

The White Riband eBook

The White Riband

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PROLOGUE

* * * * *

THE WHITE RIBAND

OR

A YOUNG FEMALE'S FOLLY

Prologue

That was how they spoke of her story in the duchy's drawing-rooms; for what had Loveday been, at the most charitable count, but a young female—less humanly speaking, even a young person? And what was the spring of her mad crimes but folly, mere weak, feminine folly? Even an improper motive—one of those over-powering passions one reads about rather surreptitiously in the delightful works of that dear, naughty, departed Lord Byron—would have been somehow more ... more ... satisfactory. One could only whisper such a sentiment, but it stirred in many a feminine breast when Loveday's story set the ripples of reprobation circling some twenty miles, till the incomparably bigger pebble of the Prince of Wales' nuptials made correspondingly greater waves, even though they took a month or so to spread all its fascinating details so far from the Metropolis. What, after all, as a topic of conversation, was Loveday's ill-gotten gaud compared with the thrill of the new Alexandra jacket with its pegtop sleeves? One should hold a right proportion in all things.

Thus the duchy's drawing-rooms. In the back parlours of the little country-town shops, where an aristocracy as rigid in its own respectable—and respectful—way, held its courts of justice, Loveday's story was referred to with a slight difference. She had become a “young besom,” and her crime was what you might have expected from the bye-blow of an ear-ringed foreigner, who bowed down to idols instead of the laws of God and the British Constitution.

In her own little seaport and the farms of the countryside, Loveday descended lower still—she became a “faggot.” Thus from one born to wield a broom we see how she descended, with the declination in scale of the chatterboxes, to the broom itself, and from that to the rough material for it. Which things are a parable, could one but fit the moral to them as neatly as did everyone who discussed Loveday, in whatever terms, fit the due warning on to her tale.

And this moral, for all who ran, but more particularly for those who danced, to read, was as follows:—



It all came of wanting things above your station.

“How simply does your sex dispose of the problems of life, ma’am,” replied Mr. Constantine to Miss Flora Le Pettit, the heiress of Ignores Manor, when she supplied him with this moral as an epitaph on the affair. Miss Le Pettit smiled on him amiably, but arched her already springing brows as well, for though everyone knew Mr. Constantine was reputed clever, there were the gravest doubts about his orthodoxy.

“Problems of life, Mr. Constantine?” she demanded. “Surely over-fine words to apply to the crazy acts of a village girl deranged in her intellects.” She would have added: “And a nameless one at that,” if she had not remembered (what, in truth, she was never in danger of forgetting) that she was a lady talking to a gentleman.



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“A village girl is as capable of passion as you or I,” replied he, and had he not remembered (what he was somewhat apt to forget) that he was a gentleman talking to a lady, he would have added: “And a great deal more so than you.” Miss Le Pettit, who considered that he *had* forgotten it, gave the little movement known as “bridling,” which reared her ringletted head a trifle higher on her white shoulders, then decided to front the obnoxious word bravely as a woman of the world. She had met with it chiefly in books where it was used solely to denote anger. There had been, for instance, the tale of “Henry: or, the Fatal Effect of Passion.” ... Henry had slain a school-fellow in his rage, and had been duly hanged; yet something told Miss Le Pettit that was not how Mr. Constantine was using the word.... She rose to it splendidly.

“Passion ... and pray where do you find such a thing in this story of the vanity of a child of fifteen?”

“In the usual place, ma’am,” said Mr. Constantine (now entirely forgetting that which Miss Le Pettit ever remembered)—“in her soul. Did you think it merely a thing of the body? The body may be the objective of passion, but the quality itself is what is meant by the word. It is generated in the soul and may pour itself into strange vessels.”

“Or even shower its ardours upon a piece of white riband?” cried Miss Le Pettit, with a titter.

“Shall we say upon Beauty itself?” corrected Mr. Constantine more gravely than he had yet spoken. Then, with a smile, he elaborated: “For as passion is in the soul, so is beauty in the heart, and hearts have differing vision. That was Loveday’s desire. Translate this paltry thing into terms of other ambitions—and where is any one of us then? Unless, indeed, we are so bloodless, so without imagination, that we cannot but be content with our lot just as it is.”

Miss Le Pettit, who had never seen reason for anything but contentment, and looked upon it as a Christian virtue, demurred with:—

“The whole affair is so ridiculously out of proportion.”

Mr. Constantine glanced, with admiration in his gallant though elderly eye, over Miss Le Pettit’s figure as she lay back in the gilt chair; glanced from her high, polished forehead, round which the smooth chestnut hair showed as gleaming, from her parted red lips and bare, sloping shoulders to her tiny waist and the outward spring beneath it of the clouded tulle that lapped in a dozen baby waves over the globe of her swelling crinoline.

“When I was a young man,” he said, “the ladies went about in little robes, such as you would not wear nowadays as a shift. We thought them pretty then, and thought none the worse of them because they made the women look more or less as God saw fit to make ’em. Yet now we think you equally lovely as you float about the world like



monstrous beautiful bubbles, so that a man must adore at a distance and only guess at Paradise in a gust of wind.... Yet to the next generation, believe me or not as you like, your garb will seem too preposterous to be true, and a generation later Time will pay you the unkindest cut of all—you will be picturesque, and your grand-daughters will revive you—for fancy dress. Proportion, ma'am, is nothing in the world but fashion.”

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“Now we are talking about something I know more about than you, Mr. Constantine,” cried Miss Le Pettit archly, “and I, for one, do not believe that the present style of dress can ever go completely out; it is too becoming. We shall have novelties, of course, but the idea will remain the same. And, talking of novelties, if you don’t scorn such things, I will tell you a great secret. I am the first person to procure one of the new jackets—like the Princess of Wales wears, you know. You must have heard about them. Alexandra jackets they’re called. Isn’t that pretty? And they’re just as pretty as she is. The sleeve....”

And thus the great description flowed on, with a bevy of entranced girls, who had caught the raised tone, fluttering round in excitement like a crowd of butterflies round a blossom of extra sweetness.

From which it will be seen that a month had already passed since Loveday had been the excitement of society, and that this conversation between the eccentric Mr. Constantine and the charming Miss Le Pettit was almost the last flickering of interest in her fate. The life of one moon had been enough to see the waxing and waning of what Mr. Constantine had surprisingly called her passion.

Yet Miss Le Pettit, eager, nay, even anxious, as she had been to lead the gentleman away from the topic, reverted to it as though by a curious fascination, when he had taken his leave. To tell the truth, her conscience had some slight cause to make her uneasy on this very subject of the violent Loveday. The thing was ridiculous, of course ... she, Miss Le Pettit, could not conceivably have been even remotely to blame for such a fantastical happening, and yet that slight pricking remained....

“An odd word to have used,” she commented, in recounting the conversation she had had with Mr. Constantine to her eager friends, “a very odd word, indeed, for by it, apparently, he did not mean an access of anger such as the word signifies in all the books I have read....”

“You mean in the books that you are *supposed* to have read, Flora,” interrupted one of the young ladies, a flighty girl, whose tongue often outran her discretion. “I have come across it meaning something quite different in books like—well, you know the sort of books I mean.”

“I do not think, though, that even *that* was how Mr. Constantine used the word,” replied Flora, with more of discernment than she commonly showed, “though I will not pretend to you, Ellen, that I do not recognise the sense in which you refer to it. To be candid, I don’t think I know what he did mean, but he seemed to me to be paying a vast deal of attention to the matter, which surprised me in a person of his standing.”



“I have heard he is a man of much sensibility, though he is so satirical,” murmured the romantic Emilia, bending over her netting so that her ebon curls shaded her suddenly flushing cheek.

“Perhaps he knows more about the fair Loveday than we have guessed,” cried the careless Ellen; “perhaps he knows *too* much, and cannot keep away from the subject for his guilty conscience, as they say murderers are drawn back to the spot where they have buried the body of their victim!”

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But this was too gross a departure from delicacy of thought and phrase, and Miss Le Pettit, the prick stirring, perchance, signified as much by the cold manner in which she brought back the conversation to the more correct and really more enthralling subject of the Alexandra jacket.

It was generally agreed that Miss Belben, of Bugletown, could not go far wrong with the sleeves if Flora would be so infinitely good as to lend her jacket for a copy, and this favour she accorded graciously to her dear friend, Emilia.

Mr. Constantine walked down the windy hill with his mind already clear both of Loveday and the elegant company in which he had been taking tea. He was, above all things, a philosopher, and that means that, though his imagination was easily touched, his heart remained unstirred. He had serious thoughts of ordering a new cabriolet, and on arriving at the market place, he turned into the coachbuilder's to renew the discussion as to whether red or canary yellow were the more fashionable hue for the wheels.

Chapter I: In which the Reader is taken back A few weeks in Point of time, and down several steps in the social scale

Chapter I

In which the Reader is taken back A few weeks in Point of time, and down several steps in the social scale

It was on a balmy day in early Spring that Loveday had first met Miss Le Pettit. Loveday had gone to fetch the milk. For Loveday's aunt, Senath Strick, with whom she lived, was a shiftless, unthrifty woman, never able to keep prosperous enough to own a cow for as long as the beast took between calvings, and the times when Loveday had a fragrant, soft-eyed animal to cherish were mercifully rare. Mercifully, for Loveday, though she appeared sullen, had ever more sensibility than was good for one in her position, and each time Aunt Senath was forced to sell the cow, Loveday behaved as though she had as good a right to sit and cry herself silly as any young lady with whom nothing was more urgent than to spoil fine cambric with salt water.

This, then, was a period of poverty with the Strick family, and Loveday was sent to fetch the evening milk from the farm at the crest of the hill. On the way, she came upon Cherry Cotton and Primrose Lear, seated upon a granite stile, their heads together over something Cherry held in her lap. Cherry heard approaching footsteps, and whipped her apron over the object she and her friend had been so busily discussing. Loveday was hurt rather than angered by the unkind action, for there was a reason, connected with Primrose, why she had felt a tender curiosity as to what the two girls were guarding so closely. Yet she was aware of bitterness also—for it was ever so when she

appeared. Maids ceased their gossip, boys laughed and pointed after her. She was “different.”



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Not in being a love-child, there were plenty of them in the village, but their parents generally married later, and even if they did not, then the female partner in crime would be one of the unmentionable women about whom other people talk so much.... She would live by the harbour plying a trade which allowed her to have a love-child or so without it being an occasion for undue remark, or, if she did not descend to those depths where no one expects anything better and censure consequently ceases through ineffectiveness, then at least everyone knew the author of her fall to be an honest, loutish Englishman, no worse than most of his neighbours.

Loveday was without either of these two rights to existence. Her mother had been a respectable girl till her fall, and, as far as anyone was aware, since, for she had died of the fruit of her guilty connection, and though her portion was doubtless hell-fire, there is nothing to show that one cannot keep respectable even under such disquieting circumstances. The elder Loveday had clung obstinately to her self-respect under circumstances which her neighbours had tried to render nearly as trying on earth. She had died, as she had lived, impenitent and only crying for the foreigner who had seduced her, while he was then lying, had she but known it, in the lap of his first mistress, the sea, who, perhaps from jealousy at his straying, had taken him forcibly into her embrace on the same night that Loveday the younger was born.

Old Madgy, the midwife, who was also more than suspected of being somewhat of a witch, declared that the expectant mother *did* know it—that she had been made aware, through a supernatural happening, of the loss of her lover, and that that was why the babe saw the light in such undue haste, and the mother took her departure almost as swiftly to that place where alone she could ever hope to rejoin him. For, as evening drew on, Madgy, having called to see how Loveday did, though nothing was thought of yet for a clear week, found her in the dairy (the Stricks had not yet fallen on that poverty which came to their roof under Aunt Senath's shrewish management) standing as one wisht beside the great red earthen pan of scalded cream.

“And 'ee can b'lieve me or no as it like 'ee, my dears,” old Madgy would say to many a breathless circle in a farm kitchen during the intervals of her duties overstairs, “but there was the cream in the pan a-heavin' up an' down in gurt waves, like a rough sea, and her staring at 'en like one stricken, as she was poor sawl, sure enough. Eh, it was sent for a sign to her, and a true sign, for that avenen' her man was drowned on his way to her, with his fine cargo of oil and onions and all. And there was the cream heavin' in waves for a sign of the rough seas that took him, though wi' us the skies was fair and the water in the bay as smooth as silk.”

A story that filled simple souls in kitchens with awe, but naturally was treated more scornfully in drawing-rooms, where it was felt that signs and portents would hardly be sent to inform a cottage girl of the death of an onion-seller. For, after all, that is what he amounts to, and the horrid secret is out.... An onion-seller ... the very words stink in the nostrils and are fatal to romance.



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Fatal to romance in the minds of the fastidious, fatal to respectability in those of the common people, for only foreigners sold onions. Strange men with rings in their ears and long, dark curls like a woman's, and an eye that was at once bold and soft.

Loveday the younger had that eye, save that it had never learned from life to be bold, and her face was milken white instead of showing the blown roses of the other girls, though the back of her slender neck was stained a faint golden brown as by the inherited memories of sun. She was most immodestly "different," and even the Vicar's lady, who had charitably seen to her baptism, had difficulty in bringing herself to believe the girl could be a Christian.

Cherry and Primrose stared up at her as she stood with the red jar in her hand, and, seeing her look so black, so white, so thin, they leant their yellow heads together and drew their two aprons closely over their plump laps.

Seen thus, fronted by Loveday, they seemed amazingly alike, because of the completeness of her differing, yet a longer look showed that, in spite of their sleek, fair heads and rounded shoulders, there was between them the deepest division there can be between women.

Cherry was a maid, thoughtless, blowsy, still untouched enough for wonder; Primrose had been a wife, though only seventeen, these three months; in another three was to be a mother. Her eyes, blue as her friend's, showed an even greater assurance, because it was based on positives and not on a mere negation. Dark-circled as those eyes were, her glance, as it passed over Loveday, was the more merciless, because it came from behind the shelter of a ring-fence.

*Chapter II: In which the onion-SELLER'S
daughter for the first time feels as
A woman*

Chapter II

IN WHICH THE ONION-SELLER'S DAUGHTER FOR THE FIRST TIME FEELS AS A WOMAN

For all her woodland timidity, Loveday was prone to those flashes of temper to which the weak in defence and the strong in feeling seem peculiarly exposed. She snatched the shielding apron back from the lap of the buxom Cherry, stamping her foot the while. Cherry, too amazed to protect her treasure, stared, slack-mouthed.

Primrose flew into a temper that surpassed Loveday's, already failing her through dismay at her own action, even as the thunder, to children, surpasses in terrifying quality the lightning.... And, had they but known it, Primrose's sounding tantrums held



as much possibility of danger, compared with Loveday's rage, as holds the crash compared with the flash. But they knew it not, and already Loveday stood panting a little and spent with her own storm, while Primrose gathered herself, undaunted, for the attack.

A hail of words would have beaten about Loveday's drooping head had not Cherry, all unwitting, come to the rescue with a cry on the discovery that her treasures, thus disturbed, had fallen to the ground, which was muddy enough, owing to the habit of the cattle of trampling the soil around the stiles.



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“Oh, my fairings, my fairings!” cried Cherry, swooping at them from her height with all the headlong thump of a gannet after its prey. Loveday’s dive was as the gull’s for grace contrasted with it. Their hands met; Loveday divined in an instant, by the tug of Cherry’s, that she was suspected of trying to snatch the fairings, instead of merely restoring them, and she straightened herself with a return of her sick anger. Cherry clutched the frail morsels of riband and lace in her lap, then, seeing there was no danger, began to straighten them out, scolding the while.

“There, see, Primrose love, that edging is all crumpled ... did you ever see the like? Never mind, I’ll press it out for ’ee, and it’ll look as good as new. And this riband, that’s the one I bought off Bendigo, the pedlar, for Flora Day—oh, my dear life, what’ll I do with it now?”

“’Tis a gurt shame, that’s what ’tis,” said Primrose, resentful both for her friend’s riband and her own edging; “and I’d get my Willie to make her buy new, only ’tis no good asking paupers for money, because, even if they was to be sold up, all their sticks and cloam wouldn’t fetch enough for a yard o’ this riband.”

The vulgar taunt had sting enough to rouse Loveday to a wholesome contempt that saved her. She stood staring with a genuine scorn at the little articles of lace and artificial flowers which Cherry’s beau had given her at the last fair. Yes, even at the riband which had been Cherry’s special pride as bought by herself from the pedlar, and it was one that had taken Loveday’s eye with its delicate beauty—for it was of palest rose, like the shells she picked up on the beach, not a crude red or blue, such as she saw in the shops at Bugletown when she went in on market days. Secretly, something in her marvelled that such a riband had been Cherry’s choice, and her scorning of it now was the easier because she hated to think she and the blowsy damsel could have a taste in common.

“You and your fal-lals!” she exclaimed; “here’s a fine boutigo to make of a parcel of ribands and laces that’ll make you look like a couple of the puppets at Corpus Fair. If you wear such as those to the Flora you’ll be mistook for a Maypole, and folk’ll dance round you.”

“Well, folks ’ull never dance even *round* you, unless you’re burnt as a guy in a bonfire, let alone dancing *with* you, Loveday Strick,” rejoined Primrose, “and so you do very well know, and that’s why your heart’s sick against us.”

A minute ago, and that had been true; it was for her isolation Loveday had raged, but when she had seen these two draw their aprons over their girl’s treasures, she had not guessed those possessions aright. What she had imagined in her girl’s heart, knowing Primrose’s condition, it is not for us to pry at; whatever it was, it was so swift, so born of instinct, as to be holy. But when she saw the crumpled finery, she was suddenly too much of a child again to rate it worth envy. The things that Primrose, all unthinking,



stood for, the things of warm hearth and hallowed bed that her house had never known, might have power to draw the woman out in her all too soon, but the things that merely charm the feminine still left her chill.



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She laughed, all the sting gone, when she saw what a milliner's paradise it was from which she was kept out, and put her foot on the first step of the stile.

"By your lave, Cherry Cotton!" she said, and swung lightly over, balancing her jar, while they still stared at the change in her.

CHAPTER III: IN WHICH SHE FOR THE FIRST TIME FEELS AS A GIRL

Chapter III

IN WHICH SHE FOR THE FIRST TIME FEELS AS A GIRL

Primrose Lear was wife to the son of old Farmer Lear, of Upper Farm, whither Loveday was bound. Willie Lear, the young man, was gay and handsome, and generally off on any and every job that took him abroad, from buying a pig to selling his own senses for a few mugs of cider. Farmer Lear was usually out in the fields, and Mrs. Lear, wrinkled like a winter apple and tuneful as a winter robin, was as a rule alone in the big kitchen or cool dairy, for small help did her daughter-in-law give her about the house.

To-day, however, Mrs. Lear was in the parlour, and no less a personage than Miss Le Pettit of Ignores was seated on the best horsehair armchair, her bonneted head, with its drooping feather, leaning gracefully against the lace antimacassar, and her small prunella boots elegantly crossed on the smiling cheeks of the beadwork cherub that adorned the footstool, and that seemed to be puffing the harder, as though to try and puff those little feet up to the heaven where he belonged, trusting to his wings (of the best pearl beads) to bear him after her.

Loveday paused, stricken, not with embarrassment, but with awe, upon the threshold.

Sight of Cherry and Primrose had deepened her sense of her own isolation and her pain. Sight of Miss Le Pettit made her forget all save what she saw.

Blow, little cherub, puff your cherubic hardest, never can you waft Flora Le Pettit higher than she now is, at least in the sight of one pair of black eyes, higher, perhaps, than she will ever be again, even in that of her own not uncomplacent orbs.

Blow, little cherub, but even if you burst the roseate beads from off your cheeks in your ardour, leaving forlornly drooping the grey threads that would show you as, after all, of mere mortal manufacture, you could not cast a doubt as big as the tiniest bead upon the heavenly origin of Miss Le Pettit—not, at least, in the heart of the devout worshipper born in that instant upon the black woollen doormat.



The angelic visitant put up a tortoise-shell lorgnon and examined the newcomer with a flicker of condescending interest. For Flora was a young lady of great sensibility, and though, of course, all females are filled by nature with that interesting and appealing quality, the finer amongst them educate and make an art of it. Miss Le Pettit, then, encouraged her sensibility, nursed it, nourished it, on the most exquisite of novels and the rarest of romances, and these had taught her to show even more sensibility than usual at sight of a barefoot girl with black hair and eyes and an arresting, though wholly unconscious air that could but be described by Miss Le Pettit, to herself and afterwards to her friends, as Italianate.



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"What an interesting face and figure!" she now exclaimed, at gaze through the lorgnon, as though it were a celestial aid to vision needful for such a long range, as it must be even for angelic eyes looking from the skiey ramparts to a world where bare feet press the earth, to say nothing of woollen doormats.

Loveday blenched before that searching gaze, the rare red burned in her cheek and her own eyes sank abashed. She rubbed the flexible sole of one foot in a stiffened curve of shyness against the slim ankle of the other. Mrs. Lear exclaimed aloud in her horror.

"Loveday Strick, where are your manners to, that you come into the parlour without a curtsey?" said she. "And indeed, I must ask you to excuse her, ma'am, for she's but a nobody's girl from the village, and doesn't know how to behave before gentry."

Mrs. Lear was a good soul, and had ever been kind to Loveday, but she too had her sensibilities, and they were outraged by this untimely intrusion of one world into another which was doubtless unaware even of its existence. But Miss Le Pettit put up a delicate gloved hand in protest.

"Nay, you frighten the child, Mrs. Lear," she said kindly, "I am sure she means no disrespect. Did you ... what is your name, girl?"

"Loveday, ma'am."

"What a strange, old-fashioned name, to be sure," commented the taffetas angel, with a crystal sounding titter, "'tis as good as the heroine in a play. Whom were you called for, child?"

"My mother, ma'am," said Loveday, and now her cheek had ceased to burn and looked pale, but she raised her eyes and confronted the vision steadily.

Mrs. Lear coughed.

"I declare I should like to do a watercolour drawing of you, Loveday," went on Miss Le Pettit, "what do you say? Will you come up to the Manor one day and let me paint your portrait?"

Loveday had not a notion what that process might be, but had she taken it to be the blackest witchcraft (as she very likely would if she saw it) she would still not have blenched. Her eye lightened, some instinct told her that had she been as all the other girls, the Cherries and Primroses, this wonderful lady would not have looked twice at her. At last her singularity was standing her in good stead. Confidence came to her, even a feeling of slight scorn for the world she knew, a feeling, indeed, to which she was not altogether a stranger, but which up till now she had stifled in affright at its presumption.



“What do you say, Mrs. Lear?” asked Miss Le Pettit, turning with her charming condescension to the old woman, whom, after all, she was merely visiting on a little matter of a recipe for elderflower-water, “what do you say? Would she not look picturesque with an orange kerchief over her head and a basket of fruit in her arms, as a young street-vendor?”

“She would certainly look outlandish, ma’am,” was all Mrs. Lear could manage.



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Loveday's thoughts flew of a sudden to the ribands she had disturbed in Cherry's lap, and for the first time in her life, till now so proudly above such matters in its aloofness, she yearned over fineries. If such as those could admit her into the company of such as this! She thought enviously of that pale pink, even of the yellows and reds she had seen in Bugletown, since such deep tones seemed to the taste of this wonderful creature.

But Miss Le Pettit, still staring at her, changed her note.

"I was wrong," she exclaimed, "that face needs no gaudy hues, those white cheeks need nothing but that red mouth to set them off, and that black hair. She should be white, all white, should she not, Mrs. Lear? A tragic bride from the south, languishing in our cold land. 'Twould make a fine subject for a painting, though I fear beyond my brush. I never can get my faces to look as sad as I could wish them to."

There was something engaging and almost childlike about the heiress as she spoke those words, but recollecting herself she resumed:

"Never mind the portrait, but I vow I will have you for my attendant at the Flora, that I will. Now, Mrs. Lear, you shall not protest, I always have my way when I set my heart on a thing, you know. I am going to dance in the Flora this year, 'tis a charming rural custom, and the gentry should help to preserve it. Besides, my name is Flora, so I am doubly bound. And this child shall be my maid; she will be a rare contrast to me, I being chestnut and she so foreign looking. It would be indiscreet if I were to dance with a gentleman—you know what the gossips are—but if I am partnered by an attendant maid 'twill be very different."

"Ma'am ..." from the scandalised Mrs. Lear, "if you are set on having a village girl ... there are many from good homes, respectable girls. Not that I've anything to say against this poor child, God knows, but her mother, ma'am.... I assure you 'tis impossible."

Miss Le Pettit, who guessed very well the sort of tale Mrs. Lear's delicacy spared her, laughed the matter off.

"It shall be as I say, Mrs. Lear, I can afford to be above these things. You shall dance with me, Loveday. You must have a white frock, of course, but I suppose you have a Sunday frock? Quite a simple thing, the simpler the better, and a white sash of satin riband. Don't forget. I shall expect to see you waiting for me at the Flora."

And Miss Le Pettit rose, having carried her freak of sensibility on long enough, and sweeping past Loveday with a dazzling smile, was accompanied to the front door by Mrs. Lear, and after standing poised for a moment against the sunny verdure beyond, took wing with a flutter of white taffetas and was gone.



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Loveday was left with that most dangerous of all passions—the passion for an idea. Though she was ignorant of the fact, it was not Miss Le Pettit she adored, it was beauty; not silk underskirts that rustled in her ear, but the music of the spheres; a new ideal she saw not in the angelic visitant, but in herself. She, too, would be all white and dazzling, was accounted worthy to follow in the same steps, were it but in those of a dance. She made the common mistake of a lover—she imagined she was in love with another human being, while in reality she was in love with those feelings in herself which that other had evoked.

Never did aspiring saint of old, impelled by ecstasy, cling closer to a crucifix as the symbol of the loved one than did Loveday to that notion of the white garb which must be hers. It was, indeed, a symbol to her, the symbol of everything she had unwittingly craved and starved for, of everything she had, could not but feel she had, in herself which was lacked by those who jeered at her. And, though she knew it not, nor would have understood it, she was a symbol-lover, than which there is no form of lover more dangerous in life—or more endangered by the chances of it. For he who loves another human being gives his heart in fee, but he who loves an idea gives his soul.

CHAPTER IV: IN WHICH THE ONION-SELLER'S DAUGHTER FEELS HERSELF A GODDESS

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IN WHICH THE ONION-SELLER'S DAUGHTER FEELS HERSELF A GODDESS

Loveday bore home the milk in a maze of bliss, and staying not for her supper, for no hunger of the body was upon her, turned and went out again into the glow of the evening. Had she been as full of sensibility as a young lady she would have wandered straight away from Upper Farm, forgotten the milk, and not thought of it again, till, returning with the upgetting of the moon, her aunt had met her with vulgar reproaches. What a charming scene could then have been staged, of sensitive genius misunderstood by coarse-grained labour; of vision-drunken youth berated by undreaming age! But she was not a young lady, and could derive no felicity from forgetfulness of such a kind, for with the poor the urgencies of the immediate task are raised to such compelling interest that only a genius could neglect them with satisfaction. Therefore Loveday never thought of forgetting the milk for her aunt, but her exultation was of such a powerful sort that it upheld her through the commonplaces of routine without her perceiving the incongruity which would have jarred on one of a finer upbringing.

She placed the milk on the table, set out the bread and soaked pilchards, found what was left of the cheese, and went hastily forth lest her aunt should stay her.

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She was bound for the little wood that lay in a fold of the moorland above the sea. This wood was to her what a City of Refuge was to the Hebrews of the Old Testament, and, like them, she fled to it when the world's opinion of what was fit had proved at variance with her own. To-night she went to it not for sanctuary from others, but to commune with herself—in truth, for the first time she went not because of what she had left but because of what she would find. Her bare heels were winged along the road.

The wood lay lapped in the shadow that the western ridge had cast on it an hour earlier than the rest of the world's bedtime, ever since the trees had been there to receive the chill caress, and that was for many a hundred years. Old Madgy swore that even in her young day the small folk had still held their revels on the mossy slopes amongst the fanlike roots, and who knows what larger folk had not fled there to wanton more sweetly than in close cottages, or, like Loveday, to play the more easily with their thoughts? The wood alone knew, and it held its memories as closely as it held the thousand tiny lives confided to its care; the bright-eyed shrew-mice that poked quivering noses through the litter of last year's leaves, the birds that nested behind the clustering twigs, the slow-worms that slipped along its grassy ditches.

Loveday turned off from the road and approached the wood from the west, pausing when she reached the smooth grey boulders that were piled along the ridge. She stood there gazing out over the smiling champaign, pale and verdant from the farthest rim to the treetops that made as it were a sea of faint green at her feet, for already in that soft clime the twigs were misty with young leaf, and on the willows the velvety pearl-hued ovals had begun to deck themselves with a delicate powdering of gold, while from the hazels beside her the yellow lambs' tails hung still as tiny pennants in the evening air. The gold of nature was as yet more vivid than her green, which still showed tentative, enquiring of April what of betrayal might not lie in the careless plaits of her garment. To Loveday, high on her rock, between the gold of the sky and the gold of the blossom, it seemed that April must of a certainty stay as fair as this and lead to as bright a May, when that vision of her new self should become a yet brighter reality. She was confident of April because she was confident of life, lapped in an aureate glow that seemed to suffuse the very air she drew into her lungs so that it intoxicated her like the breath of a diviner ether from Olympian heights. She had seen beauty, and lo! it had been revealed to her not as a thing apart and unattainable, but as a quality within herself. Her "difference" had become a blazon, not a branding.



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Lying down on her rock, she told over with the rapture of a devotee the divine excellencies of Flora Le Pettit; her radiance, her swinging, shining curls, the wings that spread from her fair arms, the light that gleamed on her bright brow and in her glancing eyes, but it was not Flora, but Loveday, who danced before her mind's eye in white raiment, and held the sorrows of the South in her eyes and the joy of youth on her lips. Flora was the excuse for that new Loveday, as the beloved is ever the excuse for the raptures transmuting the lover. Even thus do we worship in our Creator the excellence of His handiwork, and one would think that to be alive is act of praise enough to satisfy the most exigent deity. Flora had called Loveday to life, and Loveday repaid her with a worship of that which she had awakened, the highest compliment the devout can pay, would the theologians but acknowledge it.

The sun slipped slower down the field of the sky, now a pale green as delicate as the leaves burgeoning beneath it, and Loveday drew herself up in a bunch, knees to chin, her brown strong hands clasped and her slim feet curved over the slope of the smooth granite. The wood below was wrapping itself in mystery, and her eyes attempted to fathom its fastnesses. Ordinarily, she was fearful of venturing into the darkness under the trees when once the evening had fallen, and it was then she was accustomed to come out up to her boulder, but this evening she was strung to any courage, for she walked in that certainty which on rare occasions comes to all—the certainty of being immune to danger—which is of all sensations vouchsafed to mortals the most godlike.

She rose to her feet, and swinging herself down from the rock, began the descent, ledge by ledge, to the shadows below. A last spring, and she was standing on the dark gold of drifted leaves, that rose about her ankles with a dry little rustling. It was the wood's caress of greeting, and she did not reflect that it was also the kisses of the dead.

Indeed, she clapped her hands in the rush of strength she felt, both in her young muscles and her leaping spirit, and stood proudly listening to the echo dying away, unaffrighted. She was young and strong and beautiful; life, not dead leaves, lay at her feet. She was different, and in her difference lay power, she was at last herself, Loveday ... she was Loveday, Loveday ... Loveday...

She darted hither and thither through the wood, noting with a pleasure keener than ever before how soft and sleek the moss was to her feet, how silky the flank of the beech to her leaning cheek, how sweetly sharp the intimate evening note of the birds.

And she was quite unfitted to be the goddess of these rustic beauties, for all her mind could feel in that softness and sleekness and clear calling was their likeness to artificiality. She felt thin slippers on her feet, rubbed an ecstatic cheek against the sheen of satin, and in her ears echoed no diviner music than the Tol-de-rol Tol-de-rol of the Bugletown band on Flora Day. Save in her sincerity, she was as artificial a goddess as ever graced a Versailles Fete Champetre. What were leaf and bird to her but the stuff of her life, whereas white satin gleamed with the shimmer of the very heavens!



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Hers was not, it is true, the milliner's paradise of Cherry and Primrose, but it was one into which she could only penetrate fitly clad. What wonder then that, brought up without any tutoring in the excellencies of Nature, she should display the sad lack of true feeling so deplored in her later by that nice arbiter of taste, Miss Flora Le Pettit?

CHAPTER V: IN WHICH LOVEDAY ESSAYS THE WHITE GOWN

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With morning came thoughts of the practical side of the business and, the worst of her daily duties performed, Loveday ascended to her chamber to examine the scanty contents of her small oaken chest. It was a sea-chest, legacy from her roving father, who had given it to her mother, and often enough had Aunt Senath expressed scruples about allowing her to keep a gift obtained so godlessly. Perhaps the fact that it was a good chest and better than anything she could have bought had something to do with Aunt Senath's complaisance in permitting it to remain. Perhaps Loveday's fierce look in defence of it was not without influence also. The chest stayed in the little attic room, and made of it, to Loveday's eyes, a place peculiarly her own, and rich because of its associations. There was something about the chest, its dark polish and coarse carving, that even led her to think hopefully of its poor contents.

She crouched beside it now, upon her heels, and lifting the lid, gazed expectantly at what was revealed.

After all, it did not look so bad, just a level surface of white linen...

But, when she lifted it out, and all the yellow of age was revealed in the full gathers of the skirt, a shade passed over Loveday's spirit. How small and tight the bodice looked, how skimpy even the plaits of the skirt for the present modes ... yet it had been a good linen in its day, there was no doubt of that, this frock that had been stitched for her mother's wedding gown.

For perhaps he had always been coming back to marry her, perhaps only their young blood and eager hearts beating so strongly within them had made the beat of wedding bells seem at first too slight a sound to catch their absorbed attention.... So Loveday the elder had always known, in spite of the sneers of the neighbours. So Loveday the younger had maintained to carping girl-critics, though in her inmost heart she had never been able to feel it mattered so vastly, for half the girls she knew would have been in her predicament had their fathers been cut off untimely. She knew it was not that she was born out of wedlock, a misfortune that might happen to anyone, which oppressed her youth, but the fact of her father having been a foreigner, and of that she was fiercely



resolved to be proud. Neither mother nor father had she ever known, but the instinct of generous youth is ever to defend the oppressed, and with her defence had love sprung in Loveday's heart. Therefore, even with her sensation of disappointment at the sight of the yellowed linen, there was reverence and tenderness in her touch as she laid the gown across her narrow bed.



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She ripped off the coarse blue wrapper that enfolded her, and stood revealed in her little flannel under-bodice and linsey-woolsey petticoat of striped red and black, her thin girlish arms and young bosom making her look more childish than she did when fully clothed. She held the gown above her head and struggled into it. Her pale little face was red when she poked it triumphantly through the narrow opening and finally settled the neck, with its ruffled cambric frilling, round her throat, and pulled the puff sleeves as far as they would go down her arms in a vain attempt to make them conceal her red young girl's elbows. She could only see a small portion of herself at a time in the little mirror, yet that small portion, in spite of the skimpiness and yellowness of the gown, pleased her eye.

For her dark tints were set off by the creamy folds, her slight shape revealed by the tight bodice, even her bare feet, which some fine prompting had made her wash carefully lest they should shame this essay, looked small and graceful beneath the full folds.

But she could not dance in the Flora unshod, and so once again she bent to the sea-chest, and withdrew her only pair of shoes, bought for her in a generous moment last Michaelmas by Aunt Senath. She pulled on her Sunday pair of white cotton stockings, and then the stout shoes. They still fitted, and to her country eye looked well enough. She examined herself bit by bit in the mirror, from her smooth black head to her smooth black feet, and all the faintly yellowed linen that curved in and swelled out between.

She was fair to look upon, not so much the mirror as her own awakened consciousness told her that. She was meet to dance with Miss Le Pettit at the Flora, could she but obtain one thing more—the white satin sash.

CHAPTER VI: IN WHICH LOVEDAY ESSAYS TO OBTAIN THE WHITE SATIN RIBAND

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With a high heart Loveday began her quest for the work which was to earn for her the coveted white satin sash. She had but three weeks in which to make a matter of several shillings, and this meant that she must sell every moment of the time which was hers when her duties about her aunt's were discharged for the day. In the morning she was busy with cleaning and cooking till almost mid-day, and in the evenings she had the milk to fetch, but in the afternoons she could be sure of a few hours if Aunt Senath did not guess she wanted them for herself and invent tasks. On Mondays, of course, the washing kept her all day at the tub, and on Fridays at the mangle, on Saturdays there was the baking of the bread, while Thursday, being market day, she was supposed to

keep house while Aunt Senath went in to Bugletown—a task that slut of a woman was too fond of for its chances



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of gossip to send her niece in her stead. On Thursdays Loveday was wont to stay in and see to the mending, but she reflected that, by sitting up in her bed at night to darn and patch by the light of the wick that floated in a cup of fish-oil, she might take charge of some neighbour's children on that day instead and Aunt Senath be none the wiser. Loveday had a sad lack of principle, doubtless an heritage from her heathen father.

On the afternoons of Tuesdays and Wednesdays, she hoped to help in some house with the cleaning, or in some slattern's abode with the weekly wash, for, as all know, there are some such sluts that the washing gets put off from day to day, till Saturday finds it still cluttering the washhouse instead of being brought in clean and sweet from the gorse-bushes.

Then there were always odd things to be done, such as running errands, at which she hoped to earn some pence here and there. The white riband seemed no impossible fantasy to Loveday when she started on her quest.

She went first to visit old Mrs. Lear, at Upper Farm, for no one had shown such a kindly front to the girl in all the village as she. Loveday started out for the milk half-an-hour earlier than was her wont so that she might have time to discuss her hopes with the farmer's wife, and this time she did not meet young Mrs. Lear or her friend Cherry on the way. But she did come upon both Mrs. Lears in the big kitchen, the younger seated in the armchair in front of the fire and the elder anxiously regarding her. Primrose had been fretful ever since hearing from her mother-in-law of Miss Le Pettit's visit of the day before, and of the unaccountable interest the heiress had shown in that faggot of a Loveday, and by now her fretfulness had assumed the size of an indisposition. In vain did Mrs. Lear try and cosset and comfort her with potions both hot and cool; Primrose knew well that beneath the kindness of the farmer's wife lurked the feeling that it was not for one in her station to indulge in such vapours as might well befit the gentry, and that she would be cured sooner by taking a broom to the best carpet than by sitting and keeping the fire warm. Primrose sulked, and even handsome Willie, leaning by the window, wanting to be away yet dreading the outburst did he move, could not persuade his wife that nothing ailed her but too much idleness. Neither, though to their robust health it would have seemed so, would it have been all the truth, for Primrose was taking her condition more hardly than most girls who have had the good fortune to wed with a prosperous young farmer, and the thought that she would not be able to dance in the procession with the rest of the world at the Flora had for some time past embittered her. To enter the house, after her anger with Loveday and the flash of fear that the strange half-foreign girl had filled her with, only to find that the great Miss Le Pettit had offered that very girl to dance with her ... this was poisonous fare indeed for one in the discontented mood of Primrose Lear. The heaviness of her mind matched with that of her body as she hunched over the fire.



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Sight of Loveday, a Loveday oddly changed from that of the day earlier, did not ease her sickness; the light in Loveday's eye, the fresh exhilaration of her step—she, who was wont to slip along with so much of quiet aloofness—stung the other girl anew. Loveday greeted Mrs. Lear eagerly before she saw that Primrose was sitting half-hidden by the wings of the big chair, her face, paler than its wont, in shadow, pallid like a face seen through still water. Then she saw also handsome Willie, dark against the small square panes of the window, the April sun gilding the curve of his ruddy cheek and making the pots of red geraniums along the sill blaze as brightly as the beautiful blossoms of painted wax that, under their glass shade, held an example of neat perfection up to Nature.

Willie nodded at Loveday with a trifle less of sulkiness in his manner, took a step forward and relapsed once more. A little silence seemed to catch them all, broken by good Mrs. Lear saying:

“You'm early to-day, Loveday. Milken's not over yet.”

“I'm come to see you a moment, if 'tes possible,” said Loveday, some of her shining confidence already fallen from her, she knew not why.

“Well,” said Primrose spitefully, guessing her presence would embarrass Loveday, “Mrs. Lear's here and I daresay'll speak to 'ee. Can't be any secret from me, of course, whatever 'tes.”

Mrs. Lear, suddenly sorry for Loveday, although Primrose on entering the day before had told her a tale that had angered her, said:

“Come into dairy, Loveday; you can tell me what 'tes while I see to your aunt's bit of butter.”

Loveday followed her into the cool dairy, where on the scrubbed white wood shelves the great red earthen pans stood in rows holding their thick crinkled cream, which Loveday never saw without a thought of awe for her mother's miracle, and the waves that had surged over her father's head. Thought of it now restored her sense of her own power—the cream was ever for her a symbol of divine interposition, and if her own parents had been found worthy of such a sign, why should not she too have that something apart and strong which forced signs from the very heavens, that something apart which indeed she could not but feel sure she possessed, never with such a gladness in the certainty until the miraculous yesterday?

Eagerly she unfolded her plans to Mrs. Lear, her words falling forth in a rush as hurried as a moorland stream after rain, yet as clear too, and as she spoke of her hopes and plans her black eyes scanned Mrs. Lear's face more in faith than anxiety. But Mrs. Lear wore a strange look that to one less eager than the girl would have shown as pity.



“Softly, Loveday, softly,” she said at last, “while I see if I can get to the rights of this. You want to earn money for yourself this next month to buy your white riband with. Have 'ee thought 'tes an extravagant purchase for a maid like you, who should be putten any money into warm flannel or a pair of good boots?”



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"I don't want boots, Mrs. Lear, I don't want nothing on the earth but my satin sash so I can dance with her in the Flora. I want it more than to save my soul, that I do; I'll go through anything to get it. I'll work like ten maids for 'ee and for anyone else that'll have me, so as I can dance in the Flora..."

"Hush, hush," cried the good woman, justly scandalised by such unbalanced ravings from a maid of fifteen who should have had nothing but modesty in her mouth; "you mustn't say such wicked things or I can't stay here and listen to en."

Fear attacked Loveday, not for her own impious words, but lest she had shocked Mrs. Lear past helping.

"Mrs. Lear," she said urgently, "I don't mean any wickedness, but indeed I can't sufficiently tell 'ee what it means to me to get my length of riband and dance in the Flora come May. I do believe I'll die if I don't. I don't know how to find words to tell 'ee, but 'tes more to me than a white riband and a shaking of feet down Bugletown streets, 'tes my life, I do believe ..." She added no word of Flora Le Pettit, you perceive, but got a secret joy from being able to use her name thus unreprieved in mention of the dance ... and who that has been a lover will not understand this?

"I would have had 'ee up here to help now that Primrose is so wisht," replied Mrs. Lear doubtfully, "but simmingly only yesterday you had words, and indeed it was ill done of you, Loveday Strick, towards one in her condition, as you do very well know."

Loveday drooped her head. Idle to protest to Mrs. Lear that she had not been the first in fault. She waited breathless, the beating of her heart almost choking her. Mrs. Lear went on.

"If only Primrose could be made to overlook it, then I'll have 'ee and welcome, Loveday, and pay you a florin a week too, which would soon add up to enough. I'd be glad for 'ee to stay on after the Flora too, for Primrose's time'll be near."

Loveday had no interest in what happened after the dance. Life would be all golden ever after, something wonderful and new would certainly begin; it was to mark the great division in her life, but gratitude and the caution born of years of slights held her silent on that subject to the good Mrs. Lear.

"Wait 'ee here," Mrs. Lear bade her, and herself went back into the kitchen. She was gone some minutes, that to Loveday dragged as weeks, though when she reappeared Loveday felt that the time of waiting had gone too soon, and she wished for it to begin once more, so much she dreaded to ask what had been said. Mrs. Lear spared her the need for questioning.



“Tis no manner of use, Loveday,” she said, “Primrose won’t hear of it, and being as she is, I can’t contrary her.”

Loveday felt the futility of argument, and, indeed, in the violent reaction that attacks such ardent natures, she felt too numb to make the attempt even had she wished. She stood staring at Mrs. Lear with her eyes dark in her pale face and the first presage of defeat in her heart.



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CHAPTER VII: IN WHICH LOVEDAY STILL ESSAYS TO OBTAIN THE WHITE SATIN RIBAND

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IN WHICH LOVEDAY STILL ESSAYS TO OBTAIN THE WHITE SATIN RIBAND

It were a weary task to chronicle all the ways trodden by Loveday during the three weeks that followed her visit to Upper Farm, and yet, even so, it would not be as weary as was the treading of them to that still ardent though fearful girl. Hers grew to be a dread that would have seemed to a spectator disproportionate indeed—for what can one heart know of the sickness of another's, of its hurried beating when hope beckons, of its numb slackening when hope fails? How swift to Loveday seemed the relentless patter of the days past her questing feet, that, run hither and thither as she would, yet could not keep pace with Time's urgency! How slow to Loveday seemed the ticking of each moment, since each held hope and fear full-globed, as in bubbles that rise and rise only to burst into the empty air! So each moment rose, rounded, to meet Loveday, held, and broke, till her mind was but a daze which confounded speed with slowness, till she thought the future would never be the present and found perpetually that it was the past.

After her failure with Mrs. Lear it occurred to Loveday to go where she should have gone in the first place—whither she might have gone had not some irk of conscience whispered her that her purpose was all too worldly—to the wife of the Vicar, Mrs. Veale. This Mrs. Veale was the good lady who had stood sponsor for Loveday on that day when Aunt Senath had perforce to blazon her sister's shame at the font. Ever since that day Mrs. Veale had done her duty by Loveday without fail, instructing her in the catechism regularly and occasionally presenting her with the clothing of Miss Letitia Veale—who was a couple of years older than Loveday—when the garments were outgrown and when they were suitable. Mrs. Veale was too thoughtful a Christian to give Loveday artificial flowers or silken petticoats unfitted to her station, but flannels, thickened by so much washing that Saint Anthony of Egypt himself could not have divined a female within their folds, were always forthcoming to protect the orphan girl from wintry winds.

It was no day for flannel when Loveday knocked—with the timidity that always assailed her, to her own annoyance, when she was about to see her godmother—on the back door of the Vicarage. She heard her own voice, robbed of its warm eagerness, asking of the stout cook whether Mrs. Veale could see her for a minute. The cook sent the housemaid to the Vicar's lady with the request, and Loveday stood in the large, sunny kitchen smelling the strange rich foods preparing for the four o'clock dinner. There was

butcher's meat, she could smell that (she had tasted it at the harvest feast at Upper Farm, where

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it was provided for the labourers once a year), and there was a sweet pudding that she could see stirred together in a big white bowl, a pudding that smelt of sweetness like a posy. A noisy fly, the first of his kind, buzzed over the plate where the empty eggshells lay beside the bowl, and from them crawled to the scattered sugar that sparkled carelessly upon the rim. Loveday, of old, would have had a second's envy of the fly that could thus browse on what smelt so good; now the fine aromas affected her nostrils merely as incense might have those of her papist father—as the savour of the great house where dwelt those to be propitiated. For upon Mrs. Veale she now felt hope was fastened; it was from her almost sacred hands that salvation would flow. Fear and expectation took Loveday by the throat, so stifling her that the wide kitchen, the stout blue-print-clad cook, the bright pots and pans, the leaping flames, the savoury odours and the buzzing of the fly, all blended together before her dizzied eyes.

The figure of the housemaid, crisp in white and black, entered steadily, and with her voice, saying that the mistress would see Loveday Strick in the morning-room, the flow of the kitchen ebbed and subsided. Loveday followed the white and black through the long, narrow hall, where the fox's mask grinned at her from above the fanlight of the door, to the presence of the Vicar's wife.

Mrs. Veale was a personable lady, with a high and narrow brow, and a penetrating eye that few in the village could evade if they had aught upon their conscience. It was said, indeed, that she was better than a curate to her husband, for she could pass where a man could not in delicacy have gone, and few were the maids, and fewer still the housewives, who had not benefited by her counsel. She fixed that eye benevolently upon Loveday now; the lady stately in her black silk, the locket containing the hair of her departed parent, one-time a canon of Exeter, lying upon her matronly bosom; the girl awkward in her homespun wrapper, her feet fearful of standing upon the flowered carpet.

"Come in, Loveday," said Mrs. Veale kindly.

Loveday advanced a step and dropped her curtsey, but not a word could she say to explain her visit.

"What do you want to see me about?" asked Mrs. Veale briskly—for she was much busied in good works, and had no time to give over what was needful to each of them.

"If you please, ma'am, I want work," said Loveday.

Mrs. Veale looked her approval on hearing this most praiseworthy of the few sentences fit for use of the lower classes. Even when there is no work to be had such sentiments should be encouraged, and without them she never unloosed that charity which, when



the supply of work failed, she exercised for the good of her parishioners' bodies and her own soul.

Loveday felt the approval, and her heart took wings to the heaven of certain hope. Indeed, had Loveday but had the sense of what was fitting to tell the Vicar's lady, she might have attained what she wanted, but hope, like despair, ever made Loveday heady.

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“What work do you want?” asked Mrs. Veale. “I should have sent you out to service long ago, but I knew your aunt needed you at home. Has she sent you?”

“No, ma’am,” answered Loveday, “I came of myself. I want work I can do in my spare time, when Aunt Senath don’t need me.”

So far all was well; the scheme sounded fit for encouragement by the Church, ever anxious for the welfare of even her humblest children. Mrs. Veale gave thought to her boots and knives ... no, the gardener’s boy did them, and he was being prepared for confirmation and must not be unsettled. The mending ... that was done by the housemaid in her spare time, superintended by Mrs. Veale herself, and it would not be fair to the girl to leave her with idle hands for Satan’s use when they could be employed instead upon sheets and stockings. The washing ... the housemaid’s mother came to do that, glad to do so at a reasonable price for the opportunity of seeing how her daughter prospered from week to week under such care as Mrs. Veale bestowed on all the maids whom she trained. The spring cleaning ... a girl who did not know the ways of the house would make work instead of saving it. Yet Mrs. Veale felt, as a Christian woman, that it was her duty to encourage Loveday even at the cost of her own china. She resolved to do so.

“Many people would not help you, Loveday,” she said, “for it is very difficult to find work suddenly without upsetting the ways of a household, but you are my god-daughter, and so I have always taken a special interest in you. My spring-cleaning is not till May this year, as then the Vicar goes away to stay with his lordship, the Bishop of Exeter, and I will have you here under my own eye. You will not be of much assistance at first, but if you are willing and do as you are told you will be able to learn.”

At the mention of the month of May the wings of Loveday’s heart folded once more and let her heart fall like a stone, then opened in a fluttering attempt to save it.

“What—what time in May, ma’am?” she asked. Perhaps it would be the first week in that month and all would yet be well, since the Flora was held upon the eighth.

At Mrs. Veale’s next words the wings moulted away, and the bare quills left Loveday’s heart prone and defenceless.

“Not till the second week,” said Mrs. Veale, “for the Vicar wishes to stay till the Flora, as we are permitting Miss Letitia to dance in the procession this year, and naturally he wishes to be there. The Vicar feels that these old innocent customs must not be allowed to fall into disuse.”

“Ah!” cried Loveday, “’tis no good to me!”



At this shocking speech—imagine a village girl crying out that an offer of employment from the Vicarage is of no good to her!—Mrs. Veale drew such a breath of horror that the hair of the late Canon rose in its locket.

“What on earth can you mean, Loveday Strick?”



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Thus Mrs. Veale, justly outraged. But Loveday, infatuated, rushed upon her fate—the fate of expulsion from those precincts.

“Oh, ma’am, ’tis no manner of use to me unless I get work before the Flora. The Flora, ma’am” (repeating the beloved name as an invocation in time of trouble).

“’Tis this way, I must get a white satin sash come Flora Day, ’cause if I do I’m to dance along with Miss Le Pettit in the procession. She’s promised me that I should, and indeed I’ll die if I don’t. I will indeed. I’ve fixed my soul on it. I’ve got the gown and the stockings and the shoes, and all I want is the white riband, and I must someways make enough money to buy it come Flora Day. Oh, Mrs. Veale, ma’am, if you’ll let me scrub and scour for you I’ll do it on my knees so as only I can dance with her in the Flora.”

During this speech Mrs. Veale had risen to the full height and width of the black silk, feeling that thus only could she cope adequately with such a flood of ill-regulated and unseemly passions. She felt deeply wounded to think that any girl of her teaching should so betray it as this one did in every undisciplined word. She had not felt such a bitter stab of disappointment since a trusted and loved old nurse of the family had been found drinking the Vicar’s port.

“Loveday Strick,” she said, “you are forgetting yourself.”

This was not exact, for Loveday had forgotten Mrs. Veale, but the rebuke drenched the impetuous girl like a cold wave. She stood defenceless.

“I have not comprehended half this mad tale of yours,” continued Mrs. Veale, “but I gather you have the presumption to say that Miss Le Pettit—*Miss Le Pettit*—has said you may dance with her at the Flora. Perhaps a young lady in her exalted position, and of what I believe are her modernising tendencies, may have formed such a project, but you should have known better than to have presumed on such an unsuitable condescension. As to a white satin sash, I can imagine nothing more unfitted for a girl in your unfortunate position, of which I am very sorry to be obliged to remind you. I had always hoped you would never forget it.”

“Ma’am ... you don’t understand ...” began Loveday.

“That is quite enough, Loveday. Let me hear no more on the subject. If you still want work, apart from this desire for unsuitable finery, since you are my god-daughter I will forget what has passed and still try you at the spring cleaning.”

Then it was that a horrid thing happened to Loveday.

“What do I care for you and your spring-cleaning?” she stormed, “you and it can go up the chimney together for all I care. I only wanted you to give me work so as to get my satin sash, and I’ll never come near you or church again as long as I do live. That I

won't....” And Loveday turned and ran out of the front door, beneath the grinning fox, and not only ran out of the front door, but banged it behind her.



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Maids in the kitchen heard that unseemly sound, as they had heard, awe-struck, the raised voice, and Mrs. Veale felt she must read them a short but fitting lesson on the dire results of wanting things beyond one's station. The stout cook and the crisp housemaid soon knew of Loveday's presumptuous ambition, a knowledge they shared now with the Lear family and Cherry Cotton, and that soon was to spread to the accompaniment of many a titter about the twisted ways of the village.

CHAPTER VIII: IN WHICH LOVEDAY CONTINUES HER QUEST AND ACHIEVES TENPENCE

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IN WHICH LOVEDAY CONTINUES HER QUEST AND ACHIEVES TENPENCE

Loveday ran down the path to the Vicarage gate so fast that the tears she had not been able to restrain blew off her cheeks as she went. Thus it came about that she did not see Miss Letitia until she had all but knocked her down in the urgency of her flight.

Letitia Veale was no sylph such as Miss Le Pettit, however, and she caught hold of Loveday like the good-natured, rather romping, young lady that she was. Mrs. Veale always said of her that she would "fine down," but persons less well disposed to her than her own mother, and who were the mothers of daughters themselves, said that Letitia Veale was a sad hoyden. She had ever a merry nod or word for Loveday, and dazed with anger as that ill-balanced maid was, Letitia's smile won her to comparative calm again, though it was a calm with which cunning intermingled. For:—

"Oh, miss," cried Loveday, "I do beg your pardon ..." Then, seeing by the young lady's pleasant face that she had not offended by her clumsiness—"but I was so sick with misery I didn't rightly see where I was going."

"Why, whatever is the matter, Loveday?" asked the lively girl.

"Miss, I can't tell you, not now, but oh, miss, you've always been good to me, will you do something for me? I've never asked you for nothing before, have I?"

"Why, no, you have not, Loveday. What is it?"

"Have you such a thing as an old white sash you could let me have, miss? I just can't rightly tell you how I want it. It don't matter how old, so I can wash and iron it. Oh, miss...?"

Letitia thought for a moment, then shook her brown ringlets.



“I’m so sorry, Loveday, since you want it so much, but the only white sash I have is my new one for Flora Day. I have an old black one I could let you have though.”

“Black! Oh, Miss Letitia, that’s no good. Couldn’t you let me have the white one? I’ll work and work to make the money to buy you another, and your mother’d get you a new one for the Flora.”

“Loveday, you know I couldn’t. Mamma would insist on knowing what I’d done with it, you know she would.”

“You couldn’t—you couldn’t say you’d lost it, miss?” asked Loveday, even her tongue faltering at the suggestion.

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But though Letitia might be a romp, she was not a deceitful girl, and she respected her mother.

“Oh, Loveday, how can you suggest such a thing? It would be telling mamma a lie. Besides, she would never believe me.”

At this moment Mrs. Veale, hearing voices, opened the door and looked out.

“Letitia! Come in at once, and do not speak again to Loveday Strick.”

Letitia made round eyes at Loveday and sped up the path. Loveday pushed open the gate and went out.

She went along the white dusty road, between the hedgerows of elder whose crumpled green leaves were unfolding in the sunny April weather, and her tears were the only rain that smiling country-side had seen for many a day, and they, to match the month, were already drying, for the fire burnt too high in Loveday for tears to hold her long. She fled along the road at first blindly, then more slowly as the exhaustion that follows on such rage as hers overcame her, and as she paused at last to sink against a mossy bank and rest, a horseman overtook her.

It was Mr. Constantine on his white cob, looking a very dapper gentleman, but Loveday heeded him not, only raising her great black eyes unseeingly at the sound of the hoofs. Yet that so sombre gaze arrested Mr. Constantine, for it seemed to him an unwonted look in that land of buxom maids. He drew rein beside her.

“Are you a gipsy, my girl?” he asked her kindly.

Loveday shook her head.

“Come, you have a tongue as well as that handsome pair of eyes, I suppose? No?”

“My tongue’s wisht, it brings ill-luck,” said Loveday.

Mr. Constantine studied her more attentively.

“If all women thought that, there’d be more happy marriages,” he said, slipping his hand into his pocket. “You’ve wisdom on your tongue, whether it’s lucky or no. You say you’re not a gipsy?”

By this time it had dawned on Loveday what, in her absorption, she had not at first noticed, that she was speaking to one of the gentry, and to no less a one than Mr. Constantine, of Constantine. She stood up and dropped her curtsey out of habit, but sullenly. Oddly enough, it was the sullenness and not the curtsey that took Mr. Constantine’s fancy.



“No, sir,” said Loveday. “I’m not a gipsy. I’m Loveday Strick.”

“Loveday ...” said the gentleman. “Loveday ... That’s a beautiful name. No—it’s more than a name, it’s a phrase. A very beautiful phrase.”

Loveday raised her eyes at this strange talk. Mr. Constantine took his hand out of his pocket and held out a silver sixpence.



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“Gipsy or no, take that for your gipsy eyes, my dear,” he said. Loveday stood hesitant. Even she, who had just begged of Miss Letitia, felt shame at taking a coin in charity. Yet she did so, for before her eyes she saw, not a silver sixpence, but the beginning of a length of white satin riband unrolling towards her through futurity. Perhaps, unknown to herself, her foreign blood prompted her to that sad Jesuitry which teaches all means are justifiable to the desired end. Perhaps she saw nothing beyond the beginning of her riband, but she held out her hand. Mr. Constantine dropped the sixpence into it, touched his cob with his heel and rode on. Loveday stayed in the hedge, the sixpence in her palm and hope once more in her soul. That hope was to faint and fall during the days that followed and saw her quest no nearer its fulfilment.

For who wished to employ the strange, dark girl that had always been aloof and distrusted? And who could credit this violent conversion to the ordered ways of domesticity? Who had the money to squander on help from without, when, within, if there were not enough hands for the work, then the work itself, like an unanswered letter, slipped into that dead place of unremembered things where nothing matters any more? Last week’s cleaning left undone adds nothing appreciable to this week’s dirt that next week’s exertions may not remedy as easily together as singly—or so argued the slovenly housewife, while for the industrious no hands save their own could have scrubbed and polished to their liking.

Here and there Loveday earned a few odd pence, for a few hand’s turns done when necessity or charity called in her vagrant services, but the Flora Dance of Bugletown was held upon the eighth of May, and when May Day dawned she had but tenpence for all her store—and the riband would cost as many shillings. Despair settled in her heart for the first time; often before it had knocked but been refused more than a glance within, but now her enfeebled arms could hold the door no longer, and that most dread of all visitors took possession of his own—for is not the human heart Despair’s only habitation, without which he is but a homeless wanderer?

CHAPTER IX: IN WHICH LOVEDAY SEES ONE MAGPIE

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IN WHICH LOVEDAY SEES ONE MAGPIE

Upon May Day, when boys blow the May horns and girls carry sprays of hawthorn and all good folk break their fast on bread and cream, Loveday had to go, as was her wont (and a mortifying one to her pride since Primrose’s flouting of her), to Upper Farm. Twice before have we seen her on that errand—when she first was love-stricken for Miss Le Pettit in the farmhouse parlour, and again when on her search for work she saw



the querulous young Mrs. Lear in the dim kitchen. Since then she had gone monotonously enough on her errand, avoiding speech even with the elder Mrs. Lear as much as possible, and seeing Primrose not at all—an easy matter, since the girl kept her room, or lay on the horsehair sofa, languidly stitching woollen roses on a handscreen, for all the world like the spoiled bride of some great gentleman.



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There seemed never any violence of thought or emotion at Upper Farm, even the sulks of Primrose were petty in nature, her jealousies made her voice shrill but did not take her by the throat with that intolerable aching stormier women know too well, while her graceless husband was irritated on the surface of his mind as some shallow pool is fretted over its bed of soft ooze, retaining no trace when the ripples have died. The elder Lear, as befits a good countryman content with his station in life, was too hard-worked for anything save a tired back on his entry at night, and the old wife too occupied with her Martha-like toil for searching into the sensibilities either of herself or of her daughter-in-law.

Loveday, without reasoning on the matter, had yet ever been aware that this slight tide of feeling was all that ever lapped against the household at Upper Farm, therefore when she saw one magpie in the last field before the yard gate she accepted the sign for her own despairing heart alone. No young woman of education would have paid any attention to such a vulgar superstition, but Loveday had no learning other than what her elders had let fall in her hearing, both when she was supposed to be listening for her betterment, and when it was thought she would not understand the drift of their speech. And that a single magpie means sorrow was one of the few solid facts Loveday had gleaned by following the garnered sheaves of her elders.

Now, as she stepped over the topmost ledge of the granite stile, there was a fanlike flutter of black and white in her very face, and she stood a moment watching the ill-omened bird wheel and dip behind the thick blossom of the hawthorn hedge.

“There goes my white riband,” thought the ignorant girl, and yet even with the quick fear there welled a fresh and fierce determination in her undisciplined heart.

Her egotism, if not her superstition, was reproved when she reached the farmhouse, and old Madgy, the midwife, coming to the pump for more water, met her with news of what had happened not half an hour earlier. The shallow creek of Upper Farm had been invaded by a violent and dark tide, on whose ebb two lives had been borne away. Loveday, staring up at Primrose’s room, saw the withered hand of old Mrs. Lear draw the curtains across the window behind which lay a dead mother and a babe that had never lived.

CHAPTER X: IN WHICH LOVEDAY DOES NOT ATTEND A FUNERAL

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IN WHICH LOVEDAY DOES NOT ATTEND A FUNERAL

“A couple of months too soon her pains took her,” said Madgy; “she has been fretting and wisht these weeks past, with her husband always after some young faggot up



country and herself sick with envy at the girls that could still dance with the chaps. She had no woman's heart in her, poor soul, to carry her woman's burden. Ah! many's the strange things in women I see at my trade," and Madgy wrung out a cloth and mumbled to herself—her old mouth folded inwards, as though she perpetually turned all the secrets that she knew over and over within it.

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“Your mother died because she’d set her heart on death,” she added, to Loveday, “but this one died because she dedn’ know how to catch hold on life. She’d a weak hand on everything she touched, because she never wanted nawthen enough.”

“Wanting’s not getting, however hard you want,” said Loveday.

“Ah! isn’t it? It’s getting, though you may have sorrow packed along wi’ it. Out of my way, maid; I must be busy overstairs.” And old Madgy went to ply the second part of her trade, for she washed the dead as well as the newly-born; she laid coins on the eyes of the old and flannels on the limbs of the young with the same smile between her rheumy lids and on her folded mouth.

Loveday stayed awhile and helped Mrs. Lear, by milking the puzzled, lowing cows and pouring the milk into the pans, but all the time they worked the dead girl’s name was never mentioned between them. It was as though Loveday were making amends for the ill words that had been between them by refraining her tongue from everything but her first few accents of pity and amaze.

That pity was shared by all the neighbourhood, gentle and simple. Time was, just before her marriage, when Primrose was accounted a foolish and sinful maid enough, but married she had been, and into a highly-respected family, for the Lears’ graves had lain in the next best position to those of the gentry for many generations, and, for their sakes more than for hers, tributes flowed in to the funeral.

This poor, pale Primrose, who had died so young, though not unmarried, was laid to rest, with babe on arm, only a few days before the Flora dance, and her friend Cherry, who would none the less foot it gaily on that occasion, attended, with a length of black crape round her buxom waist and her eyes swollen by the easy tears of an easy nature.

Loveday was not present, for, friendly as she had ever been with Mrs. Lear, the dead girl’s petulance lay between them now; memory of it become to Loveday a pang of pity, and to Mrs. Lear a sacred duty. Nevertheless, an odd notion, such as Loveday was apt to take, made her feel that some tie, slight, but persistent, between Primrose and herself drew her, at least, to give the last look possible from behind the hedge screening the road.

There, hidden as a bird, she saw how highly the world had thought of the girl to whom she had dared feel a flashing sense of superiority; she saw how true respectability is to be admired. For never at any funeral, save that of actual gentry, had there been seen so many of those elegant floral tokens of esteem which reflect, perhaps, even more honour upon those who bestow them than upon the dead who receive them. Primrose may have been a poor creature enough, but the Lears had always held their heads high among their fellows, without ever trying to push above their station. No unseemly ambitions, no fantastic desires, had ever drawn just censure upon Upper Farm, and



wreaths and crosses decked with tasteful streamers bore witness to this fact. There was actually an exquisite white wreath from Miss Le Pettit of Ignores, laid proudly upon the humbler greener offerings of farmers and fisher folk, overpowering with its elegance even an artificial wreath under glass which came from the Bugletown corn-chandler, who was Mr. Lear's chief customer.



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Loveday, watching, knew suddenly that, when her time came, she would be an alien in death, as she was in life; that never for her would these costly tokens of respect be gathered. Yet, instead of this thought humbling her, instead of it teaching her the lesson that only by striving to do her duty in the lowly course set for her could she attain any measure of regard, it aroused in her once more, this time with an even fiercer intensity, her ardent desire to be as different from these good folk as possible. Miss Le Pettit had thought her different, had admired that difference, and to Miss Le Pettit, as supreme arbiter, her heart turned now. There was still that doorway to her future whose latch the fair Flora's hand could lift, and this door, ajar for her, would open wide if she were but fitly garbed to pass across its threshold.

Watching the funeral procession, which should have suggested such far other thoughts even to her undisciplined soul, Loveday was taken only by an idea so rash and impious that it alarmed even herself. It was the penalty of her dark and ardent blood that fear, like despair, added to the force of her desires. That idea, which she should have driven from her as a serpent, she nourished in her bosom as though it were a dove.

CHAPTER XI: IN WHICH LOVEDAY ATTENDS THE FLORA

Chapter XI

IN WHICH LOVEDAY ATTENDS THE FLORA

The eighth of May dawned fair and clear, and from early morning the young men and maidservants of Bugletown, who had spent the past week cleaning and polishing the houses, streamed out into the country to pluck green branches for their further adornment. Already the thought of the dance was in their heads, and its tripping in their feet, and they sang through the lanes.

They waylaid strangers coming into Bugletown and drew contributions of silver from them, according to custom, and all they did went to a gay measure. By the time the gentry, both of the place itself and of outlying regions, were assembled for the dance every house in the main streets of the grey little old town was decked with boughs, its front and back doors opened wide for the dancers, who at the Flora always danced through every house set hospitably open for their passage.

The band, that all day long plays but the one tune, hour after hour, was gathered together by noon, sleek and not yet heated, their trumpets shining in the sun, their fiddles glossy as their well-oiled hair, their big drum round as the portly figure of the bandmaster himself. Already, in many a bedchamber, young women had twirled this way and that before the mirror, studying the set of taffetas and tarletan, or young men had polished their high beavers anxiously against the sleeves of their brightest broadcloth frock coats. In speckless kitchens housewives prepared their cakes and



cream, and the masters saw to the drawing of the cider, and, perhaps, tasted it, to make sure that it had not soured overnight. And in each heart different words were running to the Flora Day tune, words that suited with each heart's measure. The children in the streets sang aloud the doggerel words that long custom has fastened upon the tune:—



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"John the beau was walking home, When he met with Sally Dover, He kissed her once, he kissed her twice, And he kissed her three times over!"

Thus the heedless children with their lips, but their little hearts probably beat to the even simpler words: *"I'm having a holiday! Having a holiday!"*

More staidly, and almost unheard by their time-muffled ears, a voice, nevertheless, sang to the housewives, telling each her copper and silver was the brightest in the town, and adding, perhaps, little gusts of memory that half hurt, half pleased, of how nimbly she had danced at the Flora in years gone by, and how fair she had looked....

The staid married men smiled to themselves, and would not have acknowledged that within them something seemed to chuckle: *"I'm not so old, after all; I'm not so old, after all...."*

Frankly, the hearts of the young men nudged hopefully against their ribs, calling out: *"I'm going to dance with Her! I'm going to dance with Her! And perhaps ... for I always was lucky! I always was lucky!"*

But who shall say what lilting voice, timid-bold and sly-sincere, whispered to the maidens, beating out its syllables against the new stays so tightly laced for the occasion? Perhaps the words of the children's doggerel, with a name or so altered, met the moment without need of further change....

And Loveday's heart, as she walked the three miles from the fishing village to Bugletown, sang to her of joy and hope and triumph.

When she reached the Market House, she found the band ready to strike up the famous tune, while the mayor, his chain of office about his neck, stood conversing with the ladies and gentlemen who were to lead the dance. For, as is but fitting, the couples at the Flora follow each other according to their social precedence, though all may join who choose, providing only that the females, be they gentry or tradespeople, wear white, and the men their best broadcloth and Sunday hats.

Of all who had gathered for the dance there was none more highly placed than Miss Flora Le Pettit, and none as fair to see. She stood supreme in the sunshine and her beauty, her white muslin robes swelling round her like the petals of some full-blown rose, her white sash streaming over them, the white ribands that decked her hat of fine Dunstable straw flowing down to her shoulders and mingling with her auburn curls. Even the countless tiny bows that adorned her dress (as though they were a cloud of butterflies drawn to alight upon it by its freshness) were of white satin. Everything about her save her little sandalled feet danced already—the brim of the wide hat that waved above her dancing eyes, the flounces and floating ends of her attire which the soft breeze stirred, the corners of her smiling mouth, the dimple which came and went



behind the curls that nodded by her cheek. What vision can have been fairer than that presented by Flora Le Pettit upon Flora Day? "None, none, none," thought eager Loveday, as she edged through the crowd and caught sight of her divinity. None ... and yet that sight caused Loveday a strange clutching in her breast.



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For she, too, had felt fair when she had gazed in her tiny mirror; the yellowed linen gown had gleamed pure and white, her young breast had swelled above the waist that looked so slim, and that was so finely girt.... Yet, now, something of splendour about Miss Le Pettit that she could not attain dimmed all herself and, with herself, her joy. Her face, already flushed by her walk, burned deeper still with shame. Yet the desire that three weeks of striving had swollen to a passion urged her forward, and, fingering the lovely thing about her waist to gain courage, she broke through the last ring of staring people and stood in front of Miss Le Pettit.

The heiress of Ignores had not yet caught sight of her, being engaged in laughing conversation with several admiring gentlemen, but something of an almost painful intensity in the dark gaze of the village girl drew her face to meet it. The black eyes, so full of an extravagant passion, met the careless glance of the blue orbs that knew not even the passing shadow of such a thing.

“Oh,” stammered Loveday, the set speech she had been conning all the way to Bugletown dying upon her lips, “Oh, Miss Flora, I’m come. I’ve got my white sash and I’m come....”

Over Flora’s face passed a look of bewilderment, while Loveday, her moment of self-criticism gone, stood trembling with eager happiness. Then Miss Le Pettit spoke, lightly and kindly.

“Surely I have seen you before, my girl?” she asked. And, turning to the little group of her friends, added:

“She has such a striking air, ’twould be difficult to forget her.”

Yet, till this moment, Miss Le Pettit had forgotten everything save that air. Forgotten her careless suggestion, her prettily given promise, her praise. Forgotten even the pleasant glow such evident worship as this village girl’s had stirred in her. She had had so much worship since! Who can blame her for not remembering some idle words her artistic perceptions had prompted three weeks earlier? It had been a fantastic suggestion at best, as a girl of sense would have known, treasuring it merely for its kindly intention. After all, Miss Le Pettit would be far more conspicuous dancing with a village maiden at the Flora than with a gentleman suited to her in rank and estate. Since that day at Upper Farm she had met just such a gentleman—he with the glossy whiskers and handsome form who was nearest to her now, smiling at this little encounter.

“Why, child,” said Flora to Loveday, “you look very nice, I am sure. But your place should be much further down the procession.” Then, more sharply: “Why do you stare so, girl?”



Loveday stood as one stricken, her cheek now as white as the sash she was still holding in her shaking hands.

CHAPTER XII: IN WHICH LOVEDAY DANCES

Chapter XII

IN WHICH LOVEDAY DANCES



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The Mayor had stepped forward, fearing lest this young person might be annoying the heiress; the bandsmen had turned from the final survey of their instruments to gaze; here and there various people who recognised Loveday were pressing through the crowd, eager to see and hear. Only Miss Le Pettit had drawn back against the protecting arm of the gentleman who was to be her partner. Loveday still stayed, her riband in her hands.

There came comments from the crowd.

“Loveday Strick! She’s mad! This month past she’s been like a crazy thing about the Flora!”

“I thought all the time she must be mad to have imagined Miss Le Pettit meant to dance along wi’ she!”

“What’s the maid got on? I can’t rightly see.”

“Old white, but a brave new sash.”

At that Loveday raised her head and looked about her. A shrill voice from the crowd answered the last speaker.

“A new sash; Ted’n possible. Us have all been laughing because she couldn’ come by one nohow.” And Cherry Cotton elbowed her way through the ring of curious folk to where Loveday stood. Suddenly Cherry gave a scream, and pointed an accusing finger at Loveday.

“Ah, a new sash, sure enough.... Ask her where she got ’en. Ask her, I say.”

Loveday answered nothing, only turned her head a little to stare at Cherry.

“You ask her where she took it from, Miss! You should know, seeing you gave it!”

“I gave it to her? Nonsense.”

“Not to her, but to poor Primrose Lear. ’Tes the riband that tied up your wreath. She’s robbed the dead. Loveday Strick’s robbed the dead.”

Then indeed, after a moment’s stupefaction following on the horrid revelation, a murmur of indignation ran from mouth to mouth.

“She’s robbed the dead!”

“My soul! To rob the living’s stealing, but to rob the dead’s a profane thing.”



“Tisn’t man as can judge her, ’tis only God Almighty!” cried an old minister, aghast.

“Look at the maid, how she stands.... Her own conscience judges her, I should say!”

“She’s no word to excuse herself, simmingly.”

“That’s because she do know nothing can excuse what she’s done....”

And, indeed, Loveday stood without speech. Perhaps in all that buzz of murmuring she heard the voice of her own conscience at last, for she made no effort to defend herself, or, perhaps, even at that hour, she heard nothing but the dread whisper of defeat. She stood before Flora Le Pettit like a wilted rose whose petals hang limply, about to fall, fronting a bloom that spreads its glowing leaves in the full flush of noon. The one girl was triumphant in her beauty and her unassailable position, every flounce out-curved in freshness; the other drooped at brow and hem, her slender neck downbent, her sash-ends pendant as broken tendrils after rain upon her heavily hanging skirts.

All she was heard to murmur, and that very low, was a halting sentence about her white sash: “But you said—you said you’d dance with me if I got my sash ...” or some such words, but only Miss Le Pettit caught all the muttered syllables, and she never spoke of them, save with a petulant reluctance to Mr. Constantine when he questioned her afterwards.



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“Girl,” said the Mayor sharply, “is it true?”

“Yes,” said Loveday.

“True!” cried Cherry, “I know ’tes true. I remember noticing that green mark on the riband when the wreath was laid on the grave. Ah, she’m a wicked piece, she is. She tormented my poor Primrose in life and she’s robbed her in death. You aren’t safe in your grave from she.”

Everyone was speaking against Loveday in rightful indignation by now, and the good wives expressed the opinion that she should be well whipped. Loveday turned suddenly to Miss Le Pettit. There were those there—notably Mr. Constantine, that observant philosopher—who said afterwards she seemed for one instant to be going to break into impassioned speech. She did half hold out her hands. The ends of the white sash, disregarded, fluttered from them as she did so. But Miss Le Pettit, shocked in all her sensibilities by this vulgar scene, turned away.

“Surely,” said she, “there has been enough time wasted already. Can we not begin the dance, Mr. Mayor?”

At a sign from the Mayor the band struck up into the tune that was to echo all day through every head and, perhaps, afterwards, through a few kindly hearts.

[Illustration: Music]

played the band, and, still whispering together with excitement, the dancers fell into place.

“John the beau was walking home, When he met with Sally Dover, He kissed her once, he kissed her twice, And he kissed her three times over.”

It seemed to Loveday that the whole world was dancing. The faces of the crowd, the bobbing ringlets, swelling skirts, the bright eyes and bright instruments, the houses that peered at her with their polished panes, all danced in a mad haze of mingled light and blackness. Sun, moon and stars joined in, heads and feet whirled so madly that none could have said which was upper-most. Creation was a-dancing, and she alone stood to be mocked at in a reeling world. This was the merry measure she had striven to join! She must have been mad indeed!

Turning blindly, she ran through the crowd that gave at her approach, and all day the dancing went on without her. The flutter of her blasphemous sash did not profane the sunlight in the streets of Bugletown, nor pollute with its passing the houses of the good wives. Like a swallow’s wing, it had but flashed across the ordered ways and was gone.



Yet Loveday's ambition was, after all, fulfilled that day. For she danced—and danced a measure she could not have trod without the white satin sash.... Good folk in Bugletown footed it down the cobbled streets, and through paved kitchens; Loveday danced a finer step on insubstantial ether, into realms more vast. Were those realms dark for her, thus violated by her enforced entry of them? Who can say, save those folk of Bugletown who knew that to her first crime she had added a second even greater?



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They found her next day in the wood; the wind had risen, and blew against her skirts, so that her feet moved gently as though yet tracing their phantom paces upon the airy floors. Her head, like a snapped lily, lay forwards and a little to one side, so that her pale cheek rested against the taut white satin of the riband from which she hung. The wind blew the languid meshes of her hair softly, kissing her once, kissing her twice, and kissing her three times over.

EPILOGUE

Epilogue

Such is the shocking tale of Loveday Strick, a girl who gave her life for a piece of finery. Is it not small wonder that Miss Le Pettit lamented the sad lack of proportion in the affair?

All for a length of white satin riband....

And yet, there were two people who thought a little differently from the rest of Loveday's world on the subject. They were an odd couple to think alike in anything—it seemed as though even after her death Loveday's violent unsuitability must persist as a legacy. They were the refined and polished Mr. Constantine and old Madgy the midwife, a person whom, naturally, he had never met till the day after the Flora, when his philosophic curiosity drew him to search for the lost girl in company with a band of villagers. It was Madgy who led them to the wood, sure that there was what they sought. Mr. Constantine and Madgy stood looking at the pale girl when she had been laid upon last year's leaves at their feet. One of the men would have taken the riband from her, with some vague notion of returning it, though whether to the graveyard or to the Manor he could not have told. Mr. Constantine and Madgy put out each a hand to check him.

"Leave it her," said Mr. Constantine curtly.

"Ay," answered Madgy, speaking freely as was her wont, for she was, alas, no respecter of persons, "it was more than a white riband to the maid, for all that the fools say."

Mr. Constantine nodded. He too saw in that length of satin, now soiled and crumpled, more than a white riband. He saw passion in it—passion of hope, of ambition, of love, of adoration, of despair. Not a piece of finery had ended Loveday's stormy course, but a symbol of life itself, with more in its stained warp and woof than many lives hold in three-score years and ten. Like religion, this riband held every experience. Primrose had known mating and childbearing, anxiety and content and jealousy and death; Mr. Constantine had, in his wandering life of the gentleman of leisure, experienced his moments of keen enjoyment, his tender and romantic interludes; Miss Le Pettit would



know decorous wooing, prosperity, pain of giving birth as she duly presented her husband with an heir, sorrow as she saw her chestnut curls greying and her eye gathering the puckers of advancing years around its fading blue. Yet none of these would know as much as Loveday had known in the short life they all thought so wasted and so incomplete, would feel as much as she had felt—the whole pageant of passion symbolised by this insensate strip of satin. She alone had known ecstasy in her brief mad dance across their sylvan stage.

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Madgy folded the riband across the half-open eyes and wound the ends about the discoloured throat. And thus it was when Loveday was buried in unconsecrated ground, but with the thing she had desired most in life, striven for, sinned for, and finally attained, still with her. Of whom, after all, could a richer epitaph be written?

THE END.