THE TRAGEDY IN A STUDIO.
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PART I.

THE DEAD MODEL.

SUPPOSE it will ever be true, that one cannot be a prophet in one's own country. I had hoped it might have been otherwise in my case, and that mine might have been proud of me, the Australian-taught girl artist, who, after having gone 'home' for three years' study, had come back to Melbourne with the silver medal of the Royal Academy and two years' experience of one of the most reputed studios in Rome.

But no. The people who made a lounge of the studio on my 'days,' who gushed over this 'bit' or 'that study,' never so much as bought a sketch; and had it not been for literary work in the magazines and newspapers, and a rare portrait, evil would have been those days in which I hoped and struggled and
grew sick and weary of it all, and then hoped again and struggled on.

Other people who did not come to my studio said they really 'couldn't countenance a girl who lived alone, and was so peculiar-looking;' my dress being of the plainest and simplest kind, the said 'peculiarity' could only be laid to the score of bright chestnut hair, and very black eyebrows and eyelashes, which perhaps did form a rather remarkable contrast to a face of ivory pallor. And as to my living alone, I had absolutely no relations, and could not afford to pay a companion. When my spirit was not stung by injustice of this kind, it was depressed by indifference, so at last I made up my mind to try if Fortune would not be kinder to me in the old country. I took my well-nigh worn-out courage into my wearied hands, and, having sold all I possessed—furniture, books, pictures—for whatever they would fetch, engaged a passage in a ship that was leaving a week from that time.

The last day but two had arrived; but, short as was the time that lay before me, I hardly knew what to do with it, I was in such a feverish state of unrest and impatience to be gone.

The hotel was deserted that morning: everybody was on Flemington racecourse; but, lounging idly on the verandah, I became suddenly aware of an arrival. A young man on horseback, leading a lady's saddle-horse by the bridle, had alighted, and was giving both horses in charge to one of the inevitable stable-boys.
who, all the world over, seem to spring out of the
ground at the first sound of a horse's hoof in the
distance. A waiter was also to the fore; and I could
almost fancy I heard my own name inquired for, and
the response—'Yessir; cert'nly. Who shall I say?'

The doubt, however, became a certainty as the
door of the room was flung open, and my unexpected
visitor entered. I neither knew the name that was
announced—Alston—or the person to whom it be­
longed, a strong, sunburnt young fellow of about four­
and-twenty, in high boots, and a light tweed suit
dusty from riding, looking like any other twenty of
his fellows after a long ride from some probably
remote station. But I shall never forget the expres­
sion that met my gaze as his eyes looked into mine
—the depth of sadness, the hurt, pitiful look of a
wounded animal patiently bearing a pain it can neither
realise nor understand. My woman's sympathy must
have made itself outwardly visible, for his first words
were,—

'You will come with me, will you not? I know
you will come. Can you get ready at once? I have
a lady's saddle-horse at the door. Please put on
your habit, and bring your painting things with you
—that is all.'

The abrupt strangeness of the request did not seem
to strike me, and I answered in a natural manner,
'I am very sorry. I am afraid it is impossible;
perhaps you are not aware that I am sailing the day
after to­morrow for England?'}
'And you don't even know who I am. But I quite forgot, Miss Challis—I have a letter with me that will explain.'

I took the twisted slip of paper he held out to me with an unsteady, tremulous hand, and motioned to a chair, into which he threw himself heavily with a long-drawn breath of fatigue or emotion. This is what I read:—

'You will probably have heard of me—Mordaunt of Telemon. My daughter, my only child, is lying dead. In the name of woman's charity I beseech you to come and paint her for her heart-broken father. The bearer, Dick Alston,—my son who might have been,—will bring you back with him and will take every care of you. I entreat you to come without delay.

P. MORDAUNT.'

I don't think I hesitated. I think I had made up my mind even before I had come to the signature. Every letter of the bold, manly writing, that should have been so firm and strong, was shaky, as if the palsied hand of age had held the pen. As I looked up I saw that Dick Alston had been watching me while I read, his hand nervously grasping the arm of the chair. Now he sprang up and followed me as I moved towards the door of the inner chamber.

'You are coming, I see. Thank God! You can't think how he has set his heart on having her picture, Miss Challis. He had seen the likeness you painted
THE TRAGEDY IN A STUDIO.

last year of Judge Haughton's daughter. It suddenly came across him that it would be a comfort. I don't think he could have let her go, but for this.'

I paused with my hand on the door handle, and the question forming itself on my lips—'When?'

'The day after to-morrow, I think. She died at dawn, poor little darling! I started almost directly.'

The young fellow spoke with a strangled sob in his throat, and I left him without another word to make my slight preparations.

And thus it happened that I, Magdalen Challis, on the very eve of my departure from my native land, perhaps for ever, started on an expedition to an unknown place with a perfect stranger, for the purpose of painting the picture of a dead girl I had never seen, for a man I had never heard of.

... ... ...

After first starting off, we rode side by side for about a couple of hours in almost unbroken silence. A thirty miles' journey lay before us; and although the horses had had a short rest, and were fully aware of the fact that they were returning homewards, yet we rode but slowly, with occasional stoppages. The pretty little mare on which I was mounted fretted and chafed at an unaccustomed touch; she was evidently used to a lighter hand, and probably to a far lighter weight than mine; and my companion's animal began to show signs of distress.

'Poor brute!' said Dick Alston at last. 'I didn't spare him riding in, this morning, and, but for you,
Miss Challis, I am afraid I should not be doing so now.'

I suggested that in any case we could not expect to arrive at our destination before nightfall, and I should not be able to set myself to my pitiful task until the morning. In this he acquiesced, but I saw that he was in a condition of feverish impatience to be back that was almost unendurable. My own feelings were the reverse of pleasant, as can well be imagined; but while anxious not to intrude upon a great grief, or to appear inquisitive, I yet felt I had been thrust into a position in this sad drama in which a natural and legitimate interest in my fellow-actors could hardly be misconstrued into mere curiosity.

This thought must also have occurred to the young fellow himself, for he suddenly emerged from his gloomy musings to say,—

'It's real good of you, Miss Challis, to have come straight off like this on this miserable errand, and not to have asked any questions either. I think you ought to know something about us all, and poor little Lily.'

Thus it happened that by degrees I was able to piece together and connect the story that Dick Alston told me. It was nothing very new after all, and it seemed to me that in the telling of it the young fellow's love idealized and glorified the poor little heroine who was weak enough to let herself die, and selfish enough to break the hearts of two
men who loved her for an intangible and visionary fancy based on no foundation.

He spoke of a motherless and only child, petted and spoilt by a tender father, a doting old nurse, a devoted young lover—taking all the affection that was lavished on her as a right, something as natural as the trees and flowers and the sunlight. And then, tiring of her paradise, and turning to the stranger who entered its gates from another world of which she knew nothing—a man who had lived—who had the curious attraction that world-worn, travel-stained wayfarers of his kind possess for such Eves in their innocent ignorance. To this conclusion jumped my travelled knowledge.

But, said honest Dick Alston, just even to a rival, 'I don't know that Gordon was what you would have called a bad fellow, Miss Challis. He had been extravagant, backed bills too, sold out of his regiment, and displeased his father, who had shipped him off to Australia—there was nothing worse against him than that. But he made no friends on the station, and always seemed as if he thought himself rather superior to all of us other fellows. And Lily was flattered by his notice of her, and pleased to be taught little Italian songs, and to have poetry read to her. Her father and I hadn't perhaps treated her like a grown-up woman. I was waiting till she was eighteen to ask her to marry me. Mind you, I don't think he ever made actual love to her; and even if he knew he was turning her little head,
he didn’t set about deliberately to break her heart. But one day when he had ridden into town for the mail letters, he sent back a hurried note to say important family affairs called him back to England at once,—that a vessel was leaving the next morning, and there would be just time for the messenger to ride back with some things he specified, and the rest of his belongings might be distributed among the station hands. He thanked Mr. Mordaunt for much courtesy and kindness, and sent his love to the Australian lily. She was to keep his Browning, and would perhaps sometimes read over the pieces they had read together, so that he should not be quite forgotten. That was six months ago, and from that moment Lily drooped and pined like a broken flower. We heard that Gordon had inherited a property and changed his name, and a week since news came out of his marriage. That was the finishing stroke—the last nail that went home.’

The young fellow broke off with a shudder; his own simile had conjured up a painful picture. I knew that in imagination he heard the sound of the nails being driven into his dead love’s coffin.

‘The day after to-morrow,’ he went on, half to himself, in broken sentences. ‘Poor little girl! Buried on her birthday,—only eighteen,—and I was waiting for that day!’

He said no more, but spurred on his tired horse, and the rest of the ride was accomplished in silence.
Darkness had fallen like a pall by the time we reached our destination. I felt unutterably weary, physically worn out, and almost fell prone on the threshold as I dismounted. Young Alston said something about looking after the horses, and handed me over to a grave, elderly serving-woman who had come forward, and ushered me into the house.

'You must not expect to see the master,' she said; 'he will not leave the child to-night. But you must eat, young lady, and I daresay you will be glad afterwards of rest. You must be faint and very tired. I will bring you some refreshment here.'

She removed my hat, bathed my face and hands, and even took off my habit body, replacing it by a white dressing-jacket which she threw over my shoulders. I submitted without a word to her kind ministrations, and she waited upon me where I sat, drawing up a table by the side of the chair, on which she set a cold repast.

'You are very kind,' I said at last, when a little restored by the wine and bread and fruit of which I had partaken (I could eat nothing else), 'and I think I would like to go to bed directly.'

It was a bedroom into which she had brought me. She pointed to a little slip of a dressing-room partitioned off it. 'I am sleeping there, and shall be within call of you, Miss Challis. I am Lily's old nurse.'

Great tears welled up into her eyes and trickled
THE TRAGEDY IN A STUDIO.

down her cheeks as she mentioned the girl's name; but she was bearing her grief quietly, and was endeavouring, I could see, to restrain as far as possible any outward demonstration of it.

'You will find all you may require,' she said, 'and I shall not be long without looking in. Try to sleep, Miss Challis;' and she wished me good-night and left me.

I had been in a state of unrest for days past; my own preparations for departure and leave-takings, though causing no heart-pangs, had somewhat excited and fatigued me. Then came this unexpected and extraordinary summons. Perhaps the exhausting ride of the day had been the best thing that could have happened to quiet and calm me. At any rate, I was too wearied to think either of myself or others. Almost as soon as my head touched the pillow I slept—a profound, dreamless, and unbroken sleep.

When I awoke it was seven o'clock in the morning of the next day. It was not until some moments later that I realized where I was, and for what purpose. After I was dressed and had partaken of some breakfast, the nurse, who had again waited on me, said simply, 'If you are ready, Miss Challis, I will take you to Lily.'

It was a one-storied house, and the only room in which I had hitherto been was on the ground-floor; but now the nurse preceded me up a flight of
shallow stairs, and quietly opened the door of a room, into which she entered reverentially, as into a church. I followed mechanically, almost in spite of myself, with downcast eyes which feared what they might see when their gaze should be raised and concentrated. Without looking, I became conscious of details—of matting on the floor, of cool-looking chintz coverings and draperies, of the heavy scent of flowers, of a white bed facing the door.

Slowly at last I looked up as I stood by the side of it. The bed was empty. But on a couch by the window, which was open to the verandah, lay a frail, white-robed form over which the nurse was bending. She beckoned me to her side, and I looked for the first time upon my dead model. A lily indeed! On earth, love's sweet virgin martyr, now one of Heaven's angels!

I had never looked on Death before, orphan though I was. I had feared his unknown, nameless terrors and never dreamt of such calmly beautiful repose, such pure and passionless peace.

And peace fell upon me as I looked.

When I was at last able to turn away from my contemplation, I saw that the nurse was no longer there, and knew that the time had come when I must set myself to the task which had to be begun and completed that day.

I felt relieved that none of the ghastly paraphernalia of the grave surrounded the girl, who, clad in some
soft white woollen garment, was lying on the couch, over which had been spread a large opossum rug; a crimson shawl of China crape was thrown lightly across her knees and feet, and a mass of white flowers strewn over it. On the edge of the couch a book was lying, which seemed to have just slipped from her grasp. I did not need to look at it to know that it was the Browning, and one might have imagined she had fallen asleep while reading it. Such was the picture that I saw and painted, at first calmly and steadfastly enough.

I must have been at work for several hours when the nurse came in, and, in the quiet but decided manner which she had adopted with me from the beginning, insisted on my leaving off for a time to take the food which she had prepared for me in the room downstairs. I was probably away about half-an-hour; as I returned, and had almost reached the top of the short staircase, some one passed from that room into another of which the door was quietly but quickly closed, and then the stillness was broken by the painful sound of a man’s sobs.

I felt unnerved as I sat down again to my work. The sunlight that filtered through a trellis of leaves on the verandah seemed to cast strange shadows over Lily’s face. . . . I could fancy that I saw her blue-veined eyelids quiver—that her long lashes trembled on her waxy cheek—surely a faint, wan smile was flickering over her mouth!
I threw down my brush, and buried my face in my hands. I think I must have remained long in that position, for it seemed to me when I once more raised my head that the room had grown almost dark. With a sudden desperation I seized my brushes again, and resumed my task. I painted quickly, feverishly, with hurried glances at the motionless form, whose face I hardly dared to look at. And then fell the sudden Australian twilight, and a breeze sprang up, and blew the muslin window drapery across my face. I could hear the soft pit-a-pat of falling raindrops, and my beating heart kept time to the sound. Then the wet leaves of a shrub on the verandah swung in at the window, and cast a shower of drops around. They fell chill and wet on my own warm hands, they fell on those other cold ones, and I bent forward trembling to wipe them off. Horror! what did I see? Tears on the dead face!

The ground seemed to give way beneath me. I felt myself sway and stagger. I fell across the couch. I remember no more.

The next day at an early hour I left Telemon with Mr. Mordaunt's cheque for £500 in my note-book, and with a haunting memory at my heart that will never depart from it. I saw Dick Alston for a few moments only, in which he acted as messenger for the host whom I was not to see at all.

An overseer 'who could be trusted' was to be my escort back to Melbourne, Dick Alston, of course, not
being able to leave, as the funeral was to take place that afternoon. All through the long ride from the station—a solitary one to all intents and purposes of companionship, my escort either preceding or riding behind me in silence—I could think of nothing but Dick Alston's words: 'Buried on her birthday, poor little girl! Buried on her birthday!' For, by a curious coincidence, I remembered that it was my birthday too, and my heart sank with a vague foreboding of disaster that should result to me from the association.

'Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' was the cry that rose unbidden to my lips, with an involuntary perversion of its meaning that I was powerless to prevent. Who should deliver me from an undying remembrance of death itself? Who shall break the link that must ever bind me living to the dead girl buried on my birthday? The thought pursued and remained with me even on board the ship that was to bear me away to new scenes and a new life. It took tangible shape and action, impelling me to perpetuate it by an outward and visible sign that should abide with me, and prevent me forgetting if I would. In the seclusion of my cabin it forced pencil and brushes into my unwilling fingers, till at first a faint sketch outlined itself on the canvas, and then the contours filled themselves in with all those accessories and details that seemed burnt in on my mental vision. A girl with closed eyes lying on a couch, her brown hair spread out upon the pillow,
THE TRAGEDY IN A STUDIO.

PART II.

THE VEILED PICTURE.

My nervous system had received a shock which resulted in an attack of utter prostration, accompanied by low fever. When the Storm-King arrived in the docks, I was unable to stand, and quite incapable of deciding for myself, or even of giving directions as to my destination. I had made no friends on the passage, and had rather shrunken from well-intentioned proffers of assistance and counsel. The question, however, had finally resolved itself into what was to be done with me? With me, Magdalen Challis, that strong and self-reliant young woman, now lying there in her deck chair, listening to the discussion as if it concerned somebody else!

And the ship was actually in, and people coming on board to look after their friends amongst all the indescribable bustle and commotion of greetings and collection of luggage, etc. Idly my gaze rested on a lady who had come on board with a lovely petted
little daughter, to fetch and bring away her 'very own self' the king-parrot and yellow-crested cockatoo that some kind Australian friend had sent out to the little girl.

The interest which I had ceased to feel in myself and my own concerns, or those of any other human being, was suddenly roused and centred in the pretty English mother and child, who were standing close to my chair while waiting for their precious consignment.

I saw the little one clutch at her mother's dress to arrest her attention, and caught a look of wonderment in the big blue eyes that were fixed upon myself.

'What the matter with the pale lady, mamma?'

'Hush, Lucy! it is rude to make remarks about people. The lady will hear you.'

But the eyes of the speaker were turned upon me too, and I read a sweet soft pity in them, just as I had read the wondering indifference of childhood in those of her little girl. A sudden impulse moved me to speak.

'I have been very ill,' I said; 'I am alone on board—I have money, but I don't know a soul in London, nor even where to go.'

I knew afterwards, when little Lucy's mother had become my one dear woman friend in the great world of London, that I had hardly finished speaking that day on board when I fell back fainting in my chair, and the parrot and cockatoo became a mere secondary consideration.
Mrs. Rivers held a hurried consultation with the doctor and the captain,—the latter, who knew who I was, being thus in a position to vouch for my respectability,—and carried me off then and there to lodgings that she knew of in a Surrey farmhouse, giving up the rest of the season, with all her engagements, to come there also, and herself to nurse me back to the health and vigour of which I had been so proud, and which, but for this sisterly hand stretched out in the hour of need, I might never otherwise have regained.

But though my splendid health and strength of body in time returned to me, I was never again quite the same woman I had been before the terrible ordeal which had so nearly overthrown my mental balance. I was for ever haunted by the remembrance of my dead model, and could not divest myself of the foreboding that some tragic result to myself was yet to follow the chance connection of my own birthday with hers on the day of her burial. Two anniversaries had come and gone with no special event to mark them; the third was not far off.

Fortune meanwhile had been most kind, and had led me through pleasant paths to a pinnacle of success, where stood a flower-crowned temple of happiness of which she had given me the key.

From the day in which I had taken my studio in Chelsea, everything had prospered with me. In my wildest visions of success I had never aspired to
such a position as the one in which I found myself on the eve of my twenty-fifth birthday, a woman of ample means, admired and feted, famous and envied, beautiful and beloved.

Yes—not only had Fame stooped to place her chaplet on my brows, but Love had kissed me on the mouth, and taken my hand in his. Between them they had led me to the feast; and while the pungent perfume of Fame's incense clung with subtle fragrance to my garments and my hair, Love held out to me the cup of rich red wine, of which I drank deep draughts till the thrill of life ran through me to my finger-tips. 'Twas in this supreme moment that a formless shadow cast its gloom athwart the brilliant sunlight, and a pale finger wrote upon the wall—'Lily, Lily, Lily—buried on her birthday!'

That anniversary had now returned for the third time, and I had nerved myself to meet and celebrate it as usual. Shut up within my studio, admittance denied to all, I offered up a propitiatory sacrifice; the sacrifice of one of those bright days of life that are all too few and short—one whole day!

Taking from its resting-place the picture which I kept jealously hidden all the year from my own eyes as well as from those of others, I reverentially withdrew the crape that veiled it, and forced myself to gaze upon the dead girl, who, I trust, unconsciously, seemed to influence and mar the life which had never
so much as touched the fringe of hers, but which she had enchained and bound in those fetters from which death had released her.

The studio was transformed into a kind of *chapelle ardente*; the blinds drawn close, all light as far as possible excluded, wax candles burning on a table with a black velvet covering that stood in front of the easel, white flowers everywhere. Myself in white, girdled with a sash of deep violet, offering up my sacrifice to—whom or what—I knew not.

Thus did Una Rivers find me. She had been of late such a frequent visitor, that my orders to admit no one had probably not been considered to include herself. After a moment's pause of bewildered surprise, her laugh rang out like a silver bell.

'Why, Magdalen, what freak is this, and what new and startling picture does it portend? I did not know that artists "composed" in this way. I must own that it is all so very realistic, quite Tosca-ish, in fact, that I felt almost alarmed for a moment.'

For sole answer, I suddenly broke into a passion of hysterical weeping. Oh, the relief of those blessed, weak, womanish tears! Una wisely did not attempt to check them; she just held my hand in a firm, close clasp, and let the fit exhaust itself. A devil had been cast out of me, and after a time I was myself again, and able to tell her the story of the picture,—that story which for those three years had veritably held me bound and enchained under a kind of demoniac possession. I had never before spoken of
it to any human being: at the outset, I felt as if I were committing sacrilege in doing so now; but by degrees, while I was speaking, all my morbid imaginings were dispelled, peace returned to my heart, and the horrible, haunting, formless dread which I had so long cherished, vanished like the troubled memory of a dream. I had passed through fire with a spectre which was consumed while I was saved; but from its ashes had arisen an angel, with the sweet face of a mortal woman, who held my hand in hers and smiled upon me as she wiped away my tears.

'You are yourself again, Magdalen dearest. This terrible experience, I venture to say, will become to you a sad memory, and nothing more. By degrees, too, even that will pass away, and for a beginning, let us both set to work to alter all this gloomy mise en scène; come, help me to make your pleasant studio bright again.'

We extinguished the tapers and let in the sunlight; the black velvet pall was replaced by a bright striped Algerian cloth; and even the blooms of my balcony plants, the vivid scarlet geraniums and yellow calceolarias, were ruthlessly plucked by Mrs. Rivers' busy little fingers to mingle with the white waxen scented blossoms. The easel was moved into a corner of the room, and its funereal drapery of crape cast aside into a closet; but, with one of those subtle delicacies of womanly feeling which none but a woman can appreciate, as my friend took off from my waist the mourning sash of violet that
encircled it, she threw it tenderly across the denuded easel.

'All this explains much, Magdalen,' said she, 'that has hitherto puzzled and even troubled me in your conduct towards my brother Val. That you love him, dear fellow, I know, and I believe you are proud of the love he feels for you; but that there was something on your mind which you had not told either of us, has been patent to me since the first moment I knew you. But I trusted you, dear, and believed that in your own good time you would tell him all.'

'I have had the feeling that there was a doom upon me, Una, and I loved him too well to involve him in it.'

'But that was a purely morbid fancy, darling. You will not keep him waiting any longer now. You will fix the day, will you not, to make him happy? Sometimes I have thought,' she continued, 'that it might seem to you too short a time had elapsed since he lost his wife. Poor Gracie! But it is nearly eighteen months ago. She was our cousin, you know, and we were both fond of her in a cousinly way; but Val never loved her, Magdalen. He has never loved any other woman but yourself—never!'

'Tell me then—How was it? Why did he marry her?'

'Don't you know, darling? But of course not—Val would not tell. It was an act of pure generosity on his part. Grace had offended Uncle Stephen by
marrying against his wishes,—a foolish, bad marriage it was; but she was an only child, and had always had her own way. Uncle Stephen, too, had set his heart on her husband, whoever he might be, taking her name, as she was quite an heiress. People thought he would eventually come round; but when he died, it was discovered that he had left all his money away from her to Val, who was to take his name and enter into undisputed possession at once. This was partly to punish Grace, and partly, I verily believe, to annoy our father, with whom he had quarrelled, by making Val independent of him. They were both men of stern, unforgiving spirit, and Val had also got into the black books at home, and had had to seek his fortune in Australia, whence he was hastily summoned by the news that this fortune had been left him. You know Val had been in Australia?

I nodded my head in acquiescence. Yes, I knew; but as we had never met out there, nor had I even heard of a Mr. Lennox, I had not asked him any questions upon a subject on which he had not volunteered information. I had shaken the dust of my unappreciative country off my feet. I never meant to return there. I was trying to become thoroughly English in all my ways and mode of life. I wanted to forget Australia altogether.

'And so,' continued Mrs. Rivers, 'as Val had been summoned home by a mere bare telegram, he did not know any particulars. When he found that he was to be enriched at the expense of poor little Grace, who
THE TRAGEDY IN A STUDIO.

had become a widow only two days after her father's death by an accident that had befallen her drunken, good-for-nothing husband, he point-blank refused to take one penny of the money that had been left to him. Grace on her side was not to be outdone, and this kind of thing went on for months, and might have continued indefinitely—Val declaring he should go back to Australia, Grace saying she would go out as a governess, and a fortune lying idle between them—had not Gracie discovered one fine day that she had fallen desperately in love with Val, poor little thing! She told him, it appears, that it would kill her if he went out to Australia, and—well, I suppose it really amounted to asking him to marry her, if one could ever have got at the exact truth. However that may be, they were married after a decent interval of widowhood on her side, but she only lived six months to enjoy her happiness; and if ever there were a happy wife it was Grace. She was quite utterly content and satisfied, and thought Val a perfect husband—as he was—to her. But it would require a very different kind of woman to make Val happy.

Una's soft brown eyes were fixed upon me with an expression that went to my heart. I could not resist their pleading inquiry.

'Do not fear, Una, I know I can do so, and, please God, I will!'

'Do you know, Magdalen, you look as I could fancy one of the vestal virgins, or a prophetess of old, taking a vow to devote herself to some lifelong
duty and service. You are such a grand woman—the ideal wife for my noble Val.'

For all reply, I took her little curly brown head between both my hands and kissed her on her smooth forehead. What she had said was quite true. I felt as if I had solemnly dedicated myself to a lifelong duty and service which was at the same time the object of my fondest hopes, my deepest prayers, my highest aspirations, my most perfect and unselfish love.

For a time we sat there serious and silent—sisters in heart, as we hoped soon to become in reality. We were both recalled to a more everyday state of feeling by the striking of a clock on the mantelpiece.

‘Five!’ exclaimed Mrs. Rivers, springing from her seat. ‘Why, I must have been here an hour at the very least, and I have not even told you what I came for. It went completely out of my mind when I came in and saw you.’

‘Excuse me,’ I interrupted, shrinking from a recurrence to the past, ‘and sit down again, Una, for five minutes. I will ring for tea.’

‘But indeed I ought to be at home now. I promised the child to have tea with her in the schoolroom, and we are dining at seven ourselves to-night. You have got to dine with us too, Magdalen, for Val has a box for Lohengrin. You said you wanted to hear your famous countrywoman, Madame Melba, in the part of “Elsa;” and everybody knows that a Wagner enthusiast like yourself would not want to miss one
note of the overture, so it was all settled I was to come and let you know quite early, and about six Val would fetch you himself, and bring you on to Lowndes Square. I can't persuade my dear old stupid Guy to come, so we shall have to share Val between us. And I really must be off, darling. You can give Val some tea when he comes instead of me.'

She was not to be persuaded to stay; so, having acquiesced in the arrangement, I kissed the little woman and let her go.

It was just striking half-past five when a tall, fair, distinguished-looking man came leisurely down the steps of the Reform Club and got into a hansom that was in waiting. 'Cheyne Row' was the address given to the driver, and thither we will follow him on his way. But the drive, short as it was, was not to be an uneventful one, for the vehicle nearly came into collision with an omnibus that was coming down the crowded King's Road thoroughfare, and as it drew sharply to one side to avoid it, a little child, who had just started to cross the street, was caught by the wheel and thrown across the kerb upon the pavement. She was not hurt in any way, a fact which the gentleman, who had sprung out of the cab to her assistance, was careful to ascertain as he raised her up and placed her in safety on the pavement. One of the dirty little fat arms had been grazed just sufficiently to draw blood, however, and the child was preparing to set up a howl, which was promptly arrested at
sight of a bright new shilling laid in its palm, over which the fingers closed immediately. The gentleman got into the cab again and proceeded on his way, reaching his destination without further adventure. He did not dismiss it, but told the driver he should probably keep him about half-an-hour; and when the door was opened, entered the house without parley, as if he knew that the person he had come to see was in and would receive him. In the same way he closely followed the servant along a ground-floor passage, and was in the room as soon as, or even before, she had announced, 'Mr. Lennox, madam.'

There was only one person present, who rose up from a low seat to greet him; a woman not much shorter than himself, with the splendid proportions and noble carriage of a Greek goddess. But there was no mistaking the mere womanliness in the look she turned upon him, or in the tones of her low, full voice.

'Val, Val!' she cried, and threw herself upon his neck, and clung to him in a very passion of abandonment. The man himself turned pale with the surprise and joy of it, and the intensity of his own emotion. But as suddenly disengaging herself, she started back with a cry of horror—'Oh! what is it? What is it? Are you hurt? Blood on your wrist! For heaven's sake, Val, what has happened?'

She was now trembling like a leaf, and he gently guided her to the couch from which she had risen, and sat down by her side.
'It is nothing, my dearest, absolutely nothing. A little child fell in the street, and grazed its arm; in picking it up and holding it for a moment this must have been the result.'

But she persisted in asking for details of the affair, and he had to tell her the whole incident. She had turned a little pale, and he saw her shiver as he described the accident.

'Why, Magdalen, my queen, you are surely not quite your own brave self to-day? Come, let me look at you, silly Magdalen! And sweet Magdalen, and beautiful Magdalen—sweeter and more beautiful to-day than ever!'

He was looking at her, not only with the enraptured admiration of a lover, but with the critical appreciation of a man who knows how and what to admire, and can estimate at its proper value the beauty of a woman as of that of a picture or a statue.

Then suddenly his expression changed to one of proud and satisfied proprietorship, as he exclaimed,—

'Among all the handsome women in London, you will be the loveliest in the whole opera-house to-night, Magdalen.'

Well might he say so, for this was the picture that met his eyes. A noble figure robed in some soft white fabric embroidered in silver that draped her in classic folds. It was cut slightly low around the throat, which rose out of it like a polished column; but the beautiful contours of neck and bust were covered, only the massive rounded arms bared to
their full length from the shoulder. In her sunny hair she wore a silver fillet, and a silver girdle encircled her waist. In each was thrust a cluster of blood-red blossoms of some rare tropical plant, which threw out the creamy tint of her draperies and the ivory pallor of her face,—a face from which the grey eyes looked steadily out beneath straight heavy black brows and lashes, which formed a curious contrast to hair of a bright chestnut that seemed to have caught and imprisoned the sunlight in its burnished masses. It was altogether a strange, wonderful face, with its curved, sensitive lips and dilated nostrils, its powerful chin and broad low forehead,—a face that flashed upon you its varying moods and its varied expressions, whose swift, sudden smile was like unexpected summer lightning.

On only two human beings did this smile ever linger and soften into tenderness, and these were Una Rivers and her brother. Such a look came across her now as she turned to the man who was gazing upon her with earnest intensity, while he attempted to speak with playfulness. She replied both to his look and words.

"Silly; am I, Val? and sweet, which is better; and beautiful, which is best of all? I am silly for myself, because it is my birthday to-day, and I don't want the least little miserable trifle to happen on such a day to spoil it. Silly Magdalen! And sweet for you, Val, because I love you; and beautiful for you, Val, so that you may love me.'
THE TRAGEDY IN A STUDIO.

Happy Magdalen!
Val Lennox caught her to his heart.

'Your beauty is not what I care for, Magdalen, lovely as you are. It is not— Yes; it is, it is—my goddess, my idol. I love it, I worship it. Your beauty is driving me mad.'

He pressed her closer to him as he spoke, raining passionate kisses on her hair, eyes, throat, and arms, then threw himself at her feet, clasping her knees, and buried his face in her lap with a sob.

Magdalen bent down and laid her hand on it with a soft, caressing touch.

'Val, listen to me. It is my birthday, as I told you. You did not know it, and you brought me no gift, but I shall give you one instead. I promised Una to-day I would marry you whenever you chose to ask me, and I give myself to you now—this moment. I am yours when you like to claim me—do you hear, Val? Your very own, your wife.'

He slowly raised himself to a level with the woman who was bending over him, and, seating himself on the couch, threw his arm around her. Her eyes sank beneath the intensity of his gaze; she swayed towards him as it were involuntarily, but all at once sprang to her feet with a cry,—

'The blood, the blood on your wrist! Oh, let me wash it off, and then we will go, Val! We had better go—you knew we had better go.'

She had taken hold of his now passive hand, and drawn him after her to a corner of the studio where
a white marble nymph held up a vase from which water flowed into a shell beneath. Like one in a dream she turned on the little silver tap and took up a sponge from the basin. He was gazing almost mechanically before him, beyond the little fountain to the corner of the room where a small easel draped in violet stood with a picture upon it. All at once his glance was arrested, and a look of surprise came into his face.

' Lily Mordaunt!' he exclaimed, and made a step forward.

Whether in loosing Magdalen's hand, which was holding his, she lost her balance, dazed and bewildered as she was from the violent emotion through which she had just passed, or what happened to cause her to fall, was never known. She swayed and tottered for a moment, but he was not in time to catch her before she fell heavily backwards, overturning the easel. In her fall her temple struck on the sharp edge of the marble basin, and great drops of blood fell like a slow rain upon the picture. Horror-stricken he raised her in his arms, but the doom she dreaded had wrought its consummation—Magdalen Challis was dead.

THE END.
Coo-ee: tales of Australian life, by Australian ladies

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