

'Oh! if you really knew, auntie, what dreadful suffering there is in the world!'

'If I only knew! Well, of course, I could not possibly have that profound knowledge of life which the girl of the period claims, but I have sufficient experience to know that what an individual may hope to accomplish in the way of alleviating human misery is so insignificant that it may be regarded as what the scientific gentlemen call a "negligible quantity."

'And what shall we do, Auntie? Shall we shut our ears to the cry of distress? Is there not an impulse which bids us run to the succor of the weak?'

'Precisely so, and like all impulses it must be guided and restrained that it does not hurry us into futile extravagances. One's first duty is to oneself.'

The two women formed a striking contrast, the elder one elaborately gowned and jewelled and comfortably cynical of aspect; the younger, in her simple attire of white, recalling the freshness and fairness of a budding lily.

'What is one to think,' continued Mrs. Weston, as if addressing an imaginary jury, 'of a young lady of good birth, of ample means, of varied accomplishments, of—ah—personal attractiveness derived from the best of families—'

'And in charge of the most distinguished of chaperons,' interposed Lucy, mischievously.

'Who actually prefers the society of paupers to that of her peers, and finds the atmosphere of a drawing-room quite uncongenial when compared with that of some dingy tenement-house?'

'I am afraid you put the case rather too strongly, Aunt.'

'Not a bit, my dear. It often surprises me that you do not don some hideous uniform like that of the Salvation Army, and go to live in some dreadful place on the east side.'

The young girl burst into hearty laughter at the picture thus conjured up.

'Yes, you laugh at all my remonstrances. That seems the only reward I get for my interest in your welfare.'

'Please don't say that, Auntie, dear. I know I am awfully headstrong and selfish, but I never mean to be in the least cruel or ungrateful.'

As, Mrs. Weston's eyes softened momentarily, Lucy took up a sheaf of letters from her desk.

'Now, here are some of the cases of distress which have come under my notice as secretary of the Ladies' Slumming Association.'

Mrs. Weston adjusted her gold-rimmed glasses and received the letters as if they were documents of a highly suspicious character.

'Mercy!' she cried after a while, with a little scream, 'what does that mean?' and as she held out a letter at arm's length her face expressed the utmost horror and alarm.

'Oh! that one marked "for personal attendance," said Lucy. 'Let me explain, Aunt. That relates to a young widow, a most worthy and deserving woman, who has striven very nobly to do her duty by her two children. A few days ago the eldest child fell ill of typhoid fever, so that the unhappy woman is in need of every assistance and encouragement.'

'But you do not intend to see her personally—to visit a house of infection! For the sake of your reputation for sanity, tell me that you do not entertain such a preposterous notion as that.'

'That was my intention, Auntie.'

For several moments Mrs. Weston sat helplessly in her chair as if overcome by the enormity of the disclosure. When she recovered her self-possession she spoke in a voice of desperate calmness:

'Lucy, I trust that now at the eleventh hour you will not refuse to open your eyes to the folly—I had almost said wickedness—of the course you are pursuing. You have no longer any excuse for remaining blind to the responsibilities of your position.'

'What would you have me do, Aunt—turn and flee in a moment of danger?'

'Oh! don't address that sentimental cant to me. You seem to be animated by the purest madness and Quixotism.'

'It would need a great deal of Quixotism,' retorted Lucy, 'to combat the selfish materialism which seems such a fashionable creed nowadays.'

Mrs. Weston uttered a sigh of despair. Very well, child, she said, 'pay no attention to my remonstrances if you will, but there is another way of regarding the matter. There is Mr. Lee to be considered.'

Lucy's eyes sought the floor in some confusion.

'In spite of your eccentricities,' said the good lady—and a toss of her head seemed to add, 'thanks

in great measure to my skilful generalship—you have won the affection of one of the best young men in New York society. Only three months remain until your marriage. Now, do you think Mr. Lee would give any measure of approval to the proceeding you contemplate?'

With these words she played her trump card. She was regarding the embarrassed girl with a smile of anticipated victory, when the door suddenly opened and Mr. George Lee was announced.

'What a coincidence!' said Mrs. Weston, greeting him warmly. 'Lucy and I were just speaking of you.'

'Yes, indeed,' he responded with a smile, 'my visits are so rare and my personality is so interesting that I do not think it a very remarkable coincidence.'

Mrs. Weston laughed diplomatically. 'Your good humor is never failing, George. I notice you are looking rather pale. Too much attention to business, I suppose?'

'You have framed a most judicious answer for me, Mrs. Weston, and I cordially adopt it.'

'I really believe that you and Lucy are inclined to be martyrs to what you conceive your duty. Now, I will tell you what I would do if I had my way after the marriage ceremony has been performed.'

Mrs. Weston shook her finger playfully at the young couple. 'I would banish the pair of you from New York for not less than twelve months.'

'What a dreadful tyrant she is, Lucy!' said Mr. Lee. 'Just fancy the sufferings of New York and its inhabitants in our absence!'

Mrs. Weston soon found occasion to leave the room, and the lovers engaged for some time in that style of conversation which, however intrinsically interesting, history generally eschews.

'I want to ask you a question, George,' said Lucy at last.

'Fifty, if you like.'

'Take care, perhaps one may prove more than sufficient.'

'Let us have it, then. I hope it is not a conundrum.'

'Please be serious. Now, as you are aware, I take somewhat of an interest in charitable work.'

'Yes, I know that in that as well as every other respect you are an angel.'

Lucy ignored the remark and went on in a voice of intense seriousness: 'You know that it is impossible to look after the needy and distressed without encountering some inconvenience and occasionally danger. Now, would you counsel me to draw back on that account?'

'Let us understand each other, Lucy. I presume you mean the risk of contagion or something of that sort?'

'Precisely so.'

For some moments he looked with a troubled expression into the pure depths of the girl's yearning eyes.

'Well, you see,' he said, 'since we became engaged, Lucy, you and I, so far as we are mutually concerned, are no longer free agents. You belong to me and I belong to you. When you run a risk of the kind you mention you jeopardise all that is dearest to me in the world.'

'But then, George, if you should be called on to fight for your country I would have you go even though my heart would break.'

'And I would go,' he murmured, enthusiastically, 'for then I should be answering a call which only the basest refuse to hear—the call of my country.'

'Is there no higher call? Is there not the cry of suffering humanity—the call of the crucified Redeemer?'

Lucy's ringing words brought embarrassment to the young man's good-natured face. George Lee was highly cultured, broad-minded, and as the phrase run, 'a thoroughly good fellow,' but his interest in religious matters was of a purely academical description.

'I am afraid, Lucy,' he said, 'that the spirit of self-sacrifice is too strong within you. Promise for my sake that you will not endanger yourself.'

He held her hands and pleaded with her earnestly, but she would only say: 'Whatever I may do, George, I hope will be best for you and me,' and with this enigmatical consolation he took his departure.

Lucy Bingham's life had been such as to foster self-sacrifice and independence of thought. Her father, who idolized her and whom she loved with corresponding devotion, had died when she was quite a little girl and left her without a natural protector; for her mother, a butterfly of fashion, ever on 'the wing of