

Following The Star

An Edwardian Romance of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh

Gold - Chapter One

David Rivers was home on sick leave from the wilds of Central Africa. His evening sermon was ready. He leaned back in his armchair and mentally relaxed the tension at which he had been sitting. The final sentence silently thrilled into the quiet study in words which would resound soon through the half-empty little village church.

David felt as did the young David of old, when he paused at the brook and chose five smooth stones for his sling on his way to meet the mighty champion of the Philistines. David Rivers was now ready to go forward and fight the Goliath's of apathy and inattention; the lifelong habit of the congregation of not listening to the preacher or giving any heed to the message he brought. He was accustomed to people to whom every thought was news and every word was life, men ready and eager to listen and believe and willing, once they believed, to be buried alive or tried to their last breath, tied to the stake, rather than relinquish or deny the faith he taught them.

The congregation in the little Hampshire village where the venerated Rector had suffered influenza, consisted entirely of well-to-do farmers and their families, labouring men who came because the public houses had been closed and it was the only warm place to be found on Sunday; a few devout elderly men and women and a fair sprinkling of village lads and lassies who took more interest in themselves or each other than divine worship.

The Rector, father of his people, could do no wrong. He had christened, confirmed, married and buried them for fifty years but they would as soon have thought of trying to understand his sermons as of questioning his soundness. As he slowly and carefully mounted the pulpit each Sunday, the hearts of his people were with him. Every well-known routine was safely accomplished each Sabbath and in it all they acquiesced without question. So they slumbered, fidgeted or thought of other things until the benediction bowed them to their knees and the first strident blasts of the organ sent them gaily trooping out of the church and home to Sunday dinners, virtuous and content.

Into this atmosphere of pious apathy strode David Rivers, aflame with zeal for his Lord. . . a young prophet of fire in the still waters of a Hampshire village. As David convalesced, he had wondered how on earth he would scrape together the necessary funds to enable him to return to his beloved Africa, so the Rector's advertisement for help, offering attractive terms for a short while, appealed to him.

A friendship between the two men was speedily cemented. The white-haired old man, overflowing with geniality, punctilious in old-fashioned courtesy, reminded David of his father long dead, while the young enthusiast with white, worn face and deep-set shining eyes, struck a silent cord in the heart of the easygoing old Rector. He saw him as someone he himself might have been had he chosen a harder path when standing at the cross-roads of life. It was too late

now to sigh after a departed ideal but as belated tribute to its memory, he doubled the remuneration he offered, left the keys to the bookcase in the library and recommended David to the special care of his faithful housekeeper, Sarah.

The fact that young David Rivers had left his heart among the wild tribes of Central Africa had made him careless of ordinary creature comforts so he tended to decline the sherry offered to him by a solicitous Sarah after a full day's work on Sundays although he undoubtedly did look as worn and tired as Sarah thought. Nevertheless David enjoyed the Rector's large armchair upholstered in maroon leather and delighted in the oak-panelled study with its atmosphere of calm and dedication.

This last Sunday of his ministry at Brambledene happened to fall on Christmas Eve. Also, for once, it was true Christmas weather. As David walked to church that morning, every branch and twig, every ivy leaf and holly berry, sparkled in the sunshine. The frosty lanes were white and hard and an indescribable exhilaration was in the air. Church bells, near and far, pealed joyously. The Christmas spirit was already here.

'Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given,' quoted David as he swung up the lanes. Movement seemed a pleasure. Mentally he contrasted this keen frost with the mosquito-haunted swamps of the African jungle. It was five years since he had a Christmas in England. The unaccustomed sense of health and vigour brought the contrast of his deathly lassitude and malarial fever, sharply into focus. But instantly his loyal heart cried, 'Unto them a Child is born,' and he knew again his high and holy calling and how would they believe in a Son who was given to them if they had never heard of Him. How would they hear if he did not go back to them.

The little church was bright with holly and heavy with evergreens but to David that morning his sermon had seemed to him a failure. His text confronted him in letters of gold on crimson background of the massive old church Bible.

'Emmanuel - God with us.'

Not one mind seemed to be with David as he gave it out, read it twice, slowly and clearly, and then proceeded to explain that this wonderful name, Emmanuel, was never intended to be the world's name for Him. However, at this statement, Mrs. Churchwarden Smith raised her eyebrows and began turning over the leaves of her Bible. Encouraged by this unusual sign of attention, David leaned over the pulpit and tried to drive the thought home. It had been a discovery to himself the evening before and was beginning to mean much to him.

'The name Emmanuel,' he said, 'so freely used in our church decorations at this season, occurs only three times in the Bible, the most important one is quoted in Matthew and says, 'Behold a virgin shall bear a Son and shall call His name, Emmanuel.'

David continued looking earnestly down and endeavouring to disregard the rustling pages. 'I want you to realise this was His mother's name for Him, for the new-born King, for the Babe of Bethlehem, the little son in the village home of Nazareth. His presence there, meant for that humble mother, 'God with us.' If you want to find our name for Him, look at the angel's message to Joseph, 'You shall call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins.'

David paused and looked earnestly into the church for some response to the thrill of his own soul.

‘As she clasped the infant to her through the long hours of that night ride to Egypt, she could say, ‘God with us in our flight and peril. In the carpenter’s home with the many trials and vexations of a village life of poverty where He was always subject to His parents, always patient, gentle and understanding, she could often say, ‘Emmanuel, God with us!’ said David, slowly and impressively, ‘if only boys in your village could be this to their mothers. If their loyal obedience, gentleness and love could make it possible for their mothers to say, ‘When my little boy is at home, the love of God is here. I see the Christ-like life in my boy. Truly, Emmanuel, God is with us.’

‘Whatever did he mean by trying to take the name Emmanuel from us?’ said Mrs. Churchwarden Smith at the dinner table at the farm. ‘Seems to me if he stays much longer we’ll have no Bible left.’ ‘I’ve no patience with these young chaps,’ said her husband as soon as speech was possible and his mouth was a little less full. He always enjoyed his good wife’s Sunday lunch and his sleep afterwards. ‘They’re all ‘Ebrew and Greek to parade their own learning.’ Mrs. Smith watchfully bided her time. Then she said, ‘Popish too, to talk so much about the mother of our Lord.’ ‘Did he mention her?’ said Mr. Churchwarden Smith.

Yes, as he thought it over during his lonely lunch, David felt more and more convinced that his morning sermon had been a failure. Notwithstanding, he prepared the evening sermon with equal care, a spice of enjoyment added, owing to the fact that he would possibly - probably - almost to a certainty - have in the evening congregation someone able to understand and appreciate each point, a mind of the calibre of his own, a soul he was bent on winning.

As he closed his Bible and relaxed over the thought that the sermon was complete, he smiled into the glowing wood fire, saying to himself in glad anticipation, ‘My lady of Mystery will undoubtedly be there. Now I wonder if she believes there were three Wise Men!’

Gold Chapter 2

David thrust his hands deep into his pockets. It was a short, well-cut but slightly threadbare and well loved coat. He crossed his knees, lay back in the Rector's big chair. Sitting in warmth and

comfort, he let his thoughts dwell in detail on the first time he had seen her. The Christmas snow fell softly and gathering twilight slowly hushed the day to rest.

‘Yes, undoubtedly my Lady of Mystery will be there,’ thought David Rivers, ‘unless this fall of snow keeps her away.’ It was so long since he had preached in England, he soon realised that, with his eyes down on a written page, he had no hope of keeping the attention of his audience. On all subsequent Sundays he half memorised his sermons and hardly realised how constantly, in their delivery, there flowed a subconscious depth of thought clothed in eloquent and appropriate language.

On his second Sunday evening he had stepped to the pulpit depressed and discouraged. In the morning he had fallen out with the choir. Large numbers of church offspring sat on each side of the chancel and vied with one another to out sing the other. The rivalry resulted in a specially loud and joyful noise. David, jarred in every nerve, and forgetting for the moment that he was not dealing with his African aborigines, wheeled round, held up his hand, and had said, ‘Hush!’ This resulted in the loss of the tenor solo and, from the organist, a prolonged search for a suitable voluntary during the whole of the sermon. Wishing himself back in his African forests, David began the service in a chastened voice on that second Sunday evening.

During the singing of the first of the evening Psalms, the door at the further end of the church was pushed gently open. A tall figure entered alone, closed the door noiselessly behind her and stood for a moment in hesitating uncertainty. Then the old verger hustled out of his seat and ushered her into a cushioned pew halfway up the church.

The congregation awoke to some interest. The choir infused a tone of excitement and in each pew as she passed there was a nudge or a whisper. David’s first impression of her was of an embodiment of silence and softness - so silently did she pass to the end of the empty pew right against the stout whitewashed pillar. No rustle, no tinkle, marked her progress, only a silent fragrance of violets. And of softness; soft furs, soft velvet and soft hair; soft grey eyes beneath the brim of a dark green velvet hat.

But his second impression was different. She was looking at him with an amused scrutiny and her eyes were keen and penetrating. The beautifully moulded chin was firm and white against the soft brown fur. She regarded him steadily for some minutes then looked away. David became aware with that subtle intuition which was a sixth sense to preachers, that nothing about the service was reaching her. Her mind was far away. Whatever her object in entering the little whitewashed church in Brambledene, it was not worship.

But when he began to preach, he arrested her attention.

She glanced up quickly, interest in her clear eyes. Afterwards, although she did not lift them again and partly turned away, leaning against the pillar so that he could only see the clear cut whiteness of her perfect profile, he knew that she was listening.

From that hour, David’s evening sermons were prepared with the more or less conscious idea of reaching the soul of that calm, immovable Lady of Mystery. She did not attract him as a woman. Her beauty meant nothing to him.

He had long ago faced the fact that his call to Africa must mean celibacy. He would never allow a woman to share such dangers and privations as those through which he had come. Five years of the climate had undermined his own magnificent constitution and if he took a wife there, it would simply mean a lonely grave. So David had faced it and had not the smallest intention of swerving from his decision. His people were his children. So no element of romance entered his thoughts concerning the beautiful woman who leaned against the pillar each Sunday evening. Even though she showed, by a slight flicker of the eyelids or curve of the proud lips, that she heard and appreciated each point in his sermon. How far she agreed, he had no means of knowing. Who she was and from where, he did not attempt to find out. He preferred that she should remain as his Lady of Mystery. He never chanced to see her arrive and nor did he see her depart, always resisting the temptation to leave the church hurriedly himself. So she remained as he had first seen her, the Lady of Mystery, and now his last Sunday had come.

So as he thought of her, he longed to see a look of faith and joy dawn in her cold, sad eyes. He wanted this beautiful personality, this forceful character, this strong, self-reliant soul, for his Master's service, for the kingdom of his King.

He wanted nothing for himself. Why should he? He wanted to win her for his Lord. He wanted it more ardently than he had ever desired anything in his life before. He was most perplexed at the strength and insistence of the thought. And now his last chance had come.

He rose and went to watch the snow fall. 'Undoubtedly,' said David again, 'she will come.' He paced up and down, repeating stray sentences from his sermon. Sarah brought in the lamp, drew the heavy curtains and shut out the snow and darkness.

Sarah, stout, comfortable and motherly, looked with dismay at David's thin, worn face, and the clothes which seemed to hang so loosely. It tried the kind heart and practical mind of the Rector's good housekeeper. She was used to the rosy-cheeked plumpness of her easy going master. 'But when he looks up and speaks,' she confided in a friend who had dropped in for tea and her hot buttered scones, 'his voice is like music, so 'tis, and he seems so alive although 'e's so shrunk up, something burning and shining inside of 'im. Oh, I don't know!' She concluded, alarmed by her own eloquence. 'Creepy, I call it,' said the friend. 'Creepy, it is,' agreed Sarah. Nevertheless she watched carefully over David's creature comforts and he owed it to her insistence that he weighed a good deal heavier when he left Brambledene than when he arrived there.

She now brought in tea, temptingly arranged on a tray and poured his first cup. 'My last Sunday, Sarah,' said David, looking at her with those deep-set shining eyes of his. 'I shall not bother you much longer. I've a service tomorrow, Christmas Day, then I'm off to town and in a couple of weeks sail to Central Africa. I wonder how you would like Africa, Sarah. How are you with snakes? Are you afraid of them? 'Don't mention anything like that, Mr. Rivers, sir.' replied Sarah in a whisper. 'Nasty, evil things! If Eve had been as fearful of them as I am, there'd never have been no fall. You wouldn't catch me standing there talking theology to a snake.' 'You forget the attraction of the luscious fruit, Sarah.'

'Yes, poor Eve,' said Sarah as she sidled respectfully to the door, 'I'd 'ave taken to m'heels and run. Eat your hot, buttered toast, sir, and give over thinking about snakes. Dear heart, it's

Christmas Eve.’ ‘So it is,’ said David, with a grin, ‘and my sermon’s about a star. I’ll stop thinking about snakes and look higher. All right! I’ll eat every bit, don’t worry!’

As David tramped to church the moon was rising. The church looked like a Christmas card and above its ivy-covered tower, luminous as a lamp, shone out one brilliant star.

As he reached the old litch-gate, two brilliant lights shone down the road from the opposite direction. The next moment a motor glided swiftly to the gate and stopped. A footman sprang down from beside the chauffeur and opened the door. Seated inside, half buried in furs, David saw the calm, sweet face of his Lady of Mystery. He stood to one side in the shadow of the gate and waited. The footman drew out the rug. She stepped out, tall and silent. David saw the calm whiteness of her feature in the moonlight. She took no more notice of her men than if they had been machines, but passed straight into the porch. The footman bundled in the white fur rug, closed the door, took his place beside the chauffeur and the large, roomy car glided silently away. Nothing remained save a delicate fragrance of violets under the litch-gate beneath which she had passed.

The whole thing had taken twenty seconds and seemed to David like a dream. Nothing was left to prove its reality save the elusive scent of violets and marks of the huge tyres in the snow but as David made his way round to the vestry door, he knew his Lady of Mystery was already in her corner by the whitewashed pillar and also knew he had been right in placing her in an environment of luxury and wealth.

Christmas had produced a larger than normal congregation. The service was as cheerful and noisy as the choir could make it. David’s quiet voice seemed only to be heard at rare intervals. The Lady of Mystery looked alternatively bored and amused, her expression more calmly critical. She had discarded her large velvet hat for a soft silver-grey fur, placed lightly on a wealth of golden hair. This tended to make her look older and harder and David, who had thought her twenty-five, now began to wonder whether she was not older than himself. Her expression credited her with a full thirty years of worldly experience.

David mounted the steps of the pulpit to the inspirational strains of ‘While shepherds watched their flocks by night, all seated on the ground.’ In the midst of the congregations joyful and erratic singing of this peaceful scene on Bethlehem’s hills, David’s white, earnest face appeared in the pulpit, looking down anxiously upon them all.

The words of his opening prayer brought a sense of peace and the silence of his long, intentional pause after ‘Let us pray,’ had accentuated the remembrance of the hubbub proceeding it. David felt the weird chanting of his Africans compared quite favourably from the point of view of reverence and music, with the singing in this English village church. His very soul was jarred and his nerves all on edge.

As he stood silent, while the congregation settled themselves into their seats, looking down he met the grey eyes of his Lady of Mystery.

He paused, confused, exultant. Her eyes said; ‘I am waiting . . . I have come for this.’

Gold Chapter 3

David Rivers felt a sense of inspiration fill him. With glad assurance he gave out his text. 'When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts; gold, frankincense and myrrh.'

Mr. Churchwarden Jones in his corner and Mr. Churchwarden Smith in his corner verified the text was really there in the Bible, close the books noisily, removed their spectacles, leant well back and proceeded to go unmistakably to sleep. David had got into the habit of reading his text slowly and twice while this performance took place.

When the two churchwardens were in position and their gold watch chains looped on the ample waistcoats the attention of the congregation was already wandering.

'My friends,' said David, 'although it is Christmas Eve, I am speaking about the star because I shall soon no longer have the privilege of addressing you. I expect to be shortly on the ocean, carrying the Christmas message of peace on earth, goodwill to all men, to the natives of Central Africa.'

No-one looked in any way responsive. No-one seemed to care in the least where David Rivers might be soon. He tried to gain and hold their attention. 'Our text talks about the Wise Men, guided by the star, journeyed over the desert in quest of the new-born King. If I were to ask you, how many of you would say, three wise men?' No-one looked in the least interested.

What a silly question! Of course there were three. Every child in kindergarten knows there were three. 'But why should you say three?' continued David. 'We are not told in the Bible that there were three. Look and see.'

The Smith and Jones families made no move. They knew perfectly well what their Bibles said. This would be just one more thing to report back to the Rector about newfangled preachers on his return. But his Lady of Mystery leaned forward, took up a Bible and turned rapidly to Matthew chapter two, bent over it for a moment, then smiled and laid it down. David knew she had made sure of finding three and hadn't found it. He took courage. She was interested. He launched into his subject in vivid words, more full of poetry and beauty than he knew, rapidly painting the scene; a long journey through the eastern desert, eyes upon the star; anxious days when it could not be seen and the route might easily be missed; the glad nights when it shone again, luminous, serene, still moving on before. The arrival at Jerusalem, an onward quest to Bethlehem, the finding of the King.'

'My friends,' he said, 'this earthly life of ours is a pilgrimage, often lying across a dreary waste of desert. But if your journey is to be of any purpose, if life is to be a success and not a failure, its main object must be the finding of the King. His guiding Spirit moves before you as the star.'

His word is also the heavenly lamp which lights your way. But I want tonight to give you a third meaning for the star. The star stands for your highest ideal. Have you in your life tonight a heaven-sent ideal to which you are always true, which you follow faithfully and which leads you always to the King?’

David paused. Mrs. Jones rustled, Mrs. Smith tinkled but David this time, didn’t fear or hear. The Lady of Mystery had lifted her eyes to his and those beautiful, sad eyes said, ‘I had such an ideal.’

‘They lost sight of the star and their hearts were sad,’ said David, ‘thinking they had lost the star forever. But they found it again. At Jerusalem, the place of God’s holy temple and worship. Lift your eyes tonight higher than the church roof, find again your lost star; see where it shines - your ideal, your faith and hope in things eternal. ‘And when they saw the star they rejoiced.’ David paused.

Long lashes veiled the grey eyes. Her hands were folded and her eyes were not lifted from them.

‘When these desert travellers found the King,’ continued David, slowly. ‘They opened their treasures and presented unto Him gifts; gold, frankincense and myrrh. Let these three kinds of gifts emphasise the things you have in your life today which you may offer to the King if your guiding star has led you to His feet. They opened their treasures. I want you to open yours. The treasures represent yourself and all you possess. Let’s consider the gold.’

His Lady of Mystery lifted her golden head and looked at him full in the face. There was a challenge in her eyes. ‘I don’t necessarily mean your money,’ said David, ‘although if people realised how much money is needed for God’s work they would soon open their treasures. Do you know what I really want for my people in Central Africa? Listen - I want a church, I want schools, I want books, a translation of the Bible and printing press to print with.’ David’s eyes glowed. ‘I want someone to help me do the work and a launch to work the great lakes and rivers. I want all these things for my Master and His work. I can give my own life but that is all I have to give. I’ve been taking your Rector’s place here to earn twelve guineas and that will enable me to take out a good medicine chest.’

Mr. Churchwarden Jones was awake now and fidgeting uncomfortably. This young man should not be talking about money from the pulpit! It was unsuitable. ‘But forgive me for talking about my own interests. This is not a missionary sermon.’ Mrs. Smith nodded emphatically. ‘Gold,’ continued David and they were all awake, ‘stands for much more than money. Think of all the golden things in life. The joys, the brightness, the glory of success; all beauty, gaiety, all golden laughter. Let all these golden things be so consecrated, that at any moment, you can open your treasures and bring them as offerings to your King.

But the second gift was frankincense.’ David paused, giving each listener, and at last there were many, time to wonder what frankincense stood for in their lives. ‘Frankincense,’ said David, ‘is first of all, your worship. And by worship, I do not necessarily mean public worship in church, important though that is. I mean the constant worship of adoring hearts. And then frankincense stands for all the spiritual part of you, your ideals, your noblest love, your finest aspirations. Open your treasures, my friends, and bring these to your King.

And lastly, Myrrh.’ David stopped for a moment with a look so calm yet so holy and sublime, passed into his face, almost his face was as the face of an angel. ‘The myrrh,’ he said, ‘stands for death. ‘Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.’ This gift will bring us into His presence. But meanwhile your present offering of Myrrh is the death of self. Your response to His love, your acceptance of that atoning death and your own crucifixion of your self, is your offering of myrrh.

But Myrrh stands for other things too. Look them up sometimes. It stands for love, love of the sweetest, tenderest kind; love so complete that it must bring with it a forgetfulness of self and a certain mingling of pain with its bliss.

And you will find it stands for sorrow, not bitterness of woe but sorrow accepted as the Father’s will and therefore touched with joy. Bring your sorrows, too, as gifts and lay them at His feet.’

David closed his Bible and leaned down from the high pulpit. Those who looked up responsively never forgot the light in his eyes.

‘Friends,’ he said, ‘I am leaving this dear home land of ours on the day when we keep the Feast of the Star. My star leads me to a place from which I never expect to return. My offering of Myrrh to my King is a grave in an African forest and I offer it gladly. I say to you whose faces after tomorrow I never expect to see again, do not lose sight of your star as you travel across life’s desert. Look up and look on and always move forward. I leave with you all a farewell promise.’

He looked at them all but his eyes met the grey eyes now brimming with tears of the Lady of Mystery; met and held them as he offered his final words:

‘Thine eyes shall see the King in His beauty;
They shall behold the land that is afar off.’

Gold Chapter 4

Perhaps the greatest tribute to David’s sermon was the quiet way the good people of Brambledene left the church. Lead, Kindly Light was sung with unusual reverence and feeling. The collection taken was one of the largest ever seen and in one of the plates was a gold sovereign. David knew quite well who had put it there.

He sat in his vestry and fingered it thoughtfully. The rest was all left in little piles on the red cloth for David to take home and lock up in the Rector’s safe. He had now to enter his text and the amount of the collection in the vestry book. He had glanced down the church as he left the chancel and seen his Lady of Mystery still on her knees, her head bowed in her hands. He had seen the top of her soft grey hat with golden curls on either side. He laid down his pen. He could hear the faint throb of the motor waiting at the lich-gate in the snow, two great acetylene lamps in front and delicate electric bulbs lighting the interior. He knew just how she would look as the footmen tucked the fur rug around her knees. She would lean back, bored and impatient.

David hated that kind of behaviour toward those who served others. He held that every service, even the smallest, should receive a kind acknowledgement.

David was alone in the vestry realising as he counted that even without the gold she had put in, it was a large increase on former offerings. Truly, he thought these good people opened their treasures when their hearts were touched. He could hear old Jabez knocking about putting out the lamps and tidying hymn books. David did not hurry. The rhythmic panting of the engine still reached him and he did not intend to arrive at the lich-gate until that dream motor had glided silently out of sight.

As he bent over the book to make an entry, the vestry door was pushed noiselessly open. He heard no sound but the subtle fragrance of violets suddenly surrounded him. David looked up. Framed in the gothic arch of the narrow doorway her large grey eyes fixed on him, stood his Lady of Mystery. David was so completely taken by surprise, he failed to rise to his feet. He dropped his pen and gazed at her in speechless wonder.

‘I have come,’ said his Lady of Mystery, and her low-pitched voice was full of music, ‘I have come to offer you my gifts - gold, frankincense and myrrh.’

‘Not to me,’ said David, ‘not to me! You must bring them to the King.’

‘I must bring them to you,’ she said, ‘because I don’t know any other way. I . . . I looked for the King, but I couldn’t find Him. I think I lost my way in the dreary desert. Tonight you have cleared my sky. I can see the star again. But I’m afraid I must bring them to you because you are the most like Him I’ve ever known.’

‘But I’m only His messenger, I can’t stand for the King.’

David was unconscious of the light in his own eyes as he spoke or the divine radiance on his face. ‘I’m only His messenger.’

The Lady of Mystery moved a step nearer and laid a hand on the vestry table. Two candles in brass candlesticks stood on either side of the table and in the light of these they looked into one another’s faces.

‘You have certainly prepared the way for Him in my heart tonight then, and I believe you are going to make a straight path for me in all the tangle of my life. Only, first of all, do you know who I am? Has anyone told you?’

‘Nobody has told me anything,’ said David, simply, ‘and I do not know who you are.’

‘Well - er - what have you called me yourself - all these weeks?’

‘My lady of Mystery,’ answered David, slowly, wondering to himself how she knew he had called her anything.

She smiled and there seemed to be twenty candles instead of only two. ‘Quite pretty,’ she said, ‘but too much like a fairy tale to be practical.’

She drew a small purple bag from her muff, took out a card and laid it on the table in front of him. ‘You must know who I am and where I live because I am going to ask you to dinner.’ She smiled again and David bent over the card. She marked his movement of surprise.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I am Diana Rivers of Riverscourt. Had you heard of me? I suppose we are some sort of cousins.’

But David sat without moving. He was sad. What was happening? His Lady of mystery had vanished. This tall girl in furs and velvet with her brilliant smile, sweet low voice and assured

manner, was the greatest heiress in the county; Master of Hounds; patron of four livings; notorious for her advanced views and fearless independence; a power and a terror in the whole neighbourhood. His Lady of mystery, under his guidance, was to become a meek and lowly follower of the Star! Poor David! He looked so thin and worn at that moment.

Diana Rivers felt quite sorry for him. She wanted to put him in an armchair and ply him with champagne. 'Of course I have heard of you, Miss Rivers,' he said slowly, 'The Rector told me all about you on my first evening at the Rectory. He even asked me if we were related.' 'Dear old Rector!' said Diana, lightly. 'He is my godfather, you know. I think his anxiety over my spiritual condition is the one thing that keeps him the right size to get through this narrow door.'

'Oh, please,' said Dave. She looked at him laughingly. 'Sorry, cousin, I didn't mean to be flippant, and we are cousins - really.'

'I don't think so,' he answered, gravely. 'I have never heard of any of my relations living in any courts of any kind.'

'Oh, don't be silly!' Diana retorted, drumming on the vestry table with her fingertips. Her tone was very gently, however. 'Don't be silly, cousin David. The humblest people live in courts in London and nothing but the Rivers courage could have faced these people Sunday after Sunday. An you made them really sit up tonight. I nearly cheered. We must be cousins.'

'No,' said David. He felt and looked very small and thin and miserable. Diana Rivers of Riverscourt! Oh, where was his dear Lady of Mystery? If Diana wanted to shake him she kept the desire well in hand. Her voice grew deeper, more full of music and more softly gentle.

'Well, cousin or not,' she said, 'I want your advice and I can't do without your help. Where are you having your Christmas dinner, David Rivers?' 'Well, em, at the Rectory I should think. I haven't any friends in this area.'

'I see. So you are planning on eating alone in solitary grandeur. Well, will you dine with me? You can't possibly eat alone on your own, your one and last Christmas in England.'

'You are very kind,' said David, looking up at last, 'but aren't you about twelve miles away?'

'My chauffeur does it in twenty minutes,' replied Diana. 'It would be as much as his job is worth to take more. I'll send him at seven for you and he can take you back whenever you like.' But David hesitated. 'I . . . I don't have dinner parties in Africa and since coming home, I have been mostly in hospital. I'm afraid I haven't....' He looked down at his threadbare clerical jacket. 'I'm afraid this is all I have.'

'Oh, don't be so tiresome, cousin David. If I wanted proper evening clothes I know a dozen men I could ask. I want you, not your clothes. Bring your mind along and some preparation to help me and God knows I want help as much, if not more, than any of your Africans. You are a voice in the wilderness for me and that is all I ask.'

She drew off a soft grey glove and held out firm white fingers. He took them in his. They clasped hands silently and once more, by the light of the candles, looked searchingly into each other's eyes. Each read there a quiet fact of friendship and trust. 'I'll come,' said David. She paused with her hand on the door, looking back at him over her shoulder. 'If you do,' she said,

‘we must consider the question of your church, your schools, your printing-press and your boat. So, au revoir, until tomorrow.’

David took up his pen and made an entry in the vestry book. ‘Two pounds, eight shillings and sevenpence halfpenny.’ Then he gathered up the little piles of money but Diana’s sovereign he slipped, by itself into one waistcoat pocket and her card into the other.

Gold Chapter 5

It seemed wonderful to David to be gliding silently along in Diana's sumptuous car. The footman had shown him how to switch on the electric light and arranged the fur rug over his knees. The great motor bounded passed flying trees and hedges making little noise in the snowy darkness.

They rushed through villages festooned with seasonal gaiety and to David it seemed like home and boyhood days again. He had never been, however, in a powerful, noiseless Napier car and he found it an experience.

He thought of the time when he had been so deadly weak with an Africa fever and his people had somehow to get him to the coast. The shaking and bumping of the rough little cart they had made him had become so unbearably painful he had to be slung between two bearers. And to all this he was soon returning. And quite right too. No man should glide through life on cushioned tyres. For a woman it was different. Her womanhood was a sufficient handicap without any roughness or hardship on the way. He felt he would like to know that Diana would always, literally and metaphorically, glide through life on cushioned tyres. This method of living need not hamper her following the Star. David wondered, as he lay back in the motor speeding through the old world town of Riversmede, whether his life would ever hold the enchantment he remembered of his first Christmas.

They swept through the wide iron gates, up an avenue of stately trees and came to a sudden pause before a large stone house bright with lighted windows. The great doors opened, a footman took his overcoat and he found himself following and trying to keep close to, an elderly butler who crossed a spacious hall and announced confidentially, ‘The Reverent David Rivers.’ David entered the empty drawing room. It seemed hours before he reached the other side; a long walk taken in a dream, until he stood almost petrified on the hearth-rug.

Then Diana herself swept into the room. ‘A thousand pardons, Cousin David!’ she cried, ‘I should have been down to receive you but Knox broke all records and did the journey in eighteen minutes!’ In a moment her hand was in his, her eyes dancing with pleasure, her smile enveloping him in welcoming friendliness. All David’s shyness left him. He forgot his awe of the majesty of the place. At that moment the butler opened the door with a murmured sentence about dinner.

Diana rose with a gentle grace and dignity which reminded David of his Lady of Mystery. She laid her hand on his arm and guided him to the dining room. A small round table stood in the centre of a great oak-panelled room. It gleamed with glass and silver, wax candles and snowy linen. The decoration was violets and lilies of the valley. A poodle followed them into the dining-room and lay down contentedly in front of a log fire.

Diana was wearing perfectly plain, white satin. A Medici collar, embroidered with pearls, rose at the back of her shapely head and she wore violets at her bosom. On the whiteness of her skin below the beautiful firm neck, sparkled a brilliant diamond star. David hated to see it there and he could not explain why. It rose and fell lightly with her breathing. He tried to master his aversion of the sparkling star on the soft flesh. He looked at it and looked away. Why should not Miss Rivers wear a diamond star? Why should he presume not to like it?

Before they reached the second course, Diana said to the butler, 'Please send Maria down.' In a few moments time her French maid, in simple black, stood at her elbow. Diana was talking happily to David, lifted her arms, unclasped the gold chain at her neck and handed the pendant to her maid. 'Serrez-moi ca,' she said, carelessly.

Then she turned her clear eyes to David. 'You prefer it in the sky,' she said. 'I quite agree with you.

A woman's flesh has too much of the world, the flesh and the devil to be a resting place for stars.' She spoke so bitterly that David's tender heart rose up in arms. 'True, I do prefer it in the sky but I don't like to hear you speak of . . . of your body like that. The body clothes a radiant soul. The flesh is just the outer garment. The soul lifts the body with it.'

'I don't agree,' said Diana, 'I loathe bodies, my own as well as other people's. I shock you, cousin David, but I believe only a certain number of people have souls at all. I've always maintained that the heathen have no souls.'

David's eyes gleamed. 'The young natives of Africa would sooner have their limbs hacked off one by one or be thrown to the lions or into the fire rather than give up their faith or deny their Lord. Surely bodies would hardly go through so much unless souls, strong immortal souls, were in them.'

'True, cousin,' said Diana, softly. 'I apologise. I wonder how many of us would stand such a test. I can't imagine my elderly aunt seated on a gridiron singing hymns.'

'We can't imagine or judge others,' said David, stiffly. 'Conditions of martyrdom produce martyrs. Why shouldn't your aunt rise to the occasion?' 'Oh, she would rise if she were seated on a gridiron - quite rapidly.' In spite of himself, David burst into laughter. 'I know I'm flippant beyond words, David. Have you found that out?

'Yes,' he said, gently, 'but I've found something else out, too.'

'Oh? What is that?' Her eyes challenged him. 'That you take refuge in flippancy, Miss Rivers, when you want to hide a deeper anxiety or earnestness of soul than you can cope with or understand.' She gazed at him. 'Really? Then you must explain it to me and cope with it for me. Oh, to be a little child again on Christmas Day and here I am twenty-eight and not understanding anything. She stood up. 'Let's go into the drawing-room.'

As they passed through, David's eye fell on a grand piano. 'Oh,' said David, and stopped short. 'Does that tempt you?' said Diana. 'Yes, of course, I might have known.' David's fingers were working. 'I so rarely get a chance to play. Is it a Bechstein or what?' 'I don't know,' laughed Diana. 'It's just a piece of furniture I don't use. When my aunt suddenly decides to play things like Home, Sweet Home, I suddenly decide there is no place like being out of it! You may carry it off to Africa if you like. Meanwhile, see how you like it while I think of how to tell you my troubles.'

David, tingling with expectation, opened the instrument with reverent care. Diana moving across the room to sit by the fire, watching him laughed in her heart. 'What an infant he is, I do believe he is saying, 'For what we are about to receive!' But in another minute her laughter ceased. She was receiving more than she had expected.

David had laid his hands on the keys and the room was filled with music. It did not seem to come from the piano. It seemed to override the murky darkness of an English winter and come from the clear heavens of the East. It was a vast, fathomless soft thud of camel's feet on the sand and a cavalcade of travellers with mysterious riders. Suddenly a star shone, luminous, divine, so brilliant, so unexpected that the listener by the fireplace said, 'Oh!' Then laid her hand over her trembling lips. But David had forgotten her. His eyes were shining and his face aglow. Now all was peace and serenity. They had reached Jerusalem. A minor key of doubt and disappointment crept in. Then, once more, the star shone. They arrived at Bethlehem and in chords of royal harmony they found the King.

'O, worship the Lord in the beauty of Holiness.' Diana's face sank into her clasped hands. The firelight played on her golden hair. She knew just how far she had wandered from the one true Light, how poor had been her response to the love which brought the Lord of glory to the manger. The love of Christ had not touched her. She lived for herself. Her heart had grown hard and unresponsive. And now, in tenderest, reverent melody, the precious gifts were being offered. Gold, frankincense and myrrh. But what had she to offer back? Her gold could hardly be accepted while her heart, so filled with worldly scorn and unbelief, was withheld.

The music had changed. It centred on David himself. He was playing a theme so simple and so restful it stole into Diana's heart bringing untold hope and comfort. She lifted her head. 'What are you playing now, cousin David?' she asked, softly. 'A very simple setting of my own to those wonderful words, 'At even, e'er the sun was set,' I composed it in the forests and it is wonderful to be able to play it.' 'Sing it to me. Please.' said Diana, gently. The pure tenor voice began at once. 'At even, e'er the sun was set, the sick, O Lord, around Thee lay; O with what divers pains they met! Oh, with what joy they went away.' The pure tenor voice rose and fell giving full value to each line. As he sang the words, 'And some have never loved Thee well, and some have lost the love they had,' Diana's tears fell silently. It was so true - so true. She had never loved Him well and she had lost what little faith and hope she had.

Presently David's voice rose in glad tones of certainty.

‘Thy touch has still it’s ancient power; No word from Thee can fruitless fall; Hear, in this solemn evening hour, and in Thy mercy, heal us all.’

The last notes of the quiet ‘Amen’ died away and David closed the piano softly. He did not look at Diana, he didn’t speak. He knew instinctively that there was a soul in pain beside him. He left her to his Lord.

After awhile she whispered, ‘If only my faith were strong enough and I could feel worthy of His love.’ ‘Our worthiness has nothing to do with it,’ said David, drawing near, ‘and we needn’t worry about our faith, if it is as small as a mustard seed it is living and growing. It is His power that matters. Fix your eyes on Him and healing will come. There is a changeless truth in His word and a fathomless depth in His love for you.’ A long silence fell.

At last he heard Diana’s voice, ‘Cousin David,’ she said, ‘will you give me your blessing?’ He turned closer. He was young and humble and very simple in his faith. But he realised the value and responsibility of his priestly office. He knew it had been given to him as a gift for serving others. He lifted his hands and as Diana sank to her knees, he laid them reverently on her golden hair.

There was a moment of silence then David’s voice, vibrant with emotion yet deep and tender and unflinching, pronounced the Triune blessing granted to desert wanderers of old.

‘The Lord bless thee and keep thee; The Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious to thee; The Lord lift up the light of His countenance upon thee and give thee peace

The touch of power which Diana felt on her heart and life from that moment on was not the touch of David Rivers but of his Lord and Master. She knew it.

Gold - Chapter 6

As David sped back through the starry darkness he was filled with an exultation such as he had never experienced. He had always held that every immortal soul was of equal value to God but somehow he realised the greatness of the victory which grace had won in this surrender of Diana’s. It was a wonderful thing to see light dawn where all had previously been dark clouds of cynical unbelief.

He marvelled again at the strong personality that had received the kingdom of God as a little child. He realised how great a conquest this was. Her immense wealth, her influence, her position in the county and her undoubted personal charm would all now be consecrated to his Lord and now hers. He foresaw a great future for her. The very fact that he would be soon leaving the country and would not share in that future made his joy all the purer in its selflessness. He had been the messenger preparing the way and he was no longer needed.

‘Now we believe,’ he remembered reading, ‘not because of your saying, for we have heard Him ourselves.’

When Diana had risen from her knees, she had said, gently, ‘Cousin David, do you mind if I order the motor now? I can’t speak or think of other things tonight. I would just like to be alone.’ They both sat in silence until the car was announced. As he rose to go, she put her hand in his for a moment, ‘More than ever now,’ she said, ‘I need your help and counsel. Can we

talk tomorrow over lunch?' David agreed and would come although he felt any advice he may be able to give was no longer necessary.

Lunch would have been an awkward affair with Diana's aunt and chaperone present, due to David's returned nervousness, had it not been for Diana's tact and vivacity. She drew David out to tell of his weird experiences in wild regions, the perils of the jungle and the deep mystery of the forests. He made it all sound so fascinating and delightful, Mrs. Vane announced she didn't wonder people enjoyed being missionaries.

'You should volunteer, dear Aunt,' laughed Diana as she sent David to the piano after lunch. The coffee was allowed to grow cold while they listened to David's music until Diana reminded her aunt of an engagement she had for visiting. Mrs. Marmaduke Vane reluctantly patted David's hand in her plump ones and said, kindly, 'Goodbye, my dear Mr. Rivers, and I hope you will have a quite delightful time in Africa. And mind,' she added, archly, 'if Diana decides to come and visit you, I shall come too.'

Honest dismay leapt into David's eyes. 'It is no place for women,' he said, helplessly. Then looked at Diana. 'I assure you, Miss Rivers, it is no place for women.'

'Never fear, cousin David,' laughed Diana. 'You may have fired my dear aunt with enthusiasm to rough it but I assure you I don't share it and you couldn't go without me could you, aunt? Goodbye, dear, and have a nice time.' Diana turned back to the fire with an air of dismissal and pushed a log into place. David opened the door for Mrs. Vane and returned to Diana slowly.

Diana gazed into the fire. 'That's ironic, isn't it?' She said, without looking up. 'She hopes you will enjoy it in Africa and actually, you are going out there - er - to die. Cousin David, do you really expect never to return?' 'In all probability I shall never see England again. They told me I couldn't live through another five years.' 'And do you consider it right to sacrifice your life like that? Why not go somewhere else?'

'Because,' said David, quietly, 'my call is there. Someone must go and who better than someone with no home ties. My life is all I have and I give it gladly.'

'Let's sit down and talk.,' said Diana. 'We have got all afternoon and I want to know all about you. Never mind how long it takes.' She motioned him to a chair and took the couch, leaning forward in her favourite position, elbows on knees and chin resting in her hand. Her grey eyes searched his face. The firelight played on her soft hair.

'Begin at the beginning, Cousin David,' she said.

'There is not much to tell,' said David, simply. 'My parents married late in life and I was their only child. My home was a small heaven on earth. We were not well off but my father was a country doctor and they gave me the best possible education they could. While I was at Oxford I decided to be ordained and during that time I lost both parents.'

'Oh, poor boy,' murmured Diana. 'Then you had no-one.'

David hesitated. 'There was Amy.' Diana's eyes flickered. Amy might mean a good deal or not very much. 'And did Amy want to go out to Africa?' 'No,' said David, 'When I plucked up enough courage to speak about it, she said there was a gentleman farmer in the neighbourhood who wanted to marry her. I had waited too long. I had known, if I went to

Africa I would have to go alone, so that was - erm - just as well after all. She was very pretty.’ There was silence for awhile.

‘Then,’ he said, trying to measure his words carefully, ‘she wanted me to marry them but I couldn’t to that.’

Diana looked at the thin, sensitive face. ‘No,’ she said, ‘you couldn’t do that.’ There was another long pause. Then she asked, ‘Did you care a great deal?’

‘Yes, I did care a great deal, but as a boy cares, I think. Not as I should imagine a man cares. A man who really cared could not have left her to another man, could he?’

‘I don’t hold with marriage,’ said Diana, forcefully.

‘Nor do I,’ said David, ‘and my family in Africa are all I’ll know. No man had a right to allow a woman to face nameless horrors and hardships or to make a home in a climate where little children can’t live.’

‘I do agree,’ cried Diana. ‘I once heard a missionary tell how he had to send his children to school in England and never saw them grow up. Everyone thought it was so sad for the parents, but I thought it was an unpardonable neglect of duty. No-one can take the place of a mother to a girl growing up. And do you know what those missionaries were doing? Managing a school for Indian children. I wanted to cry out, what about your own?’

‘Well,’ said David contemplatively, ‘that is one reason why I must be celibate.’ ‘And that is the better thing to do,’ said Diana. David did not answer. It had not struck him like that before. He had always thought he was giving up some undoubted joys. A silence fell between them.

David was thinking about her last remark and she was trying to fathom how much strength of will and tenacity of purpose lay behind his gentle manner and simplicity of character. She sat back. At length she said. ‘Do you remember when I first came to church?’ ‘You were late,’ he said. She laughed. ‘Yes, and I was never late again. You gave me the impression you might hold up the entire service for one unfortunate late comer. Do you know what brought me?’ David had no suggestion to make as to why she came.

‘I came to see,’ Diana continued, ‘a man my godfather had told me was taking his place, a man whose religion meant more to him than life itself. I was wondering, doubting and perplexed. First I believed in you, Cousin David. Then I saw that Christ was in you and I longed to have what you had and to find Him myself. Yesterday, He found me. Today I know Him and I am completely committed to Him I am far from being what I ought to be but I hope to, from this time onward, to be a follower of the Star you spoke of.’

‘I thank God,’ said David Rivers.

‘And now,’ continued Diana, after a few moments of happy silence, ‘I am going to burden you with my difficulties. My father, Captain Rivers, who was heir to this whole property, died when I was three. I barely remember him. My uncle took over and went to America, leaving me to the care of my grandfather. I was too young to understand details but apparently Uncle Falcon fell out with all his relations and no-one spoke of him because he broke all the rules by being in love with my mother! To cut a long story short my grandfather lost all his money and much of the estate was mortgaged when he died. My mother and I moved to a small house in London and I

went to work as a nurse living in what I thought was abject poverty. Dear Cousin David, thank you for listening because I do need your advice and counsel.

Well, Uncle Falcon sent my mother some money. It was a great deal but she refused to see him and returned the money. Then followed two very hard years and at the end my mother died. I remember her as a very lovely woman and often heard, even though she had refused it herself, how Uncle Falcon's American money was doing so much good to renovate this lovely place, mortgages paid off, tumble-down cottages rebuilt and farms put into good order. American money has a way of being useful even in proud old England. You may not believe it, Cousin David, but by now I was quite a good nurse and one morning I received a letter from Uncle Falcon, now living in my old home, telling me the doctor had said he needed looking after, just someone in the house, not necessarily in constant attendance and he wanted his own kith and kin. Why should he bring a strange woman into the house he wrote, when it was my rightful home. He said I was just like my mother and if I would like to come home he would make my life as pleasant as possible. He signed the letter, Your affectionate, unknown uncle! Well, I went. Do you know, I wept when I saw my old housekeeper still there and the dear old butler who had known me since childhood. We all wept and laughed together and they seemed to look on my nurses uniform as one of Miss Diana's pranks, half funny and half naughty. In twenty-four hours, Cousin David, I was installed as the daughter of the house. I found that Uncle Falcon had a remarkable personality and we took to each other straight away. He was strong, fiery and rugged, despite his heart giving way and had loved my mother with intense devotion. His lifelong love for her seemed to transfer itself to me and he was content to have found an object on which to lavish every luxury. I had everything I could wish for, horses, dogs, as well as an unlimited allowance. I had to agree with him though when he said I was like my mother as my love of luxury was like hers too.

But we disagreed on one subject and Uncle Falcon could never let it go. He held that a woman was not meant to live alone. She had missed her proper vocation if she did not get herself married. Her complete happiness depended upon her rightful master, her husband. On the other hand, Cousin David, you may have already discovered, I regard the whole idea of marriage with disgust. I think that in this civilised country a woman's right is a right to herself. She is her own possession. Why should she lose her liberty and her property and even have to change her name.

The whole thing is unbearable for me. It is practically slavery, unspeakable degradation.' Diana's eyes flashed and her colour rose. Her firm chin seemed even more moulded in marble.

David quailed. He felt himself to be the sole representative of this tyrant, man. He felt he ought to say that marriage was scriptural but he did not have the courage of his convictions. He shrank into the large armchair and took refuge in silence because he could not face the thought of this glorious creature before him being in subjugation to any man.

'It was the only thing,' continued Diana, 'in which I failed to please him. He would listen to me politely and then say 'My dear girl, you are quite ignorant on the matter, you have no experience, get married, child, and you will tell a different story.' He set himself the task but however inexperienced, I had certainly learned how to keep men at arm's length. At the end of every discussion he would say, 'I shall win, my girl, I shall win!' One day his speech became difficult

and slurred, he sent for his old family lawyer and afterwards, for me. I went into the library and his eyes were very bright although his lips twitched.

'I shall win some day, Diana.' Were almost his last words to me. I said, 'You have won, dear Uncle, no other man will ever win me.' I knelt down in front of him. 'Foolish girl,' he said, 'I want you to be happy, as happy as I would have been with your mother.' A few nights later I was summoned to his room and took his hands in mine. He did not speak again and early in the morning that dear, brave, dauntless soul launched out into the unknown. My first conscious prayer was that he might meet noble souls like his own. You would have liked my Uncle Falcon, David'

'I'm sure I should have,' said David Rivers.

'David,' she commanded, 'the door opposite the dining-room leads to the library. Go and study the portrait there of Uncle Falcon Rivers. It was painted by Mr. Dalmain of Scotland. See what you think' David went.

Diana rang for a glass of water, crossed to a mirror and nervously smoothed her abundant hair. Up to now she had been riding smoothly in open country. Now she was approaching rough ground. She must keep her nerve or she would find herself riding for a fall.

Gold - Chapter 7

'Now,' said Diana, as David came back into the room. Could you possibly listen a little longer When the will was produced, Uncle Falcon had left everything to me. Riverscourt, the whole estate, four livings for the country parishes with the churches and all his immense wealth. I am so rich Cousin David but I haven't learned how to spend it at all. I want you to help me. All my gold, if that is what you like to call it, I offer to the King. I want you to have, now, at once, all you need for the church, the schools, the printing press and the boat, as well as for the colleague you talked about. And then I would like you to have a thousand a year, or two, if you need it, for

all your current expenses. Will you accept this, Cousin David, from a grateful heart, guided by you, led by the Star, and able to offer it to the King?'

At first David made no reply. He sat quite silently, head in hands endeavouring, Diana knew, to master his emotions. Then he sat up and answered very simply. 'I accept, for the King and His work, Miss Rivers, and on behalf of the poor, eager people, waiting out there.' His voice broke. Diana felt happy tears welling up into her own eyes. 'And we will call the church,' said David presently, 'the Church of the Holy star.'

Diana breathes a sigh of relief. 'Well,' she said, 'then that's settled. You have helped me with my first gift, now you must advise me about the second. That is the gold dealt with. You know you said the frankincense was all our ideals and holy things in our lives. Well, my ideals are in grave peril. Riverscourt and all this wealth are mine, only on condition that I am married within twelve months of Uncle Falcon's death. He has been dead for eleven..'

Diana paused. 'Good God!' said David. It wasn't carelessly said but more a cry of protest.

'On condition that you are married? But whom?'

'No stipulation was given in the will,' she said.

'It's unbelievable,' said David. 'How could he do this to you and say he wanted you to be happy. His mind must have been affected.'

David couldn't bring himself to look at the beautiful girl sitting opposite now that he knew about this cruel condition laid on her. She should be looked at with admiration and now he felt pity overcome him. So he kept his eyes lowered. 'So you see how it is,' said Diana. 'If I refuse, the whole thing has to be handed over to my cousin, Rupert - everything. I have always known about Uncle Falcon's obsession but now, if I have to leave my home and go back to poverty, I shall end up by marrying for money and despise myself. If I marry one or half a dozen men I know just to keep all the luxuries, I am still marrying for money.'

'You can't do it,' said David. 'You couldn't do it. But - isn't your cousin a man you might learn to love, a man you could marry for the right reasons? Perhaps he is someone like your uncle?'

Diana laughed bitterly. 'I was engaged to Rupert some years ago. It was for a fortnight. At the end of that time I loathed my own body. I broke off the engagement.'

David looked perplexed. 'It should not have that effect on you, surely,' he said, slowly. 'I don't know much about it but a man's love and worship should make a woman reverence her own body and look on her own beauty in a new light. I remember kissing Amy's hand once. She wrote and told me for days afterwards it had not felt the same, it didn't feel like the other hand. She kept remembering it.'

Diana felt a good deal older than David at that minute.

'Oh, you dear boy! What can you and your Amy or your Africans know of men like Rupert or any of the others. You would love a woman's soul and cherish her body because it contained it. They make you feel that nothing matters apart from beauty. After being looked at for awhile by them you feel like smashing the mirror.'

David lifted quiet eyes at last to hers. They seemed like deep wells of childlike purity, yet there was fire in their depths. 'When you are so beautiful,' he said, simply, 'you can't blame a man for thinking it when he looks at you.'

Diana laughed and blushed. She had always had plenty of compliments but this one, so unpremeditated, pleased her more than any. But she had grave matters to consider. Uncle Falcon had been dead for eleven months.

‘Then would you advise me to marry and keep all the property?’ she suggested. ‘God forbid!’ cried David. ‘It’s intolerable to think of you leaving here but worse to think of a loveless marriage. Give it all up if you must but keep your ideals.’

‘That will mean, Cousin David,’ she said, slowly, looking at him with half closed eyes, ‘that there would not be any money for your church and schools and everything else, including your yearly income.’ Curiously enough, David had not thought of this. A great disappointment struck him with full force but he didn’t waver. ‘How could I build a church, the Church of the Holy Star, on proceeds from all your lost ideals. The money will have to be found some other way.’

‘There is another way,’ said Diana, suddenly. David looked up in surprise at the forceful decision her voice. ‘What other way is there?’ he asked.

Diana rose, walked to the window and stood looking across the spacious park at the pale gold of the sunset. She was in full view, at last, of her last high fence and did not know what lay beyond it. She knew only one way of dealing with it and that was to head straight for it and jump. She walked back to the fireplace and stood confronting him, her superb young figure drawn up to its full height. Her voice was very quiet but very deliberately she said, ‘I want you to marry me Cousin David, on the morning of the day you sail for Africa.’

David sprang to his feet. ‘I can’t do that.’

Diana had expected this and stood silently while the atmosphere palpated with David’s surprise. Then she asked quietly, ‘Why not?’ As he stood speechlessly gazing at her, she commanded, ‘Sit down, and tell me why not.’ But David stood his ground and she suddenly realised he was taller than herself.

‘Why not? Why not? Because even if I wanted to.....I mean, even if you wanted....even if we both wished....Central Africa, I have told you, I thought, is no place for a woman. I could never take a woman there!’

Diana flushed. Her white teeth bit into her lip. Her hands clenched themselves suddenly but she mastered her temper. ‘My dear Cousin, you totally mistake my meaning,’ she said, and spoke slowly, seating herself on the sofa and carefully arranging the silk cushions to her liking. ‘You totally mistake my meaning. I gave you more credit. I have not the slightest intention of going to Africa or ever inflicting my presence on you. Surely we have both made it clear what we think of marriage. It is just because we understand each other that I can say, Cousin David, would you kindly witness my signature on this document? Or would you oblige me by marrying me on the day you depart. There would be no burden to you at all and you would be freeing me from this desperate plight my Uncle has put me in. And you would also enable me to give the gold and frankincense. And you have told me over and over you never expect to return to England.’

David’s face paled and hardened. ‘I see,’ he said, slowly, ‘So I am to provide the myrrh. I can’t promise to die, you know. I might pull through and live. That would be awkward for you.’

This was the most human remark she had ever heard from David but the bitterness in his voice brought tears to her eyes. She had not realised how much her proposal would hurt him.

‘Dear Cousin David,’ she said with great gentleness, ‘God grant that you may live and spend many years in your great work but if you help me, you will also be helping your dear Africans.’ ‘So it was all a bribe,’ interrupted David, with his eyes flaming into hers, ‘bribes, to make me do this thing. And you called it gifts for the King!’ Diana blushed again. The injustice of this was very hard for her to bear but the pain in his voice helped her to reply.

‘Oh, David, every penny would have been offered if it wasn’t for this will.’

David softened slightly and then hardened at a new thought. ‘Is this why you first came to the church? Oh, say it wasn’t, say you came to worship, my Lady of Mystery.’

‘I can’t lie to you, I heard you were never coming back,’ she said in a small voice. ‘I came to see if you were a man I could trust.’

David groaned and looked wildly round the room. He sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. ‘I can’t do it. It would be sacrilege. How could I stand in any church promising to love, comfort, honour and keep you, knowing I wouldn’t even be there in the afternoon?’

He lifted a haggard face. Diana smiled softly into his eyes and held them while she talked. She had expected him to leave the room and the house forever. That he should sit down and discuss it seemed hopeful.

‘Why should it be a mockery?’ she said. ‘Let’s think of it reasonably. I know you don’t love me. But you do like me a little, don’t you?’ ‘I like you very much indeed,’ said David, woefully. Then suddenly they both laughed. It had sounded so funny.

‘Oh course, I like you,’ he said again with conviction, ‘better than anyone I know, but,’ he paused, looking at her helplessly.

‘I know. I quite understand.’ Said Diana quickly. ‘Like is not love. But in many cases it might be better. I would rather you like me. We are commanded in the Bible to love people and sometimes even though we don’t like them very much. So like is better. I would rather you like me and not love me than love me and not like me.’

David laughed again and relaxed a little in spite of his desire to maintain an attitude of tragic protest.

‘Miss Rivers, I agree with all you say and I would want to help you with anything at all that was right to do. But could it be right to go through the solemn obligations of a marriage ceremony with no intention of keeping the vows?’ ‘Well, I know women who have married men who were going to war knowing they might never come back just for the privilege of being their widows.’ ‘That was love,’ said David.

‘Not always,’ said Diana, demurely. ‘Anyway we would be absolutely faithful to each other even continents apart. And we could write as friends. Our friendship would be worth something, wouldn’t it?’

‘It’s worth everything,’ said David, ‘except wrongdoing. Look, I must go,’ he exclaimed suddenly, rising to his feet. ‘I must go by myself and think things out on my own. Then I will lay the whole matter before a man I can trust. A doctor in London. Of course I won’t mention your name. He has given me endless care and no fees asked and if he agrees, my own opinion will be confirmed and if he disagrees...’

'I know,' said Diana, 'you will stick to your own opinion?' But does he think you will stand the climate?'

'He gives me a more hopeful outlook than others have done. You may know him. Dr. Deryck Brand.' The name brought a flush of pleasure to Diana's face. 'Oh, Cousin David, I know him well. He came to the hospital where I worked. He was the consultant. You could not go to a better man. Tell him everything. You may even tell him my name if you want to. But, dear Cousin David, please remember how much this means to me.'

'I know,' said David, taking both her hands firmly in his, 'it means a great deal to both of us. I won't keep you waiting for an answer more than twenty-four hours.'

Diana watched him as the car drove away then went to the library, locked the door and stood looking up at the portrait of Falcon Rivers. 'Oh, Uncle Falcon,' she whispered, 'was this really the way to make me happy? How cruelly I hurt him. If you only knew the humiliation and the pain and the loneliness. I built the whole plan on the certainty of his death.'

Suddenly she broke down under the prolonged strain. She knelt at her uncle's empty chair, where she had so often knelt, looking up into his kind eyes and burst into a paroxysm of weeping.

'If only he had cared a little,' she whispered. 'Why was he so indignant?' Oh dear, what will he decide? No, aunt, you cannot come in. I'm not seeing anyone. No, he did not call me Diana. No, he did not propose. Go away!' Mrs. Vane stopped knocking and rustled away. Diana buried her face in the chair again. She laughed and wept alternately.

'Oh, it is so lonely. No-one really cares.'

Then suddenly, she remembered she could pray and pray with a new right of access to One Who really cared, whose love was changeless.

From a pile of Christmas cards she drew out one with a motto for the coming year. She breathed it as a prayer. If He went before her the pathway would all be clear.

Dear Christ, move on before, and let me follow where Your feet have trod,
Then shall I find in life's perplexities, the golden pathway of the will of God.

After that there was peace and with rest of soul, Diana waited for David's answer.

Gold - Chapter 8

The fire burned low in the study grate. The marble clock on the mantelpiece struck midnight. It sounded slow and sonorous and each stroke seemed like an end to all bright hopes. David sat

huddled in the Rector's large armchair, his head in his hands, his worn prayer book fallen to the floor. He had been reading the marriage service. Sarah had long been sleeping soundly.

The fire burned low but David could give it no attention and the black embers sank down into the grate. Although he looked at it from every angle, David had not yet arrived at any decision regarding the important question of marriage with Diana. He could not look at the matter impersonally. Diana's brilliant personality dominated his whole mental vision just as the sun bursts through clouds and illumines a grey scene and dull landscape with unexpected glory.

It puzzled David to find he couldn't consider his own plans and his own vital interests apart from her. The whole future seemed to depend on whether she were happy or sad, surrounded by the delights of her lovely home or cast out into the world, alone and comfortless. A readjustment had suddenly taken place in his view of things. Africa had come first and everything else, including his own life, a mere background. Now Diana had stepped forth as it were, in golden capitals and everything else had receded.

It perplexed David because it was such a new experience for him. He had not found a name for it or an explanation. Everything was receding except his determination to adhere to doing what was right and shunning what was wrong.

As he sat wrapped in thought, in the armchair in which he had prepared so many of his evening sermons, Diana became once more his Lady of Mystery. He reviewed those weeks, realising for the first time, that the thought of her had never left him - that the desire to win her unawakened soul had taken priority in his life in Brambledene. She seemed enfolded in silent shadows, from which her grey eyes looked out at him, sometimes cold and critical, sometimes anxious and appealing, then soft with unshed tears or sad with unspoken longing.

Then she had come into the vestry, giving place to Diana Rivers. His Lady of Mystery vanished and she was now radiating vitality and friendliness. He realised it was little more than forty-eight hours since he had first known her name and he marvelled at the closeness of intimacy into which she had drawn him. Yet, undoubtedly, the way in which she had dominated his mind was accounted for by the fact that, from the beginning, she had planned to involve him in her own schemes.

David clenched his hands and battled with his instinctive anger. All the while he had been preaching, he had been the tool she had intended to use to gain her own ends. As priest and as a man David felt equally outraged. Yet, at Diana's frank confession, so truthful and open, David had instantly matched it with his own forgiveness.

But the present situation must be faced. She was asking him to do this thing. Could he refuse? Could he leave England knowing it was in his power to do her so great a service that it would make all the difference to her future? Could he sail for Africa leaving her homeless, perhaps facing all kinds of temptations? The beautiful heiress in her own ancestral home could keep the Ruperts of this world at arm's length if she chose but if not and all she held dear were taken away and someone set himself to win the hospital nurse. . . ?

David clenched his cold hands again and ground his teeth, then paused to wonder at himself. Why should all this fill him with fury? Why should the possibility of anyone winning Diana make him so angry? Had she infected him with her own exaggerated views?

The more he thought it over, the more he realised that this thing she had asked could bring, surely, nothing but good, to the surrounding villages, to the dependants on the estate, to the true preachers she placed in each church living who would faithfully tend to the needs of the people. It would bring untold good to the poor, waiting people, his own people, in Central Africa and, if the Rector had been correct, Rupert Rivers already had more money than was good for him! But still the ghastly horror was there of having to stand before God's altar and utter solemn words under circumstances which would make the marriage service a mockery and unreal.

For a moment a way out of the difficulty suggested itself to David in the registry office but he had not kept the thought for long. An act which could not face the light of God's holy church could not stand in the light at all. David shivered as the Rector's clock struck one. He was no nearer a solution. 'My God,' he prayed, aloud, 'give me light. Give me a clear understanding of Your will.'

The hours from one to two and two to three hold special terrors for troubled minds and those who are lonely. The Prince of Darkness invades the world unhindered sometimes, thought David at his lowest ebb. Murder, robbery, lust and every form of sin, lift their heads, unafraid. He shuddered and whispered his nightly prayer; 'Keep me, O keep me, King of Kings, Beneath Your own almighty wings.'

Evil thoughts, satanic suggestions, swarmed around him but failed to find an entrance in his guarded mind.

By three o'clock the study lamp grew dim, flickered spasmodically and finally went out. David reached for matches and lit a candle by his elbow. He saw his prayer book open on the floor at the funeral service. David smiled. It seemed a simple solution to all earthly difficulties. 'We therefore commit his body to the ground.' It promised peace at last. Who would read those words over his forest grave in Africa? Would he be carried down the centre aisle of the Church of the Holy Star, his church and Diana's, or would he be laid in an open grave beneath the trees? It would not matter at all to his own wasted body but it would certainly matter to the dear people he left behind there.

'Oh, God, give me light, send me light, Lord,' he murmured for the last time leaning back in the Rector's armchair, completely exhausted in mind and body, he fell into a light sleep.

He didn't hear the clock strike four but a few moments later he was woken by a distinct voice in tones of great tenderness. David, instantly awake, started up, listening. He pushed back his tumbled hair. 'Speak, Lord, speak again,' he said with awe. As he heard his own voice break the silence, he realised the vibrating sounds were in his innermost spirit reaching his soul with intense distinction.

‘Son of man,’ said the voice, ‘behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes with a stroke yet neither shall you mourn nor weep.’ ‘So I spake unto the people in the morning and at evening my wife died and I did in the morning as I was commanded. ‘And you shall be a sign unto the people and they shall know that I am the Lord.’

As soon as he had heard the first words, David knew where to look for them in his Bible. He turned to Ezekiel chapter 24 immediately and read the whole passage.

As David read this most touching of Old Testament stories his mind was absorbed with the tragedy. The young prophet, faithfully preaching to hardhearted people and all the while knowing the shadow of a great sorrow was drawing near his own heart and home. The ‘desire of his eyes.’ God knew she was just that to him. Each moment of her life was precious to him yet the young preacher must remain and preach and yield to no anguish of anxiety. He must show no signs of pain or sorrow. A veil was drawn over the night of anguish and the story records simply, ‘At evening my wife died and I did in the morning as I was commanded.’

As he read, David felt himself completely in tune with the prophet Ezekiel. He also had had a long night and he, also, would do in the morning as he was commanded.

Then suddenly he understood what he was reading for himself. Here was a marriage tie, close, tender and perfect, broken apparently for no reason concerning themselves, broken simply for the sake of others, solely in order that the preacher himself would become the text of his own sermon, standing before the people, bereaved but not mourning. It was in order that he might become a living sign of God’s dealings with men.

David’s mind, accustomed to reasoning on theological points, grasped the implications immediately. If the marriage tie could be broken by God’s direction, for purposes of bringing good to others, it might just as well be formed for the same reasons and the two main characters separated for the same reasons. And it could be done without the man or the woman finding themselves outside the will of God.

From that moment David never doubted that he would agree to Diana’s proposal. David had all his life lived very simply by Bible rules. He knew that it’s revealed will of God held good through all the centuries and applied to all circumstances and although his case and Diana’s was unique, what he had read and applied, clearly contented him. He laid his open Bible down beside the candlestick. ‘I shall say ‘Yes!’ he said, aloud. ‘How pleased she will be.’

He could see her face, radiant in its fair beauty.

‘The desire of your eyes.’ What a perfect description of a man’s absorbing love for a woman. Two months ago he would not have understood it but he remembered now how he used to look forward all the week to the first sight on Sunday evening of the sweet face and queenly head of his Lady of Mystery, in her corner beside the stone pillar.

And on Christmas Eve when he stood in the snow, under the shadow of the old church gate, while the footman flashed up the lights of the car and her calm loveliness was revealed among the furs. Then those two days of intimacy had shown him so much of vivid charm in that perfect face as she laughed and talked or hushed into gentle earnestness. He had sat watching her, he knew all her expressive movements, her way of turning her head quickly or lowering her eyelids

and hiding those soft eyes. Today, this very day, he would see her again and every anxious cloud would be lifted. Her grateful look would beam on him.

‘The desire of your eyes.’ Yes, it was truly a divine description of a man’s.....

David sprang to his feet. ‘My God!’ he cried, ‘I love her!’

He began to pace the room. He was overwhelmed by this sudden revelation but began to think slowly and carefully. He had stepped out of open, fearless friendship into something the resolved celibacy of his life had never contemplated. He stood quite still in the chill silence of the dimly lit study.

‘I love her. I love Diana and in two weeks we must marry. A few hours afterwards I will leave her forever! No, how can it be, any of it!’

‘Son of man, I take away the desire of thin eyes with a stroke.’ He would never look on her face again, the face of his own wife.

‘It is not Diana who will offer the myrrh. I shall be doing it.’

Because of this my wife, my wife, he thought, and David stumbled over the words, my wife, will live a rich, happy, contented life. It will be my gift to her. But if she knew I loved her, if Diana knew, she would never accept it.

He leaned against the table.

‘Can I,’ he said, slowly, suddenly feeling a little faint but insisting on asking himself the deliberate question. ‘Can I carry this through without letting her know it now means more to me than ever it will to her? Can I marry the desire of my eyes in the morning and leave her forever in the afternoon - without her knowing I love her?’

He went to the window, drew back the heavy curtains and, looking up to the cold light of dawn saw the bright morning star.

‘My God,’ he said, ‘I thank You for light, I thank You for love and that heavenly and earthly love can meet. I thank You that I can love Diana expecting nothing in return.’

Gold - Chapter 9

Breakfast time, that supreme test of health, always found Diana radiant.

The morning sun shone brightly through the oriole window causing the delicate tracery of frost to vanish quickly. On this particular morning, however, there was a certain restless anxiety underlying Diana's gaiety. She glanced often at the clock, looked through her pile of letters and left them unopened. She looked out yearningly at the wide expanse of snowy avenue through the trees in the park and drank several cups of strong black coffee. This was the day which would decide her fate.

Before evening she would know whether this lovely and beloved home would remain hers or whether she must lose it all. What would be Sir Deryck's opinion? If David had taken the nine o'clock train her would be on his way by now. No two men could be more unlike each other but she trusted both implicitly. She also knew she could rely utterly on the friendship and right

judgement of both men yet her heart stood still Her whole future hung on the conclusion of their conversation this very morning.

She could almost see the consulting room in the doctor's house in Wimpole Street. Would David tie himself up in knots as he stated his case to the doctor's common-sense mind?

And would the doctor come down on David's enthusiastic mysticism like a sledgehammer?

Yet if David had made up his mind it would take more than that to bend it.

Diana took more coffee. The butler stood at her elbow with a telegram on a salver. She took it, opened it and read it swiftly.

'No answer, Rodgers, but I'll see Knox in the hall in five minutes. Let us adjourn dear Aunt, I have a full morning. We will meet again for lunch. I'll be in the library until then.'

Moving swiftly to the bay window in the hall, Diana stood looking through to the park. She heard Mrs. Vane go panting and tinkling upstairs and close the door of her room. Then she drew David's message from the envelopes and read it again.

'Consultation in town unnecessary. Have decided

Please send car early.'

Have decide! When David Rivers said those words it was a rock impregnable. She knew, whatever the outcome, no battery of arguments or wall of tears would change him. It seemed to imply an adverse decision and she felt she was looking her last at her lovely childhood home.

Diana's beautiful white teeth bit into her lower lip. As she sent her chauffeur to fetch David, she realised she was accustomed to men who did her bidding without any why or wherefore. Yet she could not feel angry with him. He and his Lord were so one in her mind. Whatever they decided must be right but surely it couldn't make any difference to him to have stood beside her in an empty church, repeating a few words, yet to her it would be all! Oh dear. She sighed heavily.

Diana mounted the stairs. Every dark oak carving was dear and familiar. The clear wintry sun shone through stained glass windows on the first landing representing Rivers knights in shining armour, leaning on their silver shields. One of these with a red cross on his breast, his plumed helmet held in his arm, his close cropped dark head rising firm and strong, was not unlike David Rivers. She had heard tell of this particular Crusader from the 12th Century.

'If only this one had cared just a little!' said Diana, 'if only just enough to make him glad to do this for me.'

She had found it impossible to wait in the library. She was far too restless but when she saw at last the car sweeping down the drive she passed slowly downstairs, white and cold, striving bravely for self-control.

She crossed the hall and as she entered the room David was standing gazing at the portrait of Uncle Falcon He turned as he heard the door closed with a casual remark on his lips, expressing the hope his timing was not inconvenient, then he saw Diana's face. Instantly he took her cold hands in his, saying gently, 'It's all right, Miss Rivers. I can do as you wish. I'm quite clear about it. You must forgive me for hesitating yesterday.'

Diana drew her hands away and stepped back - her eyes dilated.

'Oh, David - you will! You will?' Her voice broke. She gazed at him helplessly.

David's eyes were so calm and tender it somehow gave her the feeling of being a little child. His voice was steadfast and his smile reassuring. 'I hope to have the honour and privilege of marrying you, Miss Rivers, on the morning of my departure for Central Africa.'

Diana swayed for one moment and put out a hand to the mantelpiece. She leaned her head on her arms there and stood quite still and silently fighting for control of her emotions. Not for nothing was she a descendant of those knights in armour with silver shields on the staircase. David waited silently behind her and lifted his eyes from her mass of golden hair to the keen, quizzical look of the portrait. 'I shall win, young man,' said Uncle Falcon, his amber eyes twinkling.

Presently Diana lifted her head. 'I'm so sorry, you must think me very silly but when I had your telegram I felt sure you had decided against it. I've left Riverscourt a hundred times in this past awful hour. It might have been kinder to have put 'I will marry you!'

David smiled. 'I'm afraid it might have caused a good deal of gossip in the Post Office.'

Diana's spirits were rising rapidly. 'Please, please sit down and tell me, if you can, what made you feel you could do this for me. You will keep to it, David?'

David sat down in an armchair opposite to Diana who had flung herself into Uncle Falcon's.

David was not going to tie himself into knots so sat very still looking at her with calm and steadfast eyes which made her feel young again and inconsequential and far removed from him. 'I think our circumstances require accentuating,' he said. 'They are quite unique you realise, but undoubtedly I shall keep to it.'

David looked ill and worn but happy and at rest. As he talked his face wore an expression she had noted when he was preaching and became carried away with his subject. It was as though he were detached from the world and his surroundings. 'I saw light on the subject this morning. It came clearly from the Bible in the passage I was reading.' Diana's eyes fell before his. She felt slightly reproved for any lightness she had used in her tone in the reaction of her immense relief. Her lashes were wet but the colour was returning to her cheeks.

'Cousin David,' she said, humbly, 'I do realise the greatness of this thing you are doing for me. It means so much and yet on the other hand, so little and can never mean more, so it was difficult for you to feel it was right to do. But it would help me so much to know how you decided.'

'My chief difficulty,' replied David, without looking at Diana, 'was, I couldn't consider it right in the sight of God, to enter into marriage for reasons other than the ones for which it was ordained. Knowing that each of us understood there could be no question fulfilling any of those obligations or conditions.'

'Yes,' said Diana, eagerly, although a little disquieted by realising she had to think in David's ecclesiastical terminology! 'Yes, but we were going to do it for the sake of others. So it must be right, mustn't it?'

'Not so,' said David, gently, 'we can't do wrong so that good can come as a result. That would make marriage unreal.' David paused. 'Well?' breathed Diana, wide-eyed and anxious. This seem to make her wishes impossible.

David heard her voice tremble and smiled reassuringly. 'Well,' he said, 'I was guided to a passage in the Old Testament that proved, in one case anyway, God Himself had put aside the personal happiness of one man and woman and their home together and dealt with them solely for the benefit of the community. One case was enough for me. It answered all my questions and silenced all my doubts. True, it was unique but so is ours. True, it took place centuries ago but although bible manners and customs vary, God's ethics are the same today. I hold the Bible to be inspired from the beginning to the end. It's an impregnable rock beneath our feet and cannot be changed by man's shifting ideas.' David's eyes shone. He had forgotten Diana and the question under discussion. Her anxious eyes recalled him. She wasn't quite sure she understood.

'David, where was the passage? Who were the people?' she asked eagerly. David turned his head and looked out of the window. He had expected this but until she actually asked he had postponed a definite decision as to what he should say. He looked at the clear frosty sky and the light breeze stirring the leafless branches. He did not want Diana to read that passage in Ezekiel. She wouldn't fail to notice the words, 'the desire of your eyes.'

'I'd rather you did not read the passage. Much of it does not apply to us. And, er, there are things in it I don't want you to see, Miss Rivers.' Diana laughed. 'My dear cousin, it is too late to begin shielding me. I've never been very carefully guarded. In fact I have read heaps of naughty books and things I expect you have never even heard of.' David winced. 'I've expressed myself badly,' he said. 'But you will have to forgive me. I don't wish you to read it.'

'Very well,' said Diana. 'But I shall hunt until I find it. Anyway, I looked up pages and pages of references to David.' 'I would probably only have found one Diana,' he laughed, 'Diana of the Ephesians and she fell mysteriously from heaven, quite unlike my Lady of Mystery.' 'When you told me about that, I thought it was the funniest thing I had ever heard. My hunting friends would roar with laughter if I had told them.'

'The Greek meaning of 'mystery' means something that is known only to the initiated,' said David, quietly. 'And you weren't initiated,' suggested Diana. 'No,' said David, 'your hunting friends were not initiated.'

Diana looked at him. He wasn't proving easy to understand.

'Well,' she said, at last, 'let's talk business. I'll send for Mr. Inglestry this afternoon. How relieved he will be. He can manage all the legal details for us, special licence and so on. We can be married at St. Botolph's. Would you like that, David? It is the patron saint of travellers and that is where people go to pray for safety before a voyage. I can go there very time I'm up in town, and pray. What do you think, David? Shall it be St. Botolph's?'

'If you wish it, said David, simply. 'No-one need know the exact day and we can just have my aunt and Mr. Inglestry. We could get Sir Deryck, if you like. What time does the boat go?'

'In the afternoon, from Southampton. The boat train leaves Waterloo at noon.'

'David that's lovely! We can be married at half-past ten and have a wedding breakfast on the train. I can see you off, can't I?'

'As you wish,' he said, again.

'I can send the car down and drive home straight away afterwards. That would be quite a good plan, wouldn't it?' 'Quite a good plan,' agreed David. Diana didn't notice his quietly controlled voice. 'Godfather can marry us and then I can leave out anything I don't want to have read.' David sat up. 'No,' he said, 'I can't agree to that. Not one word must be left out. If we are married in church we can't pick and choose what the church has to say. We stand humbly before the altar and not one word is to be changed or omitted.'

'Diana's eyes flashed in rebellion. 'My dear Cousin David, have you read the marriage service?' 'I know it by heart,' said David Rivers. 'Then you must know I must have certain passages omitted,' flashed Diana. 'Very well,' said David, 'then there can be no wedding.'

'David, you are unreasonable and obstinate.' David regarded her steadfastly and made no reply. Diana's angry flush was suddenly modified by dimples. 'Is this what people call finding one's master?' she enquired.

David's eyes, as he looked into hers, were sad but tender. 'The church, Miss Rivers, will require you to say that you promise to obey. Even your godfather will hardly on if you decline to repeat that word. I don't think I am a tyrant or even a very dominating person but if I feel, before the boat sails, that there is something I want you to do, or not to do, I shall expect you to obey.'

'Oh,' cried Diana, 'I doubt if I shall venture as far as the station. We might not even get to the church door.'

Then she sprang up all smiles and sunshine. 'Come, my lord and master, if it pleases you, I can hear the lunch gong. Here is my Aunt. Quick, give me your hand. Aunt dear, I have promised to marry my cousin David. Come in and congratulate us.'

End of Gold

Frankincense - Chapter 10

It was the eve of the wedding day. Diana lay back in an easy chair in the sitting-room of the suite she always occupied at the Hotel Metropole when in town. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate. Her present mood required a blaze of light and she had turned them all on. The hustle and bustle of London suited her exactly. And when David had pleaded many pressing engagements in London and came no more to Riverscourt, Diana had packed her chaperone aunt and her maid and flown up in the motor too. There was peculiar happiness for her in the days that followed. It was so long since she had had someone all her own to think of and plan for. David had allowed himself to be driven to various appointments and let her superintend his outfit and supplement it where necessary. He was certainly very meek for a tyrant and very gently humble for a despotic lord and master.

When David found Diana's heart was set on it he allowed her to pay for an elaborate medicine chest and spent his own money on a simple but beautiful wedding ring. This, Diana wore already, on the third finger of her left hand. It was a plain gold ring with one diamond cut star shaped inset. Round the inside of the ring David had had engraved the three words, gold, frankincense and myrrh.

One afternoon when they were out together, he mentioned with pleasure having secured a berth in the cabin he had had on the homeward voyage on the same ship. 'It will seem like home,' said David. 'You will have it to yourself?' enquired Diana. 'Oh, no, no!' replied David. 'Two others will share it with me. A stateroom all to myself will seem far too palatial for a missionary.' 'But supposing the two others are not the kind of people you would want to be cooped up with on a long voyage?' 'You have to chance that' said David, 'it is always possible to make the best of it.'

Diana managed to leave David for twenty minutes and speed to Cockspur Street as fast as the car would go. She swept into the office of the steamship company asking for the manager, the plan of the ship, the secretary, the bursar, the captain all in one breathe, in such a regal manner she soon found herself in the presence of a supreme official. After much consultation and writing out a cheque for a vast amount, she was bowed out by the same official himself. 'No mention of my name, please, it is to be done with the compliments of the company,' said Diana, turning in the doorway. 'Your instruction shall be implicitly obeyed, Madam,' said the supreme official with a final bow.

‘What a nice man,’ said Diana to herself as the motor glided off into the traffic. ‘No amount of training would ever induce David to bow and implicitly obey instructions!’

The ready dimples peeped out as Dana lay back and thought, enjoying meanwhile all the narrowly escaped collisions as the chauffeur sped along Piccadilly.

‘On the other hand, according to David, I shall be expected to obey,’ she whispered in gleeful amusement. ‘I wonder how I shall behave. Poor David. Well, he can’t bully me too much between Waterloo and Southampton. Perhaps I ought to let my aunt come with us.’

So the days had passed and the eve of the wedding had arrived. David had refused to dine with them, preferring to spend the evening with his friend, the doctor. But they had had tea together with Mrs. Vane absorbing most of the conversation and nearly all the tea cake.

David had risen and said goodbye before Diana had found an excuse to dismiss her chaperone. She would not now meet David again until they stood together on the following morning at the chancel steps of St. Botolph’s church.

All preparations were complete.

At twenty minutes past ten, on the morning of the Feast of Epiphany when they remembered the great star, David Rivers stood in the empty church of St. Botolph’s, Bishopsgate, awaiting his bride. No man ever came to his wedding looking less like a bridegroom than did David. Diana had scorned her aunt’s suggestion of clerical broadcloth with a fashionable cut, to be worn by David for this one occasion. ‘Rubbish, my dear aunt!’ had said Diana. ‘I’m not marrying the clothes without a thought to the person inside. I don’t propose to be in white satin and I won’t be crowned with orange blossom so why should David go to the expense of broadcloth and an unnecessary top hat? He could hardly wear it all out in Africa. They might get hold of the things after he was gone and make something out of it all. I won’t be wearing a train so how can David appear in a long coat?’

She had turned to David, ‘Keep to your own outfit, David, please, undoubtedly it is an old friend! And anyway you would alarm me in tails or clerical skirt even more than you do already’

So David, on his wedding morning, looked quite simply, what he really was, the young enthusiast, to whom outward appearance meant little or nothing, just ready to start on his journey to Central Africa. His friend the doctor, with whom David had spent his last night in England, might, with his frock-coat, lavender tie and buttonhole, easily have been mistaken for the bridegroom as the two stood together in the chancel. ‘Years ago, Sir Deryck had said, ‘I did the same thing. It is the best thing a man can do. I’ll come to the wedding and see you safely through, although, if it is at half-past ten I shall have to be off straight afterwards. You are marrying a splendid girl. I only wish she were going with you. Yet, I must admit you are doing the right thing in refusing to let her face the dangers and hardships of such a life and travel. Only David, if you want any married life at all, you must be back within the year. With this unexpected attraction drawing you back to England you will hardly keep to your former resolution and remain longer in that deadly climate.’

David had smiled, gripping the doctor’s hand. ‘I’ll see how the work goes on,’ he said, and prayed to be forgiven for the evasion.

Mr. Goldsworthy was robing in the vestry and kept looking out so as to arrive just before Diana. There wasn't to be much processioning, he knew, but what there was would be dignified. He had spent some harrowing moments with David over the question of omissions and non-omissions. He knew Diana's point of view about the wedding service and had received strict instructions to bully David into submission but when the question came up and the moment for bullying arrived, Diana's godfather had turned his attention to buttoning his cassock. He then meekly agreed to David's firm ultimatum.

In his heart he knew the younger man was right. He himself had grown slack about these matters. It all tended to make him a bit breathless. He was glad now though, to remember that he had backed David in spite of his churchwarden's criticism.

The clock struck the half-hour and Mr. Goldsworthy met David and the doctor walking quietly towards him. Mrs. Marmaduke Vane, Diana's aunt and chaperone was there in all her grandeur. She came tinkling and rustling up the church on the lawyer's arm with nodding purple plumes.

Sarah, from her pew on the opposite side, glared at Mrs. Vane feeling the glories of her own new bonnet and crimson feather had suffered eclipse. Yet she marked with satisfaction David had shook her hand and did not even glance across at Mrs. Vane. Sarah had sent him a card with turtle doves on the cover. He tried not to laugh as he remembered it. 'How good of you to come, Sarah,' he said. 'Who could 'a' thought that card of mine would 'ave have bin prophetic!' said Sarah. 'Prophetic?' repeated David, quite at a loss for a moment. 'The turtle doves,' whispered Sara, with a wink, infinitely romantic and suggestive. Then David understood. He and Diana were supposed to be the turtle doves. Good old Sarah, how that would amuse Diana. Then a sharp pang smote him. Tragedy and comedy moved on either side of him

The truth now was that no sooner did David become aware of the arrival of Diana's aunt and Mr. Inglesby, who were, he knew, accompanying her, than he ceased to have eyes for anyone or anything but the place where she herself would presently appear. He took up his position alone at the chancel step, slightly to the right, standing sideways to the altar fixing his eyes on the distant entrance at the bottom of the church.

Suddenly from the organ loft above it, where the golden pipes and carved wood casing stood on either side of the stained glass window, there wafted down the softest, sweetest strains of tender harmony. A musician with the touch and soul of a true artist was playing a lovely setting of David's own, to 'Lead kindly Light.' This was a surprise of Diana's. Diana loved arranging artistic surprises.

In his astonishment and delight at hearing so unexpected and so beautiful a rendering of his own theme, David lifted his eyes for a moment to the organ loft. During that moment the door opened and closed without a sound and when he dropped his eyes once more to the entrance there, at the bottom of the church, pausing, as if uncertain whether to advance or retreat, was standing his Lady of Mystery. David's heart stood still.

He had been watching for Diana, that bewildering compound of sweetness and torment, for whose sake he had undertaken to do this thing, and here was his own dear Lady of Mystery, the personification of softness and of silence, waiting irresolute at the bottom of this great London church, just as she had waited in the little church at Brambledene, on that Sunday evening, seven weeks ago. How far Diana consciously intended to be like that to David it would be difficult to

say but she wore exactly what she had been wearing on the Sunday when he first saw her. It seemed to him to envelop her in an atmosphere of soft, silent detachment from the outer world which had led David to call her his Lady of Mystery.

In a swift flash of self-revelation, David realised more clearly than ever before, that he had loved this girl he was now going to marry, ever since he first saw her, standing as she now stood, tall, graceful, irresolute, uncertain whether to advance or retreat. Down the full length of the dimly lit church, David's look met the hesitating sweetness of soft, grey eyes.

He met and held them. Then, as if the deep earnestness of his gaze drew her to him, she moved slowly and softly up the church to take her place beside him. The fragrance of violets came with her. She seemed wafted to him, in the dim light, by the melody of his own organ music. 'Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom, lead Thou me on.' David's senses reeled. He turned to the altar and closed his eyes. When he opened them again his Lady of Mystery stood at his side and the opening words of the marriage service broke the silence of the quiet church.

Frankincense - Chapter 11

Diana had waited a minute or two in order to allow Mrs. Vane to be seated and Mr. Inglesby to give a signal to the musician at the organ. Even after she had left the motor and walked down the stone paving leading from Bishopsgate she paused, watching the sparrows in the garden enclosure opposite. Here she waited until she heard the music.

Once inside, a sudden feeling of awe and hesitancy overwhelmed Diana. There seemed an unusual brooding sense of sanctity about this old church. All the light filtered through some sacred scene and still bore the radiance of the stained glass transfiguration glory. The shock of contrast as Diana, passed from the noise and whirl of Bishopsgate's busy traffic into this silent waiting atmosphere of old oak carvings and the sheen of the distant altar, held her senses for a moment very still.

Then she took in every detail. Mr. Goldsworthy at the communion rails, her aunt and Mr. Inglesby on one side, Sarah and Sir Deryck on the other. Lastly she saw David and the place at his side which awaited her. David, looking very slim and youthful, one hand plunged into his pocket, a boyish attitude he unconsciously adopted in moments of nervous strain.

Slight and boyish he looked but the intellectual strength and spiritual power in his face had never been more apparent to Diana than at this moment as he stood with his head slightly thrown back, waiting for her.

She suddenly felt different. How could she ever go through with this marriage for which she herself had worked and schemed? It suddenly stood revealed as a thing so much more sacred, so far more holy, so infinitely deeper in significance, than she had realised. She knew now why David had felt it so impossible at first. The paramount cause for marriage was missing, the reverent seeking of the church's sanction and blessing on the union of two people who needed one another utterly. Had she loved David and David had loved her, she could have moved swiftly to his side without a shade of hesitancy. As it was her feet seemed to refuse to carry her one step forward. David thought he was doing this for her but she knew she was doing it all for

him. He believed he gave her all. In return she could give him much, not herself, that he did not want, but so much nevertheless. All this passed through Diana's mind in those few moments of paralysing indecision, while she stood, startled and unnerved, beneath the gallery.

Then, as her eyes grew more accustomed to the dim light, David's look reached her. It reached her and called her to his side. And down from the organ loft wafted the prayer for all uncertain souls: 'Lead kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom; lead Thou, lead Thou, lead Thou me on.' With this prayer on her lips and her eyes held by the summons in David's, Diana moved up the church and took her place at his side.

No word of the service penetrated Diana's consciousness until she heard her godfather say, 'Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?' And no-one replied. Apparently no-one took responsibility of giving her to David, to whom she did not really give herself. But in the silence that followed, Uncle Falcon's voice said, with startling clarity in her ear, 'I do and I have won, Diana.'

This inarticulate sentence seemed to Diana the clearest thing in the whole service, while the actual spoken words had held so little conscious meaning. She could recall, afterwards, the strong clasp of David's hand and when his voice, steadfast but quiet, said, 'I will,' she looked at him and smiled, simply because his voice seemed the only real and natural thing in the whole service.

When they walked up the chancel together and knelt at the altar rail, she raised her eyes to the picture of the crucified Christ but there was something there too painful to be borne just at that moment. At the agony of that suffering form, her troubled heart cried out, 'Myrrh!' Myrrh was His final offering. Must gold and frankincense always culminate in Myrrh?

In the vestry Deryck Brand was the first to offer congratulations. But after the signing of the register he took her hands in his to bid her farewell and said with great emphasis, 'I have told your husband, Mrs. Rivers, that he must come home within the year.' Diana, at a loss as to what to answer, turned to David. 'Do you hear that, David?' 'Yes,' said David, gently, 'I hear.'

As they passed out together, her hand resting on David's arm, Diana looked up and saw the particular stained glass window by the organ with the picture of the infant Christ brought by his mother and taken into the arms of the aged Simeon. 'Do you see that, David!' she whispered, 'I thought I might have seen the star. Is it Simeon and the Babe's mother?' 'Yes,' he said, 'It is.' They paused and she saw a light of great joy dawn in David's eyes. 'Do you know what Simeon said? Now, now let Thy servant depart in peace, now!' And then he added, 'I have just remembered that this afternoon I start for Central Africa.'

As David put his bride into the car, Diana took herself to task for the pang she experienced at the sight of this flash of intense relief she saw in David. The fact that an essential part of David's 'I will' appeared to her to be 'I will now go at once to Africa.' Was surely a cause for thanksgiving, not regret.

The doctor was responsible for Diana's shyness now. He had spoken of her husband. It seemed so impossible that the dreamlike service had transformed her from Miss Rivers to Mrs. Rivers but she felt an utter unreasonableness in feeling hurt at David's obvious relief over the prospect of a speedy departure. But that he should depart on the wedding day had been an indispensable part of her plan and that he should depart in peace, was surely better. He had faithfully fulfilled to the letter the undertaking between them. He had generously done as she asked at the cost of much preliminary heart-searching and perplexity but now she grudged the ease with which he was going. She wanted him a little sad and a little sorry.

Oh, it is unreasonable. She gave herself a little shake and stuck her hands firmly in her muff. Surely now, except outwardly, they were both as free as when they entered the church. But undoubtedly David was now her husband. As she sat silently beside him Diana felt as an experienced fighter must feel who had handed all his weapons to the enemy. What advantage would David take of this new condition of things during the four hours that remained to him. She felt defenceless. If David took one of her hands there was no knowing what might happen next. She remembered the compelling power of his eyes as they drew her to his side in the church. How would she feel if he turned and looked at her like that, now?

But David appeared to be quite intent on the sights of London, eagerly looking his last on each well-known buildings. Once she took her hand out and drew off the glove to gaze at the ring. David glanced at it also and looked away. He was saying goodbye to Big Ben and setting his watch. Once he spoke of the wedding and where, he wondered would be the funeral and would it be in the same suit. 'Please, don't,' said Diana and although the words were abrupt, there was such a note of pain in her voice David turned to look at her. There was also pain in her sweet, grey eyes. He put his hand impulsively on her muff. 'Don't consider it at all, my dear. I've grown used to the idea. There is really no great distance between us and those who enter heaven and come face to face with the One they love and worship.'

'Would...would you like to stop for a moment and visit the Abbey?' Diana spoke quickly, feeling, at all costs, she must stop him talking so easily about his own death.

'No, I think not,' said David. 'I made my final adieu to English cathedrals at Winchester last Monday and I had such a surprise and pleasure there. Nothing the Abbey could provide would equal it.' 'What was that?' asked Diana and her hand stole very near to David's.

David folded his arms and turned to her with delight in his eyes. 'Well, the day before you came to town, I went to Winchester to say goodbye to some very old friends. I went into the cathedral and what do you think I found? A side chapel called the Chapel of the epiphany with stained glass window about the wise men opening their treasures and offering their gifts to the Babe and I thought immediately of the star.'

'And were there three wise men?' asked Diana, with a smile in her voice but for some reason her lips trembled. David smiled. 'Yes, there were three. Mrs. Churchwarden Smith would have liked it. But, to me, it seemed such a holy place I knelt and prayed that I might live to see the completion of our Church of the Holy Star.'

'Where did you kneel, David? I shall make a pilgrimage to Canterbury and kneel there, too.'

'It wasn't Canterbury,' said David, gently, 'It was Winchester. I knelt at the altar rail, right in the middle.' 'I shall go there,' said Diana. 'And I shall kneel where you knelt, David.'

‘Do,’ said David, simply. ‘That little chapel meant a lot to me.’

Diana lifted her muff to her lips and looked at David over it with starry eyes. ‘Will you remember sometimes, David, when you are far away, that I am making that pilgrimage and doing things you have done?’ David was reluctant to continue this conversation. ‘Of course I will. Well, here we are and plenty of time to spare,’ he said, quickly.

He saw Diana into the boat train and went off to find his luggage. Before long they were gliding out of the station and David had said his silent farewells to all that London stands for to the heart of every true-born Englishman.

The railway journey passed with surprising swiftness. David’s high spirits accounted for this. To Diana it seemed their positions were reversed. David led and she followed. He set the tone of the conversation and he decided it should be light and bantering. Diana found it impossible to be personal and pathetic, bordering on the intimate and romantic which she somehow felt would be suitable.

So they had a happy wedding breakfast in the dining car and laughed a good deal over the fact of having left Mrs. Marmaduke Vane with two strings to her bow, Diana’s godfather and Diana’s lawyer.

‘Both are old flames of hers. They will probably dance attendance on her and carry her off to lunch. My aunt doesn’t return home until tomorrow. David, I shall be quite alone at home tonight.’ David turned to gaze at the splendour of the gorse on the common as they passed. ‘It seems a waste to look at the meal for one minute,’ he said, ‘while I’m passing for a last time through this beautiful English scenery. I feel I don’t want to miss one cosy farmhouse, one leafless orchard or one nesting village.’

Apparently there were to be only landscapes in David’s picture gallery. A very lovely face was opposite him at the little table and soft grey eyes looked wistfully and earnestly at his strong, eager face.

Diana was striving to imprint on her memory a portrait of David that would not fade but David was polishing the window with his table napkin and gazing purposefully at the Hampshire orchards and frost covered fields and gardens. Within an hour of Southampton Diana made a last desperate attempt to arrive at a clear understanding about the rapidly approaching future.

After the meal she had crossed over in the carriage in order to sit beside him. She now asked, on the pretext of being dazzled, to draw down the blinds on his side. He complied at once and launched into a graphic description of the difficulties and adventure of African travel. Diana laid a hand on his sleeve. Either the sleeve was thick or David was dense, or both. The account of the Africa swamps continued with increased animation.

‘As soon as the wet season is over, you see, they fire the grass which has grown to such height as to make good cover for the wild animals and mosquitoes and then it is possible to go out and shoot in safety. Do you know last year I found a hippopotamus in among my oleanders, which was such a shame as they bloom beautifully all the year round.’

Suddenly Diana turned upon him, took his right hand and caught it impulsively to her.

‘David,’ she said, ‘do you think it is right in our last hour together, completely to ignore the person you have just married?’ David’s startled face showed very white against the green window blind. ‘I...I wanted...I was’nt ignoring you,’ he stammered, ‘I was telling you about...’ ‘Oh, I know,’ cried Diana, uncontrollable pain in her voice. David thought it was a look of a wounded leopard in her eyes. ‘I know. But I don’t want to know about the scenery and the tall grasses.’ Then, more gently, holding his hand pressed against her velvet coat. ‘Oh dear, I don’t mean to sound so horrible, but we can’t ignore the fact that we were married and you are wasting the only time left to us.’

David gently drew away his hand, folded his arms and leaned back with an expression of patient tenderness reserved, she thought, for children. ‘Haven’t we said all there is to say about the future?’ She felt far removed from him. ‘No, silly we have not,’ cried Diana, then, in utter frustration, ‘Oh, I’m glad you are going, if that is how you feel.’

David’s face whitened to a terrible pallor. ‘There is nothing new in that,’ he said, very low. ‘Oh David, forgive me,’ cried Diana, ‘but I am so miserable and unhappy. If you say another word about Africa or Hampshire I shall break the window or weep or involve you in some other embarrassment. For your own sake, David, please help me.’

David’s earnest eyes searched her face. ‘How can I help you?’ he asked, his deep voice vibrating with intensity. She was assured she now had his full attention. ‘What has made you so miserable?’ ‘Our wedding service,’ replied Diana, with tears in her eyes. ‘It meant so much more than I had ever dreamed.’ Then a look leapt into David’s eyes such as Diana had never seen in any eyes before. ‘How?’ The one word David spoke held so much question, amazement, hope, suspense, that its utterance seemed to arrest the train, stop the beating of both hearts and give the universe a breathing space.

David looked with a world of agonised hope and yearning into those sweet grey eyes, brimming over now with tears. The question only added trouble to her lovely face. David pulled himself together. ‘How?’ he said it more gently. ‘I, well, I think,’ her voice broke, ‘I think I realised how much it could mean to two people who really loved, I mean who really cared for each other. We do care, David, don’t we?’

‘Yes,’ said David, gently, ‘we do care.’

‘I want you to talk to me about it. Weddings are usually so flippant. Ours seemed to mean so appallingly much. Will it come back to haunt me when you are gone? Please tell me how little I meant.’

David laid his hand on hers as it lay upon her muff and the restless working of her fingers ceased. ‘It meant no more than we intended it to mean.’ he said, quietly. ‘It meant nothing to cause you any distress. For you it meant home, your fortune, your position in the country for good and deliverance from undesired suitors. I hope, too, it means now a friend you can trust, though far away, until death takes him further.’

He kept his hand lightly on hers and Diana’s mind grew restful. She laid her other hand on his. She was so afraid he would take it away.

‘Oh, do go on, David,’ she said. ‘I feel so much better.’

‘You must not let it haunt you when I’m gone,’ continued David. ‘We couldn’t help it that the service was so wonderful. That was partly your fault for providing that lovely organ music and for choosing to impersonate my Lady of Mystery.’

Diana considered this, her head close to his. ‘David, thank you. I am comforted. I was so afraid it had, somehow, meant more than I wanted it to mean.’ ‘How could it have meant more than you wanted it to mean?’ ‘I don’t know. I begin to think Uncle Falcon was right when he called me ignorant and inexperienced.’

A sense of complete calm and rest came over the two sat silent in the compartment. Diana let her muff drop but held his hand close to her breast. She closed her eyes sitting very still. At length, without stirring Diana said, ‘We shall write to each other, cousin David?’

‘Certainly, if you wish.’ ‘Of course I wish. Will you promise to tell me exactly how you are?’ ‘I never speak, think or write about my own health,’ he added as an after thought, ‘if that is what you mean.’

‘Tiresome boy, of course I mean that as well as other things. Do you call this obeying me?’

‘I did not promise to obey you.’ ‘Oh, no, I forgot. It was the other way round. It’s very one-sided the marriage service, isn’t it? That’s one reason I said I would never marry. Well, at least I’ve kept my own name.’ Diana laughed lightly.

David did not laugh. He had caught sight of the distant ships on Southampton Water.

‘You have taken mine,’ David said, with his eyes on the distant ships.

‘How funny it will seem to get letters addressed to Mrs. David Rivers. If my friends put D it could stand for Diana. David,’ she turned to look fully into his dark eyes. ‘David, what will you call me, you can hardly begin your letters, Dear Mrs. Rivers, that will be too formal even for you. You will have to call me Diana at last.’

‘I will not call you Diana. In fact I know how I shall begin my letters.’ ‘What then?’ Her lips were very close to his. David stood up.

‘I’ll tell you as we say goodbye and not before.’

Frankincense - Chapter 12

The wooden stiffness of both chauffeur and footman suddenly subsided into warm humanity when David shook each by the hand with a kind word of farewell. Diana stood as an amused spectator. She could see the glow on their faces as they looked after David. Had he tipped them each a five pound note they would simply have touched their caps without a change of feature. David had touched their hearts. Diana thought it over as she followed him up the gangplank. Wherever he went he found out the names of those who served him anything! He knew their joys and sorrows and histories, with amazing rapidity. Diana’s heart warmed with tenderness.

She had left the train with very different sensations from those with which she had entered it. She now felt so indescribably happy. David had so patiently allowed her to hold his hand and she could feel it still where she had pressed it against her bosom. It seemed to her that she would always feel it there in any time of doubt or difficulty. It must be because of David’s essential goodness that the moment he had laid his hand on hers she had thought of the last verse of his favourite hymn.

‘Thy touch has still it’s ancient power; No word from Thee can fruitless fall:

Hear, in this solemn evening hour, and in Thy mercy, heal us all.’

So she saw David, who had left love behind, found it waiting in the brightened smiles of welcome as they boarded the liner.

‘Glad to see you looking better, sir’ and ‘We heard you were coming, Mr. Rivers.’ Then later, ‘I’m not to have the pleasure of looking after you, Mr. Rivers,’ said the steward as they approached the lower deck. ‘Oh, Martin, and I was so glad to see you still here,’ said David. ‘The purser has given orders I was to take you to the promenade deck, with the compliments of the company.’ Martin led the way, David full of excitement, pleasure and surprise.

Diana took it very quietly, this astonishing attention, reserved for actors, public personages and authors, but her eyes shone like stars.

Number 74 proved to be a large, airy stateroom for three but only one lower berth made up. David was in sole possession. ‘A private bath is attached, sir,’ explained Martin, ‘and a mate of mine is looking forward to waiting on you.’ ‘Will it add very much to your comfort, David?’ asked Diana, innocently.

‘Comfort?’ David cried, ‘it’s a palace. Just think of being on my own with an armchair, four electric lights,’ David turned them all on, ‘and this one on a desk. I shall be able to read in my bunk. And two big windows,er, portholes. Oh, no, this is far too extravagant for a missionary. It must be a mistake. I feel I ought to ask two more in.’

‘No, no, you mustn’t do that, David,’ said Diana, ‘It would be too disappointing to the, er, to the company. Look on it as an offering of gold and frankincense and you won’t rob the giver of the privilege of giving it. Promise me, David.’ ‘Of course I promise, only I am so absolutely overwhelmed and grateful’

‘Now,’ said Diana, ‘take me all over the ship and then we will return here to say goodbye’ It did not take long to see over the liner and Diana had flown about in her feverish haste to be back in Number 74 to have a few quiet moments with David.

‘Would you sit in your easy chair, David,’ she asked, ‘I would like to be able to picture you there.’ She moved about the room examining everything, laying her hand for a moment on the pillow. Then she poured water in one of the tumblers, placed it on the writing desk, took the violets from her breast and muff and arranged them in the glass. ‘They will soon revive and remind you of me for a few days,’ She hung up his coat and hat. ‘I wish I could unpack for you. This cosy little room makes me feel quite domesticated. I doubt if the feeling would last long. Oh, I’d love to be coming with you. It would be fun. Don’t be surprised if I arrive in the middle of Africa one day and present my card. It wouldn’t be possible for you to say ‘Not at home.’ The butler would show me in. Do you have butlers, Cousin David? Oh, dear, why am I being so flippant. I must see Martin’s mate and tell him to take proper care of you. No? All right, I wont. But I am perfectly certain you will be finding out how many children he has and whether they have all had measles and he will forget to notice all your needs.’

Diana took off her hat, laid it on the table and came and knelt by David’s chair. ‘David,’ she said, ‘before I go, will you give me your blessing like you did on that night when you - when you led me to the feet of the King?’

David stood up but he did not lay his hands on her head. 'Let's kneel together,' he said, 'and we will ask that our mistakes, if any, may be overruled and our sins forgiven and that, whether by life or by death we may both keep to our highest ideals and glorify the King and be faithful followers of the Star.'

The gong followed closely on David's final words. Diana rose in silence, put on her hat, looked around the room and together they moved towards the gangway.

'Are you sure all the dates and addresses you gave me are correct,' she said. David smiled. 'Quite sure.' 'You do care that I write?' 'I count on it,' replied David.

'And you will write to me?' 'Undoubtedly I will.' 'Soon?'

'I shall begin tomorrow and tell you all about Martin's mates' children and their measles.'

'It would be more to the point to tell me if he is taking proper care of you. Oh, David, I wish you weren't going.'

A look leapt into David's eyes of a drowning man sinking for the third and last time, who suddenly sees a rope dangling almost within his reach. 'Why?'

'I don't know. It seems so far away. Are you quite sure you are well? Why are you so white?'

'Look,' David answered after a moment's hesitation, 'I am going to hate seeing you standing alone in the crowd while the ship moves away. It can be a long drawn out business. Will you go straight to your car I shall be able to watch you safely on your way to Riverscourt. Will you? Will you do as I ask?'

'Why, of course, I will, David. It's the only thing you have asked me to do since I promised to obey.' Her lips trembled. 'Only I hate saying goodbye. And you really look so ill'

'I'm all right,' said David, with dry lips. 'Don't you worry.'

'All ashore, please,' remarked a senior officer, for the second time, looking in their direction. Diana placed one foot on the gangway then turned and put her hand into David's.

'Goodbye, David,' she said. His deep eyes looked hungrily into her face, one long earnest look. Then he loosed her hand, and bent over her as she began to descend.

'Goodbye, goodbye my wife' said David Rivers.

.

The steady hum and rapid rush of the motor were a physical relief to Diana after the continuous strain of the day. She lay back allowing every nerve to relax. This was a time now that she felt it was all over. She was so thankful. She was going home - alone. It seemed the same as she had felt after Uncle Falcon's funeral. It was such a comfort then to return to normal everyday life. Death had laid a relentless hand on that once precious body, change and decay had set in and it had been a relief to welcome the coffin lid and gratitude to kind Mother Earth for receiving and hiding that which had now become a burden.

She realised now as she watched the flying houses and meadows, how happy she was to know the great resurrection message that she had not fully comprehended then. 'He is not here! He is risen!'

Diana shifted her seat and drew the rugs around her. Why was she dwelling on death and funerals on her wedding day? How wonderful it was that she should still be Diana Rivers of Riverscourt, free and unfettered. How well her plan had succeeded. And what an unexpected

touch of pure romance that she had at the last done for David's sake that which he thought he was doing for hers. There was a selflessness about it all which made it fragrant with a sublime essence of frankincense. Surely only good and blessing could come from it all. Diana contemplated with satisfaction the additional prestige given to her position. She could now take her place in society as a married woman. The hateful gossip would be silenced. The insolent expectations would be disappointed.

Diana looked forward with gleeful amusement to answering the astonished questions of her many friends. Here she was, safely established with all a married woman's privileges and none of the odious obligations. And all this she undoubtedly owed to David who had made her his.....!

Diana suddenly found herself confronted by that which she had been fighting to place resolutely into her mental background. It was the moment of her parting with David. She rested her head against the soft springiness of the car, closed her eyes and pressed both hands against her breast. She was not a coward. She would face it now. David had said, 'Goodbye, my wife.' It was the name he meant to use in all his letters. 'My wife.'

It now seemed that the whole day had been moving toward that moment when David's deep tender voice would call her his wife. Diana had sped down the gang-way and when her feet touched the wharf she realised she had fled to her car without looking back. She knew if she had looked back and saw his earnest eyes watching her and his tall, erect figure standing there she would have turned and rushed back, caught his hand to her breast and asked him to say those words again.

And if David had called her his wife again, in that tone which made everything sway and reel around her, she could never have let go his hand again. They must have remained forever on the same side of the gang-way. Either she sailed to Africa with David or David returned with her to Riverscourt. It suddenly seemed as though fortune, home, friends, position were nothing compared to the fact that she was that to him, his wife.

Yet she did not want to go to Africa, and she certainly did not want David at Riverscourt. She wanted to be mistress of her own home. Then what was the meaning of this strange disturbance in the hitherto unruffled calm of her inner being.

Her knowledge of the world, her advanced ideas, had not supplied her with the golden key which lies in the fact of the utter surrender of a noble woman to the mighty love and the infinite need of a strong, good man. She had chosen to go home and this kind of parting. Then why was it so sweet to remember David's voice in his final goodbye.

She would have stopped the motor and raced back to the wharf on the chance of having a last sight of David had he not asked her to render him that one act of obedience possible in their brief wedded life.

The opening of the car door roused her and the great doors of Riverscourt stood wide. A ruddy gleam from the blazing fire in the hall streamed out on the newly fallen snow. Old Rodgers was deferential, the housekeeper expectant and alert, the poodle moved forward to greet his mistress. All was as it were and should be.

Diana greeted them all, asked for tea and passed upstairs to her room

Mrs. David Rivers had come home.

Frankincense - Chapter 13

Diana dined alone in the big dining-room. She wore the white satin gown she had worn on the evening of Christmas Day when David had dined with her. She put lilies of the valley on the table with her violets. After dinner she went restlessly to the library and stood gazing into the warming flames, a tall, lovely, perfectly gowned woman, surrounded by luxury, but desolate.

Did she need a portrait of David, she thought, suddenly realising that she had none? Hardly, though. He was so vividly pictured in her mental vision. She could see him in the pulpit of the little church at Brambledene, keen, eager, inspired, full of his subject, the dark eyes shining in his thin, worn face. She could see him at the piano in the drawing room, completely unconscious of his surroundings, enveloped in the music he was making. She could see him opposite to her in the chair, now empty, explaining with infinite tact and gentleness how he was now able after all to grant her request, making the thing as easy for her as possible.

She could see him in the church of St. Botolph's as he had stood that morning. Was it really only that morning? She saw him waiting for her. How strange. How wonderful the memory of the look in his eyes if only there had been love between them. She could see him in the train in boyish high spirits exclaiming over the beauties of the Hampshire countryside.

'Lord, now let Thy servant depart in peace' Poor David, she had certainly interfered with his peace in the last fortnight. Well, he had gone in peace and would certainly be a light to lighten the Gentiles. And what a difference her money would make. Diana contemplated all that that meant. And then she could see him bending over her at the top of the gang-way, his dark eyes gazing into hers and saying, 'Goodbye, my wife.' Surely it had meant something to David. Was it her fancy that she had seen a look of hunger in his eyes that seemed to match the ache in her breast?

But he had said of it all, 'It meant no more than we intended it should mean.' How impossible is she, Diana Rivers, who had proposed this marriage as a business transaction, should now be finding herself filled with sentiment. If David knew of it she would have to bow her head in shame before his clear, honest eyes.

No, certainly she had no need of a photograph of David. She glanced at the portrait of Uncle Falcon and looked away. She was a bit afraid of him tonight. A rush of tears fell silently. She, who never wept, found herself weeping without restraint in a vague, helpless sort of way. The foolish part was, she was crying about absolutely nothing. Her eyes fell on the concordance she had left, on that evening of perplexity and uncertainty. 'I'm being as silly as an ordinary married woman. I must find something to do.' said Diana. She rose from her chair and remembered

David's words in his Christmas sermon. 'Myrrh in the Bible,' David had said, 'stands for other things besides death. Sometime at your leisure, look them up.' She would do so now.

'It stands for love, love of the sweetest, tenderest kind; love so complete that it must bring with it self-abnegation and a mingling of pain with its bliss.' David had said that. How suitable tonight of all nights she should remember and do as he wished.

She walked to the window to draw the curtains. It seemed to Diana as she gazed at the sky that somewhere out on the ocean David's eyes were also on the night sky and the stars.

She leaned her head on the window and watched one brilliant star low on the horizon.

'May we be faithful followers of the Star,' said David's quiet voice. She drew the curtains and opened the Bible on the first reference. Bending over the Song of Solomon in the firelight she read, 'a bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me.'

Her eyes dilated and she pressed her hands against her breast reading slowly word by word to the very last.

'David, David, David!' Oh David, speeding each moment further and further away and hastening even farther to the land that is very far off, from which there is no return. She lay back, opened her arms wide and closed them, on nothing at all. 'David, David,' she understood at last. The pain in her breast, this ache of her heart, would never be stilled until David's dear head rested where his hand had been pressed.

'Oh, David,' she whispered, 'David, come back to me.' It seemed to Diana that David must hear and must return. This agony of awful loneliness could not be endured. She rose at last and looked bravely at Uncle Falcon.

'You have won, Uncle Falcon, you have won,' The eyes of the old man who loved her seemed to look down sadly this time. She had won and he had won and there was no triumph in either victory. The only undisputed victor in that hour was love who is Lord of all.

Diana laid her golden head on her arms and was shaken by desperate weeping. 'Love must bring with it self-abnegation and pain with its bliss.' She had glimpsed what the bliss might have been. She was tasting the pain to the full. Self had stepped forever off the throne of her woman's heart and love held full sway. 'David, David, David!' But there was no response from the empty chair she clasped impulsively.

The distant liner was ploughing steadily through the dark waters. Each moment took him further away. 'Goodbye, my wife.' The star shone faithfully in the sky. There was silence at last in the room where a heart was breaking.

And David, pacing the hurricane deck where there were no curtains, lifted his eyes to the clear shining of the star and the midst of his own desperate pain, saw it as an emblem of hope, a promise of guidance and a beacon light in this vast desert of utter desolation.

The midnight hour brought merciful sleep to them both.

Christmas Eve came round again. The successive changes of each season had passed over Riverscourt. Budding life of spring won its annual triumph over the pall of snow and cold and

darkening chill of winter, then the bloom and blossom of summer with its soft green foliage had ripened into fruit and the trees turned again to crimson and gold.

All this had come and gone and once more the earth slept. During the year, now nearly over, Diana's life had reflected each of these transitions. With every turn of season she felt the end had come in her experience and hope flagged, but hope born of faith and experience did not fail her brave spirit. She read 'The word of our God shall stand forever. While earth remains, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease,' and was comforted, but only slightly. Winter was not death but only sleep. Spring would sound the awakening yet her heart seemed numb and dead. Love had awakened and found itself entombed. But with the arrival of David's first letter there burst upon her winter the glad promise of spring.

'My dear Wife,' David wrote, and as she read, strong, possessive arms seemed to enfold her. Though all this distance divided them she was really that to him! His letters proceeded always in calm friendliness yet with an intimacy of detail in assurance of her interest, they came as balm to Diana's sore heart. His letters ended always, Yours ever, David Rivers.

Then followed a sweet summertime of wonderful promise. David's letters reached her by every mail. They always began, 'My dear Wife' and ended, 'Yours ever, David Rivers.'

They held nothing closer or more intimate but as Diana shared his hopes and expectations, his difficulties and solutions; as she followed with him along each step in the new developments and materialising of his ideas, the fulfilment of his plans by means of her gift of gold, it seemed to her that a glad day must follow when David would realise at last his need of her, not only her gifts but herself. It would not be long before he sent for her 'My Wife, I want you. Come here to me.'

Surely her growing love for him must waken some need in his heart for her. But though, woman-like, she forgot her grave reticence to allow no hint of her need to enter her letters, she searched diligently to find some tender need of her in his. But within this unnatural marriage, David's letters continued calmly.

One subject which neither dared mention was their love for each other. Nevertheless, for Diana it was a time of growth and bloom as there blossomed between them by means of these constant letters, a wonderful friendship

At first Diana's life moved along its accustomed lines with David and all he was to her, a sweet, central secret.

He had not asked her to give up hunting or dancing or any of the gaiety in which she delighted. Yet the more she lived with his strenuous life of self-sacrifice, the less these things delighted her.

Diana's friends never found her dull but they gradually came to realise that her horizon had grown immeasurably beyond theirs and in her field of vision were things totally unseen by themselves. They loved her still but they gradually left her. Diana Rivers ceased to be the centre of an admiring crowd. They left her but she was not conscious of their going. She stood alone but she was no longer lonely. The only leaving of which she was aware was that David had left her on their Wedding Day. The only loneliness was that David never intended to return. The

glitter and glamour of the world had passed away and the kingdom of heaven held sway in Diana's heart. But the king of that kingdom at this period of Diana's life was David.

Every now and then Diana relieved her feelings by writing a complete outpouring of her love and all she felt. This, often written side by side with her letter for the mail, she would seal up and place in a sandalwood box in which she kept all David's letters with the vague idea she would somehow, someday, be able to place them in his hands.

One afternoon callers arrived for tea a few minutes before Rodgers arrived with the post bag. Diana stamped her letters and placed them in the bag. Some time later when tea was over, something caught her eye in the letter about to be placed in the sandal wood box. She tore it fiercely open, glancing at the end, 'Yours affectionately, Diana Rivers' was in her hand. 'Your wife who loves you and longs for you,' had gone to David.

Had the mail gone? The Postmaster was summoned to his bright little office, bowing to the mistress of Riverscourt. Diana knew it would be difficult but the letter must be returned. Every word she had written stood out in letters of fire. It must never reach the man who had said 'It meant no more than we intended it to mean.'

But here, D.R. Might reign in Riverscourt but E.R. was sovereign of the realm. Her love letter to David had now become the property of the King and this courteous little person in his office was the King's official.

'But it is my own letter!' exclaimed Diana. 'Please, please substitute it for this one.'

'It ceased to become your letter when it was placed in the post-bag, Mrs. Rivers, brought here and placed among others.'

Diana's imperious temper flashed into her eyes but a wise mood prevailed and she placed her letter on the table. 'Please,' she said, 'my husband is in Central Africa. That letter would mean endless worry and anxiety to him.'

The fearless beauty now looked at him with tears in her grey eyes. 'I cannot give you the letter, Mrs. Rivers,' said the equally fearless official. Then the stars in their courses fought against David. As the Postmaster dropped her letter on the table she realised what he meant and snatching it up, replaced it with right one. 'We had best both forget this, Mrs. Rivers,' whispered the Postmaster thickly, 'otherwise I shall lose my job.'

'Thank you, thank you,' then impulsively Diana said, 'God will bless you for it, and you will not lose anything.'

Leaning back in the motor a reaction set in. The chill of a second winter nipped the bloom of her summer and the rich fulfilment of a promised, golden autumn. The fact that it was such an impossible horror to think of one of her tender love letters reaching David proved to be the fallacy of the consolation she had found in writing them.

Tears stole beneath Diana's closed lids. 'The wife who loves you and longs for you!' Oh, so true, so true. But David would never know.

As she mounted the stairs the Rivers knights stood in the glow of the stained glass windows. The knight with the dark bare head and helmet beneath his arm more than ever seemed to resemble David, the David standing white and rigid protesting in dismay, 'Even if I wished or even if we both wished for each other, in that way, Central Africa is no place for a woman. She remembered her sudden gust of fury against David and her merciless answer. 'My dear cousin David you mistake my meaning, I have not the smallest intention of going to Africa or ever inflicting my presence or companionship on you.' Diana's hand tightened on the balustrade but the Knight remained immovable. 'Oh, David,' came the low, tender voice from the staircase, 'I would go to Central Africa or to the ends of the world with you. Only send for me or come.' A bitter smile seemed to gather on the white face of the steel-clad Knight. 'I am to provide the myrrh,' said David's voice.

Away in the African swamps, at that very hour, lying in his wooden hut, recovering from one of the short bouts of fever, now becoming so frequent, David leaned on one elbow and took from under the pillow Diana's last letter. He scanned it eagerly seeking for some word which might breathe more than mere friendliness, pressing his lips against the signature. Then he lay back and fought the hopeless, consuming longing which grew as the months passed by, strengthening as he grew weaker. 'I promised it would never mean more than she intended,' he said. 'She chose me because she trusted me. Oh, my wife, my wife.'

Diana tuned on the staircase and moved slowly upward. She shivered. 'Order fires everywhere, please. The place is like an ice house. Winter has taken us unawares. Aunt, I'll dine alone, if you don't mind. I'm very, very tired. Very tired indeed.

Frankincense - Chapter 14

Diana was not fond of children but during this time when she was striving to let her whole life be a perpetual offering of frankincense, she filled her house with them at Christmas, Easter and in the summer holidays. They were children of missionaries, boys and girls whose parents were in distant parts of the world and could give them no welcome at holiday times. Poor little forsaken girls and boys!

She had no mother love to give them but she gave them what she could, gold and frankincense and in many cases the climate and conditions in which their parents lived, provided the myrrh. Orphaned, she thought, but not orphans. The old house rang with the sound of happy voices notwithstanding the solemn protestations of old Rodgers.

It was Christmas time, Diana took up her pen trying to make up her mind whether to take her cue from David not to mention that it was a significant time for them both.

The firelight flickered on her coils of golden hair and revealed the fact that her face had lost the rounded buoyancy of health which had been hers a year ago.

Its thinness and the purple shadows beneath the eyes made her look older. There was in them, however, a depth of chastened tenderness and her whole expression was one of quiet patience. The mellowing and softening of the spirit fully compensated for the thinning and ageing of the lovely face.

Diana, in her independent radiance was no longer there but David's wife took up her pen. The look on her face would have bought David to his knees at her feet could he have seen it. Uncle Falcon's amber eyes gleamed down at her. They had never twinkled since her wedding night but they often shone with a strangely comprehending light. Sometimes they said, 'We have both won,' and at other times, 'We have both lost,' according to her mood. But they were always kindly and always unflinching understanding.

Riverscourt, Christmas Eve.

My Dear David, How well you timed your Christmas letter. I have it for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day. All three important anniversaries for us. I could have had a sheet for each day but I couldn't wait in my eagerness for news concerning the Church of the Holy Star. I should so love to have been with you on your official opening day.

Indeed, I shall make a pilgrimage to Winchester and spend the time in prayer and meditation in your little Chapel of the Epiphany. I shall kneel where you knelt. It brings back every word of the sermon you preached this time last year. When you were there, did you happen to notice the window with the Virgin bending over the Holy Christ? She is holding both His little feet in one hand. I can't understand why but that seems to depict the extreme tenderness of mother-love. I dislike babies myself, exceedingly, yet ever since I saw that window I have been pursued with the desire to hold a baby's two little feet in my hand that way, just to see how it feels. I'm sure I grew up so hard-hearted because I had no demonstration of affection poured over me. You grew up so sweet and affectionate to every one simply because your mother lavished her love upon you. There, that is one of my theories of life, I thought it out in that little chapel when I should have been praying last time I went there.

Dear David, do you think you could possibly relieve my natural wifely anxiety and give me some details of your health as well as the most welcome news about your work.

One further episode from the year's correspondence shows the increased intimacy constantly bordering on the personal, which grew between David and Diana. David had written that he had so much pleasure in an old photograph he had found of Diana opening a bazaar. It was among a package of illustrated papers which had reached his station. Knowing how her heart yearned for one of them, Diana went up to town and was photographed especially for him. The portrait startled her by its expression. It was not a look she had ever seen in the mirror. The clever artist had sacrificed minor details of arrangement in order to take her unawares, before the luminous beauty of her soul was closed to him.

She had been thinking of her husband.

The depth of tenderness in the eyes and the soft wistfulness of the mouth were revelation of her own heart to Diana. She hurried it back into its wrappings. It had been taken for David, to David it must go - immediately, otherwise it would never be sent.

She could not help seeing that it was very beautiful. What would it say to David, the sight of those tender, yearning eyes? What might it lead David to say to her?

At last his answer came. 'How kind of you to send me this beautiful photograph. I fear you will think me ungrateful but I confess I still prefer the paper snapshot. You see, I never saw you look as you are looking in this portrait, whereas the snapshot is just as I remember you, tall and immensely enjoying life. I have not been able to leave it unwrapped and on my desk.

Reason No. 1 Its affect on myself. I could not work while it was where I could see it. It set me wondering about the person you must have been looking at and a man would be lost out here if he started that kind of wondering.

Reason No. 2 Its affect on the people. They thought it might be the Madonna or your namesake at Ephesus, fallen from heaven. They ask, where is the little child?

So I have put it under lock and key.

Diana put her head on the letter and wept. Sometimes her punishment seemed heavier than she could bear.

And David beat his way for hours through the swampy jungle, fighting the long grasses and the evil clinging tendrils. When he regained his hut, worn out and exhausted, the stars were out with one planet hanging luminous and low on the horizon. David stood in the doorway trying to gain a little refreshment from the night wind blowing up from the river. 'Dear God,' he gave a short, dry sob. 'I have so little. Let me keep to the end the one thing in my wife which I possess, my faith in her.'

Then he groped his way to the rough wooden table, lit a lamp and sitting down at his desk, took out Diana's portrait from its silver wrappings. He placed it in front of him and sat a long time, looking at it intently, his head in his hands. The soft lips he laid his own on, seemed to offer much to one at whom the grey eyes looked with love unmistakable. Then he laid it away, out of sight.

Riverscourt, Feast of the Star.

My dear David, A wonderful thing has happened and I am so glad it happened on the Feast of the Star which is also, as you will remember, our wedding day. It made me feel that nothing, however awful happening, is irrevocable, even in this poor world of ours and God can always rectify things.

It meant so much to me I hardly know how to write it but I must tell you in detail. It concerns one of our loveliest little children who has been my constant companion in the holidays. We call her little fairy as that is exactly how she looks. The tragedy concerned the fact that we heard that her mother had died in an unpronounceable place in China.

After lunch today I happened to go out into the hall and just as I opened the door a station fly drew up. I was about to leave the visitor to Rodgers when I noticed the visitor's face looked strangely familiar. It was the sweetest, saddest, most gentle, lovely face and she was a young widow in deep mourning.

'Is this Riverscourt,' she asked as I brought her in, 'and can I speak at once to Mrs. Rivers,' she said, as I introduced myself, and I could see she was battling with an almost overwhelming emotion. 'I'm a missionary and I have just returned from abroad. My little girl should be here. They tell me, in you great kindness you have had her here for the Christmas holidays. I have

been living for the day when I should see her again. I haven't seen her for over a year. I hope you will pardon my intrusion. I'm afraid I found it impossible to wait once I arrived in London.'

'Intrusion!' I cried, 'however could it be that. It means so much to me when I hear of any of these bereft little boys and girls finding their parents again. But we have at least a dozen. Which one is yours?'

'Her name is Eileen,' said the gentle voice, but we call her little fairy.'

David, my heart stood still. 'But...but who are you?' I exclaimed. 'I'm my little fairy's mother,' she said simply.

'But', I cried and stopped. I supposed my face made her realise what she had said. 'Oh, yes' she said. 'I had forgotten you wouldn't know. In some strange way the latest telegram home was changed. It was my husband's death, not mine. I lost him very suddenly and I didn't want the children to be told until I returned. I wanted to tell them myself.'

I rang the bell and asked Rodgers to send for Eileen at once to the drawing room. Then I knelt in front of her mother and took both her trembling hands in mine. You know I find it hard to be demonstrative, David, but the tears were running down my cheeks. 'Oh, you don't know how awful it has been thinking of you dead and buried thousands of miles away and to continually hear your baby's voice saying, 'Mummies tumming home.' And the little mouth kept to itself the kisses so loyally waiting for you. I was told each evening, 'Not my mouf, that's for Mummie!' I used to think one day I must tell her. Thank God I didn't.'

We held each other and cried.

'You wont leave her again?' I said. 'Oh, no, never,' she whispered. 'I have two sons at school in England as well. I never felt it right to be parted from any of them. It was my husband who..who..' She broke off as that sweet baby was coming down the stairs looking a picture in a white frock with a blue sash, holding the dark oak banisters, singing, 'Mummies, tumming, home!' with each step down. I caught her in my arms at the bottom but couldn't kiss her, she wasn't mine. 'Mummies come home, darling,' I said and ran with her to her mother's arms and saw the little mouth meet the loving lips I had pictured as cold and dead.

I walked to the window and looked out onto the sleet and drizzle and thought whatever did it matter outside with such love and bliss inside. It all seemed a kind of resurrection.

David, I have always said I did not like children and I have put myself into the position where that sweet responsibility, that loving tie, can never be mine, and I have realised that that former attitude of mine has been wrong and sinful. I have experienced something of the rapture of motherhood with this little baby girl. I'll tell you a secret, David, if it had been the Father who came home, I was going to ask if I could adopt Little Fairy. But you see I'm not intended even to have other people's children for my own.'

After a while, as I stood at the window I heard the mother say, 'Darling, dear daddy is not coming home.' 'Oh,' said Fairy's contented voice. Her mother persisted in a quiet tone. 'Eileen, Daddy has gone to be with Jesus.'

The little face looked earnest and thoughtful. 'Oh,' she said again, then, 'Did Jesus want him?' 'Yes,' said her mother, controlling her tears. 'Jesus wanted him. So we have lost daddy, darling.'

Then fairy jumped up on her mother's knee, put her arms round her mother's neck with unspeakable tenderness, and said, 'But we've gotted each uvver, Mummie.'

Oh David, 'we've gotted each other!' It seemed everything to that little heart. Now, do you wonder that this has made me feel as if none of earth's happenings need be altogether

hopeless and no mistake is wholly irretrievable. Aren't you glad this wonderful thing happened on the Feast of the Star? And David, godfather preached this morning on the text 'and they went home by another way,' about the wise men. You could tell me what you think that means in one of your letters.'

Your affectionately, Diana Rivers

It so happened that David had a sharp bout of fever soon after this letter arrived. His colleague wondered why in his delirium he kept repeating, 'When I am gone she can have a fairy of her own! She can have a little fairy girl of her own when I'm gone'

In the early summer following the first anniversary of their wedding day, Diana's anxiety about David increased. His letters became less regular. Sometimes they were written in pencil. The writing was larger and the letters less firmly formed. After the latest of these arrived, Diana experimented with trying to write, lying on the bed and raising herself on one elbow. This produced the same kind of variation as she saw in David's. She felt certain that David was having frequent and severe attacks of fever but all he would say in answer to her questioning was 'All is well, thank you.'

In June, Diana wrote to David's colleague asking him privately about her husband's health but the colleague was loyal and David answered the letter. As usual, all was well, but it was not well that Diana had tried to learn from someone else something that he did not wish her to know. David then wrote very sternly and did not veil his displeasure but woman like, Diana loved him for it. She got nothing out of her friend the doctor beyond a stiff reminder he had told her on her wedding day that her husband ought to return from Africa within a year. Whether or not he had received any recent news about David, he would not tell her.

Diana was annoyed and indignant. Sir Deryck was a naturally sympathetic man and was expected to be unfailingly sympathetic. But he was strong as well as kind. He had been perplexed by the suddenly arranged marriage and surprised by David's reticence over it. And when he discovered David intended to return without his wife, he found himself thoroughly disapproving.

Diana sense the disapproval and was hurt by it but it stimulated her pride. Well, that which they did not choose to tell her, she would no longer ask. She knew at least half a dozen women who, under similar circumstances, would have rushed up to town and poured out the whole story to Sir Deryck in his consulting room. But Diana was not that kind of woman. Her pain made her silent. Her stricken heart called on her pride incase her weak courage should fail. The whole tragic situation was of her own making so she would have to bear the results alone. She could not see herself as a penitent in the green leather armchair, in Sir Deryck's consulting room

A grander woman than she had sat there once and humbled herself into the dust so that she might win the crown of love. But Diana's strength did not equal this. Her pure heart was just as true

but its supporters were Courage on one side and Pride on the other and her motto was, 'I can stand alone.' So she lived on, calmly, through the summer months, while David's letters grew less and less frequent and, at last, in October, the blow fell.

A letter came from David very clear and very much to the point.

My Dear Wife.

I hope you will try to understand what I am about to write and not think for one moment that I undervalue the pleasure and help I have received from our corresponding together. In the year and nine months we have been separated your letters have been a greater blessing than I can ever express. It has been an untold help to be able to share with you all the details of my work out here. I am afraid these undeniable facts will make it sound a very strange thing to you that I am now writing to ask that our correspondence should cease.

You will have noticed my letters have been irregular lately and that is because I really need all my energy to finish the work here. I will not hide from you, Diana, that I feel my time here is nearly over and so I want to say 'Farewell' properly while there is time.

Do you remember how I said 'I can't promise to die?' I might have promised with a good grace after all. This will be the last letter I will write. When you have answered it do not write again. I don't know where I shall be but you will certainly hear when the time comes for you to be completely free again. I have written you a letter which I now keep in my coat pocket and that will be forwarded to you in the event of my death. When you have read that you will understand why I must now stop writing so that I won't give your generous heart a moment's pain, even through a misunderstanding. I cannot tell you all that your help and encouragement has meant to me and the work out here.

I am able to leave behind me a flourishing community and a growing, eager young church. Oh, Diana, if someday you could possibly just visit the Church of the Holy Star! But not yet, not now.

This brings me to my final request. As I know your kindness, and if you think I am possibly dying, you may possibly want to come out here at once. Please, do not do so. Do not leave England until you hear of my death. This is my last wish and command, my dear wife.

I haven't had much opportunity for tyranny, have I? Your bright friendship has meant so much to me.

But you must not even feel yourself a widow, Diana. I have called you wife I know but it has just been a courtesy title, hasn't it? But even death cannot sever a perfect friendship. And there is yet a closer bond between us. One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism. And that is eternal.

So now I say again, as I said, with my hands on your bowed head, on that Christmas night so long ago, before we knew all that was to be between us:

The Lord bless thee, and keep thee; the Lord make His face to shine upon thee; the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.

Good bye, my wife, Yours ever, David Rivers.

End of Frankincense

Myrrh Chapter 15

Diana had begun hesitatingly to seek for information about Africa. Where exactly was David? How long did it take to get there and how exactly did he travel? She had read of another David, David Livingstone, a century earlier, yes, but travelling through uncharted jungles on foot, racked by diseases, attacked by wild animals, menaced by hostile tribes and even robbed by his own porters. He had marched on with his Bible and she could imagine clearly her own David doing the same. David Livingstone, although living in a different age, sounded so like him, with the same vision.

Planting the seeds of emancipation in both Britain and America he had been found dead on his knees, in a dilapidated hut, in an obscure African village, half a century earlier.

How she longed to know that there was no trekking through uncharted jungles for her David. But this was the twentieth century. Surely things were easier and what had she accomplished with her own life? Diana could and would spend more time on her knees. She could be more a part of David's work, supporting him, dwelling for awhile where he dwelt, feeling nearer to him.

Now, however, Diana sat perfectly still when she had finished reading David's last letter.

A year ago she would have flung herself down and sobbed. But the time for weeping and calling for him had long gone. This deeper depth of anguish stopped all moaning or crying out. It silently turned her to stone.

Every vestige of colour had left her face. She just sat looking straight before her. David was dying and David did not need her. He was dying in Central Africa and yet his last request was that she should stay in England.

Every now and then her lips moved and she whispered. 'Just a courtesy title.' Then with a ghastly face and eyes widening with anguish, 'I have called you my wife I know but it has just been a courtesy title.'

'Oh, David, has it?' Was it a courtesy title at the top of the gangway? Was it just that, when that deep possessive voice rang in her ears for hours afterwards, teaching her what love, marriage and wife hood might really have meant? Was it a courtesy title when his first letter arrived and the words, 'My dear Wife' came round her in her shame like a strong, protective arms? All this time had it meant less to David than she had thought?

Often, the branding iron of her punishment had seemed more than she could bear when vain regret had seared her heart. She had hugged this courtesy title to herself as the one thing that proved, however little it might mean, that she was more to David than anyone else on earth.

On earth! How much longer would he be on earth? And she was not to receive his very last letter until he was no longer on earth? It would be too late then to answer that one. Oh, David, David! Are you deliberately punishing your wife for ever putting a slight on your manhood? Your wife did it in ignorance, David. She spoke out of the depths of her absolute ignorance and inexperience.

There was still time to send an answer to this letter, however. If she caught tonight's mail, David might yet receive her reply and learn the truth before he died. Pride and Courage stepped away and left an unsupported but pure, true heart.

Diana took pen and paper and wrote her last letter to David.

But the letter was not sent. Halfway through, Diana realised David might actually be dying when he read it and her mother heart finally held sway. She could not write a woman's pent-up love and longing. She must not trouble his last moments with an outpouring of grief and remorse, of longing and loneliness. Even in the midst of her own desperate need Diana's tender heart thought first of David. Nothing must trouble his peace to the last. Diana took fresh paper and drew it toward her.

Courage came back to its rightful place but Pride stayed away, forever slain, in its place was the Madonna with eyes of love and the infant in her arms.

She began her final letter.

Riverscourt.

My dear, dear David, I do not need to tell you how deeply I feel your letter, bringing the news it does about yourself. Of course I understand perfectly and I shall do exactly as you wish. Of course, I should have come out directly your letter reached me and I was already considering ways to do just that, if you had not asked me not to. David, I long to be with you. If you should change your mind, a cable will bring me out by the next boat, otherwise, I stay in England. But I cannot stay at Riverscourt.

It would be far too lonely without your letters. Do you remember the Hospital of the Holy Star where I nursed before Uncle Falcon sent for me. Well, I have been going up there lately once a week and last time the Matron told me of a vacancy, a sister's post, in one of the largest wards.

I shall apply for it and go there for at least three months, anyway, until after Christmas. Then they will employ someone permanently. This is wise for my own sake and will take me over the period in the year that means most to me.

You must not mind this, David. I cannot bear the sorrow at the moment of being on my own at Riverscourt. It is a great sorrow, David, and I shall find it easier to bear looking after other people.

I wont worry you with tales of my poor heart, but ever since I lost you, ever since our wedding day evening, I have loved you and longed for you, more and more and more.

When you called me your wife on the gang-way it revealed to me suddenly what it really meant to be your wife. David, my darling boy, when I lose you, I shall be a widow indeed. But you must not let my sorrow disturb your last moments.

Perhaps when you reach the land that is very far off, I shall feel you less far away then, than in Central Africa. Be near me sometimes if you can. I shall go on offering my gifts, though the

gold and frankincense will be overwhelmed by the myrrh. But the star we have followed together will lead me on. And perhaps it will guide me at last to the foot of the shining throne where my darling sits in splendour. And I shall see his look call me to him, as it called in old St Botolph's, and I shall pass up the aisle to glory, and hear him say, 'Come, my wife.' Then I shall kneel at his feet and lay my head on his knees. Oh, David, David!

Your own wife, who loves you and longs for you, Diana Rivers.

There was much she would have expressed and some she would have left out but it was too late to rewrite it. So Diana let it go as it was and it caught the evening mail. Even so, David never saw it. It arrived just twenty-four hours too late.

Once again it was Christmas Eve but in the middle of the strenuous life of a busy London hospital, Diana hardly had time to realise the season or to allow herself the private luxury of dwelling in thought on the anniversaries that were upon her again.

She had fled from a brooding leisure in which she dared not wait for the news of David's death. The sister in charge of St. Angelus ward had no time for brooding and very few moments to think of her own sorrows. The needs of others were all too absorbing.

Diana, in her stiffly starched uniform and white cap which almost covered her golden hair, bore little resemblance to the Diana who stood hesitatingly just inside the door of the little church at Brambledene, on that winter's night two years before.

During her two months of strong rule in the ward, the only people who feared her were those who sought to evade some duty or feign complaints. The grey eyes still held a gentleness but the firm white hands had a tenderness of touch unknown to them before. Her time of duty was nearly over but Christmas Eve had been a very strenuous time with two ambulance calls and a severe and lengthy emergency operation adding to the usual routine. Those who suffered in the ward looked with eager eyes for the approach to his bed of that tall, gracious figure. Those who were passing into a dark valley had clung to those strong fingers and listened with increasing hope to words that strengthened faith unflinching. Her time now was over. The sister whose place she had filled was appointed.

Diana waited only for one last consultation with Sir Deryck about a case he was interested in.

Her little room in the hospital seemed cosy and intimate. The curtains were drawn against the murky fog outside, and the fire lit. She drew her small tray with its homely brown pot of tea towards her and sat down by the fire thankfully. A pile of letters waited and as usual her heart tensed with anxiety. No, David's letter was not there. Several times each day she passed through this state of acute suspense. Somehow she had long felt certain that it would come on Christmas Eve, the letter, at sight of which she would know that David had reached the land that is very far off. She lay back in her chair with a delightful sense of liberty and leisure and gave herself at last to retrospective thought.

Tomorrow she would return to Riverscourt. Nothing remained for her but a submissive acquiescence and patient resignation. At first, life in the hospital with its incessant interests and constant round of important duties had so used her mind and wearied her body that she fell at

once, at night, into a sound and dreamless slumber. But, before long, the work became routine and her physique adjusted to the on duty and off duty arrangements.

Then a terrible loneliness and blank despair had taken hold of her. She seemed to have lost all She had offered willingly the gold and it now seemed worth little. Her gift of frankincense had ended in heartbroken failure. What was left now, save Myrrh, David's gift, and her anguish in the fact that he had offered it?

During this period of bleak despair, Diana went one afternoon to a service in a place where many earnest hearts gathered each week for praise and prayer and bible study. She went to please a friend rather than any expectation of enjoyment.

The proceedings opened with a hymn, three short verses, which Diana had never heard before. Yet those words, in their inspired simplicity, were to mean more to her than anything had ever yet meant in her whole life. She had time before the singing to read them through quietly..

“Jesus stand among us, in Thy risen power;
Let this time of worship, be a hallowed hour.

Breathe Thy Holy Spirit into every heart.
Bid the fears and sorrows from each soul depart.

Thus with quickened footsteps, we'll pursue our way;
Watching for the dawning of the eternal day.”

Who can gauge the power of an inspired hymn or prayer. As the simple melody rose and fell, sung by hundreds of believing, expectant hearts, Diana became conscious of an unseen Presence in the midst of them, overshadowing the personality of the minister, just as in the noble monument to Philip Brooks, outside his church in the beautiful city of Boston, the mighty, tender figure of his Master, standing behind him, overshadows the sculptured form of the great preacher. The presence of the risen Christ was there and the power of the risen Christ laid hold of Diana.

He drew near to the one lonely soul who, more than all the others, needed Him. No other human words reached Diana during that hour of worship. He, Who stood in the midst dealt with her Himself, in the secret of her own spirit chamber. She saw the happenings of the past in a new light. First of all, self had reigned supreme. Then, when that great earthly love came and had driven out self, she had placed David on the throne.

Now the true and only King of love drew near and she realised that He had come, with deepest tenderness, to claim His rightful place which should all along have been His own.

‘Bid the fears and sorrow, from each soul depart.’

Her whole life just now was made up of fears and sorrows but they all vanished as her broken heart rose and crowned Him King. Her love for and anguish over David was not lessened, but her soul had found, at last, its deepest rest and peace.

‘Thus with quickened footsteps, we'll pursue our way.’

Diana went out when that hour was over with quickened footsteps indeed. At last she realised that she, too, could bring an offering of myrrh. She remembered David's sermon so long ago. 'Your present offering of myrrh is the death of self every day.'

She felt strangely one with David. He, in the wilds of Africa, she, in the busy London hospital, each were presenting their daily offering of myrrh. And God, who alone can make all things work together for good had overruled their great mistake and was guiding them both across life's lonely desert, to the feet of their King. From that hour Diana's life was one of calm strength and beauty.

Her heart still momentarily stopped beating at the arrival each mail and she still yearned for the assurance that David had received her letter but the power that had touched her life left her with a deep inward calm which nothing could ruffle or remove.

Diana roused herself and looked at the clock. Sir Deryck Brand was due any moment. She drew back the curtains to see the fog lifting and through the forest of chimneys there shone, clear and distinct, one brilliant star.

'And when they saw the star they rejoiced,' quoted Diana to herself. 'Oh, my dear boy, are you now beyond the stars?'

She dropped the curtain, left the room, and passed down the flight of stone stairs to meet the specialist. As Diana and Sir Deryck passed through the lower hall the ambulance bell sounded. 'It's the call from Euston,' shouted someone from below. Diana recognised the ambulance driver. 'Oh, dear,' she sighed, 'that will mean another operation tonight. These fogs bring endless trouble. We had someone in this afternoon. It was a double amputation but they saved his life.'

'Does it badly try your nerves?' asked the doctor as they paused for a moment at the entrance to the ward.

Diana smiled, meeting his clear eyes with a steadfast courage of her own. 'No,' she said, 'not any more. Especially not when you are actually there helping a surgeon. There's no time for squeamishness. Besides, you might know, riding and hunting all those years dealt with my nerves.' The doctor smiled. Half an hour later they stood together at the top of the stairs discussing the doctor's case.

A little procession slowly and carefully carried a stretcher and Diana rested her hand on the rail and bent over to look. A slight unconscious figure lay on the stretcher and the light fell suddenly on the deathly pallor of the worn face. One arm slipped down and fell limp and lifeless. 'Steady!' called the house-surgeon. A nurse gently lifted the nerveless arm and laid it across the breast.

Diana, clutching the rail, gazed down speechless at the face on which lay already the unmistakable shadow of death.

Then she turned, took Sir Deryck's arm and shook it.

'It's David, Sir Deryck, it's David,' she cried, 'can you hear? Oh God, it's David!'

The doctor didn't answer but went hurriedly down to the houseman. 'He was found unconscious in the Liverpool train, sir, he seems very bad indeed but apparently still alive.' The porters moved towards the ward but Diana bared the way. 'No, no, not here,' she said and her voice

seemed to her to come from miles away, 'not here, here in the private ward.' 'It's David, it's David,' she said, over and over, mechanically. Sir Deryck and Diana drew near and their eyes met across the stretcher.

'It's David,' said Diana, 'He's come back to me. Dear God, he's come back.'

'Mrs. Rivers, Sister,' said Sir Deryck, slowly and carefully in a quiet, steady voice, 'Mrs. Rivers - just help me a moment and we will place him on the bed with the porter's assistance. Just put your hands underneath, no, don't shake him, now, lift!'

Together they lifted David's wasted form and laid it gently on the bed.

'Now,' he said, 'go at once to the window, open it and stand there. Do as I tell you, dear girl, at once, now, for David's sake.'

Mechanically, Diana obeyed. She somehow knew that she must gain control of herself before she looked on that dear, dying face again. The night air restored her powers of thought and action. She lifted her eyes and saw the one brilliant star. She took some deep breaths.

Her dear boy was dying but he had come back to her first. Suddenly she understood why he had stopped writing. It was because he was coming home, it wasn't because he did not want her. Skilful hands were undressing her beloved and as she picked up his jacket her hand flew to her throat and she gave a sudden loud cry.

Sir Deryck stepped quickly between her and the bed and led her firmly to the door. 'Go to your room. It is far better that you should not be here just now. Everything possible will be done. He may regain consciousness, in which case you must be ready and have yourself well in hand.' The doctor put her gently out. 'Will you call me...if?' 'Yes, yes, of course I will certainly call you then.' Diana still held David's jacket. She slipped her hand into the breast pocket and drew out a sealed envelope.

'Sir Deryck,' she said, a bit more calmly, 'this is a letter from David to me which I was to receive after his death. Do you think I could read it now?'

The doctor glanced back at the bed. The houseman looked up, held David's pulse with the nurse standing ready with the hypodermic and strychnine he had ordered and shook his head.

Myrrh - Chapter 16

The unexpected had taken place, beyond all imagining. 'Yes,' had said Sir Deryck, 'you may read it now.' He had firmly closed the door.

Diana passed into her room with a sense of all around her being dreamlike and unreal. Her commonplace surroundings were all vague. There was no reality about the ceaseless roar of London traffic without. The only real things to Diana as she sank into her armchair were that she held David's coat clasped to her, that David's letter was in her hand and that David himself lay, hovering between life and death, just down the corridor.

With an effort she opened the letter, suddenly realising, as she heard herself whisper brokenly, 'he has come back to me, he has come back to me,' that it was all important she knew what he said in case he regained consciousness. She held the warm and dusty coat closely to her as she read.

My dear wife,

When you read these lines I shall have reached the land from whence there is no return, 'the land that is very far off.' Very far off but perhaps not so far as Central Africa. Perhaps, as you are reading, Diana, I shall be nearer to you than we think, nearer in spirit than now seems possible. So do not let this farewell letter bring you a sense of loneliness, my wife. If spirits can draw near and hover round their best beloved, mine will bend over you as you read this?' Diana caught her breathe.

'Does it startle you that I should call you this? Be braver, dear heart, and read on because I am going to tell you the whole truth, trusting you to understand and to forgive. My dear wife, I have loved you from the very beginning, with my whole being - as any man who loved you would be bound to love. I did not know it myself until after I had made up my mind to do as you wished about our marriage. How I carried it through without letting it be more than you wanted, I shall never know because in one blinding flash, I suddenly knew I loved you, my beloved. It was all beyond the strength of mortal man but not beyond the strength of my love for you, Diana. I managed it but it is such a relief to be able to tell you at last. It cannot harm you to know how deeply you have been loved. It need not sadden you, dear, as every man is better for having given his best. The longing for you those first hours was terrible. I tried to pray but could only groan. Everything in the cabin reminded me of you, those violets, although your sweet presence was not there.

I saw my hat where you had placed it and just could not stay in the cabin. Pacing the deck I had the wild notion of rushing back to you, confess it all and throw myself on your mercy. Then I knew I could never do that. You had chosen me and you trusted me. I had agreed about the marriage that it should mean nothing yet I wanted you and the hunger of that need was a fierce agony.

I went to the side of the ship and looked over. Dare I tell you. The black waters tempted me. I was alone up there. It would just mean one silent lunge and oblivion. God forgive me that in the agony of that moment I forgot eternity.

But lifting my eyes I saw one solitary star on the horizon. Somehow that seemed to draw me nearer to you. You might be seeing it too. I prayed to be forgiven that cowardly temptation.

Then all at once I remembered something. I remembered you had placed your hand on my pillow. I suddenly seemed rich beyond compare. Your hand, your own dear hand, then God gave me sleep as I lay in the darkness with my head where your dear hand had rested. The scent of violets was all about me.

My wife, I have often had hard times since then but never so bad as that first night. Though I have longed for you always I would not have had less suffering. It would have meant to love you less.

What an outpouring. I meant to write of bigger things but I suppose that is the most vital thing of all and I wanted to tell you just as it was.

Now to the present. I cannot die miles away from you. A grave out here now seems to hold a horror of loneliness. It would really be rest to lie in ground where your feet would tread. Also I am possessed by a great longing to see your face once more. I doubt if I can die before that, it is such an unutterable yearning.

So I am coming back to England by the quickest route and if I live through the journey I shall get down to Riverscourt somehow just once to see you drive by. I shall not be breaking our contract, Diana, you wont see me but when you receive this letter from an English address, you will know that most likely, before I died I had my heart's desire, one sight of your sweet face and having had it I died content.

What a difference love, the real thing, makes in a man's life. God forgive me I cannot think or write of my work. Everything now has slipped away except thoughts of you.

Diana, I want to say, that you must always remember I want you to have the best. So if some happy man who loves you and is worthy of you and can fill your life with the golden joy of loving I want you to know this possibility makes me glad to leave you free. You are absolutely free, my wife. If you do remember me at times, remember I have loved you always from the very first with a love that would gladly have lived for you and now gladly dies for you so that you at last may have the best.

And so, goodbye, my wife. Yours ever, David Rivers.

Diana finished reading the letter, folded it and replaced it in the envelope. Very slowly but purposefully she rose, laid aside her nurses uniform and slipped into a grey cashmere wrap with soft white frills at the neck and wrist.

Then she passed down the stone corridor and into David's darkened room.

The nurse rose, her eyes on the patient. 'I was to call you, Mrs. Rivers, if there was any change. So far there has been none, but Sir Deryck expects to return in an hour but no more strychnine, he said. Dr. Walters thinks it is useless to attempt anything further at present.' 'Thank you, Nurse,' said Diana, gently, 'I'll take over now. If I want help, I'll call you.'

Diana stood quite still until the nurse had closed the door softly behind her. Then she knelt by the bed on the right hand side and drew David into her arms, pillowing his head on her breast and waited.

At length David sighed, stirred feebly and opened his eyes. 'Where am I?' he asked in a bewildered voice. 'In your wife's arms,' said Diana, slowly and clearly. There was a long silence, with David hardly breathing.

At last he whispered, 'In...my...wife's...arms?' The weak voice, incredulous in its amazed wonder tore her heart but she answered unflinching, 'Yes, David. In your wife's arms. Don't you feel her heart beating beneath your cheek? You were found unconscious in the train and they brought you to the hospital of the Holy Star where, thank God, I chanced to be.'

She gave him time to rest. 'My darling David, can you hear me? Don't go until I have told you, I have read your letter and dear, darling, David,' Diana's voice broke but she knew she must finish. 'David, it has been the same for me as it has for you. I have loved you and longed for

you ever since you called me 'wife' before the boat sailed. Ever since our wedding evening. David, dear, dear David, loved you and wanted you, can you understand?'

'Loved, loved me? He said. She could see he was striving to take it all in. It was so unbelievable a thing. Then he laughed, half a sob, a sound unutterably happy but piteously weak. Lifting his wasted hand he touched her lips then, for very weakness, let it fall on her breast. 'Tell me...tell me again,' whispered David. She told him again, low and tenderly as a mother might croon a lullaby to her sick child, and bending over she saw the radiance of the smile on his dying face and knew he understood at last.

She must tell him more. 'Darling, it was love for you that you might have seen in the photograph I sent.'

'I want...you...to... have the best,' David whispered with painful effort.

'This is the best,' said Diana. 'I wish, I need, need not,' gasped the weak voice. Diana's bravery faltered.

'Thine eyes shall see the King in His beauty,' she quoted as strongly as she could. She felt a response within him. 'You will be in His presence and He will keep me close to Him so we wont be far apart.'

David put up his hand again to her lips and she kissed and held the cold fingers. 'Has our love helped?' he asked. 'Yes, it brought me safely to the King of love.' Then Diana, controlling her voice for David's sake repeated softly,

'The King of love my Shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never,
I nothing lack if I am His, and He is mine forever.

In death's dark vale I fear no ill, with Thee, dear Lord, beside me,

Thy rod and staff my comfort still, thy Cross before to guide me.

And so, through all the length of days, Thy goodness faileth never,

Good Shepherd, may I sing Thy praise, within Thy house forever.'

After that David lay very still. He seemed unconscious. 'For ever,' he said presently, 'It's not death but life, isn't it, to know Him is life...ever...eternal life.'

Suddenly he said, 'I don't know what it is, it seems to come from your arms. I feel so rested. Am I going to sleep?' 'Yes, dear,' said Diana quietly, 'Yes, you are going to sleep.'

'Don't let's say goodbye,' he said, 'let's say goodnight.'

For a moment Diana couldn't speak. Her tears fell silently. She prayed he might not feel the heaving of her breast. Then the utter tenderness of her love for him came to the rescue of her breaking heart.

'Goodnight, David,' she said, calmly. He turned in her arms, moving his head restlessly to and fro against her like a very tired child seeking the softest place on the pillow. Then he settled down with a sigh of complete contentment. David Rivers fell asleep in his wife's arms.

Diana looked up, dazed to see Sir Deryck bending over her, scrutinising the quiet face upon her breast.

'If he sleep, he shall do well,' he quoted, softly

'Is he alive?' she whispered. 'Alive?' he said, holding David's pulse, 'better than merely alive. He's fallen asleep. His pulse is steady and strengthening every minute. If he can sleep on like

this for a couple of hours we shall be able to give him some nourishment when he wakes. Don't move! I can do what has to be done. Now, tell me, can you stay as you are for another hour or two'

'All night, if necessary,' she whispered. 'Good. Then I'll put a nurse within call if you should need help or relief. Poor boy, it seems he reached here just in time. Contact with you, my dear girl, seems like pouring blood into empty veins. Your vital force is vitalising him. Only it is a more subtle and mysterious process with more wonderful results. Let your muscles relax as much as possible. There, I'll prop these pillows behind you.'

The doctor went softly out. 'All night, if necessary,' whispered Diana happily, in an ecstasy of hope and thankfulness. 'A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me, all night. O God, give me strength to hold him and kneel on.'

She could feel the intense life and love which filled her, enveloping him in his deathly weakness. She bent her whole mind on imparting to him the outflow of her vitality. The room was very still.

Distant clocks struck the hour of midnight. It was Christmas Day! From an old church just behind the hospital came the sweet sound of a carol service. Softened by the intervening windows the choir sounded like angelic music.

'Hark, the herald angels sing, Glory to the new-born King.

Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give them second birth.....

Diana hardly knew, as she knelt on, listening to the quiet breathing so close to her own, whether the rapture which enfolded her was mostly mother-love or wifely tenderness. But kneeling in deepest reverence of praise and adoration, Diana's womanhood awoke, at last, in full perfection.

Myrrh - Chapter 17

Each Feast of the Star, Mr. Goldsworthy makes a point of asking David to preach the sermon in the Brambledene Church. The offering on these occasions is always devoted to the work of the Church of the Holy star in Central Africa. Diana puts a sovereign in the plate.

David smiles as he sees it lying on the vestry table. It calls up many memories. He knows it is dropped into the plate by the hand that has given thousands to that same work. He wears on his watch-chain the golden coin which on that Christmas Eve so long ago, was Diana's first offering to his work.

When David mounts the pulpit stairs and appears behind the red velvet cushion he looks down on his wife seated by the stout white-washed pillar wreathed with Christmas evergreens. She has become his Lady of mystery once more. He never ceases to marvel that the richness of her love is poured continually upon him and that he is actually the object on which such tenderness is lavished.

Before the second Epiphany came round that most wonderful of moments in a man's life had come to David, that moment when he sees a small replica of himself held tenderly in the arms of the woman he loves, when the spirit of a man new-born looks out of baby eyes, when he shares his wife's love with another yet loves to share it.

Then, more than ever, on that occasion, was the gracious lady wrapped in soft furs, his Lady of mystery. Yet, as she lifted her sweet eyes to his, expectant, they were the faithful comprehending eyes of his wife, Diana, and they seemed to say, 'I am waiting. I have come for this.'

Instantly the sense of inspiration filled him and he gave out his text.

'When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh.'

Diana, in her motor, awaited David outside the old litch-gate. As he sprang in beside her and the car glided off swiftly over the snow, she turned to him, her eyes soft with tender memories. 'And when they had offered their gifts, David,' she said, when the gold and the frankincense and the myrrh had each been accepted - what then?'

'What then?' he answered as his hand found hers in her muff, while into his face came the look of complete contentment she so loved to see. 'Why then, then they went home by another way.'

End of Myrrh

Copyright - B.M.Ferguson 2006