

The Mystery of Redcliffe Manor.

By the Author of "Married, But Not Mated," "A Woman of the World," etc.

CHAPTER I.

WITHOUT A CHARACTER.

Charing Cross Station at night, with its bustling throng of passengers hurrying on their different ways, its din of traffic, and the rattle of cabs; above the blue electric light pouring its glare on the busy scene.

A woman stood under the illuminated clock, waiting, as so many have done before her—for what?

She scarcely knew herself. She was not going to travel anywhere, she expected no friend presently to hurry up to her out of the moving crowd, with kindly greeting.

Alone, without a penny in the world. This thought dimly shaped itself in Adela's Deane's mind.

Since the morning she had wandered far. She had not tasted food for many hours, having spent her last penny on a stale roll at a small coffee-shop.

At last, finding herself opposite to the brilliantly-lighted portal of the great station, she went in mechanically.

The waiting rooms were crowded, and to her morbid fancy it seemed that more than one curious glance followed her.

It might well have been so, for, in spite of the unnatural pallor caused by trouble and privation, Adela Deane was a remarkably beautiful woman.

She wore a nurse's uniform of silver-grey, with long cloak, close-fitting bonnet, and veil thrown back.

It was shabby, but scrupulously neat and clean, and the soft, straight folds of the plain gown suited the graceful, queen-like figure of the girl who wore it as nothing else would have done.

Her features were slightly austere in their classical moulding; but the hazel eyes, under the level black brows, shone clear and steadfast.

Her lips closed firmly, and had a slight downward droop at the corners, betokening them strangers to mirth.

A fine, strong face—one that had looked upon death and sorrow, and gauged the mystery of life to its core.

She was desperately hungry, faint and dazed.

The madness of despair seized her. "What shall I do? I cannot stay here all night. But where can I find shelter? The river—no pain—a cold, shuddering plunge, and all would be over. But it is cruel—hard; I am young, strong, full of energy and life. Could I but get work—but, no, it is useless; no one will employ a woman without a friend—without a character"—bitterly. "God alone knows I am innocent; He will forgive me for ending this torture."

She was slowly moving away, when a hand was suddenly laid on her arm.

"You are punctual nurse; that is well. But I have kept you waiting, I am afraid. I was detained on business, and now I have an appointment for which I fear I shall be late. Will you come back with me to Gardner's Hotel? I have a cab, and we can talk on the way."

The speaker was a tall, dark man of about fifty, with powerful, rugged features and strange, deeply set black eyes.

He bent them on Adela's face and scrutinized it closely.

"You will do I think," he said quietly, lighting a cigarette. "I am late, as I have said, and cannot wait to see the other two applicants. They are not here," glancing round. "Good—that is enough. I hate unpunctual people, and will write to-morrow to decline their services. Here comes the cab."

"You are mistaken, indeed," Adela began; but her attempt at explanation was lost in the roar and rattle of the traffic around them.

"Get in! What are you waiting for?" the stranger said, peremptorily.

She obeyed, as in a dream.

Indeed, as she learned later, those who disobeyed Dr. Barrington generally did it to their bitter cost.

And suddenly a strange idea shot through her brain, sending the blood to her pale cheeks.

This man was evidently a doctor.

Hospital trained, Adela recognized the "professional" cut of his clothes, his keenly-observant eye, and the manners of one accustomed to control and command.

He wanted a nurse—why should she not, at least, try for the post?

Fate played into her hands.

"Hear me!" she insisted, as the cab turned into a quiet thoroughfare and at last she could make herself heard, "I know of no advertisement—I have never seen you in my life before. But I want work—oh! so badly, with a sob in her voice. 'For the love of Heaven save me from starvation. I am quite alone in the world, and have been cruelly wronged.'"

Paul Barrington was about to order the cab to stop. He was angry with himself for making a blunder, and wasting precious time, and had intended to put Adela out on the pavement without further delay, and drive on, but at her last words he paused.

"I made a stupid mistake; but, after all, that is not your fault. Perhaps I can help you, if you tell me your story," he said, again fixing her with a searching gaze.

"It is commonplace enough—the story of many, who, like myself, are among the flotsam and jetsam of this great cruel city. My name is Deane. My parents died when I was quite young, leaving me unprovided for, save the slender sum which paid for my training as a nurse—a career I chose for love of the work.

ant case in the country—an old lady, rich, half-crazy. Her maid, Martha Slater, was jealous of the influence I gained over her—a gold bracelet was missing, and this woman produced it, one day, saying that it had been found in my room.

"I tried to vindicate myself in vain, and I was dismissed from the Institute I worked for, for my late employer was a valuable client, whom it would be imprudent to offend. I have spent all my small savings in trying to get work; this morning I was turned out of my lodgings, for I could not pay the week's rent in advance, and I have pawned, or sold, my few possessions for food."

Paul Barrington had remained silent while Adela was telling her story.

He had a keen knowledge of the world—a wonderfully clear judgment of men and women.

His piercing gaze read Adela correctly. He was certain of the truth of her narrative.

A purpose shaped its life in his mind.

Adela's face was turned away to hide the tears with which her eyes were brimming over, or the strange expression which flitted across the inscrutable countenance of the man beside her might have warned her that it was perilous to trust one of whom she knew nothing.

"You are alone in the world—have absolutely no friends or relatives in London?" he said, slowly.

"None. I am reserved by nature, and do not make friends easily. I was called 'the recluse' at the Institute, for I did not care for the other nurses, and associated with them as little as possible—with a sad smile. 'Perchance it would have been better for me now had I taken more pains to conciliate them. But it is useless to regret the past.'"

"Useless to regret it, indeed! Rather bury it, and begin a new life from to-day. I think I can help you. But here is Gardner's Hotel. We will talk no more, however, till you have had something to eat. Oh! you need have no scruple, with quick interpretation of Adela's shrinking gesture. 'That dress of yours and my valise are passports anywhere.'"

He smiled as he pointed to the smart brown portmanteau with the words "Paul Barrington, M. D." painted in square black letters on its side.

Everything about Dr. Barrington bore the same air of spick-and-spanness.

His clothes were faultlessly cut.

His silk hat was lustrous, as if it had only just come out of the tissue-paper wrapper, and his well-groomed person harmonized with his outer garment.

His sleek hair, black as jet, contrasted vividly with the dead whiteness of his skin—almost disagreeably so—though he was undeniably a handsome man.

There was one peculiarity about his face which struck Adela unpleasantly. His eyes were narrow, and set somewhat obliquely, in the manner of an Oriental rather than of a European, and this defect gave him a furtive expression at times.

He was apt to look at one from half-closed lids, veiling his own thoughts, while some magnetic power compelled others to disclose theirs to him.

But now and then a sudden flash in the dark depths of those strange orbs spoke of stormy passions kept in check—an iron will—limitless ambition.

Adela Deane was too faint and exhausted to criticise very keenly the appearance of Paul Barrington.

He seemed a gentleman, and evidently wished to befriend her.

His position and her own excused the unconventionality of the situation, and she clung to the hope that he would give her work—so long vainly sought.

The waiter brought a steaming pot of fragrant tea and some cut lemons up to the private sitting room which was Dr. Barrington's, and set them, with dainty twisted rolls and golden shells of butter, on the table.

"Bring something more substantial, please, and a small decanter of brandy. This lady has had a long journey, and is tired and exhausted. Also order another room: she will stay here to-night, and leave with me to-morrow. By-the-by, has a gentleman called during my absence?" queried the doctor.

"Yes, sir. Card on mantelpiece. Said he would look in later, and as written something on the back."

The tiny oblong of white pasteboard was stuck in the edge of the mirror, and the name which it bore had infused a shade more of obsequiousness into the waiter's manner.

"The Honourable Cosmo Villiers, Atherton Towers, Eastbridge."

On the reverse side a few words were scribbled.

"Will see you later in the evening. You may expect a visit from Connie, who is in town. Be prepared."

The doctor knitted his brows as he tore up the card and threw it away.

Buried in apparently unpleasant thought, he stood staring into the mirror.

There was a jingle of dishes, and a savoury smell arose.

With a start, Dr. Barrington roused himself.

"Good! Fricassee chicken and green peas, with new potatoes. I'll dine now, and keep you company, instead of later. Did you ever taste tea made in the Russian fashion? No? I will prepare some for you, and you shall tell me how you like it. A dish of brandy will do you no harm. I insist—putting aside her outstretched hand. He purposely busied himself with the teapot and lemons, while Adela ate almost ravenously of the savoury food before her.

The hot tea was like nectar, and the brandy in it made her blood course more quickly through her veins, sending a glow from head to heel.

The doctor proceeded with his own meal, appearing too busy with it to notice her; but he marked the rich colour returning to his guest's cheeks, the brightness to her sunken eyes, with satisfaction.

Adela little dreamed that, had he not foreseen in her a possible instrument and aid, he would have let her perish in the gutter rather than throw her so much as a farthing.

"You have indeed been good to me. I feel a new creature," she said, at last, when the remains of their impromptu meal had been cleared away.

"That is all right. Now, to business. I will give you work, for which you will be paid well, on certain conditions. You may not care to accept them; if so, the remedy is in your own hands," with an expressive gesture towards the door. "Now, listen, and do not interrupt me, for time grows short," looking at his watch. "I expect a lady any minute, whom I wish you also to see. She is a sister of a private patient of mine—for I do not take general practice, but have a home for paying guests, we will call it, at the seaside, in the North of England. I receive, as inmates, persons who are not insane in the full meaning of the term, but who suffer from certain forms of delusion, rendering it necessary that they should be kept under supervision, and it requisite, restraint. In short, my establishment is a high-class, private asylum, though we avoid as much as possible any emphasis on the fact."

"You are married, then?" queried Adela, who had noticed Dr. Barrington's use of the plural pronoun.

It was a relief to think there would be a lady of the house.

"No. My sister, Miss Barrington lives with me; but she is something of an invalid, and has nothing to do with the inmates. I want a sensible, strong-minded woman, who has no nerves or fads, to help regulate the household, manage the servants, and keep our guests—we carefully avoid calling them patients—in good humour. By-the-by, can you play or sing?"

"Yes, both—a little, I am fond of music, but, naturally, have not had much time for it," Adela replied.

"Good. Outdoor pursuits—tennis, boating?"

"I play a fairly good game of the former, and row pretty well, I think. We lived near the river before my parents died, so I had plenty of practice."

"Good again. Have you had any experience with mental cases?" and last, but not least, are you nervous?"

"I have nursed several cases of the kind you describe, though, naturally, I have had nothing to do with dangerous insanity. But I may say I am not in the least nervous, and I have never had a day's illness in my life."

Dr. Barrington nodded approvingly.

"Just the sort of person I want. Well, Nurse Deane—I think you said that was your name?—I offer you the vacant post in my household, at the salary of a hundred a year. Yes—as she looked up, surprised at the largeness of the sum—it is high pay; but I am not a mean man. I shall exact of you a good deal in return—tact, discretion, secrecy, obedience to my directions, and, even if you think them strange, no questioning or argument. And, above all, loyalty to my interests, absolute silence as to what you may see and hear at Redcliffe Manor. Another thing, I give no holidays. Those who enter my employment stay in it—until they leave for good."

A peculiarly sinister expression flickered on his thin lips; but it was unobserved by Adela, as he was pacing the room while speaking, and, at the moment, his back was turned to her.

"You said you had no one belonging to you—no friends with whom you even correspond?"

The curious insistence in the tone struck Adela.

He had before asked the question.

"Why do you ask me this?" she interrogated, vaguely uneasy.

"I will be plain with you. My position, with regard to my patients and their friends is a delicate one. There is a skeleton in the cupboard of many a noble house, and were gossip respecting some of those under my roof to reach the outer world, my occupation would be gone. There is curiosity afoot at Redcliffe respecting the Manor and its inhabitants. Letters might be tampered with—intercepted—a thousand things.

"You are a handsome woman. If you

had a lover, he might hang about the village, or try to visit you. Both these things I should, naturally, have to forbid. You having no ties is an advantage to me—if a misfortune for yourself. I am frank, as you see; but, remember, you are in no way bound to accept my offer."

There was silence for a moment or two. Then it was broken by Adela.

"I will take the post, and agree to your conditions," she said, quietly. "I suppose I can leave your service at given notice of three months if there is dissatisfaction on either side?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" responded Dr. Barrington, easily. "But I do not think you will be unhappy at Redcliffe Manor. It is a luxurious home, and everything is done on the principle of a well-regulated private house. We have a splendid library and beautiful garden, beyond which our guests are not allowed to go without supervision. But I will not waste time on details now, for, it I mistake not, here is our visitor."

CHAPTER II.

A MYSTERIOUS LETTER.

"Miss Constance Villiers."

The waiter ushered in a tall, slender girl, elegantly dressed in an exquisite gown of French muslin, with picture hat and flowers to match.

She was not pretty, though her small regular features, and the finely pencilled eyebrows over her pale blue eyes, gave her an indescribable air of high breeding.

"Doctor Barrington!"—there was a pleading melancholy in the low refined voice. "I heard from Cosmo you were in town, and I could not help coming, though, I fear you have no good news to give me."

The doctor bowed with courtly grace over her hand, as he led her to a seat.

"Would I could contradict you, Miss Villiers," he sighed, deeply; "but, alas! I cannot."

There is no change—no shade of improvement?"

A sob choked the words.

"None whatever, I am grieved to say. In bodily health, Lord Erceidonne is well; but the fits of depression, the strange delusions, continue always, in spite of every effort to dispel them. And, I fear, there is little chance of his recovery. It would be wrong to deceive you with false hopes, gravely."

"My poor darling Ralph! Oh! Doctor Barrington, be merciful. If you have a heart try to soften Cosmo, and say that I may see him. He always loved me; perhaps it would do him good."

The tears coursed down Constance Villiers' pale cheeks.

"I regret to seem unfeeling, but I am sure Mr. Villiers is right. Lord Erceidonne is best without visitors. There is no knowing what turn his malady may take—all excitement is bad for him."

"Ralph would never hurt me, he loves me too well," she moaned. "Pray, pray let me see him—if but for a few minutes."

"My dear young lady it is impossible," said Dr. Barrington with a faint gesture of impatience. "Why prolong so painful a subject? Lord Erceidonne is well-cared for, and, in his lucid intervals, perfectly contented. Your visits might destroy any slender chances of his recovery. This lady"—pointing to Adela—"will endorse what I tell you. She understands the care of such mental cases as Lord Erceidonne's and is going down with me to-morrow, to help take charge of him."

But Constance Villiers hardly seemed to hear his last words.

Her pale face was flushed, her eyes shone like blue sparks of fire.

"Happy I—well cured for! I have no faith in you!" she cried, she cried scornfully. "You and Cosmo are leagued together in wickedness. I do not believe Ralph is really mad; or, if he is, you have driven him so by keeping him prisoner and separating him from human companionship!"

Then turning to Adela, she cried, as she pointed to Paul Barrington—

"Beware of that man—he is false—cruel. No human heart beats within his breast, but one cold as ice. Paul Barrington, if there is Justice in Heaven you and my brother Cosmo will one day have to answer for much; and such mercy as you have shown Ralph will them be your portion!"

Dr. Barrington rang the bell.

He was very white, and his lips were rigidly set, as he turned towards Constance.

"You will allow me to see you to your carriage?" he said, calmly, fixing her with the strange gaze Adela was already learning to know and dread.

Constance Villiers' sudden flash of spirit had burnt itself out already, as is the case with weak, impulsive natures.

Cold and trembling with the reaction, she obeyed, as in a dream.

In a few minutes, Paul came upstairs again.

"That is the sort of gratitude one gets for guarding other people's family secrets. I am sorry you should have heard such a tirade—only a sample of many. One gets used to them, fortunately. Lord Erceidonne has been with me some years."

"It is a sad story, to long to enter on now; but he is insane, and, I fear, hopelessly so. A great trouble to his family, and his brother, Cosmo Villiers, the heir, is anxious to keep the matter from the world, for his own and his sister's sake. But enough of this for to-night. I advise you to retire to rest. We leave London to-morrow by the ten o'clock express for the North."

Adela obeyed; but she felt disturbed and excited by the strange events which had crowded so thickly upon each other, and her temples ached and throbbed.

It was a sultry night, and she longed for a draught of cool water.

Her nurse's instinct forbade her to drink from the canteen on the washstand; but she recollected having seen a stone filter on the chiffonier in Dr. Barrington's sitting-room and glasses.

She went downstairs, and was about to knock, and apologise for her appearance,

when she heard angry voices within the room, the door being slightly ajar.

The doctor was speaking.

"I tell you it is impossible. You do not know how strict a watch is kept upon such places as mine, and, as it is, I have run enormous risks. Do you think I am fool enough to put my neck in a halter? No you must be patient for a while longer or I give up the whole thing. By-the-by, I hope you have brought the cheque you promised me. My expenses are large and—"

"My dear fellow, you are like the horse-leech," thickly. "On my word, it only seems yesterday I gave you five hundred. How long is the affair to drag on, eh?"

"You have been drinking heavily again," said Paul Barrington, sternly. "If you keep on in your present way of life, you will kill yourself before you come into your inheritance. I am taking a new woman down with me—the last one suspected and might have ruined us."

"Good Heavens, Barrington! You don't mean to say you let her go off the premises, knowing what would utterly destroy us both if—"

The speaker seemed suddenly sobered by fear.

"You may safely leave those details to me," with a grim laugh. "There is no need for uneasiness on that score. But your sister—I feel rather anxious—at all costs, she must be kept away."

"I suppose she treated you to one of her tantrums, as usual! A jolly time I have of it, I can assure you. I'll soon manage her, though. She can't go down to Redcliffe, for she hasn't a sou except what I dole out to her, and I want all the coin I can lay hands on just now," cunningly.

"Do not forget our compact—when my work is done," said Paul Barrington, sternly. "Your sister is to be my wife—her fortune by your father's will, untouched. Beware if you make away with a penny of it during your guardianship."

"Oh! well, I'll do my best. But you can't drag a woman to the altar of this nineteenth century. Connie hates you like poison. How you will ever induce her to marry you passes my comprehension."

"Leave that to me—when the time comes."

There was a sinister menace in the words which caused the listening women to shudder.

A movement in the room made Adela retreat hastily up the softly-carpeted stairs; but she paused at the landing, and saw Dr. Barrington take leave of Cosmo Villiers.

The latter was undersized, mean-looking man, with white bloated face, and furtive, shifty expression.

Adela Deane sank breathless into a chair, her brain in a whirl.

The floor seemed to give way under her feet.

Was it all a horrible dream?

Dr. Barrington her benefactor, a criminal of the blackest dye—for the conversation she had overheard between the two men left no room for doubt that some awful piece of wickedness had been planned and was being carried out at Redcliffe Manor.

Her first impulse was to fly—to seek the shelter of the streets, which, full of human misery and wickedness were yet safer than the unknown perils of the life before her.

Constance Villiers' strange words had filled her with vague misgiving, but she had put them down to anxiety and sorrow on her brother's account.

They came back to her now with overwhelming force.

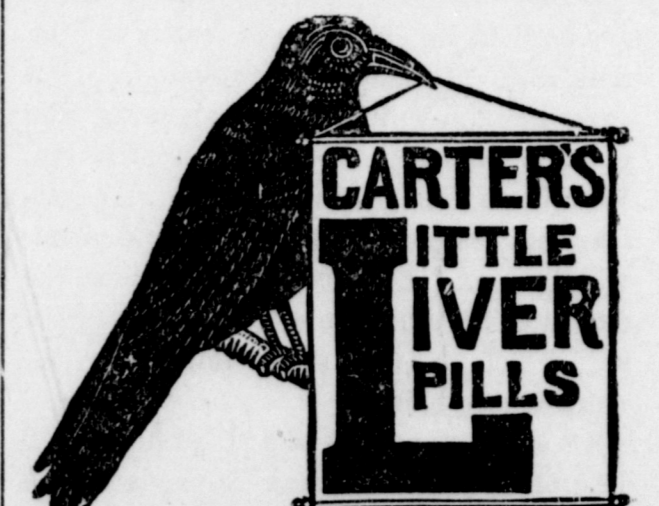
A wild idea came to her, of seeking Miss Villiers, and telling her all she had overheard; but the next moment she saw it would be useless.

The girl was evidently in her brother Cosmo's power, and it might bring terrible consequences upon her if he knew she had discovered his secret.

Besides, who would take the word of a friendless, destitute woman dismissed without a character for her last employment, against that of Paul Barrington?

She might swear to the conversation she had overheard between him and Cosmo Villiers, but it would be regarded as mere malicious invention, or the figments of a

Continued on Fifteenth Page.



SICK HEADACHE

Positively cured by these Little Pills.

They also relieve Distress from Dyspepsia, Indigestion and Too Hearty Eating. A perfect remedy for Dizziness, Nausea, Drowsiness, Bad Taste in the Mouth, Coated Tongue Pain in the Side, TORPID LIVER. They Regulate the Bowels. Purely Vegetable.

Small Pill. Small Dose. Small Price.

Substitution

the fraud of the day.

See you get Carter's,

Ask for Carter's,

Insist and demand

Carter's Little Liver Pills.

A HAMILTON LADY

Finds Laxa-Liver Pills a perfect

cure for Sick Headache.

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

—