

CHEQUE NO. 9031.

A FASCINATING ROMANCE OF A LONDON SUBURB.

By the Author of "By Crooked Paths," "Sheathed in Velvet," Etc.

CHAPTER I.

MUST begin by referring to a few trifling events which have no direct connection with my story...

I am a colonial merchant, by name Gerald Quinton, and at the time I am going to speak of I was 23 years of age.

Now, however, I had promised my mother not to roam again unless under the pressure of actual necessity...

"Hullo, Jem," I exclaimed—she was named Gemina after her godmother, a rich maiden aunt...

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"Dead! Good heavens, how shocking! Why, he went up with me this morning, Jem, and seemed in splendid spirits! Was it an accident?"

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"And what do they say it is?" "Heart disease; but there is to be an inquest."

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manhood by this awfully sudden stroke! The scene, gentlemen and the roses were in full bloom on the front lawn—vivid patches of color in the July sunshine...

Jem and I had been playing there the night before, and I had kicked a pebble off the grass and put it on the top of the summer house. I remembered some remark the doctor had made about the stone remaining there until I took it down again—I was reprieved to be the tallest man in Clayhill. As I turned into the house I saw the pebble still where I had put it, and the trifling incident brought home to me a swift realization of the words, "In the midst of life we are in death."

Jem was right! This calm, self-contained grief was a thousand times more touching than cries and sobs would have been. As she stood there, with the tears quivering in her steadfast eyes and her lips set in the saddest curve I have ever seen, but without a sound or movement about her suggestive of the indulgence of grief, I felt as if some one had suddenly clutched my throat in a grip of steel. I raised her hand to my lips in passionate sympathy, and left her with my mother.

Before that week was out Cynthia Debenham had need of all the sympathy we could give her. When the affairs of the dead man were examined, they were found to be in an almost hopeless state of confusion. He had dabbled in financial schemes; and the day of his death he had lost about five hundred pounds of our little capital, and come home at the end of a year or so absolute pauper.

Besides, there is our father's good name to be thought of. Mr. Sedger tells me that, if we are satisfied to leave everything for the creditors, we shall be able to pay them in full.

"But," I remonstrated, "the creditors themselves would not expect such self-denial as that. It would be preposterous to leave yourselves without a penny in the world!"

"We shan't quite do that," she answered, with a certain quiet, gentle decision in her voice which I knew of old to be absolutely without appeal. "We shall take furniture enough to make two or three rooms comfortable—the breakfast room, chairs and couch and so on—and start housekeeping on our own account in a very humble way in town. Horace has decided to accept your offer, and to enter the office at once, Gerald."

"That's all right as far as it goes; and I'm glad of it!" I said grumpily. "But what about you, Cynthia? It does boys good to rough it a bit; but I don't like the notion of your doing it. You don't know what life is like in a fourth or fifth rate suburban lodging house, especially when you're cramped for money, as you would be."

"Now, don't be hard on my poor little plan!" she whispered pleadingly. "You don't know what trouble I've had to talk Horace into it; and, if he once gets a notion that you are against it too, I shall have all my trouble over again. I assure you, Gerald, it is the only honest course for me. As for being cramped for money, that can hardly be possible with the hundred and fifty a year you have offered Horace and the sixty or seventy I shall earn."

"You earn? How?" The tone of her voice was more pleading than ever as she answered softly: "I mean to get an engagement as daily wage-earning."

"It is all a pack of the most fantastic nonsense!" I exclaimed, angrily. "Why can't you make yourself contented here with my mother and Jem for a few months until your first mourning for your father is over, and then come to the home I will prepare for you?"

"You are so good, Gerald! But Horace—Why should your life be sacrificed to Horace's? I cried again. "If he can't live alone on his salary, let him come and make his home here and be a son to my mother which I am no longer with her."

Her face flushed vividly, but she suppressed her emotion and answered quietly enough: "Do you think we could consent to live on your charity like that? Even should you propose it you know well enough how impossible it is for Horace to accept such an offer."

"Then let him live in a garcon in these lodgings you speak of and you come here to my mother until—Ah, do, Cynthia!" I cried imploringly, as I saw her lips tightening resolutely. "Let me beg of you not to expose yourself to the petty wearing discomforts of such a life as you propose. You can form no idea of what it is like!"

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recognized Horace's one rock ahead, his moral weakness; and his godfather, Capt. Billcoates, used to say that he carried plenty of canvas, but was short of ballast. That's what I am going to be—ballast. The day before yesterday I promised her faithfully that I would keep her place as far as I was able, and I must keep my word."

I knew every sentence she had spoken was distilled wisdom, and yet my very heart and soul seemed to cry against this sacrifice of our two lives. Knowing well enough that I was beaten, I yet put forth one last faint plea, but without any hope whatever for its success.

"And what about me, Cynthia?" I asked, still holding her hand in mine, so that she should not escape and leave the question unanswered. "Have I no place at all among your unselfish schemes? Is everybody's good and comfort to be thought of but mine? Am I the only person for whom you have no consideration?"

She flushed again, with evident signs of distress, and tried to withdraw her hand, but I would not let her. "You cannot compare yourself to poor Horace," she whispered, so low that I had to bend my head to catch the answer. "I know all this is hard on you, Gerald, and you will never know how sorry I am to be the cause of trouble to you; but I've thought it all out very carefully, and have come to the conclusion that my first duty at present is to my mother. Look at his position. Last week he was at the university, with a decent allowance from his father; today he has a clerkship in prospect, and years of drudgery before he can hope for any measure of success. In this comparative poverty he has no one in the world to depend on but one well intentioned but inexperienced woman. In choosing between you how can I refuse to stand by him in his loneliness and disappointment? You have wealth, position, friends and relations, while he—"

"That is enough!" I interposed, ashamed out of my selfishness for the moment by her great-hearted generosity. "You are right, Cynthia, as you always are. But, if I could have done it, I would give you your brother, dear, I would give you your father, all the wealth and position in exchange for you, and think it the best bargain I had ever made. Her pale face lighted up radiantly at this. "You've done the best stroke of business in your power for the boy," I added jokingly. "You'll see at what a surprising rate he'll climb to the tallest stool in the counting house of Quinton, Hill, Craxhammer & Co. And then, as soon as he's in receipt of a satisfactory salary to support a wife, I shall marry him off hand; and then—"

The last word left my lips in a tone of triumph which there was no mistaking, and she smiled in a manner that was as good as a spoken assent. "Well," said Jem, as we joined the other group, in which Horace had been looking on with his mother and sister on what he should have done in the Antipodes if he had been allowed to follow his own inclinations—"well, Gerald, here you've been to talk that obnoxious girl into a reasonable frame of mind? Have you converted her from this governing mania?"

"An contrary, she has converted me, Jem!" "I should like to kiss you," said Jem, shaking her little fingers close to Cynthia's nose; and then, changing her mind, she put her arms round my neck and squeezed her tightly. "You poor, pale, beautiful old thing," she said, with an odd little catch in her voice—"what an example you are to the rest of us!"

CHAPTER II. When I went to pay Cynthia my first visit at her new home at Kentish Town, it seemed to me that of all the vile places in London she had certainly chosen the vilest. It was cheap, and convenient for Horace's journeys to Billiter street, she told me, and also for her daily appointments as governess to the two little daughters of a very great man on the Stock Exchange near Regent's park. The rooms themselves were light and airy, and Cynthia's cunning fingers had already given them a look of home.

"You will be able to put up with it for an hour or so in the afternoon, once or twice a week," she said, in her most downright style; "because I shall take care to have everything always at its best by 4 o'clock, on the chance of your being in."

"I should like to know the difference if you were to spend the evening here, and sleep and get up and dress the next morning. Every day since we've been here the people down stairs have had blotters for breakfast; I don't think you would care to make your first meal off the odor of your neighbor's. Then the street organs begin so early. I think most of the men's daily rounds must commence at this end of the town, for we've had two or three organs every morning at breakfast."

"I think I could stand the organs better than the odorous breakfast," I said, with a grimace; and she laughed and declared she had almost ceased to notice it now. Things went on like this for three months, I, in my selfishness, running over to Kentish Town as often as I possibly could for the afternoon with Cynthia, and never thinking to ask if she were convenient for her to have me there so frequently, when Christmas time came and brought with it a disquieting discovery. Cynthia was looking worn and harassed. I had not seen her in the clear unmerciful glare of morning sunlight since she left Clayhill, in September, until she went back there to spend the blessed respite of her Christmas holidays with us.

We all three went down together—she, Horace and I—by the usual train on the Christmas eve, and there was so much mutual pleasure over the meeting and such an amount of news to be exchanged among the ladies that even my mother, one of the most observant women in the world where people's looks are concerned, was deceived by her visitor's animation during the evening of her arrival. But when Cynthia entered the breakfast room on Christmas morning, with the sunlight shining full upon her face, I stopped half dead as I went to meet her, with the dear old greeting on my lips, and stood looking at her in sudden speechless dismay.

"What is it?" I said, as soon as we were out of the car, "what do you think? Is there anything really wrong with Cynthia's health?"

"My answer, in the form of another question, set me wondering. "What is it that is worrying her?" "Nothing that I know of, or can guess at."

"And yet she has a worry of some sort, Quinton—a worry that is ever present with a playful defiance; and then, without giving him time to answer, the question she broke off into a whole string of inquiries concerning this, that, and the other person, and completely blocked the subject of her own health."

When Jennings went, I left the room with him, meaning to ask his opinion in the hall; but Cynthia followed us with some forgotten question—remembered, I suppose, on the spur of the moment, to prevent Jennings from saying anything to me. She evidently did not suspect the existence of our plot, and wanted to keep him from imparting his judgment to any of us.

I was too anxious to wait until my next meeting with the doctor, so I put on my hat, and walked to the gate with him. "Well," I said, as soon as we were out of the car, "what do you think? Is there anything really wrong with Cynthia's health?"

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my manner. "Has anything happened? Is Horace—"

"He's all right," I said, going on towards her and putting my arms round her and embracing her tenderly. "How as it I had not seen this change in her before? She has been so pale, so I did not see much more by her present pallor; but what had brought that look of distress to her face—that wild, anxious expression into her eyes, that sadly pathetic droop about the corners of her lips?"

All through breakfast time I asked myself these questions over and over again, with ever increasing anger at my own past blindness in not having noticed the change before. My mother and Jem saw it, too, I knew, but they made no remark on the alteration to Cynthia herself; and I wondered why they were thus silent.

I took Jem aside after breakfast and spoke to her about it. "Haven't I noticed the change?" she cried, exclaiming with words ironically "Why, I went back to the mother after I had been to wish Cynthia a merry Christmas in my night dress this morning, and told her I didn't know where your eyes had been for the past three months not to have seen it coming on. Whatever you do, don't say anything to her about it!"

She was quite distressed because I told her she didn't look well, and she forced such high spirits that the rest of the time I was in the room that I could have cried over her."

"Her unvarying cheerfulness before me all this time must have been assumed, Jem. You know I can't see her until after 4, because of this confounded governess business. She doesn't leave Melford's until half-past 3, except on Saturdays; and she asked me to leave her that afternoon for Horace, so I have not seen her by daylight for months until this morning. What's to be done?"

Jem looked round cautiously before she answered. "We have arranged it beautifully. The mother is going to have symptoms of sciatica to-morrow morning, and Dr. Jennings is to be sent for to apply the balm. Of course, hearing Cynthia is here, he will want to see her, and before he sees her I shall tell him how anxious we are about her. He'll manage to take her measure pretty correctly, without letting her into the secret."

That was not a very cheerful Christmas day for me. We had decided, on account of Cynthia's mourning, to make our party a strictly family affair; but, having such a high spirit, I thought I should like to have some of our best friends to dine with us. I had decided to make my party a strictly family affair; but, having such a high spirit, I thought I should like to have some of our best friends to dine with us.

"I can feel it!" she cried, with a joyful laugh. "The air is so exhilarating every breath I draw seems to give me fresh strength. I feel that I want to shout with gladness."

"You ought to have more air than you do, Cynthia. I don't believe you would have those wakeful nights Jennings spoke of if you spent more time out of doors."

She paused before replying, and I almost fancied she argued with herself during those few moments whether it would be wiser to tackle the subject boldly and finish with it for good or to let it drop. Whether she discussed the matter or not, she adopted the former course.

"I'm glad you mentioned that," she said, speaking slowly at first, but more quickly afterwards, as I uttered an exclamation of incredulity; "very glad, because I can say to you what might have offended Mr. Jennings if I had said it then. You know that is all a myth about my not sleeping—at least," she explained, as I turned to her with a reproachful glance, "it is a myth in the way he put it. He spoke as if it were quite a serious matter—as if I never got any sleep at all, while the truth is I have merely been kept awake more or less the last fortnight by violent neuralgia."

"The way you speak," said Jem, "that's what I'm looking for. I felt there could be no impropriety in my being present. Jennings and Dr. Debenham had been old friends, so there was considerable cordiality on both sides when he and Cynthia met. I stepped back a few paces, watching and listening; and through all the medical man's chattering I could see how keenly observant he was of Cynthia's every movement."

"And how do you like the governessing life?" she asked, with a playful defiance; and then, without giving him time to answer, she broke off into a whole string of inquiries concerning this, that, and the other person, and completely blocked the subject of her own health."

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"a numbing trouble, I should fancy; and the strongest mind cannot stand successfully against that sort of thing. I don't like that insomniac How does she look the first thing in the morning?"

"Why, that is just what first opened my eyes!" I cried, startled by the doctor's words. "She looked terribly ill when she came down to breakfast yesterday morning; her face was quite haggard and drawn."

"I see," he said thoughtfully—"scarcely any sleep at all, and what sleep she does get is so troubled and worried by dreams that she had almost better be awake. Well, you see, Quinton, this is a matter beyond the reach of pills or draughts. I could certainly give her something to send her to sleep, but it would do her no real good. What you want—and it is the only thing that will be of any use—is relief to the mind. Let me see—this is Friday, and she is not going up to town until Monday afternoon, you say. I'll look in again on Sunday; but—"

His lips drooped expressively as he shook hands, and I watched him march away down the snow covered road feeling desperately wretched and helpless.

What was I to do—rather, what could I do if Cynthia still chose to maintain this obstinate reserve?

How was I determined to make an effort to discover what really ailed her, so after luncheon I ordered the dog cart, and told Cynthia to get ready for a drive. She tried to get out of it at first, but I was determined, and at length she gave way. She had pleaded the cold as an excuse, so, when she came down ready dressed, I sent for my mother's fur lined carriage cloak and insisted on her wearing it over all her other garments, and saw my dog cart and the foot tin was really hot before we started.

We talked on every day matters until we were fairly through Clayhill and out on the open road beyond, and then I worked round to my topic. "Does the cold get in anywhere?" I asked, turning round to see that the bearskin was well tucked in on her side, and noting gladly the increased brightness of her countenance and the slight tinge of pink in her cheeks.

She smiled eloquently as she answered. "Not anywhere; you've not left a crack for my lady wind to get her foot in. It's delightful coming out with you, Gerald—you take such care of one." "The drive is doing you good already," I said, jocosely.

"I can feel it!" she cried, with a joyful laugh. "The air is so exhilarating every breath I draw seems to give me fresh strength. I feel that I want to shout with gladness."

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I was too anxious to wait until my next meeting with the doctor, so I put on my hat, and walked to the gate with him. "Well," I said, as soon as we were out of the car, "what do you think? Is there anything really wrong with Cynthia's health?"

"My answer, in the form of another question, set me wondering. "What is it that is worrying her?" "Nothing that I know of, or can guess at."

"And yet she has a worry of some sort, Quinton—a worry that is ever present with a playful defiance; and then, without giving him time to answer, the question she broke off into a whole string of inquiries concerning this, that, and the other person, and completely blocked the subject of her own health."

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