In Loco Parentis

BY MARGARET SUTTON BRISCOE

"NOW listen, dear little girl," said Courtney. "Do you see that pile of mail the postman has just handed in to me? I'll promise to leave it all, right on that little table, and not touch it, if you will run away while I finish this paper—it must be posted to-night. Then, before I open my mail, I shall have a half-hour free for our game."

The little lame child lifted her pretty, docile face, wistful and disappointed, and Courtney went on hastily:

"As I came up the street to-day, what do you think I saw? A man on a corner selling— No, I won't tell you now what I bought of him, but they are in that small box over there on the table yonder. Take the box off with you as you go, dear, and open it. But mind you bring it back with you on the stroke of half past five. I want to play with them too. Now look at that clock, child. Look at it! Run away, run away!"

Before the door closed on the slow-moving crutches, the bright swaying head, he was deep in his paper. It had been his wise intention to avoid intimacy with his tenants, unknown to him before they chanced to rent the rear rooms of his too large apartment, but no man with a heart in his bosom—not Courtney, certainly—could have turned away the small, wistful figure that came one rainy day on hesitating crutches to his door.

"I just wanted—please, might I?—to look out of a front window for a little while. We haven't a single one."

Courtney had lifted the child in his arms, dragged the divan close to his street window, piling the cushions high upon it; and there enthroned she spent the whole long afternoon, while he wrote and watched the delicate face light with pleasure; noted with pity the fragile body, so unchildlike, so quiet, and determined that the freedom of his front window should be hers from that hour. Mrs. Bryant, his tenant, in her customary negligee of toilet, one hand helplessly clutching at some vacancy at her throat, came anxiously in pursuit of her child; but Courtney had courteously disposed of Mrs. Bryant, still apologizing, and kept the runaway. Miss Ireland was an envoy less easy to dismiss than her disordered, ever-bewildered aunt. The chief bread-winner and the virtual head of this little waif family, adrift in a great city and with no apparent backing, she worked early and late, her busy pencil and typewriter keeping the wolf from the door. The burden of being the only practical member of a household composed of a child and three women naturally gave to her a position of authority,—which did not, however, extend over her landlord, as Courtney laughingly ventured to remind her. As he looked down from his height of six feet and several inches on her slight and graceful figure, her troubled young face, he had found himself wondering, as often before, why he did not always see her subtle, flowerlike quality of beauty. Once awakened to its charm, his education had been swift, though it was not the brilliant, sparkling type of his boyish ideal of beauty—hardly yet outgrown. Her exquisite delicacy of coloring with its faint rose-petal flush, deepened by her insistence; the clear-tinted gray eyes and sweet breadth of brow under the fair hair; the dainty, pointed chin; the lovely curving of the lips when she smiled her pretty, shy smile —were all more as a soft bloom, independent of actual beauty or the freshness of youth, permanent and fascinating, with the promise of a riper and richer charm.

As she stood waiting, still hesitating, in his doorway, Courtney well understood the meaning of her reluctance to yield her point. With the same quick and anxious caution she had tried to rebuild each breach as it was made in the invisible wall dividing the apartment.

Half-tone plate engraved by F. A. Pettit

"I JUST WANTED TO LOOK OUT OF A FRONT WINDOW"

Courtney had at first heartily approved of the set barrier, but growing interest and perhaps a little perversity had weakened his attitude. His blue eyes, usually too laughing or too lazy for contest, met Miss Ireland's entreating gray eyes with a smiling obstinacy as impassable as was his tall figure and broad shoulders blockading his doorway against the recapture of Rose. No, the beautiful child had come to him herself, touching him deeply by her innocent confidence of welcome. She should stay, and she should come again and as often as she would. Miss Ireland yielded at last, perforce and unconvinced, and Rose held her triumphant coign of vantage until joined by her older sister, Delia,—also, ostensibly, in pursuit of the child. Then Courtney yielded the little one as swiftly as he was permitted to do so, and with a guilty sense that Miss Ireland had been right. He had for the moment forgotten the complication of Delia. Delia, with her enticing prettiness, her mischievous charm, her easy disregard of anything which he or the world might say, could not be lightly forgotten. From the first Courtney had dimly appreciated that difficulties might arise concerning Delia. He was not a self-deceiver, and knowing his own temperament as gay and gregarious, was aware that the point of weakness might lie near at home. The privacy of his study had hitherto been sacred. That sanctuary now violated, a half-amused consternation told him what a security was lost. And yet, for the gay, kindly young soul of him, he could not continue to be as wise as he knew his conditions demanded—as wise, for instance, as was Miss Ireland. When Mrs. Bryant, bewildered by any decision that must be made in her niece's absence, came hesitatingly to him for advice, heeding his words as if inspired, he knew that this was a habit to be discouraged—and deliberately encouraged it. It was the same history with the intrusions of Rose. Concerning the intrusions of Delia—but of these anon.

Miss Ireland herself asked nothing of him, and indeed, as it seemed to Courtney, accepted no service which she could with civility avoid. Once, meeting her carrying little Rose with her crutches up the public stairway, Courtney had ventured a remonstrance, as he caught up the child and swung her to his own broad, high shoulder.

"'Assumption of the Virgin'! You're a saint—aren't you, Rose?" he said, laughing. "Miss Ireland, she is far too heavy for you to carry. I wish you would promise me not to do this—not when I am at home. I am broader and taller than you, and just across the hall."

Miss Ireland had smiled her pretty smile of curving lips and shy eyes, and thanked him. She never called on him for this or any other service. She was not inaccessible when Courtney deliberately sought her; he had no discourtesy to complain of; but a casual intimacy, due to the same roof covering them, was plainly what she intended to and did avoid. Young as she was and totally inexperienced in worldly training, she compelled Courtney to a wondering respect for her sensitive dignity that taught exactly when the delicate line of reserve should properly be drawn for herself—and also for him.

Had he known the truth, he would have understood. Every instinct of her womanhood was aiding her. He had dropped into her overburdened life like a fairy prince, with his charming gayety, his laughing blue eyes in his serious face, his thoughtful, courtly deference to herself, his goodness to Rose, his old-world courtesy to her aunt,—above all, this half-laughing attitude of growing responsibility for them, to whom he owed no care whatever, had knocked on her anxious heart, poor child, and before she knew that she was giving more than the gratitude which was his due she had yielded what he had never asked. She had kept her secret perfectly, almost from herself, hardly allowing a conscious struggle against what she would not admit existed. But it was his care for Rose, her own first and tenderest thought, that was making the task most difficult. The child adored him and prattled of him constantly, of all he said or did, in the quaint, poetic, literal fashion of isolated children. Miss Ireland listened at times with a gratitude intense and breathless. She alone fathomed all that Courtney was silently and patiently laboring for with the unconscious child, and saw with amazement and self-abasement what

he was accomplishing where she had failed. From the day of her first invasion, Rose had become Courtney's daily, welcomed visitor. The divan was never pushed back to its old place, but remained at the window always ready for her, while the intimacy thus begun between the little lame child and the young man ripened quickly to its close understanding, peculiarly tender on Courtney's part, of infinite value to the child.

It had troubled Courtney, on this busy afternoon, to send Rose from him, postponing the game he had promised to her, and he was writing his paper against time, to be surely ready for her on her return at the hour named, when a knock at his door interrupted him.

"Tap. Tap." A hesitating sound, as if the hand that rapped had regretted the summons midway. Courtney rose, moving softly to the door, and peering through the ground-glass panel into the dim hallway without. The shadowy figure there was not that of a child, but taller, a slight figure with head bowed as if listening for a footfall within the room. As he thought! Delia again!

Courtney flung the door wide open.

"You little rascal! Didn't I tell you— Oh! Ah! I—I beg your pardon, Miss Ireland. I thought it was—"

He checked himself and stood looking, he feared, as foolish as he felt. He had no desire that Miss Ireland should learn who was expected, and he had a shrewd idea that she knew only too well.

DELIA COULD NOT BE LIGHTLY FORGOTTEN

"Won't you come in?" he asked, and was surprised when, after a second of hesitation, she crossed the threshold. She would never enter his study when she knew that he was there. Courtney drew an easy chair near his hearth.

"Won't you sit here?" he asked, eagerly, and again he was agreeably surprised when Miss Ireland took the chair he offered.

He sat down at the opposite side of his hearth, wondering how he might best break this awkward silence, and regretting with vexation his unfortunate mistake at the doorway, which he felt was the cause of Miss Ireland's evident confusion, her flushed silence. She was not looking at him, but, as if to avoid his eyes, was gazing into the fire; and as he watched her the sharp contrast between her and her cousin struck Courtney forcibly, — not for the first time. There could be only a slight difference between their ages, and yet, when Delia sat, as in this room she usually elected to sit, perched on Courtney's study table, her pretty little hands laced about one knee, her amazingly small foot swinging gayly, as it were in the breeze, it had never struck him as conduct inconsistent with what might properly be expected of her age, or of those charming and dainty members. If Miss Ireland should suddenly—but the idea was impossible. Almost with the first time he had seen her, Miss Ireland had for some unexplainable reason vaguely recalled to Courtney an old garden he had known and loved as a boy. It was a simple, purely old-fashioned garden, with not a modern flower in its borders, and noted for its wealth of delicately tinted nasturtiums that ran in profusion over the stone walls and trellises, lifting their soft bloom on high, slight stems, bending and swaying in every breath of air, always graceful, sensitive, yet never losing that pliant poise, half stiff, half yielding—a charm wholly their own. As he now sat watching Miss Ireland, this vague, fantastic resemblance again was haunting Courtney, and suddenly he identified it. It was the nasturtiums she was like in the garden! Of course the nasturtiums. There was about her just that same expression of delicate bloom and lightly poised self-support. At the end of the long days of work, however tired her step or weary her face, the small dainty head was as erect as he saw it now, outlined against the dark chair-back, the slender figure held always as gracefully, swaying upright. Burdened out of all proportion to her youth, her sex, her strength, he had watched her carrying her cares with all the plucky silence of a boy—the unselfish overintensity of a girl. He had hardly ventured to pity her; her attitude of courageous self-reliance seemed almost to forbid sympathy; and yet what a mere slip of a girl she was — slight, frail, beautiful. Yes, it was the nasturtiums she was like!

"I wanted to speak to you about Rose," said Miss Ireland, suddenly, a little breathlessly.

"Oh no, you don't!" thought Courtney, roused to quick defence. "No, that's not at all what you have come for." But he waited attentively.

Miss Ireland went on nervously. "I have been troubled lately — very much troubled about Rose. The way she runs in and out of your study. It must worry you. I decided to-day I ought to ask you if you did not agree with me—that —it would be wiser—" she stumbled on. "Might it not be better if it were made a strict rule of the apartment that—that *no one*—"

"Ah! I knew it!" thought Courtney. "Rose worry me?" he interrupted. "How could she?" He leaned forward questioningly. "Rose told me to-day that her physician says he is much encouraged. Has he said that to you?"

Miss Ireland's face changed instantly. The worried look of effort gone, her gray eyes met his self-forgetfully, eagerly.

"Yes—oh yes! I have been so happy to-day. He says she is like another child —quite strong enough now to stand the treatment she must have before she can be well. There has been, he says, the greatest change in her of late, and— It is you who have done this, Mr. Courtney. If Rose is cured—it is you who have done it. She was just a listless, whimpering, helpless little cripple when we came here to live. She must be roused, the doctor said, but none of us knew how to rouse her. You have taught her to play games—to be active—to take interest— Oh, you know all you have been doing for her! I was too engrossed, too busy. None of us understood—but you. I have tried to thank you for this so often. I have seen what you were doing. But—I don't think I know how to say things. It's always hard for me to speak."

"I HAVE OFFENDED YOU?—WHAT HAVE I DONE?"

"Don't try," he urged, deeply touched. "I won't say I don't think I have helped Rose a little. I knew I could. I always have been able to handle children. I wish I knew as much about grown folks. But this treatment? She must go to a hospital for it, of course?"

She looked up swiftly, half laughing, half distressed.

"My aunt — aren't you forgetting her? She says she 'never did approve of hospitals.'"

"But that is absurd. She must consent. I will speak to her."

"No! Oh no! You don't quite understand yet. I think we might in time bring my aunt to consent to the hospital; but the—the free-ward. No, that she will not hear of. And as a private case—"

"I see," said Courtney, shortly. "If Rose were a child of the tenements she would go to the free-ward and be cured. As she is— Pray let me speak to her mother."

"No, no! You see, this becomes a— a question of money; and that is another thing my aunt does not approve of— 'questions of money.' I have seen you pay her for the breakfasts she sends in here to you. You lay the money on her table while both of you look the other way. What nonsense all that is! But it has been, oh, very good of you to humor her. It has made everything easier. You would offend her deeply now if you should speak to her of a free-ward for a child of hers."

"But what then can we do?"

In her reply he noted that she ignored the plural.

"I don't know yet. But in time I shall find a way. Rose must have this, if I starve the rest of us—a little."

She spoke lightly, but Courtney knew this was no jest, and he knew also that, however proud her independence, there was no chance for a further paring down of the expenses of her household—none whatever. He rose from his chair, walking restlessly across the small room, which his tall figure, his broad shoulders, seemed always to dwarf when he stood.

"See here!" he said, suddenly. He sat down on the side of his table, leaning toward her urgently. "This is all absurd. If Rose can be cured, that exquisite, patient little thing, why, then— Now look here, Miss Ireland. It's not always easy for me to speak, either." He leant yet nearer. "You know what I feel toward the child; I don't need to tell you. Would your aunt allow you to settle for Rose's cure?"

"I!"

Her face, which had grown flushed and troubled under his gaze, was, with his question, so amazed that he laughed outright.

"It would be a matter of several hundred dollars, I suppose. Well, of course I didn't imagine you had that where you could lay your hand on it at once; but I have, and— Now, just wait a moment. Hear me out—"

"No, no, no, Mr. Courtney! No!"

"Why not? I tell you I have it. It's lying now at the bank. What interest could it draw that would pay me like seeing Rose free—as other children are, only a thousand times sweeter than any other child could be? You know I love her—as if she were my own little sister. I don't believe you care more for the child than I do. This ought to be left just a plain question between Rose and me—no one else. She and I can settle all that. You are out of it—except as I have to consult you. Your aunt has unbounded confidence in your ability to do *anything*. Don't you see how easy it would be to manage, and nobody know but you and me? I have offended you? Miss Ireland— What have I done?"

Miss Ireland had turned away, her face hid in her hands. It was no surprise to Courtney when, a moment later, she lifted her head and looked up at him. He knew her power of quick self-mastery. But there was something in the smile on her lips, in her eyes, and in her face which he failed to read, a look that still perplexed him while he obeyed it as he interpreted it.

"Don't trouble to answer me. I see too well what you mean to say. I am right and you wrong—but I yield. I will say no more about it—not now."

"But I must! I can't—I can't let you offer this and not—"

"No! If you can refuse to let me do anything, I refuse to let you say anything. Play fair!"

She sat with her gray eyes lifted un-

certainly, distress in them and in her face.

"I can't thank you," she said, earnestly,—"not if you won't let me. I don't know how to do such things in spite of being prevented—as I ought to know. I can only hope you understand what I feel. I think you do." She rose, holding out her hand shyly. "Good afternoon, Mr. Courtney."

Courtney rose also, taking her offered hand. The extreme delicacy of her touch, the softness of her hands, despite their slenderness, always surprised him afresh whenever his hand touched hers. He stood looking down at her, smiling quizzically, detaining her soft, gentle hand in his.

"I shouldn't have believed this of you," he said. "You came here—didn't you?—on an errand. What was it? The last thing I should wish to do would be to head you off from anything you may have come here to say. Sit down again and don't hesitate to speak plainly."

He was very sure her actual errand had nothing to do with Rose or plans for her. He knew that Miss Ireland had dreaded her self-imposed task, and shrunk from opening it, and yet he knew that nothing would have turned her from a set purpose had she not been reminded of his services to Rose, and had he not made his offer of practical assistance, which, though refused, still placed her under some obligation of gratitude. She had, as he believed, deliberately come to interfere in his affairs. Very well. She should carry out her intention. She did not resist his motion that placed her again in her chair, and once more he sat opposite her, waiting. He would not distress her by looking at her directly. She should have every advantage—save assistance.

There was silence, and then Miss Ireland spoke suddenly, evidently grasping her courage at its flood.

"I did come here to say something to you, Mr. Courtney—something that it is very hard for me to say. I wonder if you will let me tell you just a little about ourselves—before we came here to live?"

"I should be glad. Your story begins—does it not?—'It was not always thus with me.'"

"Yes," she agreed, as if grateful for the help he gave her. "At least there seemed no lack of means when my aunt and uncle opened their home to me, after my parents died. But after my uncle's death we found that there was almost nothing left for any of us. That has given me the chance to do my part. We have no near relatives to depend on. You see, in a way, I was left as the man of the family. But there are times when—there are times and things that a woman cannot—cannot quite do, perhaps, as men do them. My aunt is not capable of being a father to her daughters. Rose is as yet too little to miss a father's protection; but Delia—it's—it's very different with Delia. I came here to-day to say something to you that—that isn't at all easy for me to say, Mr. Courtney. You tell me to speak plainly. May I then ask you—ask you plainly what—what you have meant—you have meant—"

Courtney sat staring at her, with an astonishment before which he saw her unable to continue to speak, and yet he could not control his utter amazement. He saw the soft, nervous color change to a hot, painful blush, the troubled eyes faltered away from his, her voice broke, but he could only sit speechless, rudely gazing at her. Remonstrance, admonition, he had expected—nay, he was generously preparing to admit he deserved; but unquestionably Miss Ireland was about to ask him what were his serious intentions! His intentions regarding Delia. *Delia!* It was so preposterous that he had almost laughed in her face before he recovered himself and turned deliberately to her, his manner considerate, his face serious. "I beg your pardon. I should not have met this as I did." His eyes, always his unruly feature, were less quickly grave, but it was evident that he intended to reply with courtesy, with deference, and with as entire candor as the most exacting parent could ask. "I confess you did surprise me, but you have done exactly what you ought. I will answer frankly. But first I would like to tell you in turn a little of my earlier story. I, too, might begin—'It was not always thus with me.' When I was about seventeen years old my father died suddenly, and I found then that I was not the wealthy man we had imagined I should be. The estate was in great

confusion. I was engaged to be married when my father died; a kind of boy and girl engagement, I suppose, but our parents had liked it and I was—I was very much in love. Her father broke the engagement at once when he found what my prospects were. He was perfectly right. She was accustomed to every luxury, and she was little more than a child. It would not have been fair to her. We were allowed to see each other once more, and she was finally permitted to keep my ring—though she was not allowed to wear it or ever to see me again or write to me. She was to keep my ring until she felt she no longer wished it. She promised me—I made her promise this—that she was to feel herself absolutely free, and if the time should come when she might prefer to free me, she was to send me back my ring and I would understand. It has never come back to me. I may never be able to marry the woman to whom I am engaged, but I am, in this manner, bound to her, and so—I am not what is called a marrying man, Miss Ireland. As to your cousin, while you are right in thinking I should have been more careful, there has been nothing serious of any kind. She cares not a whit for me. It has been merely an amusement. She runs in here, in a childish way—as Rose does; but I appreciate that she is by no means a child, and I should not have allowed it to go on. I have said all this to her a dozen times, and was about to say it again to-night when I thought you were she—not quite so gravely as you would approve, perhaps. But, after all, there is no harm in anything she does; she is just a fascinating, wilful, beautiful little witch. It is hard to be grave with her, and she is—very engaging."

The clear gray eyes were looking up at him steadily, indignantly.

"If Delia is as a child to you, Mr. Courtney, if you are engaged to another woman, then why have you given this to my cousin? Was this—honorable?"

She drew from her bosom the end of her watch-chain, and detaching something from it, held it towards Courtney. As he stretched out his hand mechanically to receive it, she laid on his palm a ring—a superb blood-red ruby, held in a quaint arabesque setting, between two hearts formed of beaten gold and diamonds. Courtney stood for a moment motionless, looking down as if incredulously into his hand; then quickly lifting the ring nearer, he turned it over and over in his palm, handling it as one touches a familiar object. He looked up sharply, his brow knotted.

"When did this come?" he asked, abruptly. "Where did you find it?"

"On my cousin's hand, Mr. Courtney."

"Your cousin's hand!"

He turned to the little table where earlier he had flung down the handful of unassorted mail.

"I did sign for a registered package this afternoon," he said. "It should be here. I hardly looked at it. Rose was waiting—"

He broke off, standing silent by the table, his back to the room. When, finally, the ring still in his hand, he turned and came towards her, Miss Ireland looked up at him anxiously. There was no trace of emotion in his face or manner; both were reserved, grave, and quiet; they betrayed nothing.

"It is the ring I told you of," he said, simply. "It has come back to me. The design was my own. I thought I could not be mistaken. Over there on the table I find the outer wrappings of the registered package, the contents gone. Will you tell me again where you found this ring?"

"I—I found it—indeed, where I told you, on Delia's hand. And she—she told me herself it was a gift from you."

"From me? This ring! And no one has been in this room since I brought in the mail, except—"

He lifted his head as if struck by a sudden thought, and turning back once more to the little table, took up a small box lying back of the letters and papers. Opening the box, he shook out a tangle of miniature toy animals.

"Ah! I understand now," he said. "I think I understand."

And almost as he spoke the clock on the mantel struck the half-hour, and with the stroke, on the door behind Courtney came a familiar knocking.

Courtney moved softly across the room to Miss Ireland's chair.

"Sit here quietly," he whispered. "We must not frighten her. If I turn the back

of your chair, so, to the room, she will not see you.—Is it you, dear little girl? Come in."

He met Rose at the door, and taking away the crutches, carried her to his table, where he sat down, lifting the child to his knee.

"And now what have you been doing?" he asked.

"I have been playing with Delia's beautiful ribbons."

"Not with the pretty box I gave you? Didn't you like it? What's that in your little hand?"

"My box. Feel it—all nice and furry and white. It's velvet, isn't it? And it opens and shuts with a snap. Inside it's all white, too—but not furry. It's satin, I think, inside. But I thought there were to be toys in it?"

"What was in it, dear little girl?"

"The ring—the beautiful ring."

"And where has the ring gone?"

"Delia gave me her ribbons to play with, and she took away my ring. She said it was only a play-ring. She said you wouldn't give me a real ring. You would, wouldn't you? She oughtn't to take my things. Sometimes I don't like Delia. Was it a play-ring?"

"No, dear little girl, it was not a play-ring. But what did Delia do with it?"

"I don't know. I was playing with the ribbons, and so I forgot. But she said she'd give it back to me very soon. She said she just borrowed it for a little while to have some fun with the old maid."

"The old maid?"

"That's what she often calls Catharine, because she scolds her sometimes. Why, there's my ring!"

"So it is. Right under that paper I just moved. You are sure it's the same?"

"Oh yes. Now I want to put it to bed and cover it up. I like to hear my box snap. Will you keep it for me, Mr. Courtney? Put it where Delia can't find it. I'll ask you for it when I want it again. But I wish it was toys. I thought you meant it was toys. Will you play now?"

"Look behind you—look in that big chair by the fire. How can I play? I have company."

Miss Ireland rose and stood by the table.

"I didn't see you, Kitty. Are you going to stay?"

"Yes, she is going to stay a little longer. Suppose we finish our play to-morrow afternoon. Will that do?"

"Yes. For maybe Delia won't lend me her ribbons to-morrow, and I've got them all spread out now."

"Well, go now and play with the ribbons, and come again to-morrow. Don't forget to come. Good night, dear little girl. Good night. You can take that little box from the table as you pass. Yes, that one *has* toys in it. Good night."

The door closed.

"Oh, Mr. Courtney! What can I say?"

"Nothing. What have you done—except what you always do—the brave, right thing? But perhaps you see now that it is hard to be serious with Delia. Scolding her seems only to lead her on to worse mischief, such as this trick she has played on you to-night. It was rather a neat one. Don't you think so?"

"No! But to do her justice, she did not think I would really speak to you. I took the ring from off her finger and warned her that I would; but I have so often warned her and done nothing, I saw she thought this time it would be the same."

"She must have had a beautiful time. I can imagine nothing more entirely delightful to Delia than the whole of this affair. I confess I see the joke, if you do not. But she evidently did believe the ring was glass. A good imitation."

"I knew the value of the ring the moment I looked at it; the setting—everything proved it. I felt I must speak to you at once."

"Of course."

"But—oh, Mr. Courtney, I am so sorry for—for everything."

Courtney had opened the box and taken out the ring. He was standing with it in his hand, looking down at it.

"What am I to do with this?" he asked. "What does one do with—these? If it had come back to me at seventeen I should have flung it into the fire. After twenty-five one is less—what shall I call it?—less destructive. But I can't feel this belongs to me. It belongs to no one now, unless it be—"

He looked up, the color rushing over his face.

"I know to whom it belongs!" he said, eagerly. "This is different from anything else, quite different. A moment ago it was only a pain to me to look at this. It recalled a time— If you could change all that, if you could make it be that I shall only think of this ring with great happiness, you wouldn't deny that to me, would you? The ring belongs to Rose. I gave it to her. To-morrow I shall change it for what will buy for her the greatest gift in the world. You will take it then and manage the rest? You can't refuse—not coming in this way. Think what it will mean to Rose — all her life. No, you can't refuse this to her—or to me."

She stood motionless, looking up at him, moved, shaken, unable to reply. He could feel his heart beating as he waited, watching her gentle, flowerlike face, the soft, changing color, the deep, sweet eyes. How good she was! How fine and strong, and yet so loving, so lovely and girl-like. It seemed to him that he was wandering once more in the glamour of that old garden of simple, sweet flowers —the delicate tinted bloom of the nasturtiums on slender stems about him. He knew that never in his life had he looked into eyes so gravely deep, so soft, so intimately sweet. Her voice, when she spoke, would be as were her eyes—soft, penetrating, deeply moved.

"I — I cannot answer yet — not yet. I must think first, but— Good night—and—God bless you, Mr. Courtney!"

At her motion he opened his door for her, but as she passed near him he saw that she was trembling from head to foot, and with a quick, hopeful impulse he stretched out his hand to her entreatingly. Again she glanced up at him, faltered, stood irresolute, then, her eyes still lifted, for a moment she laid her hand in his. It brushed his palm like soft, warm velvet, but no velvet was ever so informed with life, with unimagined fire, telling him with a touch all she could not speak—her gratitude, her consent. He lifted her hand reverently to his lips, then as gently released it. The next moment he was alone in the room.

Courtney moved slowly back to the table. He lifted the little white velvet ring-box and opened it, absently slipping the ring more closely into the satin slit. He touched both ring and case with slow, careful touches, and then sat motionless, the case still held in his open hand. When he roused at last it was to find that his room was in darkness save for the firelight from his hearth. He looked down wondering at his hand. His fingers had clasped down closely on the soft, warm velvet that touched his palm. His thoughts — where had they been? This strange, vague emotion, this pitying, overmastering tenderness—for what, for whom were they? Pity? No! She would have none of his pity.

He sat upright, startled, staring into the dim spaces of his room, his eyes fixed on the doorway where no one now stood. Again the slender upright figure, the flowerlike face, swayed there before him, the soft gray eyes spoke into his, and suddenly he knew.

Wistaria Blossoms

BY CHARLES DALMON

I SEE them on my trellises and walls
And straightway dream of distant waterfalls;
But when to distant waterfalls I roam
I dream of my wistarias at home.