

# INCUPID'S NET.

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(Continued.)

"I could not tell you how much I was my reply; and it seemed to please him. The way in which he pronounced my name made it sound much more sweet in my ears. Suddenly it occurred to me that, although he had spoken of Lady Cary, I could not be sure of his identity unless I asked him who he was. It must be Sir Adrian, still I had better ask the question.

"Are you Sir Adrian Cary?" I said.

"Yes," he replied; "and a very fortunate man I am to succeed to this grand old heritage. Do you not think so?"

"I do indeed, I am glad it has come to you," I answered.

"We reached Heron's Nest earlier than we expected," he went on. "Like you, Gracia, I like to be out in the starlight, and so came here."

"We call this the postern-gate," I remarked. "This is part of the old house that was built in Edward the Third's reign."

"You know Heron's Nest well?" he said, smiling.

"I know and love every nook and corner in it," I cried. "I have lived here the greater part of my life."

"It is a grand old place," he said gently. "But," he added quickly, "I must not keep you standing in the cold, Gracia; let us move on. Your story is indeed a strange one, and I must say it puzzles me. There must be some means of clearing up the mystery; and, if it is to be done, I will do it." He held out his hand and took mine. "You must have been most lonely and forlorn, poor child!"

"Now remember you have a friend, I am interested in you, and will take care of you if you will trust me."

"Trust him? My heart had already gone out to him. I could only murmur words of thanks and gratitude.

"I must talk to the matter with Lady Cary," he said; "she will know what is best to be done. I am sure she will be kind to you."

I looked at him, unable to speak simply because I wanted to say so much. I wanted to tell him how I blessed him for his kind words, and how fervently I hoped that I might remain at Heron's Nest, so that I might see him now and again.

Oh, fair and beautiful star, that had brought me to him whom I loved from the first moment I saw him, and whom I shall love until I die!

It was a new world into which I entered. I passed in at the postern-gate, leaving him there looking after me, and I left my old life far behind. The stars seemed to shine more brightly, and something I had never known before was beating in my happy heart and making my cheeks burn. I did not know why it was, and I did not stop to ask myself. Then before I reached the house, I heard the chiming of the bells over the snow, the same sweet old chiming—"Christmas is come—Christmas is come!" Christmas had indeed come to me, and had brought me a friend.

The radiance of the stars was in my eyes when I went back to the housekeeper's room. She looked at me in wonder. She had never seen my face brightened with happiness before.

"Gracia," she said severely, "where have you been? You must not run wild about the place now. You had better keep in your own room as much as possible until we know what my lady wishes." Christmas had indeed come to me, and had brought me a friend.

The words did not hurt me, because I had the echo of those others lingering in my ears. My heart could not ache, because I had found a friend.

"I should like to see Lady Cary," was all I said.

"They will pass through the hall as they go to the parlour," she answered—"both Sir Adrian and my lady."

Sir Adrian! If the worthy housekeeper could have guessed how my heart beat at the sound of that name, she would have been astonished.

I stood in the deep shadows of the gallery and saw them pass. He seemed even handsomer than he had seemed before; she was a haughty and imperious-looking woman. For the first time in my life I saw a fashionable lady in evening dress, and Lady Cary's velvet and diamonds entranced me.

Then I went to my room, and spent the remainder of Christmas Eve in watching the snow and the stars through the window; but I was happy, because my heart was warm with love. I smile now with tears in my eyes, when I think of the fervor and the passion of that lovely day. I recalled Sir Adrian's face, his voice, how I kissed his hand he had touched; how unutterably glad and happy I was; how I knelt down at last when the Christmas bells had ceased chiming and thanked Heaven for having guided me to happiness by the light of a star.

I remembered the next morning the housekeeper's warning that I had better keep in my room; but I had some feathered friends, robin-rebuses, who always expected me to feed them. They congregated on the lawn every morning, looking out for bread-crumbs. The breakfast-room opened on to the lawn, and I thought I should have time to feed the birds before her ladyship came down.

The sun shone brightly on the snow, the morning was a lovely one. My face, when I looked at it in the mirror, was so radiantly happy that I was half afraid lest any one should note the change, and I went to the breakfast-room, where I found the crumbs greedily, when suddenly I heard one of the long French windows open. Looking up, I saw Lady Cary. With one white jeweled hand she beckoned me to her, and I went.

"Who are you?" she asked, laying stress on the word "you."

The inevitable question, and the inevitable answer—"I am Gracia."

"Her face darkened.

"Gracia," she repeated, in a displeased tone. "I understood that she was a child. Come into the room. I wish to speak to you. Close the window; it is cold."

I obeyed her, and stood before her.

"So you are Gracia?" she said. "My son was telling me about you last evening. It is a strange story, one that I do not at all understand. Do you really mean to say that you know nothing about yourself, that you have no clue to your own history, your parentage?"

"None whatever," I replied.

"It is generally believed that you are a daughter of the late Mrs. Blenovee, a person, I understand, who was very respected and rich. What do you think yourself?"

"I do not think it is true," I answered, "because I can remember faintly some part of my life before I ever saw Mrs. Blenovee. I have a story, I count myself, 'I am homeless, and I have no friends, but I have a story.' My heart snatched me as I used the word 'friendless,' and I grew warm with the memory of the promise made to me. The cold proud eyes looked searchingly into mine.

"Why are you so sure of that?" she asked.

"The Squire told me so on the very afternoon of the day he died, and he promised me that, when he came here in the evening, he would tell me my history. He said, 'I added incipiently, 'that he was going to 'right a wrong.'"

"Do to what?" asked Lady Cary incredulously.

"To right a wrong," I replied.

"What wrong might that be?" she asked

curiously.

"I do not know. If the Squire had lived a few hours longer, I should have known my history; as it is, I am utterly ignorant of it."

"The pride and coldness deepened in her face.

"You do not suppose that the Squire had wronged you in any way, do you?" she asked.

"No; I have never thought of such a thing," was my answer.

"It will not do for you to encourage absurd ideas, such as thinking that the Squire has done you a wrong, or that you have any right to remain here."

"I have had no such thought, madam," I replied. "I have never had one thought of the Squire which has not been kind and grateful," I said warmly.

"Probably. There is nothing so harmful to a young mind as indulging in false ideas. Try to steer clear of doing that. Romance is a fatal thing; no girl ever succeeds who is romantic."

I thought of the postern-gate and blushed furiously. What would her ladyship say if she knew the meeting there?

Lady Cary took the brass as a sign of guilt.

"You are romantic, I see, and I am sorry for it; but I make some allowance for circumstances. Of course you have been dreaming that you are some great lady—that you have been stolen from your parents, who are anxiously waiting in their ancestral home to welcome you."

"She had been any one but Sir Adrian's mother. I should have hated her, she was so proud and scornful, so cold and haughty. She evidently mistook me.

"The Squire was good enough to exercise charity towards you for some years, but I fancy it was done unconsciously. I do not think he knew you were here."

"I made no reply.

"I should like you to tell me yourself who you think you are," she continued; "tell me frankly."

"I have never been able to form an idea. The most daring thought I have entertained is that I may be the daughter of a friend of the Squire; but I shall never know now. My story lies buried with the only person who knew it."

"You seem to have been pretty well educated," she said.

And then I told her of my hope of being able to live by teaching music.

"You play and sing well then," she said. "I am delighted to hear it. I care more for music than for anything else. Now tell me all that passed between the Squire and yourself during the few days you spent together."

I told her all—except that he had kissed me.

"So he died in your arms," she said more gently. "It certainly gives you a claim on me. I must think over what had better be done for you. In the meantime, if I want you to play and sing to me, you will oblige me, I am sure."

"I will do anything to oblige you," I replied, thinking to myself that it was because she was Sir Adrian's mother, and I not by any means because she was Lady Cary.

She went a little before I left her; but my eyes filled with tears as I went back to the lawn. She did not ask me to pass through the room.

It was a rare at Heron's Nest that every member of the household who could be spared should attend church on Christmas Day. I did not go with the servants, nor, as a matter of course, with the family. I had a seat in the chancel, at some distance from the great manor-house pew, but I could see every one in it. I saw the proud handsome lady who was like, yet so unlike, her son. I saw him, and the glory of the Christmas morning to me was complete.

Ah, the sweet calm happiness of that Christmas morning! It was Christmas to me because I had found a friend. And my friend was one to be proud of; in the church there was no one like him. His head towered above all the others.

The Vicar's wife and daughter were of course at church. Their seat was near the manor-house pew. I watched—may Heaven forgive me!—with jealous eyes. I saw that Miss Sale was especially conscious of Sir Adrian's presence. She really looked at him, and in her costume of velvet and fur and her prettily-trimmed bonnet. Evidently she admired him. I saw her look at him several times; but he seemed unaware that she was gazing at him. And then, suddenly, while the choir was singing of "peace on earth," I found that he was watching me. Ah, happy yet miserable me! I tried first to appear unconscious of his gaze, but I failed. My eyes dyed my cheeks, and I buried my face in my hands.

At length the service ended, and the people left the church. Her ladyship entered the manor-house carriage that was in waiting for her, and drove off home; but Sir Adrian joined Mr. Sale, and I saw the Vicar introduce him to his wife and daughter. I saw too how the proud lady's face brightened for him. Was I jealous? I cannot myself wish that I had fair hair and a quality bonnet trimmed with holly-berries, that I had a dress of velvet and fur. I found myself weeping bitter tears that I was not as other girls; and yet it was the happiest day I had ever known!

## CHAPTER VII.

The primroses were in bloom once more. All the snow was gone; the cold winds had ceased to blow; the air was odorous with the breath of violets; and I—my life was so different that the world did not seem to be the same place as of old. There was only one thing that made me unhappy, and that was that Lady Cary did not seem to like me.

The change from the gloom of winter to the beauty of spring was not greater than the change which had come over my life.

On the third day after her arrival at Heron's Nest Lady Cary sent for me. She wanted to hear how I could sing, and she professed herself delighted with the result.

"You have a magnificent voice," she said to me, "and your style is good. You want a few finishing lessons, and then you will be an excellent singer. How remarkable that you should have such a voice!"

From that time she changed to me. But she never really liked me, and my very presence seemed to irritate her. She abandoned mystery, and I was the very embodiment of it.

"I wish," she said to me one day, "that you had a second name. It is so absurd to call you Gracia."

"I have just the same wish," I answered.

"Why not call yourself 'Blenovee'?" she suggested. "It would be better than nothing."

"Because the name is not my own, and I shall never use it," I replied.

One morning the Christmas snow was still lying on the ground—she sent for me, and said she wanted to talk to me. She had been thinking over what would be best for me, and she offered me the post of companion to herself. I was to read to her, write her letters, be at her service whenever she required it. It was stipulated that I was in no way to interfere with the lady's son, a very important person named Kate Fisher, or "Fisher," as her ladyship called her. But whenever Lady Cary felt inclined for music, I was to sing to her.

To my great delight, she gave me two pretty rooms facing the south, and my meals were to be taken there. She also most generously provided me with a wardrobe. There was nothing elaborate or expensive, but everything was pretty—prattresses, all pink blossoms, some nice muslins, and a silk dress for my "best." I was to have a salary of forty pounds a year, which seemed to me a fortune; and I was unutterably happy, because every now and then I could see the man whom I believed to be my father. Lady Cary told me that he was delighted at what she had done.

During the last few days I had not seen much of him. One of the first things that attracted my attention was a superb portrait of him. It had been painted in Rome by an eminent artist, and by Lady Cary's was a wash at the end of the picture-gallery. It was never weary of gazing upon the sunny brow, the laughing blue eyes, and the hair of auburn.

By this time—I confess it freely—I had grown to love that face better than anything else in the world. It was my star, shining ever brightly in the dark sky of my life.

Lady Cary liked to listen to music in the gloaming, not when the lamps were lighted or when the sun was shining; and one evening in May—an evening that will never be forgotten by me—I sang Sadley's "A Beautiful Serenade," which I had set to music of my own.

On this night all the passion, all the wild deep love of my heart was aroused, and I sang as I had never sung before. Lady Cary was lying on the couch; Sir Adrian sat in the recess of the window; the dying light from the western sky filled the room. I could not suppress my emotion, so, rising from my seat, I passed quickly through the half-open window, across the lawn, down to the white gate where the lilacs grew—the gate that led to the manor-house.

My heart was full. I laid my hands on the gate and bowed my head on them. Presently I heard footsteps, each one of which seemed to strike upon my heart, and a voice said—

"Gracia!"

Raising my face, I saw him; he was looking at me with a new strange light in his eyes.

"Gracia," he said, "forgive me for following you; I could not help it. What was there in that song you sang?"

"I know what was in it; but I could not tell him that it held all the strength and passion of my love."

"What was there in it?" he continued. "I have heard many songs, but nothing like that, Gracia."

"It was the very outpour of a human soul; but he must not know it."

"The words have a sweetness all their own," was all I said; and for a few minutes he was silent.

My hero, whom I had worshipped at a distance, was standing close beside me now, with something in his eyes and face I had never dared hope to see there.

"I do not wonder," he said, "that you set your heart on such sweet harmonies. Your love of music can be seen in your face, Gracia." Then, after closely watching me for a few moments, he added slowly, "I cannot tell where, but I have seen a face in some picture just like yours."

"Did it please you?" I asked eagerly; for to win one word of commendation from his lips I would have done anything.

"I like me," he echoed. "I thought it might be the likeness of I had ever seen."

"Then it could not have been mine?" I said incredulously.

"It was. It had the same dark eyes and brows, the same delicate profile and beautiful mouth, the same dark curls, even the same dimple in the white chin. It must have been a picture of you, Gracia. Why, child," he added passionately, "you are beautiful as a poet's dream! When I met you that Christmas Eve by the postern-gate, your beauty took me completely by surprise."

Ah, beautiful Christmas Eve! how I blessed the light that let me thither! But my beauty, the beauty of a nameless, friendless girl, what could it avail? Still, if it pleased him, it was dear to me.

"I shall always like my face better now that I know it pleases you," I said gently.

A challenge began to sing in the wood near by, and we were silent for some minutes listening; then he continued—

"Pardon me, Ah, Gracia, that is a mild word; do you think that I have no eyes, no ears? Do you think that I have listened to your singing without seeing the beauty of your face? Do you think that I have looked at your face without recognizing your fair sweet hair? I have said 'dear to you; but I am sure I understand you."

And I was made so perfectly happy by those few words that I should have been content to die then and there. Oh, happy night, the memory of which was never to leave me!

"I always thought," he went on, "that to sing one must have loved and suffered. You cannot have loved."

I could have laughed aloud at the words. I had not only loved, I had almost worshipped him; and he was saying that I had not loved!

"I have said so," I answered slowly.

"Do not lean in snatching what they tell in song," he said. "It is a suffering that has taught you to sing, way—"

But he never finished the sentence. He took the hand that was lying on the white bar of the gate.

"Poor child," he said, "at your age one ought to know both art and happiness! Tell me a little of this story of yours."

I told him that I remembered of my life; not, strange to say, so unutterably happy had he made me, so great was my delight, that I could hardly speak of my own self.

"I promised you," he said, "that I would do my best to unravel the mystery that surrounds you; but I have had no success." Then, after a pause, he added, "I wonder what you will do with your life?"

A sudden horrible alarm lest he should pass out of it seized me—of a death.

"I hope I shall live here always. I never want to go away," was my answer.

"I am glad that you are so happy here, Gracia. Why should you go away? My mother tells you well; does she not?"

"Yes," I answered, "but she does not like me," I said slowly.

"What makes you think so?" asked Sir Adrian.

"She is never unkind to me, never exacting. I repeat it, but she seems to have an idea that I am an intruder."

"No, Gracia!—and the next moment he had his fair hand over my hand and kissed it.

I can smile now, but then I trembled. It was as though a light of dazzling brilliancy shined on me. I could almost as soon have imagined one of the stars falling from Heaven as that he should have acted thus.

"I think," he said gently, "that you are too beautiful, too accomplished for my mother to be very kind to you. She is naturally jealous."

"But," I interrupted, "she is Lady Cary, and I am her nameless dependant."

"You will not always be a nameless dependant," he said; "you have two gifts which rule the world. Your star will rise some day."

Looking at the handsome face before me, I said to myself that my star had risen already, and had brought me to him.

From that evening, when we stood by the white gate that led to the river, he was quite changed to me. He sought opportunities of talking to me; he would follow me when I went for a ramble by the river or in the woods; he would be all about me when the birds came, and he would draw me to the beach, we climbed the hillside, and he would always with the affection and kindness he would have shown to a younger sister. I never thought of what her ladyship would have said had she known. Way should I not drink even to the dregs the cup of happiness held out to my thirsty lips?

One day in the month of August the first terrible awakening came to me. I had never thought of any ending to my happiness, but never thought that Sir Adrian might marry. I had lived so intensely in every moment of the present that I had no time to think of the future.

It was Lady Cary's wish that for some few months she and her son should live in the manor-house, though it was the month of August she emerged from her seclusion. So a rare

dinner-party to the country magnates, and garden parties, archery parties, and picnics in the country, she took me that when my visitors were about, was to keep to my own room; so that at first I was completely isolated. Then it occurred to her that my music would be of service.

I was not introduced to any of the visitors; but I was spoken of as "my companion, Miss Gracia." My music gave great pleasure, and Lady Cary, when she found that was the case, made me a present of some pretty evening-dresses. I suppose I had not cared for, with a simple dress and a few flowers, I could compete with satin and diamonds.

On this August day, when the first shock came to me, Lady Cary had given a garden-party. She had not expressed any wish for my appearance, so for some hours I kept my room. At length I was told that I was wanted for something downstairs, and the landlady seized me to go round by the kitchen-garden and see the gaily-dressed crowd.

I saw two young girls, beautifully dressed, who were amusing themselves by feeding the peacocks on the lawn. As I passed on the other side of the hedge, I heard one of them say to the other—

"How would you like to marry Sir Adrian, and be mistress of this place?"

Marry Sir Adrian! Why, if he married, what was to become of me? Marry him! I stood still, rooted to the ground with horror and dismay. Marry Sir Adrian, my idol, and hero, who seemed to me entirely mine because I loved him so! The sun seemed to grow blood-red; the smiling beauty of the summer day was blotted out.

Then another clear, sweet girlish voice came to me over the hedge.

"I would marry Sir Adrian if he had nothing more to say, just for love of his bonnie blue eyes and his handsome face," it said.

And the second boy was even more terrible to me than the first.

One speaker would marry him to be mistress of his broad lands, the other for love of his bonnie blue eyes and his handsome face; the third, who had worshipped him as my ideal, who had idolized him, the matter-of-fact manner in which these girls discussed their willingness to marry him was revolting.

I gazed anxiously at them. They were both young, both pretty; but, oh, surely Sir Adrian would never marry either of them! If he married, I must go.

I no longer found any pleasure in watching the gay crowd. I gave no heed to the messages that had been brought to me—my heart was too sore. I went back to the house, to the picture-gallery, and stood there for some time looking at the noble pictured face and the smiling blue eyes. Ah, me, those girls, well born, well dressed, well bred, could talk laughingly about marrying him—one because he had broad lands, the other because he had a handsome face! But there was no love like my love, though he would never know anything of it, must be hidden from every eye, and die with me.

If the lips that were so firm yet gentle would but once—only once—open and say to me, "Gracia, I love you!" I should be satisfied. After that, I could meet even death with a smiling face.

But then I came to my senses. Who was I, that I should raise my eyes to him? I was without even a name; he was the proud owner of Heron's Nest. Oh, could the day would come when he must marry; and he must marry, too, in his own spare.

## CHAPTER VIII.

Lady Cary, regarding me as an utter nonentity, evidently thought other people looked at me in the same light. She never appeared to be in the least degree disquieted with regard to Sir Adrian and myself. I saw her look anxious and nervous when he was talking to some girl whom she did not particularly like; but she never evinced the least interest in me.

But one morning Sir Adrian received some new songs from London, and he asked me to try them. In one of them a night-blowing cereus was spoken of.

"What is a night-blowing cereus, Sir Adrian?" I asked.

"A flower that opens at night instead of in the day, and gives out a delicious perfume," he answered.

"I should like to see it," I said thoughtlessly.

It was so kind and seemed so interested that I had forgotten for a few minutes the great grief that was in my heart.

"Would you?" he cried. "I can show you a flower in the garden conservatory that is just like it. Come, Gracia."

How gladly I went! The August sun was shining brightly; the flowers in the conservatory, fragrant and fair, were a feast to the eyes. And I was alone with him in the midst of all that beauty and perfume.

Did my happy face flush with my secret? Did it show that I loved him? I feared to raise them, for I knew it was there. He showed me many beautiful flowers. I am ashamed to say I scarcely looked at them; I saw only the face that was all the world to me. He told me all about them; but I hardly heard one word—I was so engrossed in him.

"Gracia," he said at last, "I do believe you are not listening."

"I am indeed," I answered.

"Then do not believe you understand what I say. Look at me, and tell me the last thing I said."

But I knew if I looked at him I should not be able to utter a word.

"Indeed I heard you, Sir Adrian," I answered.

"Then why do you not look at me?"

"I raised my eyes slowly. Ah, what did that say—what did they tell me?"

"Gracia!" he cried, then raised his hand to his lips.

A moment later we saw Lady Cary coming towards us. She gave one quick look from one to the other—no searching look. Sir Adrian appeared unconcerned; but my cheeks burned hotly. Her ladyship said nothing to me, but told her son that the farm-steward was waiting for him. When Sir Adrian had gone, she turned sharply to me.

"How is it that you are wasting your time here, Gracia?" she asked harshly. "I expect you to be at work. What has brought you here?"

I told her of my thoughtless wish to see the "night-blowing cereus," and she did not seem angry.

"I think," she said, "it would be better if you did not speak so freely to my son. Although he is kind enough to take some little interest in you, you must remember the wide difference between you."

"I have never forgotten it, Lady Cary, and I never shall," was my reply.

"That is right; do not give yourself airs because you fancy you have a pretty face. Another time, if Sir Adrian, in his thoughtless kindness, should offer to show you flowers or anything else, say you are busy, and decline."

Of course it was all right and proper; but the nameless dependant and the master of Heron's Nest was a girl nothing could bridge over. But, although it was right, my heart beat in rebellious anger. Oh, my love with the bonnie blue eyes, eyes that compelled me to do his will, how could I decline any kindness he might show me in a white dress.

"How is it that you are wasting your time here, Gracia?" she asked harshly. "I expect you to be at work. What has brought you here?"

I told her of my thoughtless wish to see the "night-blowing cereus," and she did not seem angry.

of the story that never grows old. I should meet his friendly glances. Perhaps he would even come over to me as he had done before, and say something pleasant to me.

"There was a rap at my door. It was Fisher, her ladyship's maid. She looked with a morning smile at the white dress and the blue eyes.

"You can take them off, Gracia," she said; "my lady says she will see you, and she has come down to the drawing-room to-night."

As a cloud darkens the face of the sun, so, on hearing these words, all my happiness fled; I was not to see him! I sat in the room until midnight, listening to the faint sound of music and song, with the very bitterness of death in my heart. I could not go to sleep, thinking of the happy days, and how free to talk to him, of the one who had said that she would marry him for his broad lands, and of the other who would marry him for love of his bonnie blue eyes.

On the day following Lady Cary was in a more amiable mood. I had one delicious moment—I met Sir Adrian in the great corridor. His whole face brightened when he saw me