

A NEW H. P.

I scooped at the "silver lining," I sneered at Hope. The care that fell about my every hour. Cast shadows everywhere.

CHRISTINA'S GUARDIAN.

"Here's a telegram, Chris! They will be there by the 6.30. Christina Barrett turned round quickly. 'Really and truly?' she cried. 'You are not chaffing?'"

"Honor bright; look! here it is." Christina read the paper eagerly, and then fairly danced up the steps into the hall, saying: "My dear old guardian! Now, I shall have somebody belonging to me at last."

Janet and May Drayton watched her half sadly; they had parents, and brothers, and cousins innumerable, but poor little Chris was alone in the world. Then the excitement of the new arrival was too much for them, and Janet, full of the subject, went on. "We have not seen Will for five years. How long is it since you saw Major Wetheral?"

"Fifteen years!" said Christina, sobering down at once. "I was four years old when I left India, and I had not seen father for seven years before his death. 'Oh! girls, whatever you do, don't have anything to do with native regiments.'"

"I would not for anything!" cried May. "Just look at you and your people. Why, it's worse than exile. I fancy said something of somebody was trying for the staff corps, and she thought it advisable to change the subject before it became personal, so she suggested that the other two had better take things off, as it was just tea time, and no one thought anything more about parties, for the meeting absorbed everybody."

Major Wetheral was in a sad mood all the journey down from town. Christina was the only child of his dearest friend, besides being his playmate and ward; and only a year previously Col. Barrett was preparing to return, when he got fever and died after two days' illness. Christina was likely to be a serious charge, for she had lately inherited a large fortune from the distant relative who had taken care of her ever since her return from India, and the Major would have to attend to all the business, which had been interrupted by Col. Barrett's death.

Christina always spoke of Major Wetheral as her old guardian, and his appearance rather bore out her words, for his dark hair was plentifully streaked with gray, and his face had many anxious lines about it. But it was care that had aged him, and his friendship with young Will Drayton was not quite such a strange affair as Janet and May thought, for he was barely forty, and as hale and strong as any officer in her Majesty's service.

The drawing room at Drayton Hall was brightly lighted, and dazzled the two men's eyes as they came out of the November darkness; but it was only for a moment, and then, while Will was embraced by his mother and sisters, a slender, golden-haired, black-robed figure came eagerly up to the Major, two hands clasped in his ear: "Oh! guardian, I am so glad to see you again," and all his dismal surmises vanished into thin air in a moment.

Christina was very pretty, and Major Wetheral, who saw the resemblance to her fair young mother, was very much struck with her; but he felt a little envious when he saw that Will Drayton admired her immensely. The young man managed to sit next to her at dinner, and it was very irritating to the Major to hear the two tongues going, and to know that Christina was asking all the questions that he ought to have answered, and that Will was drawing all the pictures of Lucknow and the native lines he had rehearsed in imagination. But after dinner the girl came up to him with her pretty, gentle manner, and said: "I want you to tell me so many things," and Major Wetheral was disarmed in a moment, and a long talk followed that was very pleasant to both.

had sat for quite five minutes with an open letter on his knee. "Bad news, Chris!" he said cheerily. "They are going to send a force to Suakin, and my regiment has orders." "Going to send Indian troops to Suakin? Nonsense!" cried Will; "they'll never do that."

"They are going to do it," answered the Major, "and my leave is cancelled in consequence—don't cry, Chris; be brave, like a soldier's daughter." But Christina was past being brave. She clung to him and sobbed, and begged him not to go, till he had to grow stern, and tell her not to be silly, and even then it was all they could do to soothe and quiet her again.

Major Wetheral was to join his regiment at Suakin, and found that if he went by Brindisi he should have a fortnight for preparations; and a very busy fortnight it was. Not only did he have to see to his own affairs, but as he did not shut his eyes to the probability of meeting his death in the war, he had to make arrangements for his ward's future.

"If anything happens to me, Chris, you will be made a ward in Chancery," he said to her one day. "But for the present Mrs. Drayton will keep you with her." "I seem always to be a trouble," sighed Christina. "Shan't I be dreadfully in Mrs. Drayton's way?"

"Not a bit. On the contrary, they would be only too glad to keep you altogether. How would you like it, dear?" "Like staying here?" answered the girl unhesitatingly. "Oh! they're very kind, and I am very fond of Janet and May; but I think I would rather be somewhere with you, guardian."

"I did not mean the girls, dear," said the Major kindly. "Some one else wants you." And then, as Christina looked up surprised, he added, "Will Drayton has been asking my leave to ask you to marry him, little girl. What do you say to that?" Christina blushed. "I don't know," she said doubtfully. "I never thought about being married."

"I don't want you to marry unless you wish it," said the Major gravely. "But Will Drayton is a fine young fellow, and would make a good husband. You had better think about it." "What do you mean?" cried the Major. "She accepted you of her own free will!"

"She accepted me because she thought you wished it," proceeded Will. "And in the innocence of her heart she thought it would be all right. In the last six months she has grown into a woman; she has a woman's capacity for love, and she does not love me."

"Why not, indeed?" Major Wetheral saw an utterly unexpected dream of happiness unfolding before him, and then, like the gentleman he was, he turned to Will. "And you?" he asked simply. "I shall get over it," was the answer. "And at all events, I will not make her unhappy," and the two men shook hands warmly.

Some time later, when Will had carefully smoothed over matters with his mother, so that Christina should not find herself less welcome in the Drayton household, and had then taken a quiet, but far more charming, and in addition, a large fortune; but since his engagement he had been falling deeper and deeper in love, and now wrote letters, and grudging every moment that he had to spend on his duties, and not in rushing up to town to see her. As to Christina, she had developed far more character than she would ever have suspected of her—she was quieter, and her merry, childish ways had given place to a gravity which added womanliness to her gentle manner. But if Will had grown warmer, she was certainly colder; discouraged his vehement love making, absolutely refusing to spend the evenings with him, and when he came up for a night, and answered his long letters with short notes once or twice a week. "I can't help it," she said, when he reproached her. "I can't make believe, and I hate spooning. If you behave yourself I will marry you some day, but if you want what I can't give you, we had better make an end of it."

"I suppose I ought," said Chris, brightening. "Thank you, Will; I'll try and not be silly." She certainly was the better for the young man's visit, though, as he reflected on his own luck, he had not once kissed him or spoken to him about anything but her guardian's condition, and he could not help thinking that there was something wrong about their relation to each other.

"Time passed on and Major Wetheral was well enough to be moved, and at length he arrived at Portsmouth, and was brought to London, where the Draytons received him with the warmest of welcomes. His arm had not been amputated, after all, but was in a sling, and he was lame enough to require a good deal of waiting on, but as Christina seemed to think that to run errands for him was the height of human happiness, no one complained of that."

"I'm very good of you to take such care of me, little girl," he said, one afternoon when she had been reading to him, "but I don't want to be selfish, and I must not keep you here, thank you." "I would rather stay here, thank you," answered Christina, decidedly. "Janet and May are going out with Will."

"But doesn't he want you?" "I don't know," with a little pout. "I did not ask him." Major Wetheral was puzzled. Two or three things had struck him about the young couple, and there was something very marked about his ward's complete indifference to her lover's visits, so that he was hardly surprised when Will came up to him that evening for a talk. "I am very sorry to have kept Christina from you, guardian," began the Major apologetically, by way of introducing the subject.

"Pray don't apologize," answered the young man grimly. "Christina very seldom honors me with her company." "I am sorry," began the Major, "but Will stopped him." "I want to speak to you," he said quietly. "Christina does not care for me, and I don't think our engagement ought to continue. I should have spoken before this, only as you were away, and she was with my people, I thought it might be unpleasant for her."

"What do you mean?" cried the Major. "She accepted you of her own free will!" "She accepted me because she thought you wished it," proceeded Will. "And in the innocence of her heart she thought it would be all right. In the last six months she has grown into a woman; she has a woman's capacity for love, and she does not love me."

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The threat startled Will, who was far too much in love to risk the future, and he put his feelings so far aside as to behave what his fiancée called "quite nicely" from Saturday till Monday, when he had to return to Colchester. Chris had taken to reading the papers, and between careful study of the news from the Suakin field-force and Major Wetheral's letters, had grown to be quite an authority about the war; but no one was prepared for the state of restless misery that came over her when the battle of Hashen was telegraphed. No list of killed and wounded came with the first news, and she had to wait what seemed to her endless hours before the special editions of the evening papers brought her what she had dreaded. "Bombay Cavalry: Major Alfred Wetheral severely wounded," Christina read, and then, to the horror of Janet Drayton, who was with her, collapsed onto the floor in a dead faint, from which she revived only to weep in the piteous childish fashion in which she had grieved and mourned. Particulars arrived in a few days. Major Wetheral had been wounded in the arm by an Arab sword, but had retained command of his men till a bullet in the thigh caused him to succumb. He was doing well, but there were grave fears for his arm, which would probably have to be amputated. Christina heard it all, and she was so injured, that was enough for her, and she grew wan and white, and looked so unlike herself that Mrs. Drayton got seriously anxious, and wrote to Will imploring him to get a couple of days' leave, and see what he could do to cheer the girl again.

Will came, and found Christina lying on the sofa, looking so delicate that he was frightened, and sat down by her tenderly. "My poor darling," he said, taking her hand, "you have been very anxious this week." "It is not out of danger yet," sighed she, as if nothing else in the world mattered. "No; but he will be. Cheer up, Chris; he will soon come home, and you must be ready to nurse him instead of having to be nursed."

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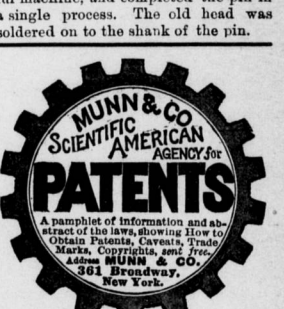
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