

Another Professional Person

By A. Goodrich-Freer

I

Lady Sarah Thompson is at her country house, emphatically *her* country house; for her family, the McTaggarts, occasionally interrupted by the Jews, have enjoyed the possession of its gabled roof-tree for three centuries or more. She owes her present occupation to Thompson money, but Thompson, *en revanche*, for the first time in his life, is in possession of ancestral portraits—a precious possession even if they are only ancestors-in-law.

To-day is Thursday, and Thompson is still in the city. On Friday evening he will appear—dine with a houseful of unknown guests, wander about disconsolate on Saturday, go to church twice with his little girls on Sunday, and joyfully return to Mincing Lane by the 8.15 train on Monday morning.

A glowing July day has come to rosy evening; evening has brought, not only dew to the grass and sleep to the daisies, but dinner to Lady Sarah's guests.

They have hailed it joyfully, and for once in their lives—some of them—have done something to earn it, for have they not driven here and there, worn yellow favours, carried yellow bouquets, speechified and listened to speechifying, in short done their best among the local electors to secure a favourable issue for Newton Winchester at to-morrow's polling.

The main business of dinner is over, and the ladies have reached the drawing-room. Monica Winchester, a little too weary to feel all the elation which the occasion demands, is hoping that for the first time since breakfast she may be allowed ten minutes of her own uninterrupted society. With this end she establishes herself behind an evening paper—the wife of a future of parliament may surely have a licence the evening paper—but the lines dance before her tired eyes, and Monica cannot read.

Mrs. Winchester is an important person just now, and Lady Sarah bustles up to discuss the day's events. Monica dexterously hands over the conversation to Lady Asquith, who—also tired with the day's work—has been yawning behind a great feather fan, and wanders off in search of a safer retreat. Behind whom can she shelter herself? Mrs. Trevelyan gushing and *décolletée*—Lady Sibree who can “ride anything,” and whose very dress is reminiscent of her habit—the Cunliffe girls in last year's fashions dating their last visit to town—Lady Strother in next year's fashions, hot from New York—three or four ponderous wives of county magnates, dull except as to their diamonds—or daughters of the same, all sitting together, organizing tennis tournaments and archery meetings! A fancy seizes her. What has become of the dainty white-cashmere-robed girl who glided in so quietly ten minutes ago? Monica noticed her at luncheon. She seemed quite alone, and apparently knew no one, and she disappeared with the children and governess. She had certainly not been at the dinner-table, but her face is not one to be forgotten. As it rises now before her mind's eye, Monica feels that that girl will give her just what she wants. At luncheon, with no one to speak to, how bright, how almost gay she had seemed in her self-contained happiness, a very embodiment of the gladness of sheer youth—all the more striking for its utter self-sufficiency—its independence of the lively racket, full of society gossip and the season's allusions which sustained the mirth of the other girls. In her simple pink cotton, fresh as her

flower face—how different had she been in every grace of movement from the Cunliffes, or Faustina Strother, in their manly shirts and leather belts!

She is nowhere in sight, Monica discovers with rising annoyance. Why is *she* not planning next week's amusements with the other girls? That tall slender figure is made for a tennis lawn, she must wear a large shady hat with drooping feathers and bold curves, not the meaningless "sailor" which hangs by the half-dozen in the outer hall.

What has become of her? Monica's whim has grown into a fixed desire—she must find that girl and know all about her, she thinks, as she pauses for a moment beside the grand piano with its decorations—or desecrations—of brocade photograph frames, and futile silver toys.

Heavy velvet curtains screen off the great bay of the centre window, across which the piano is placed, and through an accidental parting Monica can feel the fresh night air blowing in off the terrace, sweet with the breath of a thousand acres of gorse, and heather, and glowing Hampshire moorland. In a moment she has slipped gently behind the crimson folds, replacing them carefully, that her hiding-place may not be discovered.

This accomplished, she turns to the roomy window seat. Here will she stretch her weary limbs and rest her aching head upon a large silk cushion propped against the leaded panes. It is a favourite seat with her, and affords a luxurious resting-place for so small a person. No one will suspect her whereabouts, and she will watch the stars come out in the pale sky and pray that Lady Sarah may not have any of her usual newly-invented musical notorieties in store for her guests this evening. At worst it is but an easy drop from the window on to the terrace below, and Monica is but slender and girlish still.

All this she thinks as she leisurely replaces the curtains which so effectually disguise her hiding-place, and it is with a start and a shock that, turning, she discovers that some one is already there before her. Long folds of white cashmere lie on the floor at her feet—two white arms are resting on the brocade of the window-seat and a fair head is already pillowed in that very cushion which Monica had in thought appropriated to her own.

In a moment she perceives that this is the very girl of whom she was but just now in search, and that—unaware of her presence—she is weeping bitterly, her frame shaken by half-restrained sobs, while a little moan of pain now and then escapes her. For a moment Monica hesitates—shall she return noiselessly as she has come? No, the girl is alone and young; and as Monica remembers the bitterness of girlhood's sorrow, all the mother in her longs to help and comfort, and somehow in a moment she is kneeling by her side, stroking the fair hair and murmuring gentle words of soothing as to a tired child.

The girl makes no effort of resistance, she is so weary, so lonely, and few can resist the spell of Monica's gentle sympathy when she chooses to exert its influence. She clings to her new friend without speaking, and soon her sobs cease, and they are sitting side by side on the window-seat while the sweet night air brings freshness and repose.

"Wouldn't you like to come away?" Monica says presently, "we could so easily get out on to the terrace. You are so tall you could reach the ground without trouble, and I can scramble anywhere; we could take a turn in the garden, or go and sit in my room—Lady Sarah has given me such a sweet little boudoir—shall we come?"

The girl sighs. "How good you are—and how I should like it—but I mustn't! Lady Sarah will be wanting me to sing directly. What shall I do if I can't? Oh, I ought to have remembered! How could I be so silly as to cry?"

"No, of course you can't sing, you are too tired. We must all excuse you to-night."

“Oh, but I must. This is my first evening, and I couldn’t miss it. I’m engaged for six nights, and Sunday doesn’t count. Father wouldn’t let me promise to do anything on Sunday. He is a clergyman, you know, and they might want me to sing ballads, or a Scéna perhaps!”

Monica looks bewildered. “I don’t understand,” she says almost involuntarily.

“I’m the Professional,” with a wan smile— “Lady Sarah called me so this morning. It seems so funny. I never was a ‘Professional’ before.”

Monica remembers various professionals of her acquaintance—women with bare shoulders, and rouge, and sham diamonds, and smart dresses not over fresh—and to her too the situation seems “funny.” It is easier to think of this dainty damsel at home in some gabled rose-covered country rectory, than scrambling for “engagements” or making up to Bond Street *entrepreneurs*. Most likely she can’t sing—it would be doubly a kindness to carry her off. Lady Sarah is always making wonderful discoveries which come to nothing, and this girl, no doubt, is at best a prima donna of Penny Readings, with a certificate gained at a Local Examination.

“Lady Sarah won’t mind, I know. We will go and take a little turn, and send my maid with a note to say we are both tired and have gone up-stairs. I will undertake to make it right with her. She is very good-natured.”

“Oh no, no! I must do my best. I have to accompany, or to play, or anything that is wanted. I am to have ten pounds—just think! Eight are to go towards Jack’s college bills—he is going to Oxford next term—and all the rest I am to have to spend just as I like,” and Monica is comforted to hear a ring of pleasure in the tones that had sounded so sad and hopeless.

“What can have become of Miss Courtenay? We shall never get the men up-stairs unless we set the piano going.”

It is Lady Sarah’s voice; and Monica, holding her companion’s hand, checks her impulse to immediately present herself.

“I so want you to hear her, Ewart,” Lady Sarah goes on, “though by the way you know her of course; your mother was telling me that Mr. Courtenay’s parish was close by Methleydale.”

Monica feels the hand tremble as it grasps her own more tightly.

“Thanks so much; and we had better have the top of the piano open as well—yes, we must remove those things. Tha-ank you. How useful it was of you to come and leave those greedy men at their wine. Now, if you will find Miss Courtenay, Ewart.”

But Miss Courtenay is found. It is beyond the power of Monica’s restraining hand to keep her now.

“Here I am, Lady Sarah,” she says, parting the curtains, “I am quite ready to play. Perhaps you will let me sing a little later—when—when I am a little more at home with the piano.”

“Just as you like,” Lady Sarah says. “Play something first, my dear. Lord Ewart will turn over for you,” and then in a whisper audible even to Monica in her corner, “You won’t mind, will you, Ewart? She is shy, poor girl—and she is quite a lady, you know.”

Monica’s sensitive ear catches a ring of entreaty in Miss Courtenay’s “Oh no—please not,” and once more the curtains part and Lord Ewart sinks among the cushions at her side, his exclamation silenced by Monica’s upraised finger.

They are old friends. Lord Ewart, even from the days when he fagged for Newton at Eton, has been among Monica’s numerous train of juvenile admirers. Her miniature proportions have always appealed to boyish chivalry, while her superior attainments, even in their own line, her familiar acquaintance with Xenophon and Julius Cæsar, have commanded their wondering respect.

Neither of them attempts to explain the position. Both evidently desire to be quiet, and they are on sufficiently familiar terms to permit of the luxury. The rose-colour has faded out of the sky—"with one stride comes the dark,"—Lord Ewart's diamond solitaire flashes in the semi-darkness, and Monica's strained nerves and weary eyes somehow fasten upon that spark of light, which half unconsciously rivets her attention and distracts a little the extreme restlessness, mental and physical, which has seized upon her to-night.

The talk in the drawing-room reaches them as a confused murmur only, and even this ceases in response to Lady Sarah's authoritative "Hush—sh," as after a short prelude the music begins.

Monica knows it well—a lovely *Barcarolle* of Rubinstein—and this is no mere school-girl interpretation of its subtle beauty. The touch is of extreme delicacy—wanting perhaps in fulness and roundness of tone, the rendering somewhat unconventional. Herself a born musician, she listens appreciatively. Presently she forgets to criticize, her conscious attention is relaxed. With her eyes still fixed on that spark of light—Lord Ewart is silent and motionless as herself—Monica is absolutely lost in the melody's suggestiveness.

For her once more the sky is lighted, but with the richer golden flush which precedes the sunset. She is leaning back in the bows of a boat, and is trailing her fingers through the water. She can hear the splash, splash of the oars, and a flood of memory surges over her, effacing all consciousness of time and space. This is no reminiscence of yesterday's boating party—an evening row up to Twickenham ferry after a dinner at Richmond, or a dreamy lingering below Cliveden Woods on some June afternoon, when, in sheer weariness of afternoon concerts, and tea, and driving, and visiting, Newton has carried her off to eat strawberries up the river. No, she is skimming the surface of a moorland tarn, a lakelet hidden among the eternal hills, where grey boulders have rolled, a thousand years ago, to the water's edge, and wild-fowl rise screaming and fluttering from the rushes.

And this is not Newton whose image rises before her. She has been, and will be, for him an almost perfect wife; but it was not he who first stirred her womanhood, calling from the untroubled depths of her nature that which years may recall but can never repeat. Still, in moments like these, when some sudden glimpse of the beautiful and the true flashes upon her life, all the later years, with their work and friendship and achievements, fade away, and that lonely moorland tarn, with its tiny boat and that one dead Love, remains for Monica the one real eternal fact of her individual existence.

But the scene has changed. Rubinstein's *Romance in A Minor* takes her into a woodland glade. Long deep blue shadows lie across the grass and thrushes and blackbirds are singing far overhead where the highest boughs of great elm-trees rise up into the evening sky. This time the scene is new to Monica, her memories are all of grey hill-sides and silvery lakelets, but the feeling of the moment is the same. It is a moment of supreme revelation, the crisis of a lifetime, a bringing to light of unsuspected capabilities, an interpretation of life, past, present, and to come.

The speck of light still holds her attention. It is shimmering now among the grasses at her feet. The glade is luxuriant in all its July ripeness. Fox-glove and meadow-sweet, and vetch, and flowering grasses spring up around her, and there, in a fallen tangle of clematis, lies the spark which forms the nucleus of her picture. More clematis clings to the lower boughs of a hawthorn bush beyond, and away in the distance stretches the cool green vista with its purple shadows and grey distance.

Monica is an experienced crystal-gazer, and even in this moment of Memory and Fancy's supremest effort she retains—as one does in dreams—a conscious fear that at some lightest breath, some slightest movement, the whole will dissolve, and past and future will yield to the

all-absorbing, all-devouring, *Now*. A sense of the fulness of life, of its possibilities, love-lighted, love-strengthened, has possession of her for the instant, but at any moment the sense of its littleness, its futility, its failure, its reality, may return.

The moment has come, the music has ended. Lord Ewart rises and moves back again into the lighted room. The hush continues for yet one instant, when, with an obvious sense of relief, the talk is once more set a-going.

“You have made a charming discovery, Lady Sarah. Quite a young genius! Not much execution perhaps—a little thin, do you think? But such simple music gives no great scope.

“I am so glad you like her. I hope you hear all these compliments, Miss Courtenay? We feel encouraged, don't we? Perhaps you will play Mr. Champion's accompaniment? He is going to give us 'Mrs. 'Enery 'Awkins.' So clever, you know, and so droll!”

II

Lord Ewart is very hard to please. He has a positive dislike to many things which are quite fashionable, and 'Mrs. 'Enery 'Awkins' is among the number. With an air of disgust, which he is at no pains to conceal, he makes his way towards the door, agrees with uninterested readiness with half-a-dozen men who advance, in varied terms, the original view, “that things are looking very favourable for Winchester's polling”—and finally escapes into the hall, and up-stairs.

Lady Methleydale has not appeared at dinner this evening. She is a woman of but two anxieties—her son and her complexion, and on both points she has to-day been sorely tried, for the one has reduced her to tears and temper, which have been very detrimental to the other.

She is genuinely anxious for her son's happiness, even if it should include the acquisition of a daughter-in-law. Were she a mere Mrs. Smith, whom her son's marriage should make into “*old* Mrs. Smith,” things might be different, but a merciful Providence has placed her in the peerage, where Lady Ewart need be no titular annoyance to Lady Methleydale. Her maid, in moments of exasperation, longs for an opportunity of teaching a son of Lord Ewart's to say “Grandmamma,” but that is only when her ladyship's hair and complexion have been more trouble than usual.

There are, however, limits to Lady Methleydale's good-nature, and, as she this morning informed her son, she had always assumed that he would marry, but she had equally assumed that his wife would be “one of ourselves,” and his announcement that he was about to ask Hilda Courtenay to accept him as a husband had filled her with rage and disappointment. Lord Ewart is now about to convey to his mother the news of his failure in a quest which has been dear to him for many months.

Lady Methleydale lies on a couch across the foot of her bed, and assumes an added shade of languor and exhaustion as he enters the room. A Sutherland table by her side is covered with the remains of a very sufficient dinner, and beyond, in the bay of the window, is a large toilet table littered with trinkets—bangles, rings, chatelaine toys, silver toilet paraphernalia, and jewelled hair-pins. Her maid wheels away the dinner equipage, and Ewart draws up an armchair to his mother's side.

With closed eyes, and an air of extreme endurance, she waits for him to begin. He takes up a bracelet from the table beside him, twists it round his two forefingers for a moment, and finally lets it fall with a clatter to the floor.

His mother starts up with an exclamation of annoyance.

“For Heaven’s sake, Ewart, leave those things alone. You drove me crazy with your fidget this morning. I am not in a condition to bear it. I don’t suppose you have come to say anything at all agreeable, you had better leave me.”

He picks up the glittering toy and lays it gently on the table beside him.

“Yes, mother,” he says very quietly, “you’ll think it agreeable enough—Hilda has refused to marry me.”

“God be thanked,” she exclaims with unwonted piety, due perhaps to the fact, that, to the best of her ability, she has assisted Providence in His arrangements. It is certainly not her fault if Hilda is not fully impressed with her duty in the present crisis. She has sent for her this afternoon, and for half-an-hour has done her best to humiliate the girl whom her son loves and reverences, scorching her cheeks with shame and wounded pride, and filling her loving heart with doubt and dread.

Ewart must inevitably marry money, position, influence, she has told her. The Methleydale property has been going downhill for the last three generations, and it rests with the present heir to restore the balance of things. His private debts too are considerable—a boy fresh from Oxford doesn’t exactly make a profit out of stables at Newmarket, and his father is powerless to help him. Hilda need not suppose she is doing a fine thing for herself when she sets her cap at Lord Ewart—their marriage must inevitably mean utter and irremediable ruin; and her ladyship’s tears flowed freely over her poor misguided son who is being beguiled to the wreck of his career by a designing girl who had taken advantage of the kindness of her betters—and so on.

Hilda is very young and very simple, and withal has had a heavy discipline in the school of poverty; her heart shall break before she will bring the one trouble her life has ever known, upon a man who, otherwise, may never experience the added pang of the doctor’s bill in illness, or the subtraction, by tradesmen’s importunity, from the joys of Christmas-tide.

And so, under the elm-trees in a glade of the New Forest, while earth and sky were gay with all that is beautiful and glad, two young hearts have agonized in wrong and sorrow.

“Hilda—I cannot believe it—that you, of all the world, should cheat me! Surely you must have loved me in those happy days in the Rectory garden—you always let me think you did. You can’t mean it—say you don’t mean it, Hilda.” This is how he received her refusal to be his wife. After all that Lady Methleydale has said, Hilda feels that she owes it to herself to refuse his love on her own account, not his. “I cannot marry you, Lord Ewart.” That is all she will say, and her voice, so full of tears that it sounds cold and hard, is in his ears now, as his mother piously praises God for his disappointment.

Lady Methleydale had hardly ventured to hope for such a result; it has been difficult to argue any conclusion from Hilda’s almost silent reception of her own passionate outburst. “I have never sought to win your son’s affections,” has been her one answer, and her ladyship is much elated at her own success. Presently, however, her mood changes—after all who is this girl that she should scorn the heir of Methleydale? There is impertinence in the very idea. True the Courtenays are as old a family as any in the county, but still a daughter of their house ought to be more sensible of such an honour as Lord Ewart has proposed to confer upon her.

Lord Ewart receives his mother’s remarks, congratulatory and depreciatory, with equal indifference, the result of many years’ endurance of her inconsequent chatter. At last one remark catches his attention.

“I can’t understand it altogether,” she says. “There must be some one else. Girls are so silly and romantic—some curate perhaps.”

Lord Ewart, ignorant of the afternoon's work, catches at the suggestion. But no. It can hardly be—she was so frankly glad at his coming, only last June at Methleydale, when he used to make his way over to the Rectory every day, and twice a day, on various pretences of talks with the rector, and of tennis and fishing and boating. No shadow of falsehood lay in the clear blue depths of Hilda's eyes as they met his this afternoon.

"It is inconceivable from any other point of view," her ladyship continues, "that a girl like that, without a penny, and seeing so few people as she does—a girl who sings for guineas at country houses—should refuse to become 'Lady Ewart.'"

Truly, he thinks, the humours of society are the same in all classes. "Mrs. 'Enery 'Awkins eyn't a bad sort o' nyme." Marchioness and costermonger appeal to the same passion—not one, he thinks with a sad pride, likely to have much weight with his simple-minded Hilda.

"Good-night, mother," he says, rising abruptly, "I'm off to-morrow. I'll send you a line in a day or two. You can't expect me to stay here flow."

"No, perhaps not, though Miss Courtenay ought to be the one to go away. It will look so odd for you to be the only man to leave before Newton Winchester's election. What can I say to people? You ought to consider. We can afford to entertain so little in the country that you ought to keep up your connection at other houses. What shall I say when people ask where you are gone?"

"Say you don't know," he answered almost roughly—for him. "Good-bye, mother," and with a somewhat perfunctory kiss, reminiscent of early incursions into rouge and pearl-powder, he leaves her.

III

The polling is over, and Newton has won by a large majority. Monica has been too busy to give any thought to her new friend, beyond noticing at breakfast that her eyes looked swollen and weary as if from want of sleep.

To-night, however, she will not forget her. Hilda has come early into the drawing-room with the governess and the two elder girls, an acknowledgment of their services in decorating the dinner-table and the drawing-room with Newton's colours during the absence of the rest of the party. She makes no attempt to secure her retreat this evening; it is quite characteristic that, though grateful for Monica's sympathy, she is careful not to appear to seek it, but remains chatting with her companions.

Lady Methleydale is down-stairs this evening, which may perhaps account, in some degree, for the effort Hilda is forcing herself to make. But her ladyship is not thinking of Hilda to-night. She has the kind of mind which holds but one idea at a time, and for the whole of this day she has discoursed to every human being, not away at the polling, upon the loss of her marquise diamond ring. Yesterday it lay on her dressing-table, Ewart was playing with it before lunch; this morning, when she was dressing, it was not there. She had never left her room. The room had been thoroughly searched, and every hanging and all her belongings well shaken, and the ring was not there.

Twenty times over she has told the story. The ring was of immense value, not merely for the size and beauty of the brilliants, but because it had been a royal gift to an early Methleydale, and had been a feature in the portraits of the ladies of the house from Lely's days to Millais'.

No one listened to the story who could help it. Lady Methleydale generally had some grievance on hand, and half the guests attached no consequence to the story, till, an hour later, when a

servant entering with a card for her ladyship, the announcement, "The detective from Scotland Yard," acted on the company like an electric shock.

This was business, and the guests gathered together in little groups discussing possibilities, each out-ying his neighbours in stories of the miraculous recovery of lost property in unexpected places. It was sure to turn up, perhaps years hence, in a roll of lace, or the hem of a gown, or out of some impossible chink or cranny.

Lady Sarah was closeted with Lady Methleydale, the detective, and her maid, in the room which was the scene of the loss.

"You saw the ring yesterday at twelve o'clock or thereabouts," said the officer, summing up the information he had extracted from the meanderings of his chief witness, "and it was missing at nine o'clock this morning, and your ladyship had never been out of the room, and had been waited on solely by your own maid, and had had no visitors except your son."

The maid, who resented the responsibility thus thrown upon her, had at this point an inspiration. Light broke at last, and with a gasp of excitement she cried— "Yes, sir—my lady—there was that Professional person!"

The detective looked up sharply.

"She can have nothing to do with it. I have the highest references with her," remonstrated Lady Sarah.

Lady Methleydale, like most stupid persons, found a certain security in returning to an earlier position. Till her loss had put it out of her head, she had been occupied with dislike of Miss Courtenay, and she seized eagerly upon the suggestion.

"I should never have thought of anything so shocking, dear Lady Sarah," she exclaimed, "but as Morton has mentioned it, to be sure she was quite a long time here yesterday. I sent for her to talk about her family. Lord Methleydale is always very kind to them—they're so poor, you know."

"Send the Professional person here," said the detective decisively, turning to Morton.

IV

Monica was conscious, now that the strain of the election was relaxed, of extreme weariness. She had gone to bed soon after dinner the night before, but had had little sleep, and she left her room early next morning.

She found the children and governess at breakfast in the dining-room, and to the delight of the girls, sat down beside them. After some minutes of merry chatter one of them observed—

"Miss Courtenay promised to breakfast with us, she is late."

"She will not be here," replied the governess, "she will not be with us to-day."

"Why ever not?" asked the girl discontentedly.

"I have received Lady Sarah's instructions, and 'why ever' is not English," responded the governess icily.

Monica listened, but said nothing. Presently some of the guests came in. Lady Asquith had letters in her hand, and was adjusting a bracelet. She laid it down to shake hands with Monica.

"I shouldn't leave that about," said Faustina Strother. "It isn't wise in this house."

"Awkward position for the little singing girl," remarked an old gentleman; "nice little girl too."

"And when Lady Methleydale asked her into her room out of kindness," suggested one of the Cunliffe girls, following with the herd, not intentionally ill-natured.

At this moment Hilda entered, pale but erect, and with an added fearlessness and dignity, which Monica, ever observant, hailed as a revelation of depths in her nature as yet exhibited only in her music.

There was an obvious pause, no one greeted her; there was none of the little bustle which commonly greets a new-comer.

"Hilda dear," said Monica, unconsciously using the Christian name, "I've got such a headache. Do come and coax me to eat some breakfast in my room." Then turning to a footman—"A fresh tea-pot, and some dry toast, and some peaches in my boudoir, please."

She passed her arm through that of the girl, and led her silently up-stairs.

"That's a nice chair, so, near me. Now, not a word till we've had our breakfast. Then you must tell me all about it, please."

"There is nothing to tell—except—except *that*." She laid a letter on the table. She had not spoken before, and her voice sounded hard and unfamiliar. Monica took up the letter.

"Lady Sarah McTaggart encloses a cheque for ten guineas for Miss Courtenay's services, and as she need detain her no longer from her friends, the station brougham will be at her disposal at ten o'clock."

Monica took up the cheque and tossed it airily into the fire. The footman entered at this moment. "Say that Miss Courtenay will not require the carriage at ten. She will go with me at twelve. And tell my maid to pack." Then turning to Hilda, "It might inconvenience your mother if you went home before you were expected. You will come home with me, and stay till this little mistake is set right. Now give me some tea, please. Two lumps. I've got a splitting headache."

No one would have thought it, to hear Mrs. Winchester's chatter, nor to see the energy with which she insisted on going for a walk when breakfast was over.

"Anywhere—anywhere you like—only let us get out. There is nothing like fresh air when you are overdone. Take me the prettiest walk you know."

For Hilda—poor girl—there was but one walk in the world, and though every step of the way had its especial pain, she had a sad pleasure in retracing the scene of her last meeting with Lord Ewart.

Bit by bit Monica led her on to relate the incidents of the last few days. Ewart, she said, had been her friend ever since they were both in pinafores, and she had a right to know whatever concerned him. Then somehow the girl went on to tell her simple history—the free, unconventional yet always refined and cultured life at the quaint old Rectory, her long childish intimacy with Lord Ewart, dating from the days when they learnt their Latin grammar together.

Thus talking, Hilda brightened visibly. They wandered on among the tall forest trees, where the sombre shades were broken here and there by brilliant patches of the morning sunshine. Presently she began to gather a little bouquet—meadow-sweet and vetch, and yellow bed-straw and long trails of bind-weed. Then they came upon a little glade of great sombre elms, where all the undergrowth was draped with tangles of wild clematis. Monica threw herself down among the long, dry, flowering grasses, and Hilda went on adding to her bouquet, singing softly as she moved about.

"Is it a dream? Then waking would be pain. Oh, do not wake me," she sang softly in her fresh young voice.

Monica lay and listened in a luxury of rest, satisfied alike in eye and ear, gazing dreamily into the creamy tangle of clematis, which a few feet away waved gently in the morning breeze.

A numbness crept over her as she abandoned herself to the sense of the moment. The sun, striking through the boughs overhead, fell upon her, and Monica was almost a sun-worshipper.

She felt, in a dream-like misty fashion, that the scene was familiar to her, that, if she could but wait, some interesting development would ensue, something was about to happen.

Hilda's song had changed, she was softly crooning the melody of Rubinstein's Romance in A Minor. Its swaying rhythm rose and fell in time with the swaying of the clematis tangle.

She was fascinated by the subtle mystic motion. In another instant, with a sudden flash, activity returned to her brain, but her limbs felt incapable of motion. All the vitality she possessed was, for the moment, absorbed in a single effort.

"Hilda," she said softly, and only her lips moved, "is this the place where you were that evening?"

"Yes," said the girl, wondering.

"Did Ewart stand just there, by that hanging festoon of clematis?"

"Yes," I think so, "just there."

Then Monica knew that it was, as she had fancied, the very scene she had looked upon as she listened enrapt to Hilda's music, Lord Ewart by her side, his mind doubtless revisiting the spot which the afternoon had made so memorable. Another memory returned to her—the speck of light which in her vision had lain in the shadow of the clematis bushes.

Her breath came quickly. "Come here, Hilda," she said, "do exactly as I tell you. Stand in front of me—so! Do you see that long spray of blossom? Each time it waves it touches, on the right, a long spear of grass. Put your finger on that spear and follow it down to its root—your finger will touch the lost ring!"

There was something in her tone impossible to question. Hilda, wondering, trembling with excitement, crossed over the intervening space. She uttered a little cry, gratitude was the first emotion to express itself.

"How shall I ever thank you, Mrs. Winchester?"

"Thank God," said Monica, as she rose to her feet.

V

Lord Ewart was accustomed to Monica's vagaries—only the unexpected was to be looked for from her at any time; but in telegraphing to him—*Hilda and I are waiting for you— Westminster Hotel, London*—she seemed to have surpassed herself. Of course he obeyed the summons, and as he entered a private sitting-room in which Monica sat quietly writing, he exclaimed—

"What in the world are you here for?"

"To be near Scotland Yard."

"But why—what—what about?"

"This," she answered, drawing from a small band-bag the celebrated Methleydale "marquise."

The story was soon told, despite interruptions from Ewart. "How dare they! Where is she? I must go to her. What a pack of idiots they are! Monica, you are a brick, a witch, an angel. How dare they!"

She paused at each interruption, but continued her story without reference to his remarks. When she had finished he started to his feet. "Where is she?" he cried.

"You'll please to sit down again," said Monica firmly, "and give an account of yourself. You will remember that I am responsible to the police, and I wish to know in what character, whether as witness or prisoner, I am to take you to Scotland Yard."

He resumed his seat. "I forgot," he said, "of course I must explain. It was quite true I was in my mother's room that morning (day before yesterday, wasn't it?—it seems weeks ago), and I

was fidgeting her things. She was rowing me about Newmarket and bills and things, as if I wouldn't give up all my amusements thankfully to-morrow for Hilda's sake, and I hardly knew what I was playing with, till I suddenly realized I'd got hold of the Methleydale marquise ring. It is an heirloom, you know, and though I hope my mother will wear it a long time yet, my wife will own it some day, and I thought I'd like to see it, for once, on Hilda's finger. I never thought things would happen as they did, you know, and I'd got it in my hand that afternoon in the wood, and when—when everything went wrong, I suppose I just flung it away, and thought no more about it. I had meant to put it back when I went to tell my mother that I was going to marry Hilda, never thinking I should have only failure to report. Monica, do you think she really meant it; don't you think there is any hope for me?"

"You had better judge for yourself," said Mrs. Winchester, rising. "I'll send her to you. But in half-an-hour you must both be ready to meet the detective. I'll telegraph for him at once, and he must go down to-night to Lady Sarah's, and take the ring with him."

* * *

The young people got a whole hour for their deliberations after all. The detective was a little late, and Monica kept him for some little time while she gave such an account as she thought fitting (or *credible*, perhaps, to the Scotland Yard intellect) of the progress of the affair.

"And now where *is* the ring?" he asked finally.

"I will fetch it," said Monica.

She found the ring on Hilda's slender fore-finger; but she didn't tell that to the detective.