

THE SECRET BEQUEST

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The Secret Bequest by Christian Reid

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CHRISTIAN REID

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BY
CHRISTIAN REID

AUTHOR OF "THE LIGHT OF THE VISION," "A CHILD OF
MARY," "FAIRY GOLD," "VERA'S CHARGE," "HIS
VICTORY," "PHILIP'S RESTITUTION,"
"THE COIN OF SACRIFICE," ETC.



THE AVE MARIA
NOTRE DAME, INDIANA, U. S. A.

CHAPTER I.

THE dusk of a spring evening was making deep twilight in the large basilica-like church of the Paulists in New York, lending a shadowy remoteness to the lofty roof and pillared aisles, while bringing out with exquisite effect the radiance of the ever-burning light within the sanctuary, which brightened in steadfast glow as the obscurity deepened. Here and there throughout the church a few devout worshippers were kneeling; but it is doubtful if to any one of them the spell of the place and the hour appealed with a deeper sense of its spiritual and poetic charm than to a girl who sat quietly in one of the seats near the door.

Yet, had any one observed her entrance a short time before, it would have been apparent that she was not a Catholic; for she made no reverence to the altar, nor knelt even for a moment before dropping into a seat. But her quietness breathed a respect that was almost devout, as she sat, motionless as a statue, with an air of absorbing the influence of the wonderful stillness and silence which surrounded her. Now and again she sighed softly, as one sighs who feels weariness yielding to a consciousness of rest and peace; and but for the deepening shadows it might have been seen that all the lines of her face were relaxing from the strain of the day. Her very immo-

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bility was expressive of an attitude of the spirit in which it asks only to lie passive and be acted upon, drawing in refreshment from some source of infinite tranquillity.

Presently one of the kneeling figures rose, genuflected toward the altar, and silently as a ghost passed out. Thus roused to a recollection of the lapse of time, the girl rose also, hesitated, and then, as if constrained by some power too strong to be resisted, bent her knee in recognition of the Presence that dwelt behind the golden doors on which the distant lamp-light gleamed, and, turning quickly, hurried from the church.

On the steps outside she paused for a moment, while the contrast between the ineffable quiet of the church she had left and the turmoil of the traffic-filled avenue struck her with a force she had hardly ever felt before. Almost unconsciously to herself, she had been for a brief space so far away, in regions of thought and feeling so remote from the world into which a step had now again brought her, that the scene of hurrying tumult seemed as unreal as it was discordant with her mood. She was smitten with a sudden sense of the strange difference between these two worlds, so far apart, yet touching so closely, and acting and reacting one upon the other through a thousand channels. Her eyes had for an instant the rapt look of one to whom a vision was revealed; but time was not allowed her for further meditation. A distant sound, rising above the noises of the street, warned her of the approach of a train on the elevated road. She fled hastily to the near-by station, ran up the stairs, and, breathlessly enough, found herself

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a few minutes later clinging to a strap in a crowded car.

It was a very familiar position to one whose daily work carried her up and down these avenues of the narrow, congested city during the "rush hours" of morning and evening. Taking it, therefore, as a matter of course, she stood, steadying herself, with the ease of long practice, to the movement of the train, and gazing absently over the heads of a row of seated men before her, when, somewhat to her surprise, one of these suddenly rose and offered her his seat. With a murmured word of thanks, she dropped into the vacant place, conscious of a great sense of weariness from her long day's work; and, as she leaned back and closed her eyes, something in her pale, tired face arrested the attention of the man who had surrendered his seat.

He had succeeded to her strap; and so standing, with his tall, heavy figure swaying slightly, he stared down at her until the magnetism of his steady regard lifted the lids from a pair of leaf-brown eyes, which unexpectedly glanced up at him. Thus detected in staring with apparent rudeness, he colored and looked away quickly; but the girl who had met his eyes only smiled a little. In her life among the working throngs of the great city, she had learned too much to make a mistake in reading a man's looks; and she knew that in the gaze she had encountered there was nothing of admiration, offensive or otherwise, but only an intent scrutiny, as of struggling recognition. "Does the man think that he knows me?" she wondered. A very brief observation convinced her that she did not know *him*; and, although his bodily presence

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continued to stand in front of her, she dismissed him from her mind, until, on leaving the train when her station was reached, she found him behind her.

There was nothing in this to attract attention; but the fact that he followed her as she turned from the avenue into the street on which she lived, began to seem rather more than accidental. And she was quite sure that it was more when he appeared immediately behind her in the vestibule of the house she entered. Without a glance at him, however, she was about to pass on her upward way, when he stepped quickly forward, took off his hat and spoke.

"I think I can hardly be mistaken," he said, in a voice full of the inflections as well as the courtesy of the South. "Am I not addressing Miss Trezevant?"

"Yes, I am Honora Trezevant," the girl answered, pausing and measuring him with a cool, level gaze. "But I don't know you," she added with concise directness.

"No, you don't know me, for the very good reason that you never saw me before," the stranger replied, with a smile. "My name is Maxwell." He produced and handed a card to her. "I am a lawyer from Kingsford, North Carolina, the old home of your family; and I have come to New York specially to see you."

"To see me!" Honora Trezevant lifted eyes full of astonishment from the card she had received. "For what purpose?"

"For a very agreeable purpose," Mr. Maxwell answered genially,— "to inform you that you have inherited a fortune."

"It!" She regarded him incredulously. "From whom?"

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"From your cousin, Mr. Alexander Chisholm, of whom no doubt you have heard."

"I have heard of him, yes" (her delicate, dark brows drew together as if such hearing had not been altogether pleasant), "but I can not conceive it possible that he should have left me a fortune, or anything else, for that matter."

"Nevertheless, he has done so," Mr. Maxwell said positively. "If you will permit me to accompany you to your apartment—you live here, do you not?—I can have the pleasure of giving you full details."

"Oh, certainly! Will you come up with me?" she said hastily.

As they went upstairs together—the house contained no elevator—she glanced at him critically, and took in the full impression of his highly respectable personality: that of a middle-aged, professional man, with a shrewd, pleasant face, kindly though keen eyes, and a certain note in manner and appearance which differentiated him from the type of men with whom her daily life associated her, and recalled a type to which her own father belonged. She felt her heart warm toward him as, notwithstanding a considerable avoirdupois, he mounted lightly enough beside her.

"Will you tell me how you knew me at once?" she asked. "My name is not printed on my face."

"You think not?" He laughed. "I found it printed there quite plainly. Are you not aware that you are strikingly like your father?"

"I have been told so," she answered. "But I didn't know that the likeness was so strong that I might be recognized by it. Was that why you were—er—"

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"Staring at you in the train? Yes. The likeness struck me as soon as I looked at you; but I couldn't be sure enough to risk speaking until you turned into this house, of which I had the address. Then I felt certain of making no mistake."

"It's a little strange that you should remember my father so well," she said. "He has been dead five years, and it was ten years before, that he left home."

"He wasn't a man one could easily forget," Mr. Maxwell replied. "We grew up together, and I not only knew him very well, but I was also much attached to him. He was a very brilliant and lovable man, you know."

"Yes, I know," she said with an accent of sadness. "But here we are! I hope the stairs haven't tired you very much."

"Oh, not at all!" he assured her, though conscious of some shortness of breath, and much satisfaction that there was not another flight to mount.

"You see, one gets a better apartment if one doesn't have to pay for luxuries, such as elevators and buttoned pages," she explained, while she fitted her latchkey into the door which faced them on the landing.

As it opened, a voice from within spoke fretfully:

"O Nora, have you come at last? What on earth has made you so late?"

Then, over the shoulder of the girl before him, Mr. Maxwell saw another girl, standing in the door of a brilliantly lighted room that opened on the hall into which they entered,—a slender, graceful girl, with an arrestingly beautiful face, crowned by a splendid mass of copper-tinted hair, which the light