

Rita

The background of the entire page is a halftone illustration of a landscape. It features rolling hills and a deep valley. The hills are covered in dense vegetation, represented by a pattern of small dots. The lighting suggests a bright day, with the sun casting shadows that create a sense of depth and texture. The sky is a pale, clear blue, and a single, small bird is visible in flight in the upper center of the frame. The overall style is reminiscent of a woodcut or a high-quality halftone print.

*A Woman
of Samaria*

Rita

A Woman of Samaria



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CHAPTER I.

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"We will sing," said the Vicar, "the 329th hymn, before I read the usual chapter."

He glanced round at a circle of attentive faces, bent over the rustling leaves of respective hymn books. If his eyes rested for a few seconds longer on one down-bent head than on any of the others, there was no one sufficiently inattentive to note the fact. It was the hour of family prayer at the Vicarage, and habits of years had disciplined children and servants alike into deferential attention to that observance. Even strangers and visitors fell into similar decorous habits when staying with the Rev. Gideon Webbe.

He was a man whose personality was the outcome of pure and gentle and generous emotions. A man with the student's dreaminess, the thinker's absorption, the Christian's patience and long suffering. In daily life he was more noticeable for a general belief in humanity's best than worst side. In the exercise of his office he was more faithful than convincing. He was much beloved, and not at all feared. He kept to the simplest form of worship compatible with the rubric, and his only clerical extravagance was an insistence on the best organ and the best music it was possible to procure in an unfashionable parish, where collections were not "*de rigueur*" after every service, and where "early celebration" was an unheard of ordinance.

The death of his wife after the birth of their second child had left the Vicar to comparative loneliness. He had loved her as his second self, relied on her, trusted her, confided in

her. Such relationship cannot come twice into a life, and he did not tempt providence by any effort to replace her. She had been his boyhood's love and his manhood's joy, his staff and help-meet in all that appertained to the duties of his parish. Her loss was terrible to him, and the years, though they softened the pain of that first agonising blow, yet brought no possible consolation. Nothing in his life could ever be again as in those first few happy years, when he had installed her in the quaint old Vicarage of Dulworth. They had been as one in unity of content and use and happiness.

The children she had left were sweet and fair and dutiful, but they were not her, not the sweet helpful other half that had made life complete for him, and the slow years drifted on, and he grew more absorbed and absent-minded, and childhood, girlhood, bloomed and grew beautiful before his dreamy eyes, and yet to him seemed only childhood still. An unmarried sister of his own had ruled his household and seen to the girls' education and manners and well-being. He only noted how like his youngest child was to her mother, and how her voice had the same thrill and her laugh the same music.

Now, as she sang, his ear detected her voice among the others, though to-night it sounded strangely faint and uncertain.

*"Abide with me, fast falls the eventide,
The darkness deepens, Lord with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me."*

He glanced up. The burnished brown head was still bent. The lamplight shone on a girlish shape somewhat too tall and rounded for her seventeen years, a contrast to her elder sister's fary-like proportions. Decidedly she was not singing as usual. The notes were tremulous; there seemed a pathos as of hidden tears in the words. Emotion seemed on the verge of breaking some leash of strength that checked its overflow. There was a tremor of lip, a flutter of the soft muslin that crossed the girlish breast. Her father watched and wondered.

Near the girl, so near that her white gown touched him, stood the Vicar's nephew—Cyril Grey. He was leaving on the morrow for China. He was a handsome though somewhat effeminate-looking youth of two-and-twenty, and had been staying at the Vicarage for the past month. The Vicar's wandering glance, combining as it did the two handsome young figures, the girl's troubled face, the youth's drooped eyelids and thin lips and beautiful colouring, gathered something of uneasiness into its expression. They were children no longer, this trio before him. What was life already meaning for them?

The last verse of the hymn began. His glance turned to the open page. It seemed to him that the lovely young voice had regained its accustomed firmness and quality. He thought how misleading fancy might be on occasion, and joined his own mellow baritone to the beautiful words:—

*"Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee,
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!"*

There came a brief pause. The group seated themselves and looked at him expectantly. He opened the Family Bible

at the place where lay the old worn book-marker, worked by his dead wife nearly twenty years before. He cleared his throat and gave out the chapter. "The fourth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John."

The Vicar had one great gift, not too common to the clerical profession, and that was a beautiful voice, and one that had been trained to perfect elocution. It was always a pleasure to hear him read or preach, and an impossibility to be unimpressed or inattentive. Even his nephew, to whom the outward and visible signs of the priesthood meant infinitely more than the inward grace of that holy ordinance, admired the Rev. Gideon Webbe's reading.

He listened now with the criticism of mature youth and the assured conviction that it lay in his own power to do equally well what he criticised.

"Jesus said unto her, Thou hast well said, I have no husband."

Cyril Grey was conscious of a sudden stifled sob, a quickened breath in his vicinity. He glanced at his young cousin. Her face betrayed visible emotion. A frown darkened his brow, his eye shot an angry rebuke at feminine weakness. She read the anger, and the rebuke, and grew suddenly calm. But the effort to attain such composure left her deadly pale, and gave to her young face a hardness that altered all its bloom and beauty. Then the gentle "Let us pray," brought individual seclusion and gave temporary relief to an enforced strain.

The Vicar's prayer was extempore and eloquent. He alluded impressively to the coming parting. He spoke of the "young traveller preparing his weapons for the battle of

life." He asked a blessing on his spiritual life, its guidance and direction into right paths, and then with a few earnest and impressive words closed his petition with a solemn "Amen."

The servants rose and quietly left the room. Miss Sarah Webbe, the Vicar's sister, drew her spare figure into upright position and smoothed a crease or two out of her black silk gown. Cynthia, the eldest girl, crossed the room and put away the books of devotion in their respective places. The vicar's nephew smoothed back his fair hair with a languid hand. He alone noticed that a white-gowned figure had slipped out of the room in the rear of the parlourmaid, a proceeding unusual enough to excite comment.

There was a general murmur of "Good-nights." Cynthia followed her aunt, the Vicar retired to his study, and Cyril Grey walked slowly up the oak staircase to his own room. He put down his candle on the dressing-table and glanced at the white blind screening his window. Then with a sudden movement he blew out his light, and, drawing up the blind, opened the window and leaned out. His room was at the back of the house, and looked down upon a remote corner of the garden, where stood an old tumble-down summer-house covered with ivy and creepers.

The bright moonlight silvered the tall stems of sheltering beech trees that in summer time almost concealed the retreat. Now the leafage was less a screen than an adjunct. Light and shadow, growth and decay, there mingled and met in strange companionship. From the doorway came the white clutter of a handkerchief, waved as if to signal another presence. The young man turned from the window as he

noted it, and going to a cupboard near the bedstead, he took out a knotted rope of some length. This he fastened to an iron hook outside the window frame and let drop to the ground below. Then he changed his coat for an old Norfolk jacket, kicked off his boots and replaced them with tennis shoes, and getting out on the broad ledge of the window let himself down by the rope. He rapidly crossed the intervening space, keeping as much as possible in the shadow, and presently stood at the entrance of the little summer-house. A girl sprang forward and threw herself into his arms.

"Oh, Cyril, I had to do it. I couldn't help myself. Your last night! Our last night! Oh, you don't know how awful it is to me!"

The unchecked tears were streaming down her face. A passion of sobs shook her frame. He drew her to a seat and held her closely to his heart, smoothing her hair and murmuring soothing words from time to time.

"It won't be such a long parting," he said. "There, there, darling, don't cry, the time will soon pass. I'll send for you as soon as I am able."

"Oh, if you could only take me with you!"

"Impossible. You know that as well as I do. My father is a crochety old beggar, as you know, and I'm quite dependent on him. He's sending me to the foreign house only out of spite, and because I'd rather be in England. And he's so rich, it's a shame. . . . Now, sweetheart, don't cry. Try and be sensible. Tell me you haven't breathed a word of our secret to anyone."

"Of course not, Cyril. You made me promise that day."

"Yes, brave little girl! Well, you must keep that promise a little longer. You see it would ruin my prospects altogether, and I've made up my mind to be a partner in Grey, Lovel, and Co.'s before I marry."

"But we are married."

"Of course, child, but that was a very queer sort of ceremony. It wouldn't count for much. We'll have to pretend it never happened, and do the thing properly."

A pale face uplifted itself in sudden terror.

"Oh, Cyril, but you assured me——"

"Of course I did. You and I are satisfied with the form. It was enough to pledge us to each other, but it's not what would be called a regular marriage in this country. However, don't you worry. You can live on here until I see how things are going to turn out. Then I'll break it to my father. It's a pity your dad and he are such bad friends. I never could understand why. The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children get the toothache; eh, childie? Come, that's better. You're smiling."

He breathed a sigh of relief. He hated tears, and his conscience accused him of having brought a good many to those fond and foolish eyes.

The moonlight waned. Night and shadow breathed their spells around, enclosing that charmed recess with the magic of passion, set to music of throbbing pulse and tender vows and fond caress. It was such an old story to the night and the springtime. But it was still new and entrancing to one at least of the story tellers.

"You are my love, my law, my conscience," she murmured passionately. "If I have done wrong it has been at

your bidding—if you change, regret, repent, it will be my death!"

"I shall not change, Dolores."

"You are going to a new life, a new world. I—I must stay behind, watch the dreary days, weep out my long nights, fearing I know not what. A year ago I was a child, Cyril. Your love has made me a woman. I feel capable of anything—passion, sacrifice, revenge!"

"Revenge!" he said, half-startled by the word and tone. "Revenge, my pretty one. The word has a hateful sound on your lips. I don't like to hear it. You are inclined to be tragic, Dolores. I have often told you so. I fancy sometimes you would have made a good actress."

She laughed mirthlessly.

"I only speak as I feel. My heart is so full to-night I can't say one half of what I want to say. Cyril, you are so calm. You can't love me."

"I do love you," he said, "as well as it is in me to love. Our natures differ."

There was a moment's silence. Some passing memory of a sentence he had read flashed through his mind. Its cynicism affected him uncomfortably. That he should even think of it at such a moment held a suggestion of disloyalty. "We love best the woman we never win."

He had won. He had known all the triumph and pride in a girl's first passionate self-surrender that is so sweet to a lover's heart, but now, he told himself, the plucked fruit ceased to be quite so desirable. There is a subtle pleasure in restraint, a happiness in being unhappy, that one only realises in the "afterwards" of certainty.

She rested in his arms, quiet and subdued, yet a keen sense of misery filled her heart. The love of youth is ever shadowed by forebodings, no matter how sure or how absolute its worship.

He lifted her tear-stained face and looked down into her eyes. They were strangely beautiful. Large, shadowy, full of earnest purpose, self betraying in what they revealed.

"You won't forget, you won't repent," she entreated once more.

He unloosed the clinging arms and rose to his feet.

"I have promised," he said. "Your question shows you lack faith, Dolores."

"Oh, it is so hard, so hard," she cried. The chill of fear stole over her again. A knell of change sounded already in the tones of his voice. They were less lover-like, less assured, and had an undertone of impatience.

"Good-night," she said faintly, "and good-by. I shall not see you to-morrow before you start. I—I could not play a part before the others."

He was thankful she had recognised the fact. A highly-strung emotional nature is usually unreliable.

"Better not, dearest," he said, with a tenderness born of relief and self-reproach. "It would be too hard on us both. We will part here—here where our love was first confessed, our vows plighted."

The moonlight shone on her uplifted face, and lit the soulful sorrow of the eyes that matched her name. He drew her arms about his neck. Their lips met in a parting farewell. A moment later he stood and watched a white figure flitting towards the house.

"Poor child!" he said, softly. "Poor little girl! But she'll get over it."

He felt uncomfortable, and told himself he was unhappy. An element of hypocrisy in his nature mingled with the selfishness of young manhood, and he tried to persuade himself that it was regret, not relief that gave him such discomfort.

He sought his room once more. It would be long before he played Romeo again, he thought. A new life lay before him. One to arouse ambition and interest. This brief love dream had no part in it. With the morrow he would march forth towards a life that wore the smile of promise and worldly success. That he left a shadow behind cost him no pang. If absence were worth anything as a test of constancy, why then they could take up their love story where its first volume had ended. Change comes with the passage of time and ardour cools. No harm was done. She was so young now, naturally her life's horizon seemed bounded by her first love. Women were like that. But a man lived for other things. He could not look out on a limited landscape and call it the world.

At this stage of reflection the philosophic youth lit his candle. His preparations for the morrow were evident on all sides, in the shape of portmanteaux, hat box, straps, and walking sticks. He glanced at them complacently. Then, catching sight of his own face in the toilet glass, he gave himself up to a few moments' consideration of its good-looking promises.

"Poor little Dolly!" he murmured. "She certainly was desperately gone on me. I'm very sorry for her. I suppose

she's crying her heart out now, and I can't comfort her."

A man's pity for what he is unworthy to love is only good-natured contempt for the weakness of the sex. He knew in his heart he could not comfort her, because he could not understand the depth of feelings lavished upon him with youth's prodigal delight in giving.

She lay prone on her bed, conscious of nothing save the intensity of her own misery. Tears had exhausted her. Prayer died upon her lips with a sudden sense of its impotence to avert sorrow. She was so young that in her first grief she felt as if she had reached the extremity of earthly woe.

"God keep me from thinking," she cried to the silence, and like a cloud the darkness rolled over her aching senses, and the quick living agony of the day died out of heart and brain in sudden unconsciousness.

CHAPTER II.

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"You have done nothing but mope since Cyril left. Talk of wearing one's heart on one's sleeve, why anyone could read your secret," said Cynthia, scornfully.

The tragedy of the parting was ten days old. The sisters were sitting on the grass under the old cedar tree. It was close on sunset. The air was full of warmth and fragrance. Birds chirped a last good-night to day from lilac tree and chestnut bough. Dolores turned a white face and wistful eyes to the speaker.

"I don't care," she said, slowly.

"I suppose you don't, or you wouldn't make such an exhibition of yourself."

Cynthia threw herself full length on the green sward, and clasping her hands behind her head, looked up into the soft blue depths above.

"What's it like?" she asked abruptly.

"What's what like?"

"Being in love, and melancholy over the beloved's absence, and all that. Tell me, Dolly. It will do you good to unburden your soul. 'Give sorrow words,' doesn't someone say? Well, I invite confidence. It's too bad you should take the lead of me when I'm two years older than you and ever so much better looking, but Cyril was a booby."

The white face flushed scarlet.

"How dare you say that? You know he was ever so much cleverer and—and nicer in every way than that idiot you have dangling after you. I wonder you can be civil to him."

"I'm not. That's just why he likes me so much. The worse you treat a man the fonder he gets of you. Believe me, my dear, there's no greater mistake than showing your feelings. I'm always preaching that to you."

"I don't believe you've any to show. You flirt with any male thing that comes in your way, but you couldn't care for one of them. If you love anyone it's yourself, Cynthia. You were always like that."

"Well, I'm worth loving, judging from all the love letters I get. Bobby Trevor has turned that old hollow tree by the stile into a post office for my benefit. Would you like to hear his latest effusion?"

"No. And I don't think it's a nice thing to do to read out what's only meant for yourself to some other person."

"How badly you speak, Dolly. You'll really have to attend to your education."

She glanced at a coldly averted cheek, and smiled meaningly.

"Have I hurt your feelings, dear? Never mind. We can't all have the same tastes. Though what you could see in Cyril passes my comprehension. Now, when I marry——"

"Here comes Aunt Sarah and the tea table," interrupted Dolores. "I should hold my tongue if I were you."

Cynthia sat upright. "Poor Aunt Sarah! Wouldn't she be shocked if she knew that the little god's arrows were already flying about in this sacred retreat, or that a proposal and ten thousand a year are lurking in my pocket at this very moment, waiting only for a word of three letters on father's side."

"What!" exclaimed her sister, glancing round.

"Ah! I thought I'd wake you up. I'm perfectly serious."

"But Bobby——"

"Oh, you little goose, of course it's not Bobby. Calf love and no prospects are all he has to lay at my feet. No, it's—— But never mind. I'll tell you after tea. I see dad leaving the drawing-room. How astonished he'll be to-morrow morning!"

She rose and assisted the maid to set out the tea table. The Vicar joined his sister, and they came up to the two girls. They always took tea out of doors when the weather permitted.

The talk was chiefly about parish matters—the ailments of old people, the vagaries of the young. The Vicar alluded to the forthcoming concert which Mrs. Ferrers, of the Hall, was getting up for the village schools. She was a lively elderly widow, with a large income and no family, and was so socially disposed that she always filled the hall with visitors when she was in residence there.

"Oh, by the way, I have a letter from her," said the Vicar, putting down his tea-cup and trying his pockets in succession. "She wants you to sing, Dolores. I know that is what it is about. Yes—here it is. Read it yourself, my dear. I suppose you will do as she asks. There's a sketch of the programme there, too. Her friends seem very talented. They are all doing something."

"Let me see!" exclaimed Cynthia, taking the slip from her sister's indifferent grasp.

She rattled off a string of names, with accompanying criticisms on their proposed performance. She was a great favourite of Mrs. Ferrers, and knew most of her guests by reason of meetings at luncheons and teas.

"*'To Anthea,'* Mr. Thomas Lilliecrapp," she read. There was a little touch of consciousness in her voice. But apparently the listening ears were not critical. "Fancy Mr. Lilliecrapp singing! Why, he doesn't know one tune from another. He has positively no ear. And as for Mrs. Ferrers, of course it's *'Luce di quest anima.'* Dad, you ought to give the *'Vicar of Bray.'* The sentiments don't suit, of course, but it's just your compass. Dolores, shall you appear? For goodness sake don't sing one of your doleful ditties if you do."

"I'd rather not sing at all," said the girl.

"Why, my dear? I thought you'd be pleased," said the Vicar, wonderingly. "And you have an excellent voice, you know. It will seem a little—well, a little impolite, to refuse. Especially when you consider the object for which the concert is given."

"Of course you must sing, Dolores," said her aunt, sharply. "You have no possible reason for refusing."

The girl raised her cup to her lips to hide their sudden tremor. She said no more.

The conversation went on. Cynthia had always plenty to say, and loved the sound of her own voice. She was a gay butterfly of a girl, totally unlike her sister, still more unlike either father or mother. She adored her own small, pretty person, and flirted promiscuously with all and sundry who were flirtable. She had long ago made up her mind that a rich marriage and a position in society were to be her portion in life, and already had achieved their possibility. They took the form of a middle-aged admirer, a friend of Mrs. Ferrer's, who had done great things in the

manufacturing line, and patented a certain British industry which had led to fortune.

That he was ugly and commonplace and coarse and stupid were trifles of no importance to the soulless little beauty. He was 45 years of age, and, she hoped apoplectic. He would serve her purpose admirably, and he was quite besottedly in love with herself. She had his proposal in her pocket, and had authorised him to call on the Vicar the next morning. It was little wonder she had no sympathy to spare for her sister's woebegone face and lovelorn listlessness. They were so immeasurably foolish that she could not even take them seriously as a point of discussion.

The swing of the garden gate came as an interruption to the conversation. Miss Webbe looked round. "A gentleman," she said, peering into the distance with short-sighted eyes.

Cynthia turned her head. "Why, it is Mr. Lilliecrapp!" she exclaimed. "He must have come about the concert."

A short, thick-set man, with a red face and iron-grey hair, came towards the group. The Vicar knew him slightly, but that fact made no difference to his greeting. Cynthia's welcome was tinged with a little conscious blush, and Dolores simply shook hands, with a conventional remark, ere retiring into the background.

It appeared Mr. Lilliecrapp had come about the concert. They were anxious to get the programme printed, and Mrs. Ferrers had commissioned him to secure the two young ladies of the Vicarage for "something." Perhaps Miss Cynthia would play and Miss Dolores sing? He gave the message, looking ardently at Cynthia.

"We were just trying to make up our minds when you appeared," she said. "At least I was trying to make up my sister's mind for her. I see you are going to sing '*To Anthea*.'"

"I was about to request the favour of your accompanying me. You play so well."

"It is a very difficult accompaniment," observed the Vicar. "And a fine song," he added, "though the sentiment has always appeared to me somewhat exaggerated."

"Love," observed Mr. Lilliecrapp, "cannot be exaggerated when it is real."

His face grew redder, he rumbled his iron-grey hair in sudden confusion, and pronounced the weather "very 'ot indeed for the season." Cynthia rushed into a discussion on the programme, and endeavoured to include her sister. But Dolores was evasive. She would not promise anything.

Presently the visitor evinced an admiration for the garden that impelled his host to suggest further inspection; and they strolled off together, followed by a suspicious glance from Cynthia. Nature had formed her coquette, despite all rules of heredity and example. She knew she had limited her opportunities now by choice of one among her victims. The reflection caused her some uneasiness. She felt she had been hurried, and already saw the Vicar puckering an honest brow in wonderment.

Of course Lilliecrapp would seize the opportunity, and equally of course would confess himself authorised to do so by the lady of his desire. At this stage her thoughts wandered to Aunt Sarah, and took a tinge of triumph. She became less critical respecting the favoured swain, and

revelled in pictures of splendid successes and social elegance.

The tea things were removed, and Dolores went indoors. Cynthia remained with her aunt, and awaited events with pardonable impatience.

The world was her golden apple. Lilliecrapp would be the ladder by whose means the fruit might be reached. Once reached she would make him a sharer in her triumph's. He must go into Parliament. He would win a title. "Sir Thomas and Lady Lilliecrapp," had a pleasant-sounding flavour about it. She murmured it over, and the name seemed less homely, and smacked less of manufactures, or licensed victualling.

"My dear Cynthia, I have spoken to you three times," exclaimed her aunt. "What are you thinking about? I want you to take those flannel petticoats to old Mrs. Babbage. They are quite ready and,—"

The future Lady Lilliecrapp rose impatiently. "Oh, bother Mrs. Babbage! I don't want to go down to the village this evening. Send Dolly. I'll tell her."

Aunt Sarah looked dignified. "In my young days——" she began.

"Here comes papa. If he wants me, tell him I'm in the drawing-room."

A lapwing, a swallow, anything airy and graceful, gave its likeness to her swift flight as a pair of infatuated eyes watched it.

"I have your permission to claim her, then?" was murmured rapturously.

"You say she has accepted you, conditionally to my approval. It seems to me that means—everything," answered the Vicar. "I am a little bewildered. It had not dawned upon me that my children were grown up—marriageable, in fact. But if you are so deeply attached to her, and your position is all that you have stated, I cannot offer any objection except that of youth."

"A lovely fault!" said the enamoured swain, "and one I am only too willing to overlook. Then I may tell her you consent?"

"I—I suppose so."

If Cupid ever lends wings to middle-aged feet, his aid was apparently invoked, for the last words were addressed only to vanishing coat-tails.

CHAPTER III.

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The two girls were dressing for the concert. Two white gowns lay on the bed in Cynthia's room, and two exquisite bouquets of white flowers with trails of green foliage lay beside them. Cynthia stood before the glass, radiant in déshabillé of snowy mysteries and giving finishing touches to her hair. The door opened and Dolores entered. She moved with a languid step, and her face was pallid and anxious.

"You look awful!" exclaimed Cynthia, with sisterly candour. "I can't think what's come over you! For goodness sake, child, try and put off that melancholy Ophelia business for once. Really, people will begin to notice you. You're just like a ghost. I declare I'd make you rouge if I had any. I've heard geranium petals do as well; but it's not the season for them. Try a rough towel."

Dolores made no reply. She did indeed look ill. Her face had lost its youthful roundness and grown sharp and thin. Dark circles shadowed her eyes and intensified the dusky length of lashes. Her step was slow and languid, and her lips never smiled. She seemed to move and act and speak by mechanical instinct. The verve and spring of life had gone from her.

"No letter yet?" observed Cynthia, enquiringly. "Well, after all, he's not been gone so very long. You'll have to adopt my philosophy, dear. *'If he do not write to me, what care I how nice he be!'* Not that Cyril was ever 'nice' in my opinion. He thought too much of himself. A conceited man

never makes a satisfactory lover. Now my poor old dear is rather too fond of bringing himself to my notice. See there!" She pointed to the flowers, and then took up a trinket box from the dressing-table.

"This—to my Anthea," she read, and opening it showed the sparkle of a diamond circlet, which was speedily transferred to a slender finger. "Pretty, isn't it? That's the third ring he has given me. I suppose the fourth will be the one."

"Miss Tatton has excelled herself," said Cynthia presently, in approval of her own appearance. "Taste and the *'Lady's Pictorial'* can do wonders even in a country village. These gowns have quite a town-made touch about them, I assure you. I've not studied Mrs. Ferrers's frocks for nothing. I hope your bodice will fit, Dolly? Mine is barely comfortable; but you want singing-room. Goodness! there's Aunt Sarah calling, and you're not dressed. What a nuisance punctual people are."

"I'll take this into my room," exclaimed Dolores, hurriedly. "She'll only fuss and detain me. Keep her here for goodness sake. Show her your ring—anything." She seized her bodice and fled.

A quarter of an hour later the two girls were in the drawing-room of the Vicarage, undergoing the criticism of father and aunt. Cynthia was radiant. Her lovely colouring was all the more brilliant in contrast to her colourless attire. Dolores, too, had no lack of roses to complain of, but the flush on her cheeks was too feverishly brilliant to last, and her eyes had a wild strained look that spoke of mental tension.

The Vicar regarded them with admiring interest, their aunt with a due appreciation of the dressmaker's skill as an adjunct of youth and beauty.

Her father's eyes rested on Dolly's face with a dawning expression of wonder, and their gaze growing more intent, noted some change in that face that gave him a momentary pang; it brought out the likeness to that dead wife so strongly. But why should the child look ill, and what had brought that hunted, half-terrified look into her soft eyes? Those eyes which had always seemed to foreshadow sorrow even in childhood.

Ere he could frame his troubled thoughts into words she had thrown her cloak over her shoulders and turned away on pretence of finding her music. Her hands shook, she felt cold and sick. The names and titles of the songs swam hazily before her eyes. She wondered how she would ever get through the evening with this new sense of terror weighing upon her heart.

When she stood on the platform and gazed down on the familiar faces it seemed to her that they all wore a look of curiosity, or question. The blood mounted to her brow, the beating of her heart was quick and painful. Her eyes fell on the flowers she held in her hand, and their snowy purity seemed to mock her agonised thoughts. As one in a dream she heard the accompaniment to her song, and knew the bar that gave the signal for the voice. With a rush of emotion she began,

*"The stars shine on his pathway,
The trees bend back their leaves,*

*To guide him to the meadow
Among the golden sheaves."*

The passionate words, the burst of joy that proclaimed the "waiting" over, sent a thrill through the listeners. It seemed as if the singer's very soul was in the music, its longings and abandonment and delight, for it was her own love and longing that she sang, and memory carried her back to hours when she had waited for a footfall and trembled with ecstasy in her lover's embrace. Then Hope arose and whispered that as it had been so it should be again. Her eyes were like stars, and men looking at her thought that she sang too well of love for one to whom love was an unknown guest. But they recalled her again and again, for no voice there was like hers, and the joy and beauty and pathos of it left strange memories behind.

She was succeeded by Mr. Lilliecrapp, whose performance afforded intense amusement to all and sundry, and tried his fiancée's nerves and patience to a degree that the diamond circlet scarcely rendered passive. However, he was so well satisfied with himself that comment was superfluous. Certainly none was made.

Dolores had to sing once more, and this time selected the old ballad of "*Robin Gray*." There were few dry eyes in the little hall when she had finished, and her own were wet as she left the platform.

Mrs Ferrers greeted her with enthusiasm. "I wonder you don't go into the profession," she said. "With a year's training your voice would be admirable. You'd create a furore in London."

"Nonsense! Don't try to turn the child's head," exclaimed Mr. Lilliecrapp. He did not particularly desire his future wife's sister to adopt a public profession. He had the curious middle-class prejudice against art. It was not a thing by which fortunes were rapidly made; and therefore of small account, commercially considered. Besides, this chit of a child had created quite a sensation where his efforts had only met with polite toleration. It argued badly for country tastes.

To Dolores herself the whole evening was an ordeal from which she was longing to escape. She refused Mrs. Ferrers's invitation to return to supper with the rest of the concert party. She declared her head ached, she was tired, she must go home, and persuasions were useless.

When she was alone in her own room she threw off her pretty frock with a sudden disregard of everything but relief. Then she sat down at the little table in her window, and wrote a letter. It was not long, and as she wrote it all the girlish beauty of her face seemed to harden and grow cold and fierce and determined. When she had sealed and addressed it she blew out her light and sat for long by the open window, gazing out at the starlit garden.

"If I could only stop thought until I get his answer!" she cried to herself. "I cannot bear this silence and suspense. I feel as if I should go mad. Has he altered? Has he forgotten? Oh! if he has, what will become of me!"

She sank down on her knees, her head pillowed against the hard window seat, alone with the night and desolation.

* * * * *

The door handle was softly turned. Someone looked in.

"Are you asleep, Dolly?" said a voice. The girl lifted her head and struggled to her feet.

"Why, good gracious me, I thought you were in bed. Don't tell me you've been moping in the dark all this time. How silly you are! And we had such a good time at the Hall. Why wouldn't you come?"

"I didn't want to," said the girl, dully.

"Didn't want to? But why? Surely it was better than sitting up here alone fretting yourself ill. Why," touching her suddenly, "you're as cold as death. Really, Dolly, you want a good shaking! I shall tell father about you. You do nothing but sulk and mope; it's getting unbearable."

"What did you come in for? To tell me this?"

"No. I just came in to say the day has been fixed. I'm going to be married the end of next month. Tom declares he won't wait any longer, and Mrs. Ferrers and I were talking about the bridesmaids' dresses. I'll only have two, and a page to hold up my train. That pretty boy of Mrs. D'Arcy's will do. She's promised him. He has been at lots of weddings, and can be trusted. There's very little time, but it's no use thinking of a grand wedding here. Now what colours do you say? White and pink is pretty, and suits the season, too; and you always look well in pink."

A little uncertain laugh broke from Dolores. "Do I? Well, it's all one to me; have what colour you wish."

"If a girl cannot take an interest in a wedding, and her own sister's, too, there must be something radically wrong about her!"

"What do you mean?" cried Dolores, sharply, her face growing suddenly white.

"Just what I say. You don't show the least interest or sympathy; and it's very hard, considering how we've been brought up together and had everything in common."

"Except our sympathies," said Dolores, coldly. "They were always at variance, to the best of my recollection. And as for your marriage, what do you expect me to say? I know you don't care a rap for this man. You are marrying solely for money and position. You can't expect to be happy. He is vulgar and common and old."

"Thank you; that will do. I might have guessed the sort of things you would say."

She turned, away with the dignity of wounded feelings. The moonlight, flooding the room, showed the two white girlish figures, one seated on the bed with clasped hands and lowered eyes, the other erect and scornful and offended. As her hand was on the door Dolores spoke.

"Say good-night, don't let us part bad friends. It won't be for so very long that we shall be together. And we've no mother to wish us Godspeed on our life's journey, or counsel us by the way."

"No," said Cynthia, suddenly melting. "And I've made my choice and you've made yours. There's no need to quarrel because they're so different. We never did think alike about anything."

She came back to the quiet figure. They kissed each other silently in the moonlight. The tears that were wet on Dolores's cheek were no tribute of her own aching heart as she turned away from the closed door.
