

Two Hours : Two Women

By Susan Christian

BETWEEN the Cotswold hills and the Severn river lies a widely-spreading town, with innumerable church spires rising from the midst of its glistening rows of white stucco villas and unimposing terraces. The more "fashionable" parts of this town are, in August, a great opportunity for the study of window-blinds, for at the end of July one house after another looks down on an agitation of departure in front of its door, and then seems with fatigued relief to drop its faded eyelids and bask tranquilly in the hot silence. In a month or six weeks' time its pleasurable torpor will be rudely disturbed by rattling brooms and buckets, and then, with its stair carpets in new creases and its window-boxes run to seed, it will stand ready to endure for another spell the life that will presently pour back into it.

Number 50, however, was not entirely deserted ; it was completely noiseless, but the front door was open and the gas was alight in the dining-room. On the stairs, at the top of the second landing, there was sitting in the dusk a very tiny boy in his night-shirt ; his small arms were clasped tightly round his spare knees, and his little outstretched ears had the funny aspect of being "cocked" like those of a terrier ; he was tensely listening to the profound stillness.

He had tossed about in his bed, and then left it, for it was too hot to go to sleep. He had no idea the house was so tall as it seemed to-night ; the downward aspect from the very top landing was abysmal. He crept down ; and down again a little further ; no stair-board creaked beneath his elfin footfall.

A rudimentary spirit of adventure which attended his setting-out had been quenched ; he called a halt ; he was certainly a little frightened. Poking his head through the bannisters, he could see in the passage below a streak of light, which lay across it from the dining-room door ajar ; but there was no sound. Intangible fears rocked his diminutive soul, his nervous fingers were tightly interlaced, he was heroically nerving himself to meet calamity.

It was a long, long time ; but at last there came the noise of chair legs scraping over a Brussels carpet.

His grown-up sister, then, was still alive, and presumably safe, for presently there floated up to him, a little out of tune, a few bars of a then fashionable song.

He moved down another flight of stairs, with an apprehension that she perhaps was feeling solitary. She had begun to work the sewing-machine, and its dull whirling, which seems always laden with the weariness of a thousand women's lives, was a harsh accompaniment to his tragic thoughts.

A little dread was mixed with his admiration for his grown-up sister. She was so upright and trim, the colour in her cheeks was clear and bright, and there was a dimple in her chin ; but her grey eyes always smiled above and beyond, and not at him, and this never quite compensated for her indulgence at teatime, when she would sometimes only laugh when she saw him surreptitiously eating the forbidden combination of butter and jam. Even in after-life he only partially realised what an entire sacrifice his sister's life had been to him and to his elder brothers. If the slender

slender education and narrow opportunities of small means, inevitably, as years went on, contracted her mind to a degree woefully incomprehensible to the brothers for whom she had thus helped to make a wider life possible, we may be consoled to think that she could successfully, for her part, bridge over the chasm which lay between them by cheerful pride in their success. A certain brisk cheerfulness was certainly the pivot of her life ; there was neither self-consciousness nor wistfulness about her immolation. She bent now as spiritedly over the machine as in the morning hours, not sensitive to the incongruity of her employment with the magic of the summer twilight.

Alas ! she was not sensitive. She never quite understood. It was one of the impossibilities of existence that any spiritual suspicion should acquaint her of the little figure outside on the stairs in the dark, with slow tears creeping down his cheeks.

For he was silently crying.

He was so very, very lonely, and there was no one in the world who would come to him.

In future years a very strong sense of the ridiculous could never make him smile at the remembrance of that hour, for he recognised that, as he had at length gulped back his childish tears into his aching throat, and sat on immovably in the gathering darkness, he had there, timorously, but for evermore, set his feet in the path that alone leads beyond sorrow ; the path—how shall we call it ? —of accepted loneliness of soul.

It was not long ago that, after an interval of many years, he walked once again through those streets, and past his childhood's home in the tall terrace. It must have been preconcerted that there should be standing on the very steps just such another tiny boy as he himself had once been, in the immaculately clean collar
and

and red-and-white hat ribbon of the well-known school, which, though it has long changed hands, still retains these distinguishing marks. He passed by with a smile to visit other haunts, and it is improbable that any one noticed him. He is a small man, as he had been a small boy, and it must be confessed that his neckties are not as piquant as they should be, and that he has no right feeling on the question of boots. An insignificant figure perhaps, but a face with a loveliness of its own, insensibly bringing back some far, faint, fair sensation, as the clear singing of birds at dawn in the stunted trees which border the silent streets of a great city.

It is impossible to trace the causes which have given him, without any very obvious genius on his part, the position he holds in the world of to-day ; where his friends sometimes realise that he is more to them than they can ever be to him.

He possesses one of those old-world houses in James Street, Buckingham Gate, which look over the end of Wellington Barracks Square towards the Mall and the Green Park. It was late in an afternoon towards the end of July, and there were several people in the little drawing-rooms with their modelled plaster ceilings. A very young girl in a crisp muslin dress stood at a window in the front room, looking down on a number of Guardsmen playing cricket beyond the tall iron railings and the row of dusty plane-trees. There was an undulation of bonnets and low-pitched voices behind her, and at a piano in the innermost room, which was much darker, and where conversation had stilled, there sat a young man, reciting with unrivalled art :

“ Dear as remember'd kisses after death,
 And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign'd
 On lips that are for others ; deep as love,
 Deep as first love, and wild with all regret ;
 O death in life, the days that are no more”

and,

and, adding to the pathos of the words, music which alone seemed as if it must light up the flame of romance in cold or old burnt-out hearts, but which roused no appreciable emotion—only a little tepid applause.

People were beginning to go away, and well-known men and women passed down the twisted oak staircase. The fragile-looking young man who had recited remained to the last, and, talking with him, a slender woman, whose dark auburn hair was just slightly turning grey. Her host went with her downstairs, and across the pavement to her carriage.

“When do you leave town?” he said. “You are looking completely done up.”

“Ah, well, it will be soon,” she answered. “And you?”

“I shall turn up again with the swallows.”

It was characteristic of him that he never directly answered questions about himself.

They were holding one another's hands above the closed door of the tall barouche. The sunset, which was making splendid the tree-tops in the Green Park, illumined for them each other's pale face. It was the highest tribute that was ever paid him, that she, a very proud woman, did not mind that he should know she had always loved him.

They had built between each other with respectful hands a wall of silence, across which her eyes had long learnt not to wander, but he saw to-night once more in the brown depths which it was the vogue to call “cold,” the gleam of bitter emotion.

He quietly withdrew his hand, and for the first time in their long acquaintanceship she felt for him a slight contempt.

It was an ironical moment.

She wished him to know that in quite a short time she was to die, and that this was truly a last good-bye.

A bugle was sounding at the other end of the barrack square ; people passed along the pavement where the tall footman stood immovable ; the innumerable windows in the row of houses gazed down unblinkingly. It all seemed to her so detached, so far away, unreal ; and he the greatest unreality.

She did not look at him again, but signalled to the footman, and bent her head as the horses sprang forward. She was not to be unenvied. Her last disappointment on earth was over as she went swiftly up the Buckingham Palace Road.

For himself, he returned to his dishevelled rooms, and, teased by some vague half-misgiving, stood a few moments beside the open piano, tapping gently with his fingers on the mirror-like wood before sitting down to play.

Ah ! the inexplicable incapacities of the human soul !

Yet here, under his moving hands, was music—such music ; perfect expression of immortal pain, immortal love.