordant strings came gradually into tune. Her freshness came back to her with the charm and influence of the wilderness she loved; her old self lived again to Jack Swift. On the other hand, she came to realize her own delight in the old good life as she had never realized it before; she felt that henceforward she should miss it as she had not missed it yet. Now she could have defined her sensations and given reasons for them. She spent many hours in the saddle, on a former mount of hers that Swift had run up for her; often he rode with her, and the scent of the pines, the swelling of the sand-hills against the sky, the sense of Nothing between the horses' ears and the sunset, spoke to her spirit as they had never done of old. And even so on their rides would she speak to Swift, who listened grimly, hardly daring to answer her for the fear of saying at the wrong moment what he had resolved to say once and for all before she went.

And he chose the wrong moment after all. It was the eve of her going, and they were riding together for the last time; he felt that it was also his last opportunity. So in six miles he made as many remarks, then turned in his saddle and spoke out with overpowering fervor. This may be expected of the self-contained suitor, with whom it is only a question of time, and the longer the time the stronger the outburst. But Christina was not carried away, for she did not quite love him, and the opportunity was a bad one, and Swift's honest method had not improved it. She listened kindly, with her eyes on the distant timbers of the eight-mile whim; but her kindness was fatally calm; and when he waited she refused him firmly. She confessed to a fondness for him. She ascribed this to the years they had known each other. Once and for all she did not love him.

"Not now!" exclaimed the young fellow eagerly. "But you did once! You will again!"

"I never loved you," said the girl gravely. "If you're thinking of two years ago, that was mere nonsense. I don't believe its love with you either, if you only knew it."

"But I do know what it is with me, Tiny! I loved you before you went away, and all the time you were gone. Since you have been back, during these few days, I have got to love you more than ever. And so I shall go on, whatever happens. I can't help it, darling."

Neither could he help saying this; for the hour found him unable to accept his fate quite as he had meant to accept it. Her kindness had something to do with that. And now she spoke more kindly than before.

"Are you sure?" she said.

"Am I sure!" he echoed bitterly.

"It is so easy to deceive oneself."

"I am not deceived."

"It is so easy to imagine yourself – "

"I am not imagining!" cried Swift impatiently. "I am the man who has loved you always, and never any girl but you. If you can't believe that, you must have had a very poor experience of men, Tiny!"

For a moment she looked away from the whim which they were slowly nearing, and her eyes met his.

"I have," she admitted frankly; "I have had a particularly poor experience of them. Yet I am sorry to find you so different from the rest; I can't tell you how sorry I am to find you true to me."

"Sorry?" he said tenderly; for her voice was full of pain, and he could not bear that. "Why should you be sorry, dear?"

"Why – because I never dreamt of being true to you."

For some reason her face flamed as he watched it. There was a pause. Then he said:

"You are not engaged; are you in love?"

"Very far from it."

"Then why mind? If there is no one else you care for you shall care for me yet. I'll make you. I'll wait for you. You don't know me! I won't give you up until you are some other fellow's wife."

His stern eyes, the way his mouth shut on the words, and the manly determination of the words themselves gave the girl a thrill of pleasure and of pride; but also a pang; for at that moment she felt the wish to love him alongside the inability, and all at once she was as sorry for herself as for him.

"What should you mind?" repeated Swift.

"I can't tell you, but you can guess what I have been."

"A flirt?" He laughed aloud. "Darling, I don't care two figs for your flirtations! I wanted you to enjoy yourself. What does it matter how you've enjoyed yourself, so long as you haven't absolutely been getting engaged or falling in love?"

Her chin drooped into her loose white blouse. "I did fall in love," she said slowly – "at any rate I thought so; and I very nearly got engaged."

Swift had never seen so much color in her face.

Presently he said, "What happened?" but immediately added, "I beg your pardon; of course I have no business to ask." His tone was more stiff than strained.

"You *have* business," she answered eagerly, fearful of making him less than friend. "I wouldn't mind telling you the whole thing, except the man's name. And yet," she added rather wistfully, "I suppose you're the only friend I have that doesn't know! It's hard lines to have to tell you."

"Then I don't want to know anything at all about it," exclaimed Swift impulsively. "I would rather you didn't tell me a word, if you don't mind. I am only too thankful to think you got out of it, whatever it was."

"I didn't get out of it."

"You don't – mean – that the man did?"

Swift was aghast.

"I do."

He did not speak, but she heard him breathing. Stealing a look at him, her eyes fell first upon the clenched fist lying on his knee.

She made haste to defend the man.

"It wasn't all his fault; of that I feel sure. If you knew who he was you wouldn't blame him anymore than I do. He was quite a boy, too; I don't suppose he was a free agent. In any case it is all quite, quite over."

"Is it? He was from England – that's why you hate the home people so!"

"Yes, he was from home. He went back very suddenly. It wasn't his fault. He was sent for. But he might have said good-by!"

She spoke reflectively, gazing once more at the whim. They were near it now. The framework cut the sky like some uncouth hieroglyph. To Swift henceforward, on all his lonely journeys hither, it was the emblem of humiliation. But it was not his own humiliation that moistened his clenched hand now.

"I wish I had him here," he muttered.

"Ah! you know nothing about him, you see; I know enough to forgive him. And I have got over it, quite; but the worst of it is that I can't believe any more in any of you – I simply can't."

"Not in me?" asked Swift warmly, for her belief in him, at least, he knew he deserved. "I have always been the same. I have never thought of any other girl but you, and I never will. I love you, darling!"

"After this, Jack?"

He seemed to disappoint her.

"After the same thing if it happens all over again in England! There is no merit in it; I simply can't help myself. While you are away I will wait for you and work for you; only come back free, and I will win you, too, in the end. You are happier here than anywhere else, but you don't know what it is to be really happy as I should make you. Remember that – and this: that I will never give you up until someone else has got you! Now call me conceited or anything you like. I have done bothering you."

"I can only call you foolish," said the girl, though gently. "You are far too good for me. As for conceit, you haven't enough of it, or you would never give me another thought. I still hope you will quite give up thinking about me, and – and try to get over it. But nothing is going to happen in England, I can promise you that much. And I only wish I could get out of going."

He had already shown her how she might get out of it; he was not going to show her afresh or more explicitly, in spite of the temptation to do so. Even to a proud spirit it is difficult to take No when the voice that says it is kind and sorrowful and all but loving. Swift found it easier to bide by his own statement that he had done bothering her; such was his pride.

But he had chosen the wrong moment, and though he had shown less pride than he had meant to show, he was still too proud to improve the right one when it came. He was too proud, indeed, to stand much chance of immediate success in love. Otherwise he might have reminded her with more force and particularity of their former relations; and playing like that he might have won, but he would rather have lost. Perhaps he did not recognize the right moment as such when it fell; but at least he must have seen that it was better than the one he had chosen. It fell in the evening, when Christina's mood became conspicuously sentimental; but Swift happened to be one of the last young men in the world to take advantage of any mere mood.

As on the first evening, Mr. Luttrell was busy in the store, but this time with the storekeeper, who was making out a list of things to be sent up in the drays from Melbourne. Tiny and the manager were thrown together for the last time. She offered to sing a song, and he thanked her gratefully enough. But he listened to her plaintive songs from a far corner of the room, though the room was lighted only by the moonbeams; and when she rose he declared that she was tired and begged her not to sing any more. She could have beaten him for that.

But in leaving the room they lingered on the threshold, being struck by the beauty of the night. The full moon ribbed the station yard with the shadows of the pines, a soft light was burning in the store, and all was so still that the champing of the night-horse in the yard came plainly to their ears, with the chirping of the everlasting crickets. Christina raised her face to Swift; her eyes were wet in the moonlight; there was even a slight tremor of the red lips; and one hand hung down invitingly at her side. She did not love him, but she was beginning to wish that she could love him; and she did love the place. Had he taken that one hand then the chances are he might have kept it. But even Swift never dreamt that this was so. And after that moment it was not so any more. She turned cold, and

was cold to the end. Her last words from the top of the coach fell as harshly on a loving ear as any that had preceded them by a week.

"Why need you remind me I am going to England? Enjoy myself! I shall detest the whole thing."
Her last look matched the words.

CHAPTER III. THE TAIL OF THE SEASON

"What do you say to sitting it out? The rooms are most awfully crowded, and you dance too well for one; besides, one's anxious to hear your impressions of a London ball."

"One must wait till the ball is over. So far I can't deny that I'm enjoying myself in spite of the crush. But I should rather like to sit out for once, though you needn't be sarcastic about my dancing."

"Well, then, where's a good place?"

"There's a famous corner in the conservatory; it should be empty now that a dance is just beginning."

It was. So it became occupied next moment by Tiny Luttrell and her partner, who allowed that the dimly illumined recess among the tree-ferns deserved its fame. Tiny's partner, however, was only her brother-in-law, Mr. Erskine Holland.

The Luttrells had been exactly a fortnight in England. It was in the earliest hour of the month of July that Christina sat out with her brother-in-law at her first London party; and if she had spent that fortnight chiefly in visiting dressmakers and waiting for results, she had at least found time to get to know Erskine Holland very much better than she had ever done in Melbourne. There she had seen very little of him, partly through being away from home when he first called with an introduction to the family, but more by reason of the short hurdle race he had made of his courtship, marriage, and return to England with his bride. He had taken the matrimonial fences as only an old bachelor can who has been given up as such by his friends. Mr. Holland, though still nearer thirty than forty, had been regarded as a confirmed bachelor when starting on a long sea voyage for the restoration of his health after an autumnal typhoid. His friends were soon to know what weakened health and Australian women can do between them. They beheld their bachelor return within four months, a comfortably married man, with a pleasant little wife who was very fond of him, and in no way jealous of his old friends. That was Mrs. Erskine's great merit, and the secret of the signal success with which she presided over his table in West Kensington, when Erskine had settled down there and returned with steadiness to the good, safe business to which he had been virtually born a partner. For his part, without being enslaved to a degree embarrassing to their friends, Holland made an obviously satisfactory husband. He was good-natured and never exacting; he was well off and generous. One of a wealthy, many-membered firm driving a versatile trade in the East, he was as free personally from business anxieties as was the hall porter at the firm's offices in Lombard Street. There Erskine was the most popular and least useful fraction of the firm, being just a big, fair, genial fellow, fond of laughter and chaff and lawn tennis, and fonder of books than of the newspapers – an eccentric preference in a business man. But as a business man the older partners shook their heads about him. Once as a youngster he had spent a year or two in Lisbon, learning the language and the ropes there, the firm having certain minor interests planted in Portuguese soil on both sides of the Indian Ocean; and those interests just suited Erskine Holland, who had the handling of them, though the older partners nursed their own distrust of a man who boasted of taking his work out of his head each evening when he hung up his office coat. At home Erskine was a man who read more than one guessed, and had his own ideas on a good many subjects. He found his sister-in-law lamentably ignorant, but quite eager to improve her mind at his direction; and this is ever delightful to the man who reads. Also he found her amusing, and that experience was mutual.

A Londoner himself, with many reputable relatives in the town, who rejoiced in the bachelor's marriage and were able to like his wife, he was in a position to gratify to a considerable extent Mrs. Erskine's social desires. That he did so somewhat against his own inclination (much as in Melbourne his father-in-law had done before him) was due to an acutely fair mind allied with a thoroughly kind

and sympathetic nature. His own attitude toward society was not free from that slight intellectual superiority which some of the best fellows in the world cannot help; but at least it was perfectly genuine. He treated society as he treated champagne, which he seldom touched, but about which he was curiously fastidious on those chance occasions. He cared as little for the one as for the other, but found the drier brands inoffensive in both cases. The ball to-night was at Lady Almeric's.

"Not a bad corner," Erskine said as he made himself comfortable; "but I'm afraid it's rather thrown away upon me, you know."

"Far from it. I wish I had been dancing with you the whole evening, Erskine," said Christina seriously.

"That's rather obsequious of you. May I ask why?"

"Because I don't think much of my partners so far, to talk to."

"Ha! I knew there was something you wouldn't think much of," cried Erskine Holland. "Have they nothing to say for themselves, then?"

"Oh, plenty. They discover where I come from; then they show their ignorance. They want to know if there is any chance for a fellow on the gold fields now; they have heard of a place called Ballarat, but they aren't certain whether it's a part of Melbourne or nearer Sydney. One man knows some people at Hobart Town, in New Zealand, he fancies. I never knew anything like their ignorance of the colonies!"

Mr. Holland tugged a smile out of his mustache. "Can you tell me how to address a letter to Montreal – is it Quebec or Ontario?" he asked her, as if interested and anxious to learn.

"Goodness knows," replied Christina innocently.

"Then that's rather like their ignorance of the colonies, isn't it? There's not much difference between a group of colonies and a dominion, you see. I'm afraid your partners are not the only people whose geography has been sadly neglected."

Christina laughed.

"My education's been neglected altogether, if it comes to that. As you're taking me in hand, perhaps you'll lend me a geography, as well as Ruskin and Thackeray. Nevertheless, Australia's more important than Canada, you may say what you like, Erskine; and your being smart won't improve my partners."

"Oh! but I thought it was only their conversation?"

"You force me to tell you that their idea of dancing seems limited to pushing you up one side of the room, and dragging you after them down the other. Sometimes they turn you round. Then they're proud of themselves. They never do it twice running."

"That's because there are so many here."

"There are far too many here – that's what's the matter! And I'm a nice person to tell you so," added Tiny penitently, "when it's you and Ruth who have brought me here. But you know I don't mean that I'm not enjoying it, Erskine; I'm enjoying it immensely, and I'm very proud of myself for being here at all. I can't quite explain myself – I don't much like trying to – but there's a something about everything that makes it seem better than anything of the kind that we can do in Melbourne. The music is so splendid, and the floor, and the flowers. I never saw such a few diamonds – or such beauties! Even the ices are the best I ever tasted, and they aren't too sweet. There's something subdued and superior about the whole concern; but it's too subdued; it needs go and swing nearly as badly as it needs elbow-room – of more kinds than one! I'm thinking less of the crowd of people than of their etiquette and ceremony, which hamper you far more. But it's your old England in a nutshell, this ball is: it fits too tight."

"Upon my word," said Erskine, laughing, "I don't think it's at all bad for you to find the old country a tight fit! I'm obliged to you for the expression, Tiny. I only hope it isn't suggested by personal suffering. I have been thinking that you must have a good word to say for our dressmakers, if not for our dancing men."

Christina slid her eyes over the snow and ice of the shimmering attire that had been made for her in haste since her arrival.

"I'm glad you like me," she said, smiling honestly. "I must own I rather like myself in this lot. I didn't want to disgrace you among your fine friends, you see."

"They're more fine than friends, my dear girl. Lady Almeric's the only friend. She has been very nice to Ruth. Most of the people here are rather classy, I can assure you."

He named the flower of the company in a lowered voice. Christina knew one of the names.

"Lady Mary Dromard, did you say?" said she, playing idly with her fan.

"Yes; do you know her?"

"No, but her brother was in Melbourne once as aid-de-camp to the governor. I knew him."

"Ah, that was Lord Manister; he wasn't out there when I was."

"No, he must have come just after you had gone. He only remained a few months, you know. He was a quiet young man with a mania for cricket; we liked him because he set our young men their fashions and yet never gave himself airs. I wonder if he's here as well?"

"I don't think so. I know him by sight, but I haven't seen him. I'm glad to hear he didn't give himself airs; you couldn't say the same for the sister who is here, though I only know her by sight, too."

"He was quite a nice young man," said Christina, shutting up her fan; and as she spoke the music, whose strains had reached them all the time, came to its natural end.

The conservatory suffered instant invasion, Christina and Mr. Holland being afforded the entertainment of disappointing couple after couple who came straight to their corner.

"We're in a coveted spot," whispered Erskine; and his sister-in-law reminded him who had shown the way to it. It was less secluded than remote, so the present occupiers found further entertainment as mere spectators. The same little things amused them both; this was one reason why they got on so well together. They were amused by such trifles as a distant prospect of Ruth, who was innocently enjoying herself at the other end of the conservatory, unaware of their eyes. Erskine might have felt proud, and no doubt he did, for many people considered Ruth even prettier than Christina, with whom, however, they were apt to confuse her, though Holland himself could never see the likeness. He now sat watching his wife in the distance while talking to her sister at his side until a new partner pounced upon Ruth, and bore her away as the music began afresh.

"There goes my chaperon," remarked Christina resignedly.

"Who's your partner now? I'm sorry to say I see mine within ten yards of me," whispered Erskine in some anxiety.

Tiny consulted her card. "It's Herbert," she said.

"Herbert!" said Mr. Holland dubiously. "I'm afraid Herbert's going it; he's deeply employed with a girl in red – I think an American. Shall I take you to Lady Almeric?" His eyes shifted uneasily toward his expectant partner.

"No, I'll wait here for Herbert. Mayn't I? Then I'm going to. You're sure to see him, and you can send him at once. Don't blame Ruth. What does it matter? It will matter if you don't go this instant to your partner; I see it in her eye!"

He left her reluctantly, with the undertaking that Herbert should be at her side in two minutes. But that was rash. Christina soon had the conservatory entirely to herself, whereupon she came out of her corner, so that her brother might find her the more readily. Still he kept her waiting, and she might as well have been lonely in the corner. It was too bad of Herbert to leave her standing there, where she had no business to be by herself, and the music and the throbbing of the floor within a few yards of her. These awkward minutes naturally began to disturb her. They checked and cooled her in the full blast of healthy excitement, and that was bad; they threw her back upon herself straight from her lightest mood, and this was worse. She became abnormally aware of her own presence as she stood looking down and impatiently tapping with her little white slipper upon the marble flags. Even about these there was the grand air which Christina relished; she might have seen her face far

below, as though she had been standing in still water; but her thoughts had been given a rough jerk inward, her outward vision fell no deeper than the polished surface, while her mind's eye saw all at once the dusty veranda boards of Wallandoon. She stood very still, and in her ears the music died away, and through three months of travel and great changes she heard again the night-horse champing in the yard, and the crickets chirping further afield. And as she stood, her head bowed by this sudden memory, footsteps approached, and she looked up, expecting to see Herbert. But it was not Herbert; it was a young man of more visible distinction than Herbert Luttrell. It is difficult to look better dressed than another in our evening mode; but this young man overcame the difficulty. He stood erect; he was well built; his clothes fitted beautifully; he was himself nice looking, and fair-haired, and boyish; and, even more than his clothes, one admired his smile, which was frank and delightful. But the smile he gave Christina was followed by a blush, for she had held out her hand to him, and asked him how he was.

"I'm all right, thanks. But – this is the most extraordinary thing! Been over long?"

He had dropped her hand.

"About a fortnight," said Christina.

"But what a pity to come over so late in the season! It's about done, you know."

"Yes. I thought there was a good deal going on still."

"There's Henley, to be sure."

"I think I'm going to Henley."

"Going to the Eton and Harrow?"

"I am not quite sure. That was your match, wasn't it?"

The young man blushed afresh.

"Fancy your remembering! Unfortunately it wasn't my match, though; my day out was against Winchester."

"Oh, yes," said Tiny, less knowingly.

"And how are you, Miss Luttrell?"

This had been forgotten, Tiny reported well of herself. Her friend hesitated; there was some nervousness in his manner, but his good eyes never fell from her face, and presently he exclaimed, as though the idea had just struck him:

"I say, mayn't I have this dance, Miss Luttrell – what's left of it?"

"Thanks, I'm afraid I'm engaged for it."

"Then mayn't I find your partner for you?"

Now this second request, or his anxious way of making it, was an elaborate revelation to Christina, and wrote itself in her brain. "Do you remember Herbert?" she, however, simply replied. "He is the culprit."

"Your brother? Certainly I remember him. I saw him a few minutes ago, and made sure I had seen him somewhere before; but he looks older. I don't fancy he's dancing. He's somewhere or other with somebody in red."

"So I hear."

"Then mayn't I have a turn with you before it stops?"

She hesitated as long as he had hesitated before first asking her; there was not time to hesitate longer. Then she took his arm, and they passed through a narrow avenue of ferns and flowers, round a corner, up some steps, and so into the ball room.

The waltz was indeed half over, but the second half of it Christina and her fortuitous partner danced together, without a rest, and also without a word. He led her a more enterprising measure than those previous partners who had questioned her concerning Australia. The name of Australia had not crossed this one's lips. As Tiny whirled and glided on his arm she saw a good many eyes upon her: they made her dance her best; and her best was the best in the room, though her partner was uncommonly good, and they had danced together before. Among the eyes were Ruth's, and they

were beaming; the others were mostly inquisitive, and as strange to Christina as she evidently was to them; but once a turn brought her face to face with Herbert, on his way from the conservatory, and alone. He was a lanky, brown-faced, hook-nosed boy, with wiry limbs and an aggressive eye, and he followed his sister round the room with a stare of which she was uncomfortably conscious. He had looked for her too late, when forced to relinquish the girl in red to her proper partner, who still seemed put out. Christina was put out also, by her brother's look, but she did not show it.

"You are staying in town?" her partner said after the dance as they sat together in the conservatory, but not in the old corner.

"Yes, with my sister, Mrs. Holland; you never met her, I think. We are in town till August."

"Where do you go then?"

"To the country for a month. My sister and her husband have taken a country rectory for the whole of August. They had it last year, and liked the place so much that they have taken it again; it is a little village called Essingham."

"Essingham!" cried Christina's partner.

"Yes; do you know it?"

"I know of it," answered the young man. "I suppose you will go on the Continent after that?" he added quickly.

"Well, hardly; my brother-in-law has so little time; but he expects to have to go to Lisbon on business at the end of October, and he has promised to take us with him."

"To Lisbon at the end of October," repeated Tiny's friend reflectively. "Get him to take you to Cintra. They say it's well worth seeing."

Yet another dance was beginning. Christina was interested in the movements of a young man in spectacles, who was plainly in search of somebody. "He's hunting for me," she whispered to her companion, who was saying:

"Portugal's rather the knuckle end of Europe, don't you think? But I've heard Cintra well spoken of. I should go there if I were you."

"We intend to. Do you mind pulling that young man's coat tails? He has forgotten my face."

"Yes, I do mind," said Tiny's partner with unexpected earnestness. "I may meet you again, but I should like to take this opportunity of explaining –"

Tiny Luttrell was smiling in his face.

"I hate explanations!" she cried. "They are an insult to one's imagination, and I much prefer to accept things without them." There was a gleam in her smile, but as she spoke she flashed it upon the spectacles of her blind pursuer, who was squaring his arm to her in an instant.

And that was the last she saw of the only partner for whom she had a good word afterward, and he had come to her by accident. But it was by no means the last she heard of him. The next was from Herbert, as they drove home together in one hansom, while Ruth and her husband followed in another. The morning air blew fresh upon their faces; the rising sun struck sparks from the harness; the leaves in the park were greener than any in Australia, and the dew on the grass through the railings was as a silver shower new-fallen. But the most delicious taste of London that had yet been given her was poisoned for Christina by her brother Herbert.

"To have my claim jumped by that joker!" said he through his nose.

"But you had left it empty," said Tiny mildly. "I was all alone."

"It isn't so much that," her brother said, shifting the ground he had taken in preliminary charges; "it's your dancing with that brute Manister!"

"My dear old Herbs," said Miss Luttrell with provoking coolness, "Lord Manister asked me to dance with him, and I didn't see why I should refuse. I certainly didn't see why I should consult you, Herbs."

"By ghost," cried Herbert, "if it comes to that, he once asked you to marry him!"

"Now you are a treat," said the girl, before the blood came.

"And then bolted! I should be ashamed of myself for dancing with him if I were you. He said I was a larrikin, too. I'd like to fill his eye for him!"

"He'll never say a truer thing!" Christina cried out; but her voice broke over the words, and the early sun cut diamonds on her lashes.

Now this was Herbert: he was rough, but not cowardly. His nose had become hooked in his teens from a stand-up fight with a full-grown man. There is not the least doubt that in such a combat with Lord Manister that nobleman, though otherwise a finer athlete, would have suffered extremely. But it was not in Herbert to hit any woman in cold blood with his tongue. Having done this in his heat to Christina, his mate, he was man enough to be sorry and ashamed, and to slip her hands into his.

"I'm an awful beast," he stammered out. "I didn't mean anything at all – except that I'd like to fill up Manister's eye! I can't go back on that when – when he called me a larrikin!"

CHAPTER IV. RUTH AND CHRISTINA

Here is the difference between Ruth and Christina, who were considered so much alike.

Of the two, Ruth was the one to fall in love with at sight – of which Erskine Holland supplies the proof. She was less diminutive than her sister; she had a finer figure, a warmer color, and indeed, despite the destructive Australian sun, a very beautiful complexion. In the early days at Wallandoon she had given herself a better chance in this respect than Christina had done, not from vanity at all, but rather owing to certain differences in their ideas of pleasure, into which it is needless to enter. The result was her complexion; and this was not her only beauty, for she had good brown eyes that suited her coloring as autumn leaves befit an autumn sunset. These eyes are never unkind, but Ruth's were sweet-tempered to a fault. So the glance of one scanning both girls for the first time rested naturally upon Ruth, but on all subsequent occasions it flew straight to Christina, because there was an end to Ruth; but there was no coming to an end of Tiny, about whom there was ever some fresh thing to charm or disappoint one.

Thus, but for the businesslike dispatch of Erskine Holland, it might have been Ruth's fate to break in Christina's admirers until Christina fancied one of them enough to marry him. For Ruth's was perhaps the more unselfish character of the two, as it was certainly the simpler one, in spite of a peculiar secretive strain in her from which Tiny was free. Tiny, on the other hand, was much more sensitive; but to perceive this was to understand her better than she understood herself. For she did not know her own weaknesses as the self-examining know theirs, and hardly anybody suspected her of this one until her arrival in England – when Erskine Holland came to treat her as a sister, and to understand her more or less.

In Australia he had seen very little of her, though enough to regard her at the time as an arrant little heartless flirt, for whom sighed silly swains innumerable. That she was, indeed, a flirt there was still no denying; but as his knowledge of her ripened, Holland was glad to unharness the opprobrious epithets with which Ruth's sister had first driven herself into his mind. He discovered good points in Christina, and among them a humor which he had never detected out in Australia. Probably his own sense of it had lost its edge out there, for love-making blunts nothing sooner; while Ruth, for her part, was naturally wanting in humor. Holland had never been blind to this defect in his wife, but he seemed resigned to it; one can conceive it to be a merit in the wife of an amusing man.

Some people called Erskine amusing – it is not hard to win this label from some people – but at any rate he was never likely to find it difficult to amuse Ruth. Now no companion in this world is more charming for all time than the person who is content to do the laughing. As a novelty, however, Christina had her own distinctive attraction for Erskine Holland. And they got on so well together that presently he saw more in Tiny than her humor, which others had seen before him; he saw that her heart was softer than she thought; but he divined that something had happened to harden it.

"She has been falling in love," he said to Ruth – "and something has happened."

"What makes you think so? She has told me nothing about it," Ruth said.

"Ah, she is sensitive. I can see that, too. It's her bitterness, however, that makes me think something has turned out badly."

"She is sadly cynical," remarked Ruth.

"Cynically sad, I rather think," her husband said. "I don't fancy she's languishing now; I should say she has got over the thing, whatever it has been – and is rather disappointed with herself for getting over it so easily. She has hinted at nothing, but she has a trick of generalizing; and she affects to think that one person doesn't fret for another longer than a week in real life. I don't say her cynicism

is so much affectation; something or other has left a bad taste in her mouth; but I should like to bet that it wasn't an affair of the most serious sort."

"Her affairs never were very serious, Erskine."

"So I gathered from what I saw of her before we were married. It's a pity," said Erskine musingly. "I'd like to see her married, but I'd love to see her wooed! That's where the sport would come in. There would be no knowing where the fellow had her. He might hook her by luck, but he'd have to play her like fun before he landed her! There'd be a strong sporting interest in the whole thing, and that's what one likes."

"It's a pity I didn't know what you liked," Ruth said, with a smile; "and a wonder that you liked me, and not Tiny!"

"My darling," laughed her husband, "that sort of sport's for the young fellows. I'm past it. I merely meant that I should like to see the sport. No, Tiny's charming in her way, but God forbid that it should be your way too!"

Now Ruth was such a fond little wife that at this speech she became too much gratified on her own account to care to discuss her sister any further. But in dismissing the subject of Tiny she took occasion to impress one fact upon Erskine:

"You may be right, dear, and something may have happened since I left home; but I can only tell you that Tiny hasn't breathed a single word about it to me."

And this is an early sample of the disingenuous streak that was in the very grain of Ruth. Christina, indeed, had told her nothing, but Ruth knew nearly all that there was to know of the affair whose traces were plain to her husband's insight. Beyond the fact that the name of Tiny Luttrell had been coupled in Melbourne with that of Lord Manister, and the *on dit* that Lord Manister had treated her rather badly, there was, indeed, very little to be known. But Ruth knew at least as much as her mother, who had written to her on the subject the more freely and frequently because her younger daughter flatly refused the poor lady her confidence. There was no harm in Ruth's not showing those letters to her husband. There was no harm in her keeping her sister's private affairs from her husband's knowledge. There was the reverse of harm in both reservations, as Erskine would have been the first to allow. Ruth had her reasons for making them; and if her reasons embodied a deep design, there was no harm in that either, for surely it is permissible to plot and scheme for the happiness of another. I can see no harm in her conduct from any point of view. But it was certainly disingenuous, and it entailed an insincere attitude toward two people, which in itself was not admirable. And those two were her nearest. However amiable her plans might be, they made it impossible for Ruth to be perfectly sincere with her husband on one subject, which was bad enough. But with Christina it was still more impossible to be at all candid; and this happened to be worse, for reasons which will be recognized later. In the first place, Tiny immediately discovered Ruth's insincerity, and even her plans. Tiny was a difficult person to deceive. She detected the insincerity in a single conversation with Ruth on the afternoon following Lady Almeric's ball, and before she went to bed she was as much in possession of the plans as if Ruth had told her them.

The conversation took place in Erskine's study, where the sisters had foregathered for a lazy afternoon.

"Oh, by the way," said Ruth, apropos of the ball, "it was a coincidence your dancing with Lord Manister."

"Why a coincidence?" asked Christina. She glanced rather sharply at Ruth as she put the question.

"Well, it is just possible that we shall see something of him in the country. That's all," said Ruth, as she bent over the novel of which she was cutting the pages.

Christina also had a book in her lap, but she had not opened it; she was trying to read Ruth's averted face.

"I thought perhaps you meant because we saw something of him in Melbourne," she said presently. "I suppose you know that we did see something of him? He even honored us once or twice."

"So you told me in your letters."

The paper knife was still at work.

"What makes it likely that we shall see him in the country?"

"Well, Mundham Hall is quite close to Essingham, you know."

"Mundham Hall! Whose place is that?"

"Lord Dromard's," replied Ruth, still intent upon her work.

"Surely not!" exclaimed Christina. "Lord Manister once told me the name of their place, and I am convinced it wasn't that."

"They have several places. But until quite lately they have lived mostly at the other side of the county, at Wreford Abbey."

"That was the name."

"But they have sold that place," said Ruth, "and last autumn Lord Dromard bought Mundham; it was empty when we were at Essingham last year."

For some moments there was silence, broken only by the leisurely swish of Ruth's paper knife. Then Christina said, "That accounts for it," thinking aloud.

"For what?" asked Ruth rather nervously.

"Lord Manister told me he knew of Essingham. He never mentioned Mundham. Is it so very close to your rectory?"

"The grounds are; they are very big; the hall itself is miles from the gates – almost as far as our home station was from the boundary fence."

"Surely not," Tiny said quietly.

"Well, that's a little exaggeration, of course."

"Then I wish it wasn't!" Tiny cried out. "I don't relish the idea of living under the lee of such very fine people," she said next moment, as quietly as before.

"No more do I – no more does Erskine," Ruth made haste to declare. "But we enjoyed ourselves so much there last August that we said at the time that we would take the rectory again this August. We made the people promise us the refusal. And it seemed absurd to refuse just because Lord Dromard had bought Mundham; shouldn't you have said so yourself, dear?"

"Certainly I should," answered Tiny; and for half an hour no more was said.

The afternoon was wet; there was no inducement to go out, even with the necessary energy, and the two young women, on whose pillows the sun had lain before their faces, felt anything but energetic. The afternoon was also cold to Australian blood, and a fire had been lighted in Erskine's den. His favorite armchair contained several cushions and Christina – who might as well have worn his boots – while Ruth, having cut all the leaves of her volume, curled herself up on the sofa with an obvious intention. She was good at cutting the leaves of a new book, but still better at going to sleep over them when cut. She had read even less than Christina, and it troubled her less; but this afternoon she read more. Ruth could not sleep. No more could Tiny. But Tiny had not opened her book. It was one of the good books that Erskine had lent her. She was extremely interested in it; but just at present her own affairs interested her more. Lying back in the big chair, with the wet gray light behind her, and that of the fire playing fitfully over her face, Christina committed what was as yet an unusual weakness for her, by giving way voluntarily to her thoughts. She was in the habit of thinking as little as possible, because so many of her thoughts were depressing company, and beyond all things she disliked being depressed. This afternoon she was less depressed than indignant. The firelight showed her forehead strung with furrows. From time to time she turned her eyes to the sofa, as if to make sure that Ruth was still awake, and as often as they rested there they gleamed. At last she spoke Ruth's name.

"Well?" said Ruth. "I thought you were asleep; you have never stirred."

"I'm not sleepy, thanks; and, if you don't mind, I should like to speak to you before you drop off yourself."

Ruth closed her novel.

"What is it, dear? I'm listening."

"When you wrote and invited me over you mentioned Essingham as one of the attractions. Now why couldn't you tell me the Dromards would be our neighbors there?"

Ruth raised her eyes from the younger girl's face to the rain-spattered window. Tiny's tone was cold, but not so cold as Tiny's searching glance. This made Ruth uncomfortable. It did not incapacitate her, however.

"The Dromards!" she exclaimed rather well. "Had they taken the place then?"

"You say they bought it before Christmas; it was after Christmas that you first wrote and expressly invited me."

"Was it? Well, my dear, I suppose I never thought of them; that's all. They aren't the only nice people thereabouts."

"I'm afraid you are not quite frank with me," the young girl said; and her own frankness was a little painful.

"Tiny, dear, what a thing to say! What does it mean?"

Ruth employed for these words the injured tone.

"It means that you know as well as I do, Ruth, that it isn't pleasant for me to meet Lord Manister."

"Was there something between you in Melbourne?" asked Ruth. "I must say that nobody would have thought so from seeing you together last night. And – and how was I to think so, when you have never told me anything about it?"

Christina laughed bitterly.

"When you have made a fool of yourself you don't go out of your way to talk about it, even to your own people. It is kind of you to pretend to know nothing about it – I am sure you mean it kindly; but I'm still surer that you have been told all there was to tell concerning Lord Manister and me. I don't mean by Herbert. He's close. But the mother must have written and told you something; it was only natural that she should do so."

"She did tell me a little. Herbert has told me nothing. I tried to pump him, – I think you can't wonder at that, – but he refused to speak a word on the subject. He says he hates it."

"He hates Lord Manister," said Christina, smiling. "It came round to him once that Lord Manister had called him a larrikin, and he has never forgiven him. But he has been less of a larrikin ever since. And, of course, that wasn't why he was so angry with me for dancing with Lord Manister last night; he was dreadfully angry with me as we drove home; but he is a very good boy to me, and there was something in what he said."

"What made you dance with him?" Ruth said curiously.

"I was alone. I hadn't a partner. He asked me rather prettily – he always had pretty manners. You wouldn't have had me show him I cared, by snubbing him, would you?"

"No," said Ruth thoughtfully; and suddenly she slipped from the sofa, and was kneeling on the hearthrug, with her brown eyes softly searching Christina's face and her lips whispering, "Do you care, Tiny? *Do* you care, Tiny, dear?"

Tiny snapped her fingers as she pushed back her chair.

"Not that much for anybody – much less for Lord Manister, and least of all for myself! Now don't you be too good to me, Ruth; if you are you'll only make me feel ungrateful, and I shall run away, because I'm not going to tell you another word about what's over and done with. I can't! I have got over the whole thing, but it has been a sickener. It makes me sick to think about it. I don't want ever to speak of it again."

"I understand," said Ruth; but there was disappointment in her look and tone, and she added, "I should like to have heard the truth, though; and no one can tell it me but you."

"I thank Heaven for that!" cried Christina piously. "The version out there was that he proposed to me and I accepted him, and then he bolted without even saying good-by. It's true that he didn't say good-by; the rest is not true. But you must just make it do."

Her face was scarlet with the shame of it all; but there was no sign of weakness in the curling lips. She spoke bitterly, but not at all sadly, and her next words were still more suggestive of a wound to the vanity rather than to the heart.

"Does Erskine know?"

"Not a word."

"Honestly?"

"Quite honestly; at least I have never mentioned it to him, and I don't think anybody else has, or he would have mentioned it to me."

"Oh, Herbert wouldn't say anything. Herbert's very close. But – don't you two tell each other everything, Ruth?"

The young girl looked incredulous; the married woman smiled.

"Hardly everything, you know! Erskine has lots of relations himself, for instance, and I'm sure he wouldn't care to tell me the ins and outs of their private affairs, even if I cared to know them. It's just the same about you and your affairs, don't you see?"

"Except that he knows me so well," Christina reflected aloud, with her eyes upon the fire. "If I had a husband," she added impulsively, "I should like to tell him every mortal thing, whether I wanted to or not! And I should like not to want to, but to be made. But that's because I should like above all things to be bossed!"

"You would take some bossing," suggested Ruth.

"That's the worst of it," said Christina, with a little sigh, and then a laugh, as she snatched her eyes from the fire. "But I can't tell you how glad I am you haven't told Erskine. Never tell him, Ruth, for you don't know how I covet his good opinion. I like him, you know, dear, and I rather think he likes me – so far."

"Indeed he does," cried Ruth warmly; and a good point in her character stood out through the genuine words. "Nothing ever made me happier than to see you become such friends."

"He laughs at me a good deal," Tiny remarked doubtfully.

"That's because you amuse him a good deal. I can't get him to laugh at me, my dear."

"He would laugh," said Christina, with her eyes on the fire again, "if you told him I had aspired to Lord Manister!"

"But I'm not going to tell him anything at all about it." Ruth paused. "And after all, the Dromards won't take any notice of us in the country." She paused again. "And we won't speak of this any more, Tiny, if you don't like."

The shame had come back to Christina's face as she bent it toward the fire. Twice she had made no answer to what was kindly meant and even kindlier said. But now she turned and kissed Ruth, saying, "Thank you, dear. I am afraid I don't like. But you have been awfully good and sweet about it – as I shan't forget." And the fire lit their faces as they met, but the tear that had got upon Tiny's cheek was not her own.

Ruth, you see, could be tender and sympathetic and genuine enough. But she could not be sensible and let well alone.

She did that night a very foolish thing: she brought up the subject again. Tempted she certainly was. Never since her arrival in England had Tiny seemed so near to her or she to Tiny as in the hours immediately following the chat between them in Erskine's study. But Christina stood further from Ruth than Ruth imagined; she had not advanced, but retreated, before the glow of Ruth's sympathy. This was after the event, when some hours separated Christina from those emotional moments to

which she had not contributed her share of the emotion, leaving the scene upon her mind in just perspective. She still could value Ruth's sweetness at the end of their talk, but her own suspicions, aroused at the outset, to be immediately killed by a little kindness, had come to life again, and were calling for an equal appreciation. The extent of Tiny's suspicions was very full, and the suspicions themselves were uncommonly shrewd and convincing. They made it a little hard to return Ruth's smiles during the evening, and to kiss her when saying good-night, though Tiny did these things duly. She went upstairs before her time, however, and not at all in the mood to be bothered any further about Lord Manister. Yet she behaved very patiently when Ruth came presently to her room and thus bothered her, being suddenly tempted beyond her strength. For Christina was discovered standing fully dressed under the gas-bracket, and frowning at a certain photograph on an orange-colored mount, which she turned face downward as Ruth entered. Whereupon Ruth, discerning the sign manual of a Melbourne photographer, could not help saying slyly, "Who is it, Tiny?"

"A friend of mine," Tiny said, also slyly, but keeping the photograph itself turned provokingly to the floor.

"In Australia?"

"Er – it was taken out there."

"It's Lord Manister!"

"Perhaps it is – perhaps it isn't."

"Tiny," said Ruth with pathos, "you might show me!"

But Tiny drummed vexatiously on the wrong side of the mount; and here Ruth surely should have let the matter drop, instead of which:

"You are very horrid," she said, "but I must just tell you something. I have heard things from Lady Almeric, who is very intimate with Lady Dromard, and I don't believe *he* is so much to blame as you think him. I have heard it spoken about in society. But don't look frightened. Your name has never been mentioned. I don't think it has ever come out. Indeed, I know it hasn't, for *I*, actually, have been asked the name of the girl Lord Manister was fond of in Melbourne – by Lady Almeric!"

"And what did you say?"

"What do you suppose? I glory in that fib – I am honestly proud of it. But, dear, the point is, not that Lord Manister has never mentioned your name, but that he can bear neither name nor sight of the girl he is expected to marry! Lady Almeric told me when – I couldn't help her."

"He is a nice young man, I must say!" remarked Christina grimly. "My fellow-victim has a title, no doubt?"

"Well, it's Miss Garth, and her father's Lord Acklam, so she's the honorable," said Ruth gravely. (Tiny smiled at her gravity.) "But I've seen her, and – he can't like her! And oh! Tiny dear, they all say he left his heart in Australia, but his mother sent for him because she heard something – but not your name, dear – and he came. They say he is devoted to his mother; but this has come between them, and she's sorry she interfered, because after all he won't marry poor Miss Garth. I had it direct from Lady Almeric when she tried to get that out of me. But I lied like a trooper!" exclaimed poor Ruth.

"I'm grateful to you for that," Christina said, not ungraciously – "but I must really be going to bed."

With a last wistful glance at the orange-colored cardboard, Ruth took the hint. Christina turned away in time to avoid an embrace without showing her repugnance, because she had still some regard for Ruth's good heart. But she had never experienced a more grateful riddance, and the look that followed Ruth to the threshold would have kept her company for some time had she turned there and caught one glimpse of it.

"Now I understand!" said Christina to the closed door. "I suppose I ought to love you for it, Ruth; but I don't – no, I don't!"

She turned the photograph face upward, and stared thoughtfully at it for some minutes longer; then she put it away.

CHAPTER V. ESSINGHAM RECTORY

Essingham Rectory, which the Erskine Hollands had taken for the month of August, was a little old building with some picturesque points to console one for the tameness of the view from its windows. The surrounding country was perfectly flat but for Gallow Hill, and not at all green but for the glebe and the riverside meadows, while the only trees of any account were the rectory elms and those in the Mundham grounds. It is true that on Gallow Hill three wind-crippled beeches brandished their deformities against the sky, as they may do still; but the country around Essingham is no country for trees. It is the country for warrens and rabbits and roads without hedges. So it struck Christina as more like the back-blocks than anything she had hoped to see in England, and pleased her more than anything she had seen. She showed her pleasure before they arrived at Essingham. She forgot to disparage the old country during the long drive from the county town; and that was notable. She had actually no stone to cast at the elaborate and impressive gates of Mundham Hall; apparently she was herself impressed. But opposite the gates they turned to the left, into a narrow road with hedges, from which you can see the rectory, and as Herbert put it afterward:

"That's what knocked our Tiny!"

For the girl's first glimpse of the old house was over the hedge and far away above a brilliant sash of meadow green. The cream-colored walls were aglow in the low late sunshine, what was to be seen of them, for they were half hidden by a creeper almost as old as themselves. The red-tiled, weather-beaten roof was dark with age. Even at a distance one smelt rats in the wainscot within the stuccoed walls. Around the house, and towering above the tiles, the elms stood as still against the evening sky as the square church tower but a little way to the right. To the right of that, but farther away, rose Gallow Hill. Thereabouts the sun was sinking, but the clock on the near side of the church tower had gilt hands, which marked the hour when Christina stood up in the fly and astonished her friends with her frank delight. It was a point against this young lady, on subsequent occasions when she did not forget to decry the old country, that at ten minutes past seven on the evening of the 1st of August she had given way to enthusiasm over a scene that was purely English and very ordinary in itself.

Not that her immediate appreciation of the place became modified on a closer acquaintance with it. At the end of the first clear day at Essingham she informed the others that thus far she had not enjoyed herself so much since leaving Australia. Of course she had enjoyed herself in London. That did not count. London only compared itself with Melbourne, Christina did not care how favorably; but Essingham was for comparison with the place that was dearer to her than any other in the world. You will understand why all her appreciations were directly comparative. This is natural in the very young, and fortunately Tiny Luttrell was still very young in some respects. Blessed with observant eyes, and having at this time an irritable memory to keep her prejudices at attention, her mind soon became the scene of many curious and specific contests between England and Australia. In the match between Wallandoon and Essingham the latter made a better fight than you would think against so strong an opponent. The rectory was homely and convenient in its old age, and Christina was greatly charmed with her own room, because it was small; and if the wall-paper was modern and conventional, and not to be read from the pillow in the early morning, it was almost as pleasant to lie and watch the elm tops trembling against the sky. And if the sky was not really blue in England, the leaves in Australia were not really green, as Christina now knew. So there they were quits. But England and Essingham scored palpably in some things; the kitchen garden was one. Christina had never seen such a kitchen garden; she found it possible to spend half an hour there at any time, to her further contentment; and there were other attractions on the premises, which were just as good in their way, while their way was often better for one.

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