

Linked by Fate

BY CHARLES GARVICE

Author of "The Verdict of the Heart," "A Heritage of Hate," "Nell of Shorne Mills," "Paid For," "A Modern Juliet," Etc.

[CONTINUED.]

With the clothes she stood up in—and they were mostly Polly's—and a small handbag, also Polly's, she found herself in the whirl of the crowded thoroughfare. She had remembered a cheap and quiet hotel in one of the streets in the Strand—Durham Street—at which she and her father had stayed many years ago, and she went there in a cab, and was fortunate enough to obtain a room. It was a small one, near the roof, and she sat down on the bed and looked around, and through the window at the opposite roof, with a sense of loneliness which she had never experienced, even in her worst moments, on the island, for Manning had been there to rely on, to cheer and encourage her.

She tried to drive all thoughts of the past from her mind and to fix it on the future, and when she had washed and rested she took out her money and counted it.

There were only a few pounds, and for a moment the reflection flashed across her that there, on the island, she had left wealth which, as Manning had declared, half cynically, was beyond the dreams of avarice.

But the island was far away, so far as to be the island of a dream, and her present needs were very near and pressing.

She remained in her room until the morning; then she rose early and, with every regard to economy, purchased some clothes. After breakfast she made a parcel of the things Polly had lent her and, with a few lines of gratitude, sent them to the address on the card—"26 Percy Street, Chelsea."

Then she set out to begin that most difficult of quests, the search for a livelihood. It need scarcely be stated that she looked through the advertisements in the daily papers. There were several that seemed to her suitable to her case, and she selected one which set forth the desire of "X. Y. Address Messrs. Sloper & Slyne, 249 Rutland Street, Regent Street," for a young lady secretary.

Nina, in the simple black dress she had bought, and with her veil down, found, not without some difficulty, the Rutland Street mentioned in the advertisement, and was somewhat surprised to find that, instead of a private house, which she had expected it to be, it was an office over a rather seedy-looking bonnet shop.

Knocking at the door, which bore in black paint the name of Sloper & Slyne, she was bidden by a shrill voice to enter, and, obeying, found herself in a small room furnished, as far as a desk and two chairs went, as an office.

The first thing that struck Nina was the strong perfume of hair oil, with which she rightly credited the sleek, black head of a young man who was seated at the desk surveying himself in a small, crooked mirror which hung conveniently above it. Seeing that he was an extremely commonplace youth, with a face spotted like the pard, one would have thought that the glass could have afforded him little satisfaction. Nevertheless he did not withdraw his eyes from it as he drawled in a rich cockney accent:

"Well, what is it?"

"I wish to see Messrs. Sloper & Slyne," said Nina.

At the sound of the musical voice the youth swung round, opened his mouth—it was like a gash across his ill-favored face—and stared at her with watery eyes.

"Oh," he said at last, as if he were slowly recovering from the shock of her beautiful face and low, sweet voice, "you want to see the guv'nors? Sorry, they're both away. Gone on special business to the Marquis of Quibsy. Wired for this morning. Awfully sorry. P'raps I'll do. I'll get their confidential clerk, you know."

"I came in answer to this advertisement," said Nina, taking it from her purse and laying it on the desk. The youth looked at it curiously, critically, as if it were a curiosity of the rarest kind.

"Oh!" he said at last. "Ah, yes. Quite so! So you want a situation as secretary?"

Nina expressed assent.

"Yes; will you take a chair?" He dragged one forward. Nina sat down and waited, and the youth stared at her and stroked the place where, if the gods are good to him, a moustache will some time grow. "Well," he said, when the silence and the stare had become almost intolerable to Nina, "this place has gone."

Nina promptly rose, saying, "I'm sorry. Good-day."

"Oh, here, stop a moment, you know!" exclaimed the youth in an aggrieved tone. "Don't go like that! There's no hurry, is there? This thing's gone, but there may be something else to suit you. Lemme see."

He turned—his eyes left Nina's face slowly and reluctantly—to the desk, and opening a ledger ran through the pages, muttering in a sing-song voice to himself, but glancing the while out of the corner of his watery, vulgar little eyes at Nina.

"Nursery governess, £50 a year. Ah, that's gone. 'Lady help in a nobleman's family.' That's gone. 'Companion to a clergyman's widow.' Filled up last week. 'Secretary to a Member of Parliament.' And that's gone. Don't seem to be anything left to suit you at present. You'd better let me put you on the books, Miss—Miss—"

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"Wood," said Nina.

"Wood. Right. And address?"

"Hickley's Hotel, Durham Street," said Nina.

"Right. One guinea booking-fee, please," he remarked in a business-like tone.

"Is this a registry for situations?" asked Nina with pardonable surprise.

"Of course it is!" he responded, briskly. "What did you think it was, a chessmonger's? Sloper & Slyne—sorry they're not in; they'd be glad to see you—employment agents. See? I'll enter your name and let you know if anything turns up likely to suit you. Though, by the way," he added, with a glance at her, "it would be better if you looked in now and again."

Nina smiled not at her ignorance and unsophistication, reader—was foolish enough to take a sovereign and a shilling from her purse and place them on the desk. The youth caught them up, as if he feared they might fly away if he lacked promptitude, and put them inside the desk.

"That's all right," he said, as it assuredly was from Messrs. Sloper & Slyne's point of view. "You look in again; early and often, you know. Come in to-morrow—in the afternoon. I get back from lunch about four. See? Good-morning."

He got off his seat and opened the door and stood gazing with his gash of a mouth stretched in an admiring grin as Nina went down the stairs.

"My, she's green!" he ejaculated as he tore himself away from the door and returned to the desk. "But she's prime, prime! Wonder if she'll come back, or whether she'll spot the game!"

Nina was not without her suspicions; but she did not spot the game, and the next afternoon—oh, the desolation and the solitude of that day in London, in a place which owned to a population of four millions, and not one friend for the solitary girl!—she again presented herself at Messrs. Sloper & Slyne's.

The youth was in his accustomed seat, and carried a pungent cigarette that mingled amiably with the scent of hair-oil—in his loose and bibulous lips.

"Ah, how are you?" he said with a mixture of impudence and deference, for the refined, beautiful face, with its grave, violet eyes averted even him.

"Glad to see you. Guv'nor's still away. The Marquis can't part with 'em. Important business. Sorry to say nothing has turned up." He referred to the ledger and mumbled over it as before. "Rather a slack time just now. Dessay you find time hang 'eavy on your hands. Do myself sometimes. Now, what do you say?"—he had sufficient grace to stammer and look uneasy—"what do you say to doing one of the halls this evenin'?"

"I'm not particularly flush—Sloper & Slyne don't pay me a princely salary, oh, by no means!—but I can run to a couple of dress circles for the Frivolity. Know the Frivolity, I s'pose?" with a leer; "I dessay we can manage a bit o' supper afterwards, eh?"

Nina regarded him with an amazement which evidently disconcerted him, for he turned away and eyed the glass and fingered the incipient moustache with some embarrassment.

Nina leant forward in her chair, her heart beating fast with a sensation of disappointment tempered by disgusted amusement.

"Are you asking me to go with you—with you—somewhere?"

"That's so," he said uneasily. "You'd better."

Nina laughed bitterly, for her eyes were suddenly opened.

"Tell me—though it isn't necessary—is this pretence of business, of getting me a situation, only a pretence? Tell me the truth, please."

Something in the musical voice, so low and yet so clear and commanding, compelled the youth to an unaccustomed veracity which afterwards astonished him.

"Well, you know," he said, grudgingly, "if you drive me into a corner—and that's where you are driving me, don't you know—it's something like what you call it. We're a registry office. We take the fees, don't you know. As to the situation"—he shrugged his narrow shoulders—"we might get 'em or we mightn't; most often and generally we mightn't."

Nina rose pale and statuesque in her anger.

"But don't you cut up rough! Look here, you're no good for any of this 'secretary' or 'companion' business. You're a lady; anybody can see that with 'alf an eye. What you want, with that face of yours, is the theatre or the 'alls. You come with me to the Frivolity and we'll talk it over."

Nina rose, pale to the lips, but smiling.

"My good boy!" she said. "Haven't you a mother, a sister? Is there no one to teach you—no, I will not go with you to this place. Will you give me back my guinea?"

"The youth's face fell.

"Can't!" he ejaculated. "Entered it in the books. More than my place is worth. Sure you won't come with me? Pleasant evenin'."

As Nina moved towards the door he followed her.

"Hi!" he said. "Look here. You're new at this game. Take my advice and cut it. There's no good in it. They'll—Sloper & Slyne or anyone else, it don't matter—pocket your coin and do nothing for you. Cut the secretaryship business. Better—"

CHAPTER X.

The Earl of Leshborough!

The title rang in Manning's ears mockingly. He fought with his emotion and with a gesture of shame and apology raised his face from his hands.

Lady Letchford had slipped away—with the tears in her own eyes—but Sir Charles still stood beside his friend.

"I beg your pardon," said poor Vane; "it—it is so sudden, and the boy—great Heaven, to think that he—and Augustus—are dead, and that I—I, who never dreamed of it should stand in their shoes!"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

Opportunity.

"In about seven cases out of eleven," said Uncle Eben, "when a man comes are'n axin' yoh foh advice he's gwine to give yoh a chance to offer to lend him money."

on the stage. Why, for, you're made for it! And I say, won't you be nice and friendly, miss? Won't you join me in a regular beno of an evenin'?"

Nina left him, pleading and expostulating, and made her way out into Regent Street.

Early in the afternoon as it was the well known thoroughfare was crowded, and she was jostled and elbowed as she made her way to the Strand. She went back to the hotel discouraged and dismayed. She had spent a guinea at the sham registry office, and saw no prospect of employment. She was too tired, too heart-sick to eat, and she spent the rest of the evening in the attic near the sky. At nightfall, weary of her solitude and the thoughts that weighed upon her like a physical burden, she went out. The streets were crowded and her solitude in the midst of the multitude was almost intolerable. She made her way to the Embankment and, leaning against the stone work which keeps the slow but mighty Thames in bounds, looked listlessly yet longingly at the brown water sweeping placidly towards the sea.

There, across the ocean, to which the tide was tending, was the island where she had known a happiness beyond the power of words to express. Was Vane Manning, her husband—her husband!—still there? Was he mourning for her? No; for there was the unknown woman, Judith! All his thoughts would be of her, of the woman he loved, and of whom he murmured when he slept.

She leant her head on the cold stone and gave way to the despair which is so fitting an emotion to "the finest thoroughfare in Europe," and the most desolate, the most heartbreaking in its magnitude and solitude to one in Nina's situation.

A footfall roused her from her absorption. A woman in most unwomanly rags crept up to her and in weak and abject tones begged of her.

"Just enough for a night's lodging, my dear?" she moaned. "I haven't slept in a Christian bed for the last three nights!"

Nina raised her head and looked at the woman. A wave of pity swept over her. How long, or, rather how soon would it be before she herself was in a similar plight? She took out her purse and, in the light streaming from the Savoy Hotel—the strains of the supper band floated towards her on the night air—she was hunting for half a crown, when a man—the woman's accomplice—hustled against her, snatched her purse and, with the woman, disappeared as suddenly as if they were as unsubstantial as the mist that was rising over the river. Nina uttered a cry of dismay and started after them, but a policeman who had witnessed the latter part of the familiar act stopped her with a friendly hand on her shoulder.

"No use, no use! They've got clear off into the Strand. You should never think of taking your purse out on the Embankment and, begging your pardon"—as he looked suddenly at her face with its pure, distraught eyes—"this is no place for you. Shall I call a cab, miss?"

"No, no!" said Nina, bethinking herself that she had no money left. "It—it does not matter. Thank you—and good-night."

The theft of her purse had left her penniless. She tried to face the situation bravely, to laugh, but the laugh would not come. Unconsciously she turned and walked up the Embankment. It was, at any rate, quiet and solitary, and she craved solitude and quiet. She had to think, to decide where she would go. She was penniless, friendless, in this great city and already she had found how heartless it could be to the friendless and penniless.

She made her way slowly, mechanically to the Chelsea end of the Embankment. She had no thought of Polly in her mind, and it was with a gasp of surprise rather than relief that, in the garish gaslight, she saw the name of Polly's street staring at her from the end house.

Still mechanically, and half unconsciously, she walked up the street, and, as if in a dream, stood before the house with the number Polly had given her.

By this time she was weak and faint with fatigue and excitement, and she stood, swaying to and fro, and gazing at the house. At this moment a hansom cab drove up and a girl alighted, paid the cabman—after the usual dispute—and was entering the house, when her eyes fell upon the figure clinging to the rails.

Polly—for it was she—hesitated a moment, then she went up to Nina.

"Now, then," she said, in a matter-of-fact voice, "what are you doing here; what is the matter?"

Nina turned her white face, and Polly uttered an exclamation of surprise and dismay.

"Miss Wood! Not really! You, and here! No, cabbie, not a sixpence more! I know your fare! Off you go! Miss Wood! Oh, my dear, what has happened? Here, come in with me! Dear, dear! To think that I should find you here! And like this! Oh, come in; come in!"

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Atlantic Time. Trains daily except Sunday unless otherwise stated.

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7.30 a. m.—Mixed, via Gibson Branch, for Woodstock, Presque Isle, Edmundston and intermediate stations. Leaves St. Mary's 8.10 a. m.

9.50 a. m.—For St. John and East.

5.50 p. m.—For St. Stephen, Houlton, Woodstock, Boston, etc. Montreal and West. Palace Sleeper Fredericton Jet to Montreal. Pullman Sleeper Fredericton Jet to Boston.

9.00 p. m.—For St. John and East.

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No. 317 Suburban for Marysville. 6.15

No. 318 Suburban for Marysville. 6.25