

slightly, a startled look in his eyes. He gazed, with a feeling of growing wonder and dismay, at the pretty face opposite, realising with a sort of shock that his little Peggy was really quite grown up.

'Why, daddy dear,' Peggy put in anxiously, 'you look startled! Did she—'

'I am startled,' Mr. Linville returned, with his slow, whimsical smile. 'I have just discovered the amazing fact that my little girl is—a woman.'

'Oh! Peggy laughed. 'Is that such a calamity? Girls, like other people, must grow up, you know.'

'Yes, yes, I suppose so!' her father returned vaguely.

Peggy laughed outright; then suddenly became grave.

'She has invited me to attend some "affair" she is giving on the tenth, and wishes me to remain for the week-end as her guest,' she explained rather hurriedly, fearing that he might ask to read the letter which contained such unkind allusions to himself. 'She also enclosed a cheque, with the request that I procure suitable wearing apparel.'

The indignant thrill in the clear young voice was quite apparent; but Dick Linville chose to ignore it.

'Aunt Caroline is quite right,' he said slowly. 'I have been both headstrong and selfish.'

'She is rude and—and horrid!' Peggy cried hotly.

'Reserve your judgment, my dear,' he said quietly. 'until you have learned the facts in the case. The subject is a painful one, and—'

'Then why speak of it?' Peggy could not refrain from saying. 'It cannot really matter.'

'But it does matter; and I must speak of it, else you will not understand,' Mr. Linville said firmly. 'I owe it to Aunt Caroline and to my conscience to put the whole matter before you, that you may be able to judge fairly.'

'But I shall return the cheque,' Peggy said decidedly, her small head held high.

'Wait!' her father commanded. 'You are naturally kind-hearted and usually fair-minded. I think you will see that it will be best not to return it.'

He sat for some moments, staring into the depths of his coffee-cup, a slight color in his usually pale face, his fingers playing nervously with a spoon beside his plate. Then, squaring his shoulders, he lifted his head suddenly, his face quite pale again.

'As you know, my parents died when I was but a child,' he began abruptly. 'Aunt Caroline de Ville, my mother's sister, became a second mother to me; and when her only child, Vincent de Ville, a lad two years my senior, sickened and died, she centred all her affections and worldly hopes in me.'

He paused for an instant, frowning into his plate; then, with a sigh, continued:

'I was always stubborn, "pig-headed," I have often been called, bent upon having my own way at any cost. My aunt, a power in the circle in which she moved, was equally strong-willed. As I grew from boyhood into manhood, our wills often clashed, and (I admit it with shame) in nine cases out of ten, I carried the day. But the upheaval came when, my education finished, my aunt tried to force me to enter my uncle's bank, to learn how to take care of the great fortune that was to be mine some day, she said. I know now she was right; but at the time my whole irresponsible, visionary nature revolted at the idea of spending golden years in the commonplace and uncongenial task of counting money and balancing book accounts. My mind was filled with wonderful visions and dreams; and, with the egotism and unbounded assurance of callow youth, I demanded the right to live my own life.'

After an instant's pause, he went on hurriedly, as if anxious to finish:

'One day we quarrelled. In my blind, headstrong passion, I forgot all she had done for me. The debt of gratitude which I owed her a life's devotion could scarcely repay. I had some means of my own, and I went abroad, in search of the care-free life of which I had dreamed. For nearly two years I led a Bohemian sort of existence—scribbling when the notion seized

me, dreaming impossible dreams—in a word, an idle, listless life, that shocked my aunt, and frightened her into writing me to return. If I must scribble and dawdle through life, she said, do it at home.

'I might have returned, but it was then I met and married your mother. She was a sweet, gentle girl, much too good for me; but we fell desperately in love with each other, and, after a very short courtship, were married. She was the last of a proud old family, and had no relatives to interfere. For three years we were blissfully, ideally happy. All my impossible dreams of earthly joy were realised. Your mother was a devout Catholic. The beauty of her religion appealed to my artistic sense, and I was always ready to accompany her to church. The music, the lights and incense delighted me; and most of all I loved to watch her rapt face as she knelt in prayer. I know a goodly share of those prayers were offered for my conversion.'

He drew a deep breath, passing his hand for an instant across his eyes. Peggy half rose from her chair, but he motioned her to keep her seat.

'I have told you before,' he resumed, 'how the light gradually dawned in my soul. I was baptised and received into the Catholic Church. And then, as if her work were finished, your mother died. When the first wild grief had subsided, I awoke to my duties as a father. You were but a year old, and needed constant care—a woman's care. In my trouble and perplexity, I turned instinctively to Aunt Caroline, the only mother I had ever known. I had received but one letter from her since my marriage—a letter filled with such bitter reproach, together with such unkind allusions to my "Papist" wife, that I never answered it. But now, in my loneliness and despair, I determined to take you to Aunt Caroline, to—'

'O father!' Peggy cried, starting up in dismay. 'You never told me that! And did she—she—'

Mr. Linville nodded.

'She—refused to see either of us,' he said without a trace of resentment. 'Her husband had died only a few days before, and she was plunged in deep grief at the time. I had been a great disappointment to her—how great, I never knew until this morning' (tapping the letter). 'She had no religious views to sustain her, and she grew bitter and cynical. I do not wonder now, and I do not blame her, that she sent me back as I had come—to the life I had, against all entreaties and expostulations, deliberately chosen. It was only what I richly deserved, but it seemed a little hard at the time. Wait! I have not much more to tell. I came down here to the old home; and, hunting up my old nurse Dinah, persuaded her (she did not need much persuading) to come home with me. But to return to Aunt Caroline. She is a woman of wide culture and experience, and would be a great help to you in—in many ways.'

'We do not need her help—you and I,' said Peggy, a little proudly. Then she added earnestly: 'But I should like to know her, daddy dear!'

Mr. Linville looked relieved.

'You shall know her,' he answered decidedly. 'Father Tracy, to whom I have told the whole wretched story of youthful folly and selfishness, was urging me only last week to make another attempt to see her, and ask her forgiveness before it was too late. God is so good, my child! This invitation, coming just now, makes the way easy. We will both go to Aunt Caroline's party.'

'Really?' Peggy cried joyfully. 'Oh, I shall be only too glad to go with you!'

All her resentment and indignation vanished. Warm-hearted and impulsive, she thought only of the pending reconciliation; her vivid fancy picturing many pleasant scenes.

'Aunt Caroline speaks of Uncle Robert's great-nephew, Dr. Chalmers, as being a guest at The Maples. I knew his mother.'

Peggy started slightly, struck by a new note in her father's voice. It was almost as if he were soliciting her favor for this young man. But she dismissed the thought instantly. He might have added that