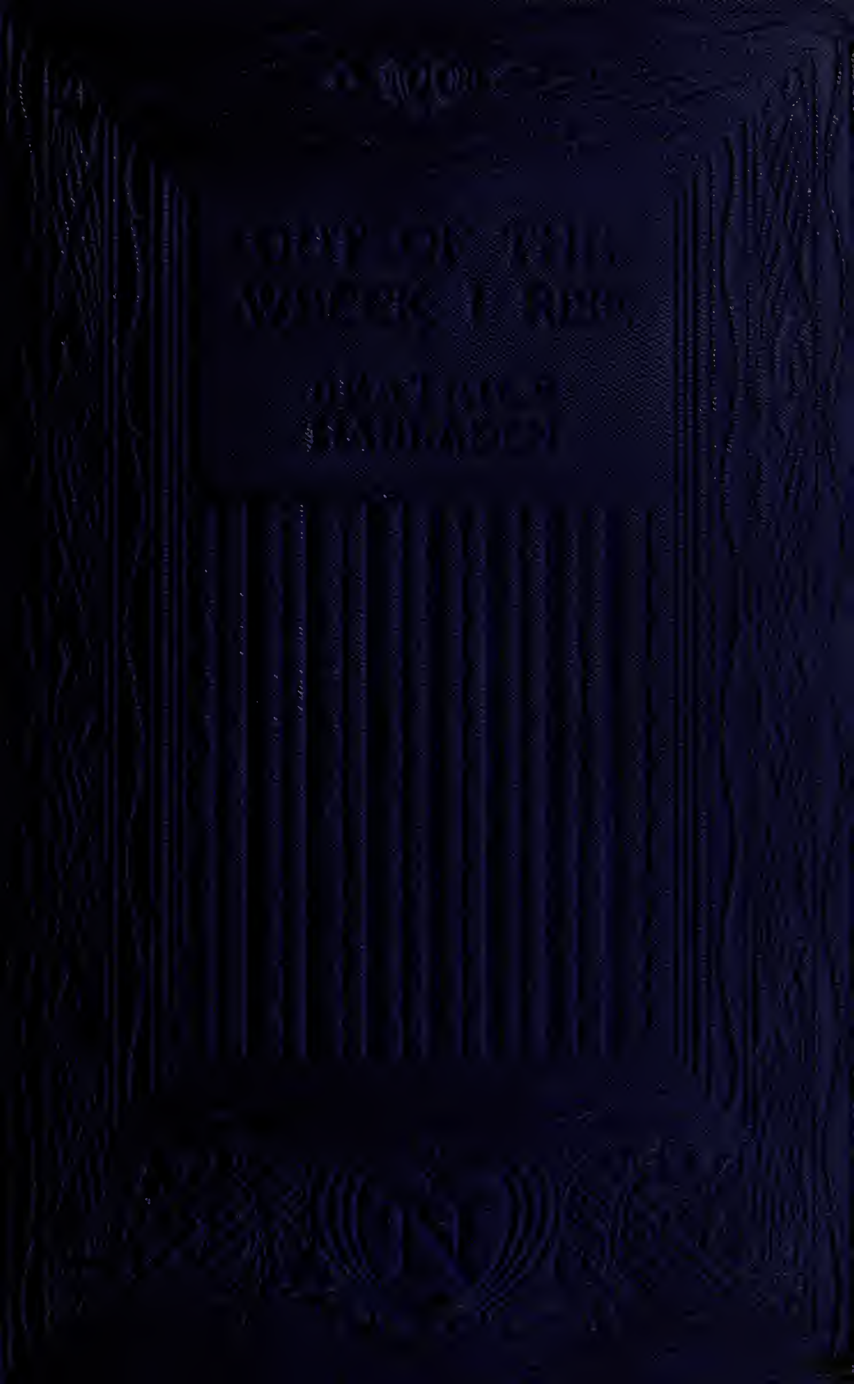


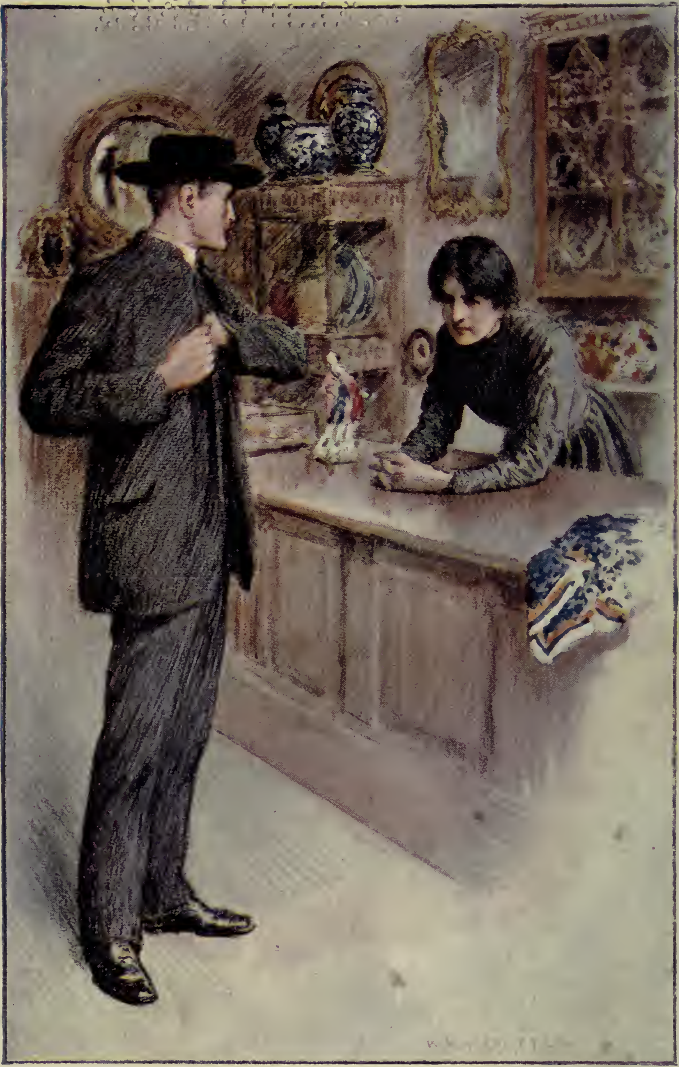
SIGILLVM · VNIVERSITATIS · CALIFORNIENSIS
FIAT LVX
MDCCCLXVIII
EX LIBRIS
955
H296

N

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

http://www.archive.org/details/outofwreckirise00harrrich

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA



Out of the Wreck I Rise

By BEATRICE HARRADEN

AUTHOR OF "SHIPS THAT PASS IN THE NIGHT"
"KATHARINE FRENSHAM," "INTERPLAY"
ETC.

"Out of the wreck I rise,
past Zeus, to the Potency o'er him."

R. BROWNING, "Ixion."

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

THOMAS NELSON AND SONS
LONDON, EDINBURGH, DUBLIN
LEEDS, MELBOURNE, AND NEW YORK
LEIPZIG: 35-37 Königstrasse. PARIS: 189, rue Saint-Jacques

First Published in 1912

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

OUT OF THE WRECK I RISE.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

ADRIAN STEELE sat in his office in Brick Court thinking. He had during the past two weeks received two letters which had caused him much annoyance and anxiety. A third one, which had just come to hand, added to his disturbance. He took them all now from a drawer, and read them through, consecutively. They ran thus :—

"Dear Steele,—With reference to the tour of *The Invaders*, how many performances did we play in Birmingham ?—Yours faithfully,

"R. S. Hailsham."

"Dear Steele,—You say six performances in Birmingham. I have, however, been in communication with the manager of the 'Royalty,'

329083

who says we played seven. Can you explain this ?—Yours faithfully, R. S. Hailsham."

"Dear Steele,—Your answer is not satisfactory. You will hear further from me on the subject of the royalties on my plays. I am not satisfied with my returns, and am investigating the matter for myself.—Yours faithfully, R. S. Hailsham."

Adrian Steele frowned as he restored the letters to the drawer, and locked it. He leaned back in his chair and faced the prospect opened out by those few simple sentences in the third letter.

"Yes," he said aloud; "this means my eventual humiliation unless I am able to handle this man adroitly, and thus stem the tide of further investigations. If I remember rightly, I calculated that, all told, I've kept back about £15,000 from John Noble, £6,000 from Sanford, from Cecil certainly £4,000, and from this new fellow Hailsham about £1,700. Inappreciable amounts from lesser fry, too. Total, about £28,000. A fortune. And well earned, too, over and above my commission."

He rose impatiently, and walked up and down his luxurious room.

"Well earned, I repeat and maintain it," he said, as though to an accuser. "Without me, those men would never have come into their own. And if I chose to take my full payment for services, partly in percentage and partly in—in this way, it was my own affair."

He added after a pause, by way of explanation: "I mean that, mentally, I was more than justified. Morally, I of course admit that I have no case."

He stood before a picture of the snow peaks of the Bernese Oberland, and seemed for the moment spellbound by the magic of the mountains which he dearly loved.

"Well, whatever happens, I must see the mountains once more," he said, half to himself.

His frail and small frame drooped; his arms hung listlessly; his chest shrank away; his clever and keen face became curiously passive. But suddenly, with a determined gesture, he gathered himself together, and an almost boyish smile transformed his gloom of countenance into an amazing radiance. It was obvious that this man was a born fighter, delighting in the prospect of a fray.

"And after all," he said aloud, "life was getting just a little dull. Prosperity is dull if taken in continuous overdoses. Dull and deadening. One sees that all round. One needs crises. Well, this is a crisis."

At that moment his telephone bell rang. He answered the summons.

"Is that you, Steele?" the voice said. "It's I, Noble. I want particularly to see you about something. Coming round to your office to-morrow morning. Shall you be in at twelve?"

"Yes," Adrian Steele answered. "But why trouble to come here? I'll come to your house as usual. Twelve o'clock sharp."

"No," the voice said. "Prefer to come to you on this occasion. Twelve o'clock. Good-bye."

"*Prefer to come to you on this occasion*," Adrian Steele repeated as he went to his desk. "Now that's quite unusual. I've never known Noble to say that before. Has some rumour reached him? Has Hailsham been putting him on the track?"

For a long time he sat pondering over the whole matter, trying to find some solution to the problem presented to him, and tracing out, for his own guidance, the successive steps of subterfuge and deception which had led up to this crisis in his affairs. How was he to meet it? What means should he take of throwing dust in the eyes of Noble, Sanford, and Cecil? How could he satisfy this upstart Hailsham that the shortage of payment to which he referred, was due merely to this cause or that cause, and that the deficit was only temporary? He racked his brains and thoroughly enjoyed the mental gymnastics. Difficulties had always stimulated him. He was stimulated now. But it struck him that he needed advice. It was not that he felt himself bereft of ideas. Far from that. It was merely that he believed an outside opinion, from some one of a different mental outlook, might have a useful modifying influence on his intellectual impulses and methods.

To what friend should he turn? In other circumstances he would have submitted the matter to Noble. Noble, in this instance, was of course unavailable. To a lawyer friend? No, inadvisable, and probably quite futile. To Grace, his wife? No, certainly not to her. The last person in the world whom he could profitably consult. Her code of honour would recognize no differentiations of wrong-doing, and her mind would be incapable of offering any wise and useful suggestions.

His thoughts travelled back to friends of former days. He recalled Nell Linstead, now Mrs. Silberthwaite. She would have understood: not because her code of honour was fundamentally less strict than his wife's, but because she, as he well knew, took a large view of life; and although she would grieve over his conduct, yet she would realize that the circumstances had offered great opportunity to the temptations of his temperament, and she would judge him accordingly, and not turn from him in horror and alarm. And Tamar Scott would have understood, for the simple reason that her mind ran on the same lines as his own.

A sudden craving came over him to see them both. It was years since he had spoken to either of them. They belonged to that period of his life when, in order to acquire a settled habit of mental ascendancy, he was deliberately practising mastery over any one with whom he chanced to come in contact. Nell Linstead and Tamar Scott had been unfamiliar types to him, and he had taken special interest in watching each of them, so different from the other, pass gradually under the spell of his personality. He wearied, first of Nell, and then of Tamar, and passed on callously to another phase in his complex life. Physically he had been blameless in his relations with them; but he knew that psychically he had been guilty. He had wrought havoc in their minds, emotions, and passions. He remembered Nell's last words to him: "*But I shall recover my pride, my independence of spirit, my liberty of mind, my joy in life—all this shall come back to me and in full measure—in spite of you.*"

He heard her voice; he saw her noble presence; he remembered her fine idealism; he renewed his remorse of having tried to injure her in any way whatsoever; he longed to ask her pardon, even at the eleventh hour. Yes, he would go and see her, now, this very moment, whilst the mood was on him.

Would she refuse to receive him? No, Tamar might; but Nell, no. He decided to go to Nell. He had more or less followed her career. She had for some long time been devoting herself to the problems of the poor, and had, with others, helped to found the Society for the Abolition of Sweated Labour. He knew that she was honorary secretary of this Society, and indeed the heart and brain of the whole movement. He also knew that she had married Rupert Silberthwaite, a distinguished engineer, and that she had been widowed two or three years after her marriage; and he had heard that she was using her independent means entirely for this chosen work of her life, and by her enthusiasm and determination had succeeded in making the Society into a powerful body, which was gradually gaining support in all directions. So that he did not feel that he was going to a friend of former days whose intervening life had been spent in separating scenes and conditions. Nell had always been interested in public service, and he himself had directed her attention to some of the problems. A sense of continuity rather than of renewal, therefore, stole over him as he looked up the address of the offices and started off without delay to Arundel Street, Strand.

When he entered the enquiry office, his mind had gone back, without the least difficulty, to twelve years ago. The actual surroundings were strange to him, it is true; but the atmosphere was familiar, and a bright flash of memory lit up his face.

A cheerful, brisk young woman, distinctly of the Suffragette type, attended to him with a pleasant manner of independence which had nothing of aggressiveness in it.

"Can I see Mrs. Silberthwaite?" he asked, smiling at her with one of his curiously charming quiet smiles.

"I am so sorry," she answered. "She has just sent in the message that she did not wish to be disturbed for two or three hours. She has had a very hard day. We are up to our eyes in work here. Could I perhaps make an appointment for you?"

He shook his head.

"No," he said quietly. "I will sit here and wait for two or three hours."

His appearance and his persistence impressed little Joan Neville. Instinct told her that this was not the sort of man to be kept waiting, and she resolved to take the risk of sending in his card, so that Mrs. Silberthwaite might decide for herself. She therefore asked for his card. He took out a blank one, on which he wrote in a neat, peculiar handwriting these few mysterious words:—

"Looking down on snow-white plains of mountain mist caught with purple light. L. P."

The little clerk glanced at it when he handed it to her, glanced at him and decided that he was mad, and that she must not leave him alone. But she showed no outer sign of her inner conviction. She merely pressed the bell and gave the card with her instructions to another girl who answered her summons. She kept a sharp little Suffragette eye on her lunatic, and was prepared to use "ju-jitsu" if he made a sudden attack on her. Nothing of the sort, however, happened. He was immediately fetched to see Mrs. Silberthwaite, and Joan Neville said to herself, smiling over her work:

"A-ha! A good thing I treated 'Looking down on snow-white plains, etc.,' in a suitable manner!"

Meanwhile the door closed on Adrian Steele, and he found himself alone with Nell Silberthwaite.

"Nell," he said simply, and without any

preliminaries, "I had a great heart-hunger to see you."

She stood looking at him, holding the card in her hand. She was evidently very much moved.

"Sit down," she said kindly, and he sat down in silence.

For several minutes they neither spoke nor moved. It was twelve years since they had met, and they were busy with thoughts, memories, and all those conflicting emotions, harmonious strains and discordant notes stirred up by the past. At last she opened a drawer and handed him some cigarettes, and she herself took the piece of embroidery which she had put down on his arrival, and continued to work on a large pomegranate. He watched her intently. It was she at last who broke the silence.

"I had a curious dream about you last night," she said. "I dreamed you had climbed a steep mountain. And a fearful storm came and cut off your retreat. I see you now with my mind's eye—a little stubborn, self-contained figure—inaccessible."

He made no comment on her words.

"Nell," he said, after another spell of quiet, "I believe I have come to ask your forgiveness."

She glanced at him with a humorous little look.

"It isn't like your former self to ask for any one's forgiveness," she observed. "Either you've changed very much, Little Playmate, or else you're feeling on the brink of the grave. I wonder which it is?"

A slight smile passed over his face at the sound of his old name. But he vouchsafed no answer, and said again in his persistent way which she remembered so well:

"I believe I have come to ask for your forgiveness."

"You have had it for many years," Nell said gravely. "It took me a long time to work myself free from hatred and bitterness, but at last, thank goodness, I came out on the other side, born anew and restored. And then I was able to thank you for all the true benefits I had had from you. They stood out clearly, Adrian, separated definitely from the injuries. They stand out clearly now."

"I introduced you to Meredith's books," he remarked. "I admit that was a great deal to do for you."

"Yes," she said. "It was indeed."

"I believe I saved you from settling down into an academic prig, out of touch with modern conditions," he ventured teasingly.

"I deny that, entirely," Nell said with spirit.

He laughed softly.

"I knew that would stir you up," he said. "Well, let that pass. You are evidently not one now."

She laughed too, in spite of herself.

"You've not changed much, after all," she said. "So I can only conclude that you are feeling on the brink of the grave."

"May I take the liberty of asking why you forgave me so long ago?" he said. "It was like you, I admit. I always knew you had a generous mind. But it would interest me to see where your academic brain came in."

She paused for a moment.

"When I had reached the haven of impersonality," she said, "my 'academic brain' looked into things clearly and realized that you probably could not help yourself, Adrian, and that you had been born with a consuming hunger for power in some form, and with an extraordinary talent for subterfuge. I understood better the temptations arising from your natural mental equipment. And I saw that the weakness in my character had called forth the wrong strength in yours. That's the whole thing seen in its proper proportions after the passage of years."

He remained silent, but an expression of sudden resolve and hopefulness lit up his face. Yes, he could tell her his position. He could lay the whole matter before her, and, as he had anticipated, she would understand. Her breadth of view alone would help her—and him.

"I'm so thankful you haven't overreached yourself, Adrian," she added impulsively. "I knew, of course, that you were bound to make a position for yourself. That was obvious. Your cleverness and your persistence would have carried you anywhere. But I was always afraid lest you might get on to the quicksands. For some mysterious reason which I could never fathom, in spite of our estrangement, I should have been woefully distressed if you had gone under."

He got up from his seat, leaned against the mantelpiece, and stared at the fire.

"I have gone under, Nell," he said at last. "That's just what I have done. I've gone under."

"Don't say that, don't say that," she said in a voice which was charged with real pain.

"But it's the truth," he said, turning to her; and when he saw the expression of concern and kindness on her face, he longed to tell her everything. Could he tell her? If he could tell any fine, honourable person, he could tell her, because she was great souled and great hearted. He had felt that years ago, and he felt it even more strongly now. Life and experience had widened and not narrowed her vision. This was the legend written clearly on Nell's countenance for any one to read. He read it now. Could he tell her? Why not? It would be such a tremendous relief to him if he could speak out. Why not? He wanted from her neither money, nor sympathy, nor blame, nor condonation, nor exoneration. He wanted chiefly to give way to the crying necessity of his mind, and put it in touch with hers. Could he tell her? Could he overcome his shame? Could he conquer his natural reticence? He had never given his confidence to any one. His reserve was part and parcel of his temperamental deceitfulness. All through his life, if he could have spoken to people, he could have broken through an ever-thickening network of perfectly unnecessary deceit. He struggled now, in this hour of his great mental need. Standing there in the presence of one in whom he wished to confide, he fought a pitched battle with his reticence — and was defeated. No, he could not tell her. It was impossible. Nell, who guessed at the conflict within him, knew also that it was impossible.

He turned away from her, and began staring at the picture of the snow peaks of the Bernese Oberland hanging over the mantelpiece. He had given it to her years ago. It was the duplicate of the one in his own office.

"The same picture," he said. "My picture. So you kept it, Nell. Yes, we always loved the mountains, didn't we? Do you remember when I was in a particularly irritating mood, how I used to annoy you by quoting those words from 'Childe Harold'?—

'He who ascends to mountain tops shall find
Their loftiest peaks most wrapt in clouds and snow,
He who surpasses or subdues mankind,
Must look down on the hate of those below.
Though far above the sun of glory glow,
And far beneath the earth and ocean spread,
Round him are icy rocks, and loudly blow
Contending tempests on his naked head.'"

"Yes," she answered. "You used to spoil the mountain peaks for me at such times."

"That was only because of your weakness of character, Nell," he remarked. "A good, a very good instance of your weakness of character calling out the wrong strength in mine. Your own words, you observe."

She smiled a little. It was exactly like him to use her own words against herself. No, he had not changed.

He read her thought and smiled too.

"All the same, I have changed," he said challengingly. "Otherwise I could never have humbled myself to ask for forgiveness. And I am to understand that I have it absolutely and imperishably?"

"Yes," she repeated, "absolutely and imperishably. But I think you owe it to me to explain why you suddenly come after twelve years and ask for it."

"You always used to scorn explanations," he said. "'Explanation spells complication.' That was one of your learnèd phrases. I recall it well."

She did not appear to hear him, but said gravely:

"Has your coming anything to do with your going under? I merely borrow your own expression. Of course, I don't know in the least what you mean. But I beg of you to explain to me."

Again he had the impulse to tell her, but again his innate secretiveness overcame that impulse.

"I can only make to you the same sort of answers which the poor drunken derelicts make to the questions of the magistrate," he said. "'Have you any explanation to offer?' asks the magistrate. 'No.' 'Have you any friends in court to speak for you?' 'No.' 'Have you anything at all to say?' 'No, nothing except that I'm sorry.' *Nothing except that I'm sorry, Nell.*"

The next moment he had gone.

CHAPTER II.

THE past, which we vainly believe we throw off, held Nell in bondage. This man, Adrian Steele, had come into her life years ago, wrecked her outlook, checked her enthusiasms, tampered with her ideals, and taken the joy out of the heart of things and the very delight out of nature. But, as she had told him, she could look back now and realize with a fair-mindedness born only of lapse of time, how in other ways he had distinctly ministered to her. He had kindled her intellectuality to a livelier flame; he had eased the tension of her culture; he had indicated modern methods of expression and action to her. Under his influence her powers of observation had ripened, her judgment had widened, her interests had expanded. His very persistence of character, the driving force in him, the dogged stubbornness of his nature had produced a healthy and lasting effect on her own natural impatience. Yes, she knew now that she owed a great deal to him. If he were glad to have asked for her forgiveness, she was equally glad to have had the chance of paying him a tribute of gratitude. But why had he come after all these years? Why should he suddenly ask for forgiveness? What did he mean by saying that he had 'gone under'? Was it possible that he had overreached himself? Was he in some difficulty and had been led by instinct to seek out an old friend? She was uneasy about him. He had brought his curious charm with him out of the past, and she felt once more a vague concern and responsibility for his welfare. She wrestled with it.

"This is quite absurd," she said, remonstrating with herself.

She gathered herself together and began writing down the headings of a speech she was to make the next day on Sweated Industries. But she shook her head. She could not get on with her subject. That little figure from the past haunted her, and conjured up for her memories, anxieties and apprehensions which were too insistent to be carelessly disregarded. She was seized with a longing to know more about his present life and circumstances. She knew that he had made a splendid career for himself as a dramatic agent, and that he took charge of the affairs of many of the leading dramatic authors of the day. She knew where his offices were in Brick Court. She had heard that he was married, and that he had a little daughter. But these were the only facts which had strayed to her, and merely by chance. For when he had tired of his influence over her, and had deliberately impelled her to put an end to their comradeship, which to him apparently had been a mere passing friendship and to her a real and serious affair of the heart, Nell, in her wounded pride, had separated herself permanently from several people, known to them both, in whom she was deeply interested. Tamar Scott was one of them. Nell had always been jealous of Adrian Steele's intimacy with Tamar, and Tamar had always been jealous of his admiration for Nell. Yet they had certainly liked each other, and in other circumstances would probably have become firm friends.

The memory of her suddenly took possession of Nell. She longed to see her. She resolved to go at once to Tamar and risk a rude reception. She smiled as she recalled the first occasion on which Adrian had taken her to the antique jewellery shop in Dean Street. Tamar, sulky and peculiar, and yet with a subtle, indefinable attractiveness of her own, had received them and given them tea in an inner room where she kept all her choicest treasures, and where she mended rare and delicate bits of china, and altered and 'faked' antique jewels of many sorts. Nell saw now the half-reluctant amiability which she conceded to Adrian Steele, and the almost rude forbearance which she vouchsafed to herself. She heard Adrian's voice saying :

"Don't take any notice of her manners. Tamar keeps all her manners for minerals. You should see her, for instance, in the Jermyn Street Museum, worshipping emeralds in their matrix and rubies in the rough. You wouldn't know her. Manners for minerals only. No one else need apply."

Yes, she would go to Tamar. Even if Tamar knew nothing about him now, it would at least be some consolation to speak to some one who, even as herself, had been intimate with him in the past. She locked her desk, left instructions in the outer office, and hurried off in an absent-minded way. The little Suffragette clerk closed one bright eye and said to herself:

"Never knew Mrs. Silberthwaite to go home so early. Something to do with 'Looking down on snow-white plains,' I expect!"

Meanwhile Nell found herself outside Tamar's shop, in which she had not set foot for many years. She had passed it scores of times, but had never once encountered Tamar face to face, although she had often seen her in the distance, and knew that she was still carrying on her business in the same place. And there was her name, shabbily painted as ever, "*T. Scott, dealer in antique jewellery, etc.*" Nell looked at the window for a few moments, and then opened the door and went in almost hesitatingly. A very old woman, who was sitting in a corner behind the counter, got up reluctantly, but did not leave off knitting.

"Well?" she asked in an uncompromising tone of voice.

"Can I see Miss Scott?" Nell asked.

"She said she didn't want to buy anything of any one to-day," the old woman answered gruffly.

"But I'm not wanting to sell anything," Nell replied good-naturedly. "I wish to see Miss Scott on a private matter."

The old woman, having taken a keen look at Nell, touched a bell and retreated to her corner. After a rather long delay Tamar Scott came dreamily into the shop. When she saw Nell Silberthwaite she scanned her without making any sign of recognition or any attempt at courtesy.

"Tamar, you don't remember me," Nell said.

"Yes, I do," Tamar answered sulkily, and she bent over the counter, fiddled with a little Chelsea figure which stood there, and remained silent. She appeared to be thinking, and in the process of thinking had evidently forgotten her visitor. Suddenly she turned to the old woman and dismissed her with a quiet but not an unfriendly gesture.

"What is it you want?" she asked of Nell brusquely. "I am busy. I have no time for visitors."

Nell smiled. She again heard Adrian's voice saying:

"*Don't take any notice of Tamar. She keeps all her manners for minerals. No one else need apply.*" Certainly her manners now were even more uncompromising than before.

"What is it you want?" Tamar repeated. "Please be quick and state your business."

"I had the impulse to come to you," Nell said simply. "That's all. I wanted to speak to some one who knew Adrian Steele."

"I have not seen him for nine years," Tamar said, her face assuming a hard, set expression directly she heard Adrian Steele's name.

"And I have not seen him for twelve years—until to-day—this afternoon," Nell said.

"Until to-day," Tamar repeated. "And why to-day?"

"Ah, that's just what I don't know," Nell repeated. "That's why I have taken the liberty of coming here. I thought you might be able to tell me something about him. I have a sort of idea, Tamar, that he is in trouble."

"Well, why shouldn't he be?" Tamar remarked. "Most people are."

"You are right," Nell said, nodding her head. "All the same, if I knew what his trouble was, I should wish to stand by him."

There was a pause.

"So should I," Tamar said, turning her back on Nell.

There was another pause. Nell leaned against the counter staring sightlessly at a collection of Battersea enamel snuff-boxes on a table by themselves; and Tamar, with her arms folded tightly together and her back to her visitor, closed her eyes and saw a vision of the past. The thoughts of each woman were centred on the man who at one time had been all the world to each of them, in a different way, and who had wrecked them both, each in a different way also.

Tamar broke the long silence.

"Why should you think he was in trouble?" she asked.

"He told me he had 'gone under,'" Nell said. "He—"

"That's nothing. We've all gone under in some form," Tamar interrupted.

"He asked me to forgive him," Nell continued. "I am sure he would never have deigned to ask any one's pardon unless he were in a state of intense depression."

"No," Tamar admitted with a grim smile. "There must be something wrong. Perhaps he wants money. Most men come to women for money."

"He was never that kind of man," Nell said indignantly. "You do him an injustice."

Tamar shrugged her shoulders.

"Ah," she said, "I see you have not cured yourself of what Adrian Steele used to call '*your morbid and pathological craze for justice.*'"

Nell smiled at the recollection, and even Tamar's set expression of countenance relaxed to an easier adjustment.

"However," she said, "I don't mind owning that you are probably—"

The shop door opened, and a young clergyman with a singularly interesting face came into the shop, advanced to the counter, paused and glanced nervously round.

"Probably in the right on this occasion," Tamar continued, without taking any immediate notice of the newcomer. "He wasn't that type. No, you needn't go unless you want to. But perhaps you'd better wait in the inner room."

As she spoke she touched the key which was attached to a black ribbon hanging round her neck, as though to reassure herself that she had locked up the roller desk at which she repaired and altered some of her antique jewellery. Then she turned her attention to her client. She guessed from long observation that he had something to sell, and that he wanted the money badly. She yawned, put on her patent look of indifference, and watched him fumble at his coat pocket and produce a small case, out of which he took a lovely old silver crucifix set in rubies and pearls. Her eyes sparkled at the sight of the jewels, for quite apart from anything to do with business, Tamar worshipped precious stones.

"I—I—want to sell this," he said with extreme nervousness, "if—if I can get a good price for it."

Tamar stretched out her hand for it with a steadiness which belied the agitation in her breast. Her practised eye saw that it was a beautiful thing of its kind—French, date probably about the middle of the eighteenth century; the pearls of no value, but the rubies, Burmese, and finely cut, six in number. Here was beauty, and here was business too—very good business, the real name for which was plunder. Tamar was always stimulated by any prospect of plunder, not only for the sake of accumulating money easily, but also for the mental enjoyment of the scheming involved in securing the plunder. Well, here was the chance of plunder, and here was a clergyman. She had always hated clergymen of all denominations. The situation, therefore, appeared to her highly satisfactory. Up went her pulse, a light came into her eyes, her heart beat with pleasant excitation. She examined the crucifix silently for several moments, which seemed as æons to the anxious young man waiting for the verdict.

At last she spoke.

"The rubies and pearls are very poor, especially the rubies," she said in that dreamy poetical tone of voice which she unconsciously used when she was cheating. Tamar plundering was ever in her most æsthetic mood, and she was therefore pursuing her own form of art, her fine art, in fact, brought to a high state of secret development.

"The crucifix itself is good," she continued; "the date, I should say, about middle of the eighteenth century. French workmanship."

"How can you know, I wonder?" the clergyman asked, much impressed. "Yes, it is French, and that is approximately the date."

"Of course it is," Tamar remarked severely. "How do I know? It's my business to know. How do the astronomers know stars? How do you know lost souls?"

"Souls are never lost," the clergyman said quietly, but with a slight flush on his face.

"Aren't they?" Tamar asked in indulgent surprise.

"No," he answered quite definitely.

Tamar stared at him a moment, and resumed her investigations.

"Very interesting design," she continued. "Rim characteristic. Workmanship delicate. Yes, I will buy it—for a small sum. As I remarked before, the stones are poor."

"I had always understood the rubies were valuable," the clergyman said.

Tamar scrutinized them once more. She applied a magnifying-glass to them.

"Interesting from one point of view, because specially well cut," she said slowly, "but unsatisfactory from a market point of view. Too deep in colour, and not free from flaws. I will give you—let me see—four pounds—no—four guineas. Four guineas."

"Oh, I can't sell it at that price," he said. He was evidently much disappointed.

"Very well," she said, nodding her head; and without further comment she replaced the crucifix in its case.

"I had always understood it was worth at least £25," he said with great sadness.

"Most people put an undue value on their own possessions," she remarked dryly. "I don't blame them. Mind, I don't say your crucifix might not be worth £25 to any one who would pay £25 for it. Only I don't care to chance that, you see. Lots of these things in the shop have been here for years. This little lovely Chelsea figure, for instance, I have had by me for ten years. I shall sell it, perhaps, some day; perhaps never. Meanwhile I have to pay rates and taxes and house rent. No one thinks of that. You may get a pound or two elsewhere. I should advise you to try. Others who have not already got so much stock as myself may care to risk more. I have stated what I care to risk. I admit the figure is low, but I should not dream of giving any more."

"Thank you," the young man said with a grave smile. "Good afternoon. I am much obliged to you for your explanation."

"Good afternoon," she said, and she watched him go towards the door, obviously disheartened, but not resentful. As a rule Tamar paid no attention to people's dejection. She was accustomed to it, and moreover she was, by nature, proof against pathos. But the simple bearing of this young fellow appealed in some curious way to her kinder feelings. There was no trace in his manner of clerical superciliousness, and no faint echo in his voice of clerical arrogance. The dignity of spirit with which he accepted his disappointment, struck her as being something which she had never observed in others who had come to her. Instinct told her that he was something set apart ; though she could not have explained to herself what she actually meant by this vague description of him. Nevertheless this was how he impressed her. She called him back. Perhaps she allowed herself this impulse because the affair had passed out of her hands ; for it was her rigid business rule, which had been laid down by her mother before her, never to alter the sum which she offered, either in buying or selling. Her face was a remarkable study at the moment. She was annoyed with herself for having lost the chance of securing those six crucifix rubies, and she was half pleased with herself, half astonished with herself for her unwonted attitude towards a disappointed seller—a clergyman to boot.

"I am going to tell you something," she said, leaning with her elbows over the counter. "I am going to let you into a secret. Why, I don't know. Now listen. This matter does not concern me now. I've made my offer, and that's the end of it, so far as I am concerned. But I'll give you some good advice, more valuable than most people's advice. If you want to get good money for your crucifix, take the stones out and sell them at one place, and the crucifix at another. They are far more valuable separate, *because they can't be played off against each other*. One dealer will tell you that the silverwork is good and the stones are bad."

"You told me that the stones were bad," he interposed.

"Yes, I told you that the stones were bad," she repeated slowly. "Another dealer will tell you that the stones are good and the silverwork is bad. Separate, each can claim a better value, *especially the rubies*."

He stood staring at her with a perplexed look on his face; for all this was entirely out of his scope. Still, he had a vague perception that this woman was by nature hard and grasping, but that she had been prompted spiritually to show him a true service. As this thought became clearer to him, the troubled expression of his countenance faded away into that calm radiance which is often seen on the face of those who have pierced into the inner secret of spiritual life.

"You have indeed been kind to me," he said. "And I thank you sincerely."

Without any further word he went towards the door, but when there, paused, glanced across the shop, seemed to include the whole surroundings in one keen, comprehensive survey, and then looked back at Tamar. He hesitated a moment, coloured, fought with his shyness, and finally took out a card. He handed it to her, and she saw that it bore the name of the Rev. Richard Forest, Herne Vicarage, Warwickshire.

"If I can serve you at any time," he said, "that is my name and address. My little church has one of the finest Norman fonts in England. I am proud of it. I should like to show it to you if you ever come that way."

She nodded indulgently, as though to a child, and after he had gone, appeared to be caught in a network of thought, from which she at last extricated herself with a sigh of relief and a shrug.

"All the same," she said aloud, "I am sorry I lost those rubies."

CHAPTER III.

MEANWHILE Nell Silberthwaite sat in the little inner room where, in the old days, she and Tamar Scott and Adrian Steele had often taken tea together; a curious party, and never a genial one. For Tamar was not a gay companion, but there had always been something attractive about her very sulkiness, and when she was in the mood she could be deeply interesting. If they were lucky enough to get her on the subject of precious stones, her face would light up and her whole nature become kindled with interest and excitement. Adrian knew how to awaken these dormant possibilities in her. He would pretend to criticize ruthlessly one of her finest gems, possibly one of her rubies, rubies being her passion, and thus having aroused the tigress in her, would wait patiently until the outburst of indignation had passed into a flood of enthusiasm. Then she, at first all unawares, would open to her listeners a treasure house of rare and fascinating knowledge, which she closed with abrupt rudeness when she realized that she was allowing others to share her secret rapture.

Nell remembered this, and recalled the details and difficulties of their three-cornered intercourse, and the silent, deep-rooted jealousy which, as time went on, grew up between herself and Tamar. Yes, this little inner room with its enamels and china, its silver, its miniatures, its jewellery, and its two iron safes had been the scene of much fierce though suppressed combat, and Nell, to her own surprise and shame, found herself, after twelve years, continuing that conflict with an intensity which had not been diminished by the lapse of time. She rose, and to get rid of her thoughts, began looking at some of the miniatures and bits of old brass hanging on the walls. Finally, her eye caught sight of some beautiful pieces of old china in Tamar's favourite corner cupboard, and she was trying to see whether she could recognize any of the cups and saucers familiar to her in the past, when she suddenly noticed on the table hard by, a book on precious stones. She took it up, became engrossed in it, and was still intent on it when Tamar joined her.

"A most interesting book," she said; "and the illustrations are really splendid. This one, for instance, a Burma ruby. I don't think I ever saw a more beautiful picture of a precious stone."

"Don't talk to me about rubies," Tamar remarked curtly. "I don't wish to think of them at present. I've just lost some beauties through—well—through an error of judgment."

She unlocked her roller desk, sat down and began doctoring an antique ring of rose topaz set with three rows of beautiful pearls, medallion shape. Nell watched her, and at the same time feasted her eyes on the really lovely ring.

"The clergyman was poor," Tamar said after a period of silence. "Well, a man of God should be poor."

"Do you remember how Adrian Steele always spoke of the clergy as if they had ceased to exist?" Nell said. "It always amused me how he was able to banish from his world all the things which he decided did not concern him personally."

Tamar nodded.

"Yes, that was one of his habits," she said, and a slight smile stole over her face.

"But he was right about the clergy," she added. "He merely anticipated their eventual doom. They are dying out fast."

"They are making a struggle," Nell said. "New types, you know."

"They are not clergy," Tamar said. "There will have to be a new name. We don't call taxi-cabs four-wheelers."

"No, but we put them all in the category of conveyances designed to carry us from one place to another," Nell said.

Tamar laughed softly.

"Do you mean that remark to include the clergy also?" she asked. "I must say I never heard them described in those words. They are words worthy of Adrian Steele. Well, we were both his pupils, weren't we?"

"Yes," Nell said. "And do you know I only now begin to realize how much I owe to him."

Tamar looked up from her work.

"He treated you badly, too," she said triumphantly.

"Yes," Nell said. "I admit it with all humility, Tamar."

"I was glad at the time," Tamar said. "I was always bitterly jealous of you. Here, in this very room I suffered martyrdoms of jealousy."

"And I also suffered martyrdoms of jealousy in this very room," Nell said.

"We were a couple of fools," Tamar said. "That's what we were."

Nell was silent.

"I suppose you know that when he tired of you—the modern product as he called you, he turned to me," Tamar said. "And I was weak enough to be caught in the toils from which you had been allowed to escape."

"Yes, I knew," Nell said. "And one night, Tamar—I recollect it was snowing hard—I stood outside your door here, and had the impulse to come in and beg you to free yourself before he had the chance of humiliating you by wearying of your love too, as he had wearied of mine. But I remembered that in my own case, people's well-meant advice had only made me more stubborn. So I went away."

"Well, you did wisely," Tamar replied. "You would have had colder comfort inside than outside.

"All the same," she went on, "I am rather glad you wanted to help me. I have never disliked you. But no one could have helped me. Nothing could have helped me—except this."

She pointed to the book on precious stones.

"I wrote that book," she said proudly.

"You?" Nell exclaimed in astonishment.

"Yes," she answered. "He thought that no one could do anything without him. He told me one day that I could never put a book of that sort together. He said I was not clever enough to make my fragments of information into a coherent whole. Fragments of information! I never forgot that insult. You know how he used to discourage one sometimes, and force one to depreciate oneself, because he wished to pose as an indispensable element in one's life and work."

Nell nodded. She remembered that well enough. She had had her full share of that treatment.

"Well," Tamar continued, "I was determined to show myself and him too that I could write that book, and bring it out worthily. Oh yes, it was a costly affair. But I assure you that, if necessary, I would have spent my last shilling on its production. It was my mental defiance to him, and the confirmation to myself of my own special abilities. It was the only thing in the world which could have helped me to pass on."

Her voice was low, but charged with intense feeling, and her hands trembled a little as she tried to go on with her work. Nell made no comment on her words, but took the book once more and turned over the pages with a sort of reverence, inspired by an intimate understanding of the stress and strain of spirit which she and Tamar had suffered in common.

"Has he ever seen it?" she asked gently. "I hope so."

"I don't know," Tamar answered sullenly.

The shop bell rang and Tamar said:

"Perhaps you'll go. The old woman still falls asleep over her tea. Nothing rouses her then. I can't leave off fixing in this little pearl at this moment."

Nell sauntered into the shop with Tamar's book under her arm, and in the dim light of one gas jet, saw a little man standing with his back turned towards the door through which she had passed. Even before he moved his position, she knew it was Adrian Steele.

"Ah, Nell," he said quietly, as though he had encountered her every day of his life in recent years and accepted her presence in Tamar's shop as a matter of course. "Is Tamar in?"

"Yes," she answered smiling a little at his characteristic coolness which had always amused her. "Will you wait whilst I tell her? Take a look meantime at this beautiful book of Tamar's. To use a favourite old word of yours, it is superb."

She placed it deliberately in his hands and lingered a moment trying to make the gas burn more brightly, for the shop looked depressingly dreary.

"Oh, I shouldn't bother," he said, watching her. "Tamar was always famous for her dismal gas, wasn't she? Nothing human was ever able to remedy it. And so this is her book. 'Precious Stones and Gems, their history, sources, and characteristics,' by T. Scott. I had heard of it. I always meant to read it. But one gets swept off in fresh directions."

He had taken the book near the gas, and immediately became immersed in it. Nell, as she went to fetch Tamar, heard him say:

"Ah, well, upon my word, that's rather good for Tamar."

When Tamar heard the name of the newcomer, she put down the rose topaz ring, and pondered awhile.

"No, I don't wish to see him," she said at last. "I have always considered the past an intolerable nuisance. It was bad enough that you should have come. But that he should have come too, passes all endurance. Perhaps you knew he was coming. I suppose you did, really."

"No, no," Nell denied. "I hadn't the least idea. I should have told you. But I do think, Tamar, that this double visit to us shows he must be in some kind of trouble. It is most curious that he should suddenly come to see us after so many years. I do beg of you to receive him. My first impulse was to refuse. I, too, dreaded the reawakening of old memories. But my second impulse was different."

"Much better for your second impulse to have been the same as your first," Tamar replied.

"What good has it done you? Drawn you back into the past. Weakened you. The past is no good to anybody. I'm not going to be weakened. No, I won't see him."

"You said a little while ago that if he were in trouble, you would wish to help him," Nell persisted.

"Well, let him write then," Tamar said surlily. "Go and tell him that at once, and don't plead for him with me. It annoys me."

"I cannot deliver your message if you are too rude," Nell said with spirit. "One accepts a certain amount of rudeness from you, Tamar, but there are limits to one's forbearance, you know."

"I don't mind saying I'm sorry," Tamar conceded with a little reluctant apologetic smile which won for her Nell's instant forgiveness; for every one, however angry, had always capitulated to Tamar's sullen smile. Nell went obediently back to Adrian Steele to give him his dismissal.

"Tamar won't see you, Adrian," she said. "She says you can equally well write."

"So I can," he answered cheerfully. "Really this is a most interesting book and exceedingly well done—considering Tamar's limitations. I never thought she could make her fragments of information into a coherent whole. But apparently I was mistaken. One sometimes is.

Some of the sentences are almost literary. This one, for instance, Nell, about the opal, through no fault of its own, losing its ancient glory and being falsely accused in latter days of bringing bad luck. Tamar could never have written so feelingly of anything or any one except a mineral. And look here, I implore you. This sentence is quite scholarly: rather in your old style. You must have helped her, surely."

"No one helped her," Nell replied indignantly. "It has been her pride and her triumph that she did it unaided by any one—especially by you."

She flushed as she ranged herself on Tamar's side. He glanced at her.

"Still suffering from your old illness, Nell, I see, a pathological craze for justice," he said, teasing her.

She smiled as she heard once more that well remembered phrase.

"But you're right to call me to order," he said, putting on a chastened expression. "And as for Tamar, I can understand that she was helped not by you or any one else, but by her own passionate wish to assert her individuality and vindicate herself to herself. I retarded her mental growth. Free from me, her mind expanded. Well, it is a superb book. And she has shown great discretion in the choice of the illustrations. Lavish expenditure also. No wonder she can't afford a more lively illumination in the shop. Ah, this plate is the best of them all, isn't it, this Burma ruby. And that reminds me, it is of rubies I wanted to speak to her—or write—since she will not see me."

He took an envelope out of his breast pocket, tore a piece of paper from a small notebook, and wrote :—

"DEAR TAMAR,—No doubt you remember those negotiations I carried out for you in connection with Lady Whitcombe's rubies. They gave me a great deal of trouble, and there were complications at the time, the annoyance of which I was anxious to spare you. I found later, that I had made a wrong calculation of our respective profits, and I have been wishing for a long period to have the impulse to make reparation to you. The impulse has come, Tamar. I have brought you a cheque for £19, and as you would rather not see me, I enclose it in this letter. Pray accept it from me, even at the eleventh hour, and pardon me for having been—well, shall we say, since we understand each other—inaccurate. I have been reading your interesting book by the light of your prehistoric one gas jet.

"ADRIAN STEELE."

He folded the letter into the envelope and handed it with a smile to Nell.

"It's really too bad to give you this trouble, Nell," he said. "Tamar was always tiresome, wasn't she? I wish I could myself take it to the inner room. But that's impossible, since I'm debarred from her imperial presence. And no doubt the old woman is asleep over her tea, as in the old days. Was it tea, I wonder? Does it necessarily mean that a teapot should contain tea only?"

"I can only tell you I've heard direct from Tamar that the old woman is asleep over her tea," Nell said, laughing, "and that's why I've been promoted to the position of imperial messenger boy."

"Does Tamar often concede this distinction to you, may I ask?" he said. "You will recall that I was ever inquisitive."

"I have not seen Tamar for many years until to-day, Adrian," Nell said gravely.

He stood silent for a moment.

"Ah," he said at length, "then you and she did not come together again after—"

He broke off.

"After I had forsaken her too," he finished bravely. But his face showed that it cost him an effort to speak those words.

"No," Nell answered; "not until to-day."

"Not until to-day," he repeated as though to himself; and he moved away from her, and unfastened from the wall a rosary of beautifully chased silver and cut jet beads.

"It's strange she has never sold that," he said. "I remember it well. Spanish, isn't it?"

Nell made no answer, but took the letter he had written to Tamar, who read it, glanced at the cheque, and showed both to her.

"You are right," Tamar said. "There must be something wrong with him. He would never make reparation to any one unless he were—well—at bay."

And with sudden anger she flung the cheque on to the ground, and cried:

"He asked your spiritual forgiveness. But he pays *me* back money. Even now, after all these years, he gauges the difference between us. I was always bitterly jealous of you, and I am now."

"No, no, Tamar, not now," Nell answered. "It isn't worth while now. You know it isn't. Don't be angry. Don't be jealous. If any one ought to be jealous, it is I, seeing him entranced over your splendid book. Come, let's burn the cheque, and then you'll feel better."

"Burn the cheque," Tamar said, snatching it away as Nell picked it up. "Why, you must be mad. Burn it, did you say? Certainly not. I shall cash it, and as soon as possible. It's my money. He cheated me out of it. I knew. I let him cheat me, because I was in love with him at the time. I've never allowed any one else to cheat me, never in my life. But I knew well enough, and I shall go now and tell him I knew."

She threw the cheque into a drawer, locked up the desk, glanced at Nell, who stood dumbfounded by her outburst of fierceness and her display of avarice, and passed into the shop where Adrian Steele had become once more absorbed in her book.

"Ah, Tamar, so it's you," he said, looking up for a moment. "I am so glad you changed your mind and came out to see me. This is really a superb book. Upon my soul, you haven't done it at all badly. Do you know I never knew you had been to Amsterdam and learned the diamond cutting at first hand. Most interesting."

She gave no greeting, showed no sign that his words of praise reached her, but bending down, took a large ledger from the bottom shelf of a cupboard behind the counter. She placed it on the counter, opened it at the letter W, and without preliminaries read aloud:

"*Lady Whitcombe's rubies, £19 short of real deal, kept back secretly by A. S.*"

"So you see I knew, Adrian," she said slowly. "I knew you had to cheat. I forgave you. It would have been quite simple for you to claim a higher commission. But you preferred to pay yourself in this way. I understood probably because—well—because you and I always understood certain characteristics in each other which we had in common."

She closed the ledger, and stood waiting for him to speak. There was no faintest trace of conciliation in her manner, no outward betrayal of feeling, emotion, or opinion. She might have been a statue to which even the semblance of vitality had been denied.

Adrian Steele appeared entirely unaffected by her attitude towards him. It was relatively unimportant to him that she was at the moment uncompromising, unreachable, hostile. Probably he did not believe that her hostility towards him was deep-rooted. What mattered to him was that she knew him through and through, and that this one instance of her knowledge and discrimination, placed on record in her ledger, ought to suffice as an encouragement to him to seek her counsel in his hour of need. No explanations, no excuses, no expressions of shame were necessary. All he had to do was to say: "*Look here, Tamar, I've been keeping back about* £25,000 *of my clients' money for* *precisely the same reason that I kept back your £19. I've come to ask you to talk things out with me and ease my mental tension.*" She would not stand like a sphinx then. Even although against her will, she would be impelled, from sheer love of scheming, to put her mind in contact with his. Could he tell her? He had not been able to tell Nell, because, at the last, his pride, as well as his natural reticence, had got the better of him; but, in the case of Tamar, who was on a lower ethical plane, his reticence was at least not reinforced by his pride. He was that much to the good—or the bad. Could he tell her? He longed with an intensity, the pain of which was scarcely bearable, to share with some one the burden of his impending difficulties. Now that he saw Tamar again, who knew and understood him, he felt that she, and no one else in the world, was his true comrade, and his only possible counsellor. Yes, here she was, the one and only Tamar, and here were the old familiar surroundings, the old familiar treasures, the old dim light, and the old aspect of neglect and meanness which had always been characteristic features of Tamar's shop. The spirit of place laid its spell upon him and whispered to him, in a thousand voices, that this was his chance, this was his moment snatched defiantly from Time and Circumstance, and that he must use it for his own, in a desperate struggle against the instinct of secrecy and reserve which had been the curse of his temperament.

So he fought his fight—fought it valiantly alone, unhelped—but was again disarmed and overcome. Tamar watched, with pitiless stare, the strained expression of his countenance and the keen suffering in his eyes. She noted, too, the sudden collapse of some secret force within him, and she saw the baffled look which testified to some sure though silent defeat. Her old love for him tugged at her heartstrings, but she refused to respond. Some inner voice of her own spirit's necessity called out to her, and she refused to hear.

"Why don't you speak?" she said rigidly.

He shook his head, and opened his hands with a gesture which implied powerlessness to express himself by speech.

Again something knocked at the door of Tamar's citadel. Again she turned a deaf ear.

"Why don't you go?" she said roughly. "The past annoys me. I have no use for the past."

He took up his hat which was lying on the counter near Tamar's book. He glanced at her with a half-humorous, half-pathetic little smile which seemed to say at one and the same time, "*It's only Tamar. She hasn't really failed me. Yes, but Tamar has failed me. Tamar has failed me in my hour of need.*" He glanced around the dim shop as though bidding it farewell, and without any attempt at speech or delay, passed quietly into the street.

Tamar stood for a long time where he had left her, rigid, immovable. Her eyes were directed fixedly towards the door. Was she perhaps expecting to see that little loved figure from the past return and press its claims in the present? At last she sat down in the old woman's chair and, leaning back, covered her face with her hands.

Nearly half an hour afterwards Nell Silberthwaite, tired of waiting in the inner room, and troubled at hearing no stir of life in the shop, came and found her in this same position of entire despondency.

"Tamar," she said with gentle concern, "Tamar."

At the sound of her voice Tamar uncovered a worn and tearless face.

"Woe is me, woe is me," she murmured, and beat her breast.

CHAPTER IV.

IT was a cold and dreary morning in February. Even Richard Forest himself, usually unconscious of bad weather, shivered a little as he stood in the tower and rang the bell for the early morning service, and then hastened to the vestry to put on his surplice. Before he came into the chancel, old Mrs. Eustace, his servant, who also swept and garnished the church, crept in and took her accustomed place near the Elizabethan pulpit, a position which experience had taught her was relatively draughtless. Rain or snow, storm or calm, the young clergyman stood at his lonely post, and the old woman crouched in her sheltered corner. He never realized the true self-sacrifice and fine homage of her unfailing daily attendance.

"Old though my bones be, some one must hearten the poor young master," she said. "It's some sort of company for him."

But for all her devotion, she longed secretly for the blessed day when he would give up these early services which no single person in the scattered parish wanted. She even went to the length of praying on several occasions that his heart might be turned from its stubbornness. Her prayers sent heavenwards, and her mild remonstrances to him personally, were of no avail. Richard Forest clung to these services with an obstinacy characteristic of all clergy, but in him developed to an unusual degree of imperfection.

"The blessing of God must rest on the village for the day, whether the people care to hear it or not," he said gently but firmly.

"Very good, sir," she answered with patient resignation. "But would it make much difference if the village got it half an hour later?"

So coaxing was her tone that Richard gave in, and this was the first morning that the two worshippers received the benefit of the half-hour's grace. Old Mrs. Eustace offered up a special prayer of thanks for this concession, and even the young clergyman, as he opened the church service book and glanced around the church, had a distinct feeling that the place was not wearing its usual air of dreary desolation. For the first time for many months he felt encouraged, and his voice rang out with a stronger note of hope and cheerfulness.

Indeed, there had been little enough to encourage him since he came, a few months past, to this poor and lonely parish of Herne. No one had wanted him nor his ministrations. Three of his predecessors had left behind them records of indifference and neglect in their work and carelessness in their conduct. The advent of a new clergyman meant nothing to the parishioners, except the probable continuation of the same traditions. Thus their minds were rigidly adjusted to receive an unfavourable impression of the stranger. Richard Forest, without knowing it, had begun immediately by stirring up hostility against himself, for he had deliberately chosen to inhabit the old haunted vicarage, which had been abandoned for many years; and when he was warned that footsteps would be heard, and strange 'presences' felt, his simple answer confirmed the unfriendly verdict against him.

"Why should I fear the footsteps? Why should I be afraid of the 'presences'?" he said. "I do not shrink from intercourse with the other worlds. The good, one can merge oneself into, and the evil can be met face to face."

It was not a wise nor a diplomatic answer, but Richard spoke out of the truthfulness of his spirit, and it would not have been conceivable to him that his words were capable of any sinister interpretation. So, accompanied by his sister Margaret, the friend of his spiritual as well as of his corporeal life, as William Blake, his teacher and master, would have said, he established himself contentedly in the old vicarage down in the dip of the hills. But three weeks after their arrival, Margaret, who had come with a chill heavy on her, and should not have ventured on the journey, died from pneumonia following on influenza. Then the people around shrugged their shoulders, and said amongst themselves that the young parson had been warned, and that of his own free will he had exposed himself and his household to dire calamity. Nevertheless his bereftness and his patient bearing made some little headway against their animosity, and they urged him, kindly enough, to move away from his ill-omened home.

"Why should I move?" he asked. "My sister has died here, it is true. All the more reason, then, that I should wish to be in the surroundings which belong to her last hours on earth. No, certainly I shall not move."

"You won't get a servant to stop with you there," they warned him.

"Then I shall remain alone," he answered stubbornly.

But that was not to be his fate. Old Mrs. Eustace, who did not belong to the neighbourhood, and, in consequence, had not a native respect for local traditions, settled down resignedly at the vicarage, and at least showed no outward signs of fear. She had become attached to this lonely young man, and was determined to mother him. She by no means liked ghosts, but it would have taken a great many ghosts to make her abandon him.

So the people of the parish did not interfere further, and left him severely alone. But although they held him in vague distrust, they had the sense to realize that some one had come amongst them, who was of a different stamp from his predecessors. Still, he was only there amongst them on sufferance, even as the others ; and they showed no sign of wanting him or his ministrations. Sometimes in the early stages of his disappointment, he used to reflect that perhaps these very men who had left black records behind them, had come to Herne as eager as himself to effect human and spiritual intercourse between themselves and their flock. Repulsed, they had been thrown back upon themselves, with nothing to foster their ideality or to fire their ambition, without companionship of their own class and culture, and out of touch with the people of the countryside, to whom they were as unwelcome intruders. What then remained, or was likely to remain ? Nothing much, alas ! unless, even as Richard Forest, they kept enshrined in their hearts the inner secret of an abiding truth, which was independent of dogma and doctrine, of chance and circumstance, of propitious or hostile conditions of life and thought.

In a way, therefore, Richard Forest was the right man to have come to Herne, since he ran the least possible risk of incurring harm from the desolation of the place and the absence of even ordinary comradeship. For he was by nature dreamy and meditative, deeply occupied by and immersed in that school of thought known as mysticism, and indeed a direct spiritual descendant of William Blake, whom he loved and understood. He belonged by birthright to that company of prophets and seers to whom alone the underlying truths of life are known, and who are slowly, slowly, silently, but with irresistible progress, forging their way to a universal recognition, tardy but complete, which, for all we know, may herald the true redemption of the world. Richard Forest was one of them, obscure, unhonoured, unrecognized, as so many of them have ever been throughout the ages, yet bearers of the torch which has shone more brightly as the space has grown into a lengthening distance. In addition to his interest in the writings of the mystics, he possessed a really remarkable gift of painting, preferably in water-colours, always succeeding best when he worked at a subject from memory or from vision—dream vision or waking vision; for he then gave an interpretation of it which, in some indefinable fashion, added a mystic meaning to its outer semblance. He loved, too, to try his hand at illumination and decorative design, and when he was not deep in his books, he was always busy with his brush and pencil. So the hours at home, which might have been irksome to others, were to him times of real and unfailing delight; and he walked, cycled, and visited those of his parishioners who had not made a rigid rule of always shutting the door in the parson's face. He conducted his simple services without affectation, and preached little jewels of sermons set in a fine and delicate workmanship. They were entirely free from dogma and doctrine, and appealed, vainly of course, to the spiritual lying dormant in every one, apart from recognized religion. No one, naturally enough, understood these sermons; but they were considered by the few who heard them to be rather good, because un-understandable. They were, in fact, the one thing about him of which the community was becoming slowly, surlily, and silently proud. He laughed when he first learnt this, and then was angry. His sermons were to him the least important part of the ministration which he had been so eager to offer to them, and which they had rejected. In spite of his struggles to the contrary, he resented their indifference to his personal influence, and was often furious over the rebuffs he received. He was by nature hot-tempered, and gave way to attacks of uncontrolled anger, which at first terrified old Mrs. Eustace, and finally amused her.

"If tempers send folk to paradise, then the dear young master is bound to go," she said to herself time after time, with a twinkle in her eye.

But she always concluded with :

"Well, well, it be only top dust, easily brushed off without no trouble."

And it was true enough that he soon recovered from his outbreaks, and passed through a quick and chastened stage of penitence to the cheerfulness which had in it something of boyish charm.

The dilapidated condition of the church was one of his trials which he did not always bear with Christian fortitude. He was sometimes exceedingly depressed and at other times shockingly cross that there should be no one in the neighbourhood to come forward and help with the expenses of the much needed repairs. The old manor house had long since been deserted, and the property was in that fixed and mysterious state 'in Chancery.' The lay rector who owned the chancel, invariably turned a deaf ear to Richard Forest's appeals. The people of the countryside were poor. There was in fact no one who either could or would trouble himself to spare a thought for the vicar or a penny for the church. Richard Forest, after many disappointments, saw that he could hope for no help, and that he must give up all ambitious schemes of real restoration, and content himself with only a few patchings up of a humble nature, and moreover pay for them out of his own slender means. Gladly enough, but how? That had been the difficulty, and he puzzled over it, and made his brain reel over estimates of costs and possible and impossible economies in his simple life.

The only solution of the problem was to sell the pearl and ruby crucifix which had belonged to his sister Margaret, but he was most reluctant to part with it. It had been her most cherished possession, left her by an old French countess in Provence, and she had owned it for a number of years. But when she came to Herne and saw the neglected general condition of the church and the especially bad state of the roof, she had begged him to accept it from her, sell it, and begin a few of the repairs. This thought burnt itself into her brain during her short illness.

"The roof—disgraceful—the pearl and ruby crucifix—sell it, sell it," she murmured repeatedly.

Richard could not bring himself to give it up.

It had always seemed to be part of Margaret, and he struggled for a long time with his wish to keep it in memory of her. She had been fifteen years his senior, and he had known and noticed that crucifix ever since he could remember. As a little child he had even understood vaguely that it was the cause of family religious discussion. But Margaret had clung to it with a pertinacity which finally overcame all opposition, and it outlived its stormy past. He also clung to it now, and it was only after great suffering that he resolved to carry out her wishes and part with it. So one day, suddenly, he took it up to London, and went first to T. Scott, dealer in antique jewellery. Tamar never knew how reluctantly he had entered her shop that day.

But now the pang of sacrifice was over, he was experiencing an anticipation of pride and pleasure in being soon able to start the repairs. And this morning, as he finished the service and rose from his knees, he glanced towards the roofing over the left transept and said in a whisper :

"Yes, Margaret. The crucifix has been sold, and the roof will be mended."

He had not mentioned the subject to Mrs. Eustace, probably because he wanted to be sure that he dared undertake the expense. But he told her this morning, when she followed him as usual into the vestry, to hang up his surplice safely. For it was his shocking custom to leave it in a heap on the floor, if he happened to be in a specially abstracted mood.

"Mrs. Eustace," he said, his face smiling with pleasure, "now I'm going to tell you something which I've been keeping as a secret. Listen. At last the roof is going to be mended."

"Time it was, I'm sure," she said.

"Yes," he answered sadly. "I know that."

"No fault of yours, sir," she remarked soothingly. "It was them others."

"Perhaps they could not help themselves," he answered. "Perhaps there were too many difficulties." And he whispered to himself: "Also there was no pearl and ruby crucifix."

"Anyway," he said, "the hole and the disgrace will soon be things of the past. So I feel exceedingly happy, in a very good temper, and fearfully hungry. And I must own that it is better to have the service half an hour later. We'll always keep it at this hour."

"Good news all round," said Mrs. Eustace. "We must have ginger pudding for dinner."

Richard laughed and passed through the vestry door into the churchyard, where little black Skib, Margaret's schipperke, was waiting for him, faithfully but reproachfully, at the foot of the old preaching cross. Skib also loved not these early morning services, but, imitating Mrs. Eustace, did not allow his personal discomfort to interfere with his loyalty. Every weary morning he turned out of his comfortable basket and braced himself up to meet the sacred daily calamity, strengthened, it is true, by reconciling visions of the 'after bone.'

He followed his master now into the house, and in a few minutes was busily engaged in gnawing at the materialized expression of his fantasy, a satisfactory and sweet piece of shin, whilst Richard, seated at breakfast in the panelled living-room, sipped some piping hot coffee, and opened a letter addressed to him in an unknown handwriting. This was the letter :—

"SIR,—You may perhaps recall the name of T. Scott, dealer in antique jewellery. You offered to show me your Norman font. I am stopping at Kineton to-night, as I have to attend a sale at Meyntoun Moat to-morrow at twelve o'clock. Your church appears to be only four or five miles off, so shall drive over before eleven in the morning. T. SCOTT."

A flush of excitement passed over his face.

So he was to meet her again and almost at once. He was to have the opportunity of telling her personally that through her kindness and her advice he had realized £36 on the rubies and £4 on the pearls and crucifix. He would actually be able to show her how he was going to spend that money, and she would see for herself that the impulse to which she had yielded on his behalf, had brought into the regions of possibility the fulfilment of a pious work.

She had been pervading his thoughts and even his prayers. He saw her standing before him, stern, mercenary, pitiless in her dealings, accustomed to drive hard bargains. This impression of her, vague at the time, had gained strength of outline since the afternoon when he entered her shop and offered her the crucifix. But his belief in some secret spring of grace in her had also gathered force and vigour. She had tried to mislead him. That was quite evident, even to him. Suddenly she had repented and tried to help him. Some inner prompting had aroused her to a consciousness, evanescent though it might be, of 'truths that wake, to perish never,' and he had a sure hope that the good in her would prevail, in spite of the temptations to which her business and her character might expose her. He knew, of course, nothing about her character.

The intricacies and subtleties of a person like Tamar would always have remained to him unsolved, perhaps unperceived problems; but spiritual instinct told him that she was of this world, worldly, and that her treasures were being laid up on earth. So he had prayed for her, in the little desolate church and in the old haunted vicarage. Tamar herself might have bestowed an indulgent smile on him if she had heard the simple and unsectarian words falling from his lips on her behalf:

"*Let the shrine of the secret of life be opened to her, so that she may recognize the true and rarest jewels.*"

Her letter put him in excellent spirits, and he gulped down his breakfast, romped with little black Skib, and went off whistling happily to fetch his cycle out of the shed. He believed he would have time to call on a sick old shepherd about five miles off, and yet be back to receive T. Scott at eleven o'clock. But on reflection, he decided that this was an unwise plan. Supposing he missed T. Scott? That would never do. No, the shepherd could wait an hour or two. Certainly T. Scott never would wait. He also could not wait.

He was much too excited to settle down to his studying or painting. He therefore determined to go along the Kineton Road and meet T. Scott. Suppose that she took a wrong turning at the cross roads and then found she had not enough time left to come to Herne. This mischance must certainly be prevented. He must start off at once. He seized his straw hat, called out some wholly unintelligible words to Mrs. Eustace, who took no notice of them, and dashed up the long and steep hill, pushing his machine gaily along. When he reached the high road, he stood looking, now at the lovely view spread generously before him, and now at the shut-in hollow in the hills which contained the tiny hamlet and its old church.

"What a contrast!" he said to himself. "And yet I should not have liked to live up here away from the church. I am glad I went to the old haunted vicarage."

He mounted his cycle, and had gone only a few yards along the Kineton Road when he saw a crazy little four-wheeled trap approaching slowly, drawn by a decrepit white pony, and driven by an old man of the time of Moses. Richard hastened to meet it, for his eager eyes had caught sight of T. Scott.

She nodded to him, and smiled in a sulky, reluctant sort of way, which, in Tamar, implied a remarkable degree of friendliness.

"Well," she said, "I've come to see your Norman font."

"It is good of you to come all the way from Kineton," he said, his face colouring with excitement. "And good of you to spare the time. Perhaps you will care to get out and walk down this steep hill. My little church lies in a hollow of the hills."

"It's a pity you have to leave this splendid view," Tamar said as she stepped out of the trap. "They ought to give you a vicarage, or whatever you call it, on the top of the hill."

"They offered me a little house on the Kineton Road," he said. "You passed it on your way. But I preferred the time-honoured old vicarage adjoining the church; not because I don't love the expanse, but because I wished to live within the precincts of the church."

They strolled together down the hill until they reached the vicarage gate.

"This is your vicarage, I suppose?" she asked, staring at the desolate and dilapidated old house.

He assented with the quiet dignity which was characteristic of him, and Tamar remained silent, repressing, out of consideration for him, an unfavourable comment which rose to her lips.

He read her thoughts, for he said:

"I like it. It is not desolate to me, even though it is supposed to be haunted."

"Well, it looks like its reputation," Tamar observed. "Aren't you afraid of living here? I should be."

"Afraid?" he said simply. "Certainly not. Why should any one be afraid of the so-called dead?"

"*The so-called dead*," she repeated slowly. "Then you don't believe that people die?"

"Oh no," he answered quietly. "Shall we go now to the church? You might like to see my old oak-panelled room afterwards, if you have the time."

She followed him through the gap in the hedge which bounded the churchyard. She noticed that there had once been a gate which had disappeared, and she saw everywhere signs of poverty and long neglect. Again he appeared to divine her thoughts.

"Yes," he said, glancing round, "I admit it will take a very long time before the graves and stones are put in decent order and before the churchyard becomes a smiling garden. But that is what I intend it shall be."

"Is there any one to care?" she asked brusquely.

"No," he replied. "No. But I care."

He opened the vestry door and they passed into the church. Tamar thought that never in her life had she seen such a shabby and tumbledown church. It looked all the more dilapidated because, obviously, some recent attempt had been made to modify its woeful appearance and condition. But nothing could disguise its poverty. Nothing could conceal the large gap in the roof. Everything was in need of ordinary work-a-day repair, quite apart from the luxury of restoration. The old rood screen had gone to rack and ruin for want of care. The Elizabethan pulpit was cracked and split in every direction. The flagstones were broken and discoloured from the damp. The pews were awry because the boarding beneath them had sunk with the ground. It was a scene calculated to fill the most indifferent heart with concern and depression. Tamar turned to the young clergyman standing silently by her side in the chancel.

"I should love to get hold of one of your bishops or archbishops and cage him here for a few months," she said. "Yes, I assure you I should like to make him 'do time' here. I never saw such a place."

"Ah, but it won't always be like this," Richard Forest said triumphantly. "Thanks to your kindness, we begin to-morrow on the roof."

"My kindness?" Tamar repeated.

"Yes, yes," he said eagerly. "I followed your advice about the pearl and ruby crucifix. I sold the rubies separately and got £36 for them. And £4 for the pearls and crucifix."

"I offered you four guineas, didn't I?" she said.

"Yes," he answered.

"Well, you couldn't have mended the gap in the roof with four guineas, could you?" she said carelessly.

"No," he said smiling. "And I had set my heart on that. That, and the reconstructing of the pews. I can't tell you how much I thank you for your help. I wish my sister, to whom the crucifix belonged, could be here to thank you too. Yet she must know and thank you from afar."

"Where is she? Why isn't she with you in this lonely place?" Tamar asked with curious fierceness.

"She is—well, dead; though she is not dead to me. Her true presence is here," Richard Forest said quietly. "She—died here, about two months after we came."

He remained silent a moment, and went on:

"It seems only a few weeks since we stood together on this very spot, and she offered to sell that crucifix and have the roof mended. We had learnt by that time that there was no one in the neighbourhood to come forward and help with the work. We had to do it ourselves. We had no money. But Margaret had that crucifix. It was a legacy from an old French lady in Provence to whom my sister had shown some kindness in illness. She valued it greatly. But she wished it to be used in this way. It cost me a great deal to part with it, and I fought with myself a long time before I felt able to carry out her wish."

Tamar made no comment, but stood staring at the gap in the roof and frowning.

"Now I must show you my splendid old Norman font," he said brightly, signing to her to follow him down the nave. "This at least is a treasure, isn't it? An antiquarian told me that there is no finer specimen in the whole country. This is what I thought you might like to see, you know. I have reason to be proud of it, haven't I?"

"Yes," she answered; and as she glanced at his face, she saw once more that amazing radiance, the memory of which had been haunting her and had led her footsteps in this direction. The thought again passed through her mind that he was 'something set apart,' some spirit dwelling apart, to whom poverty, desolation, and death presented visions veiled to meaner eyes. She stared long at the font, but it was not of the font that she was thinking. She was thinking that she was ashamed to have tried to cheat him. For the first time in her life T. Scott was ashamed of her instinct for plunder. In the exaltation of this passing mood it was not enough for her that she had put him on the right way to realize a proper value for his sister's crucifix. She was seized with a sincere wish to make personal reparation to him, and at once. She closed her eyes, and saw a vivid mental picture of the desolate church, the dreary vicarage, and the lonely young clergyman accepting his circumstances and difficulties without bitterness of heart. Some one must help him to make that churchyard into a smiling garden, and the church itself at least weather-proof, if nothing more. If there were no one else, then she must be the person. Her right hand sought her pocket; but the next moment she had changed her mind, and with a sigh of relief, as though she had escaped some grave danger, she transferred that right hand to the outside of her coat, where it clutched convulsively at one of the buttons.

"No," she said to herself, her face tense with the struggle through which she was silently passing. "No; certainly not. Why should I?"

But once more her hand stole to her pocket.

She made a last determined effort to restrain its further activity by thinking of something of far more importance to her than a perfectly unnecessary impulse of contrition.

"Where did he sell the rubies?" she asked herself. "I must find out, and get Christopher Bramfield to buy them back. I must have them. I liked them."

The question rose to her lips, but died there. The thought perished in her brain, to be reborn later on. She drew out her pocket-book slowly, reluctantly, opened it, and went through the contents until she found what she sought. It was Adrian Steele's cheque for £19.

"I shan't miss it," she said to herself. "It came unexpectedly. He can have it. I shan't miss it."

She stared at it, and a grim smile stole over her face.

"Rather amusing to think of Adrian and me helping to restore a church," she said to herself.

She turned to Richard Forest.

"Where is your collection box?" she asked in her brusque way.

"There is none," he answered, flushing a little. "I found none when I came."

"Then take this from me," Tamar said, handing him the cheque. "Add it to the money for the crucifix."

He took the cheque, glanced at it, glanced at her, and stood motionless, with a perplexed look on his face. He did not seem to grasp the situation.

"Add it to the money for the crucifix," Tamar repeated slowly. "Call it—call it—well—my—my—conscience money."

Suddenly he understood that she had again yielded to some inner spiritual prompting, and a wave of gladness swept over him. He rejoiced in the generous gift itself, and in the blossoming of yet another flower of grace.

"Do you really mean this?" he said joyously. "Do you know, I can scarcely believe my senses. Do you really mean this?"

"I shan't mean it for long if you don't hasten to accept it," Tamar said. "I part with my money not very easily, I assure you."

"But I do hasten to accept it!" the young fellow laughed. "I accept it with gladness and gratitude and understanding. And, you see, it is all the more valuable since you don't part with your money easily, isn't it?"

Tamar smiled at hearing her own comment on herself repeated by Richard Forest in his eager excitement. The church, as a church, mattered not to her at all; but she was curiously happy to have made him so happy. For the moment she did not grudge the cheque, nor regret her generosity. She forgot that she had intended to add the money to the amount which she proposed to spend at the Meyntoun Moat sale, and she forgot that the time was passing, and that she ought to be retracing her steps to Kineton. She lingered on, listened to his plans for restoring the church, and took note of the Early Perpendicular window, the delicate intersecting pillars, and some faint remaining traces of frescoes on the wall of the right aisle.

She even asked how far his registers and churchwardens' accounts went back, and expressed a wish to see them. He told her that he was copying them out, and that he would show them to her in the vicarage. She was deeply interested when he told her that the church had once possessed a valuable old Bible, which had been mysteriously stolen.

"I should like to have seen it," she said, "and needless to observe, I should have liked to own it."

Richard laughed happily.

"There is an entry in the churchwardens' accounts which I believe refers to it," he said. "The date is 1578. I've looked it up, and find that it's the date of the first edition of the Geneva Bible for use in churches. I can't help thinking that this is the Bible which local tradition says disappeared about a hundred years ago. I heard the tradition first from an old shepherd, the friendliest of all my flock, who had it direct from his father. He says it was an old brown leather book with much brass on it. And this very entry mentions brass clasps. I must show it to you. I can put my finger on it at once. I am always looking at it."

Tamar nodded, and they passed out of the church. He was pointing out to her the witch's grave, over which the grass was said never to grow, when she suddenly remembered that she had left the Meyntoun Moat catalogue behind in a pew. At the same moment, the tower clock began to strike the hour of eleven. Bibles, registers, roofs, intersecting pillars and Norman fonts were at once instantly forgotten. Her mind leapt back to business. Her face hardened, by immediate and magic transformation.

"I must go," she said brusquely. "I shall be late for the sale."

Richard saw the subtle change which had come over her manner and her countenance, and guessed that she had returned to her commercial concerns, from which there would be no recalling her. Indeed, she had hurried into the church, seized her catalogue, hastened through the churchyard and taken her place in the broken-down little trap, before he had recovered from the surprise of her excessive abruptness.

"Good-bye," she said, nodding at him. "Thank you for showing me your church."

"Good-bye," he answered. "Thank you for coming, and for—"

She cut him short by telling the old man to drive on. But the decrepit white pony had scarcely gone a few yards up the hill when she signed to the driver to stop, and, turning back, beckoned imperiously to Richard Forest. He ran up to the side of the trap.

"By the way, it would interest me to know where you sold your rubies," she said dreamily, as though the matter were of no importance to her.

"At Messrs. Willoughby, 128 Holborn Viaduct," he said. "Shall you remember it?"

She nodded, this time with a little less indifference, and the prehistoric trap passed on. Richard stood watching it until it reached the top of the hill and turned off, out of sight. Then he went straight to the panelled room, closed the door, and took out the cheque, at which he looked for a long time, but without any sign of his former joyfulness.

"She will regret it," he said to himself with great sadness. "I feel sure she will regret it."

He locked it up with his most precious papers.

CHAPTER V.

TAMAR had been much torn by the memories and emotions stirred up by Adrian Steele's visit to her shop. She fought valiantly and obstinately with herself, but she could not banish him from her brain, and with her mind's eye she saw always that little, well-known figure making silently for the door, dismissed by her with merciless cruelty, abandoned by her in an hour of distress.

She attempted to turn her thoughts from him by giving added time and skill to her favourite task of faking antique jewellery, an occupation which was always a source of interest and amusement, especially in moments of depression. Even that failed to hold her. She then determined to tidy the shop, an entirely abnormal proceeding, which nearly had disastrous results on her aged servant's nervous system. After this she gave the rein to her restlessness and went out more frequently. She went several times to Christie's and to one or two suburban auction sales, where she picked up several bits of china and a few oddments of jewellery which, so her practised eye saw, could be altered into profitable disguises. As she found that her mental tension was eased by these outings, she resolved to take a whole day and night off and go into Warwickshire to attend an important sale taking place at an old house called Meyntoun Moat. She had been studying the catalogue for some time, but it was not until she had definitely made up her mind for the journey, that she looked out the exact spot on the map, and learnt that it was in the neighbourhood of the young clergyman's church, not far from Kineton. This unexpected discovery stimulated her in her decision, for her thoughts had been turning repeatedly to Richard Forest. He had appealed in a strange way to something secret and hidden in that part of her nature which did duty for spirit. Yes, she would go to Herne Vicarage and see him in his own surroundings, even if she had to incur the expense of hiring a trap from Kineton.

She arranged her plans thus. She would go one day before, and view the sale; she would stop the night at the 'Prince Rupert,' and early in the morning drive out to Herne, arriving there about ten o'clock; she would leave at eleven, and as the sale did not begin until half-past one, she would thus have plenty of time to get to Meyntoun Moat. She put the map aside at once, took out her pen and wrote to Richard Forest. Whilst she wrote, some of the craft and hardness cleared from her face.

"Something set apart," she said aloud, and she sat for a few moments lost in vague thought.

She shrugged her shoulders, opened the catalogue, and began studying it afresh with minute attention. Amongst the silver, she noted a Dutch ship. She read the description of it several times and nodded her head approvingly.

"It must be a beauty," she said aloud. "And not too large, only thirty-two inches long. Shall I bid for it? No. On the whole, no. I should have to give up the other things which will be more useful."

But an idea leapt into her brain.

"Adrian Steele would like to have it," she said. "He always hankered after a Dutch ship to add to his silver collection. If he were to come in now, I could tell him of it."

For in spite of the harsh manner in which she had rebuffed him, she half believed he would return. Scores of times she had looked up from her work expecting to see him stroll casually into the shop, as if nothing had happened to prevent him from paying her a second visit. She had planned to herself how differently she would receive him this time, and how she would unlock her safe and show him some of her treasures which he had loved to see in the past. But he had not come, and he did not come now. Suddenly another thought struck her. She would send him the Meyntoun Moat catalogue. She would mark, not only the Dutch ship, but one or two other items which she knew would especially attract his interest. This had been her custom in the past; her one attention to him, 'her one and only courtesy in life,' as he had always laughingly said. So she marked the Dutch ship, and, amongst the china, a peacock of old Chelsea, and, amongst the Limoges enamels, a plate illustrating the month of July, a harvest scene. She turned down the pages, put the catalogue into an envelope, addressed it, and without waiting to consider the matter further, went out and posted it together with the letter to Richard Forest.

"*My one and only courtesy in life*," she repeated to herself grimly, as she stood before the pillar-box. "More than seven years since I did anything of the sort. And I'm a fool to do it now. Shall I do it? Isn't it better business that the past should be past?"

She paused. But the vision of the little figure rose before her. A great yearning to see him came over her. She dropped the catalogue into the box.

Then she had come to Kineton, viewed the sale, visited Richard Forest, abandoned him suddenly; and now, with her face set in the direction of Meyntoun Moat, and her thoughts turned towards the business which she hoped to transact at the sale, she began to wonder whether Adrian Steele would be present. It was quite likely that he might come, for he had always been an enthusiastic collector, and Meyntoun Moat was known to contain many interesting and valuable treasures. It had been an open secret amongst dealers and collectors for a long time that, on the death of the owner, an old man of unerring artistic judgment and instinct, the contents of the house would be put up for sale.

Tamar therefore had only sent Adrian Steele a reminder of what he probably knew; but she believed it was possible that this definite sign of a renewal of their old comradeship might increase the chances of his appearance on the scenes. It was at a sale in Hertfordshire that they had first met, and their first conversation and dispute had been over the catalogue.

But although she wished to see him, her mind was for the moment far too much occupied with business schemes and calculations of probable profit to focus on anything so relatively unimportant as a human being. She had always had the power of dismissing people instantly from her brain when her commercial instincts exacted from her an imperious and concentrated attention; and at this juncture neither Adrian Steele nor Richard Forest had any chance against Limoges enamels, a Doge's ring which she greatly coveted, Battersea enamel snuff and patch boxes, and several small bits of George II. silver, to say nothing of certain antique rings and brooches which were always safe investments. Richard Forest, indeed, had for the time passed entirely out of her memory, and would never have been recalled that morning, but that in again making her calculations of how much money she would spend at the sale, she was confronted with the hampering fact that she had parted with that cheque for £19.

"Nineteen pounds," she said, frowning. "Nineteen pounds. I must have been mad. A gap in the roof. Why shouldn't there be a gap in the roof? I could have bought that Cellini ornament. I must have been mad."

So Richard Forest had been right when he looked sorrowfully at the cheque and said: "She will regret it."

But Tamar had not a great deal of time in which to repent of her impulse of understanding and generosity, for in a few minutes her shabby little trap had passed into the fields which were the remains of the old park, and before long she arrived in front of the house itself. Motors and conveyances of various kinds were drawn up near the stables, which were situated on the left-hand side of the old fortified homestead, and separated from it by the moat. On the bridge which had formerly been the drawbridge, stood Adrian Steele, leaning against the wall scanning the coat-of-arms over the massive gate-house. He glanced round as Tamar got down from her trap, but he made no movement to meet her. But when she was near him, he raised his hat slightly and said:

"This is an interesting place, Tamar. Quite one of the most interesting I have seen. These old fortified homesteads are historic jewels. Judging from the catalogue, the interior must be a treasure house. I suppose you have already been inside?"

"Yes, I came to view the sale yesterday," she said abruptly; but her brusqueness could not conceal her sullen pleasure.

"Ah, you were always prudent," he remarked cheerfully. "Well, shall we go in now?"

She nodded, and without further interchange of words, they joined forces and passed through the gate-house entrance into the beautiful little courtyard, round which the house formed a massive square. It was characteristic of them both that they remained at first entirely silent on the subject of the catalogue, even though Adrian Steele carried it in his hand and held it open at the page where Tamar had marked the Dutch ship. Tamar glanced at it and smiled imperceptibly. Perhaps there was a slight smile on Adrian's face which he immediately repressed.

Tamar did not care to wait for him whilst he lingered taking his first survey of the picturesque old place. She hurried through the great hall to the dining-room where the silver, the china, the antique jewellery, the Limoges enamels and the various kinds of patch and snuff boxes had been collected together. She was anxious to be sure that she had made wise choices, and she took this opportunity of reconsidering some of the limits of prices which she was prepared to pay; for she was exceedingly cautious, and never let her enthusiasm, nor her irritation at being outbidden, run away with her commercial common sense.

Suddenly she looked up and observed a tall, rather robust man who was standing near her. He was evidently much interested in the catalogue, which he was consulting with really boyish pleasure. He went straight to the Dutch ship, and compared the description of it with its real appearance. He seemed satisfied, for he nodded his head approvingly, made some calculations in his catalogue and nodded again, smiling to himself in that quietly inane way which betrays the ardent lover of antique treasures. At that moment Adrian Steele arrived. The tall man saw him. A curious and immediate change came over his countenance. The boyish pleasure, the collector's rapture gave way to some fierce and uncontrolled anger. Tamar, watching like a lynx, noted the turbulence on the stranger's face and the calm on Adrian Steele's.

"Well, Steele," the stranger said excitedly. "I suppose you've had my last letter?"

"Yes, I received a communication from you which I am intending to pass on to my solicitors," Steele said quietly, with a touch of his Napoleonic manner which had always been his effective weapon in moments of difficulty.

"I intend," said the other, "I intend that this affair shall be investigated—"

"Pardon me," interrupted Steele with unruffled serenity, "this is not my private office. I wish it were. I can imagine no more agreeable spot for that purpose. I came here on other matters to which I must now attend."

Tamar, to all outward appearance concerned only with her own affairs, listened with bated breath, hoping to hear further details. But the encounter terminated as abruptly as it had begun. The stranger dashed out of the room, and Adrian Steele advanced composedly to the table and proceeded to examine the Dutch ship.

"Yes, it is a fine specimen," he said.

"Yes," Tamar said.

"An honest description of it too," he added, consulting the place in the catalogue marked by Tamar's own hand. "Model of old Dutch fighting ship, late fifteenth century. In full sail. Thirty-two inches long. In the shape of a dolphin, beautifully embossed with mermaids or seahorses. Cherubs flying about in the air. A mermaid with a lyre making entrancing music. Do you see her, Tamar? And there's Neptune. He is evidently very pleased with her, isn't he? And there are the look-outs at the mastheads, and the fighting-tops, and the cannons, and the men climbing up the rigging. And the lamp at the stern. Ah, and here's the anchor hanging over the side. Well, I think it is a splendid little fellow. Not too big. I have always wanted one of these Dutch ships. I shall try and get it. What have you got your eye on, Tamar?"

Then in a half-reluctant way she pointed out to him the objects which she intended to buy, provided the prices were not run up beyond her carefully calculated limit. She did not mention the Doge's ring because she feared he might possibly want that himself; but she showed him the Cellini ornament, the snuff-boxes, one or two of the Limoges enamels, and some of the antique jewels. Later, they wandered upstairs into the other rooms, glancing at the fine old furniture, the sale of which was to take place on the following day; and finally they found themselves in the chapel, and, by means of the guidebook, discovered in the adjoining little sacristy the opening to the well staircase leading under the moat. They scarcely spoke. They were both preoccupied, and to the outside world they could easily have passed for two strangers unacquainted with each other, who had chanced to come together on the same business, and had chosen tacitly for the time to keep each other company.

Tamar was thinking chiefly of her own affairs, but she was also scheming intermittently how to find out the history of the tall blustering man who had been worsted in his encounter with Adrian Steele, but who evidently was holding some threat over his head. She knew that Adrian Steele was always calm in danger. Here, then, was danger. There was no mistake about that. But what was the danger? What had he been doing to Adrian, and what had Adrian been doing to him? A garish type of man, too, but most of the people there were garish and worldly, including herself. A curious contrast to Richard Forest, she thought. It was only a hurried excursion that her mind took to that lonely vicarage and desolate church, but it nevertheless represented a true tribute to the young fellow's personality, even though it terminated in another acute attack of regret over the loss of that £19 cheque!

As for Steele himself, his brain was engaged in trying to decide on the wisest attitude to adopt towards that blustering Robert Hailsham, the dramatic author whom he had cheated out of £1,700, and who was bent on his disgrace and destruction. Adrian flattered himself that so far he had not done badly. It was a piece of downright bad luck to come across him here, but he had kept his serenity over their unexpected meeting, and had shown no sign of fear or anxiety. That must be his note: entire fearlessness, the unconcern of innocence. He smiled, laughed softly to himself, and when the sale began, and Hailsham reappeared, Steele had added to his secret and impervious armour.

He gave an immediate indication of it. One of the first things put up to auction was the beautiful old Dutch fighting ship. Hailsham bid for it. Steele, without a moment's hesitation, outbid him. Hailsham bid more. Steele outbid him again. A duel ensued. Hailsham became excited and irritated, whilst Steele remained perfectly calm and self-contained. Hailsham in his anger flushed crimson. Steele turned a little pale perhaps, but his thin lips tightened at the corners of his mouth. Every one in the room was tense with the interest of this undoubtedly personal conflict. No one else bid. The field was left to these two combatants.

At last, when the price had been run up by them to a considerable figure, far beyond the commercial value of the object, Hailsham outbid Steele by ten pounds. There was a pause. All present turned to Steele expectantly, and Tamar, who had been watching him closely, though furtively, held her breath. He shrugged his shoulders slightly, and otherwise made no movement. The Dutch ship was knocked down to Hailsham at £200. Tamar drew her breath. She was thrilled with pride and delight in her old friend.

"Splendid," she said to herself. "He has had the courage to defy his enemy, and the sense to keep his money."

A wave of admiration for him swept over her, and brought back her old passionate love for him with a rush. Then and there she determined to ferret out his trouble by some means or other, and to save him from it, or stand by him through it. It did not enter her brain to ask him any questions. She knew him well enough to be sure that questions would only have the effect of silencing him, and enclosing him more securely in his citadel of reticence. No, she would have to find out details for herself. So far, good chance had helped her, and she bent forward eagerly now when the auctioneer, a handsome man of clerical countenance, asked for the name of the buyer, and called out to his clerk:

"*Mr. Robert Hailsham.*"

"I didn't quite catch the name," she said to a dealer standing near her whom she knew. "What was it—Hayson?"

"Hailsham, Robert Hailsham, the well-known playwright," the dealer told her. "Hailsham."

Tamar entered it in her notebook.

"The author of *The Invaders*, you know," the dealer said. "Haven't you heard of it?"

"No," Tamar said. "Plays have never interested me."

"A good piece of its kind, and a huge

success," the dealer said. "He must have made a mint of money over it."

Tamar added to her notes, "*author of successful play 'The Invaders.'*"

As she made this entry, the relationship of Adrian Steele to Hailsham suddenly dawned on her.

"Ah," she thought, "of course. Now I begin to understand. A client of Adrian's. A client. Of course. And a client turned into an enemy. That is obvious. What has Adrian been doing? I must find out, somehow or other, from the playwright man himself."

At this juncture Adrian Steele, who had been stationed at the opposite side of the room, quietly withdrew into the great hall. Hailsham followed him precipitately. Tamar saw them both go, and, with half her mind, longed to be present at their second encounter. But both prudence and business forbade.

Hailsham, who was furious at having been led on by Steele to bid extravagantly, advanced on his little enemy and said angrily:

"If you didn't want the damned ship, Steele, why did you run up the price?"

"I did want the damned ship," Adrian Steele answered quietly. "I consider it is a most beautiful specimen, but I did not choose to advance beyond the price I quoted last. There are limits to—well—to one's indiscretion, shall we say?"

"Yes, you are right," Hailsham said excitedly. "I rather think you will soon be learning that."

"Probably," Steele answered. "It is said to be an experience which comes to most of us."

He turned away from Hailsham, consulted his guidebook, and proceeded to study the special points of interest in the great hall, the fine English Renaissance fireplace of carved stone, and the complicated heraldic devices in the windows. So far as he was concerned, Hailsham had ceased to exist. Hailsham glanced fiercely at the little, calm, stubborn figure, but realized the uselessness of his own excited blustering methods. He contented himself now with the reflection that although he had never been any match for Steele, either in speech or in manner, and had indeed often writhed under his quiet but scathing intellectual scorn, Steele was in his power.

He gave his head a shake, recovered his equilibrium, and passed back into the dining-room at the moment when the auctioneer was putting up the Doge's ring. Tamar's mind was now entirely focussed on business, and she had forgotten every one's concerns except her own.

For all she cared, Hailsham and Steele might have been murdering each other in the moat when she once began to bid for the things on which she had set her heart. She secured the Doge's ring, a beautiful Spanish crucifix, the Cellini ornament, and several snuff-boxes enamelled on copper, and a rather fine enamelled gold watch-case. She bid carefully, advancing moderately, stopping at once well within her own prescribed limit, and showing no sign of appreciation or eagerness. Her face was a study of watchfulness and wariness. Hailsham, who had singled her out and had been observing her for some time, became greatly interested in her.

He saw that her choice was in each case dictated by intimate knowledge, and not by ill-directed enthusiasm. So, guided by her, as it were, he outbid her on a Battersea snuff-box, which was rather rare because it contained two compartments. She herself had not one of this kind, but she did not increase her offer, and the snuff-box was knocked down to Hailsham. She was disappointed, and looked sullen and even fierce. But when she realized that the purchaser was the author of *The Invaders*, a brilliant idea leapt into her clever brain. The sulky expression faded from her countenance, and she glanced at Hailsham, nodding at him pleasantly enough, considering she was Tamar. Her glance and her half-reluctant greeting seemed to say: "*Never mind, it doesn't matter much. It's all right.*" He began to regret that he had deprived her of the Battersea, all the more so as he attributed her friendly forbearance to his name and fame. His vanity would not have been flattered if he had known that Tamar had never even heard his name until an hour or so ago, and that it meant nothing to her, except a useful signpost indicating a road which might possibly lead her to a desired destination.

He resolved to find some opportunity of expressing his regret; and he was influenced in his decision not only by his gratified vanity, but by the real interest with which Tamar had unconsciously inspired him. Perhaps, too, he was impelled by an author's natural promptings to probe and analyze unusual specimens. Tamar appeared to him an unfamiliar type, and it was not improbable that she might fit in somewhere in one of his melodramas. He kept his eye on her, and when she left the dining-room, he left it too, and joined her in the great hall. She was alone. Adrian Steele had disappeared with his guidebook, and was at the moment overhead, examining the oak panelling in the ghost room.

Hailsham approached Tamar with an apologetic little smile on his big and rather boyish face.

"Excuse me," he said pleasantly, "but I do want to tell you that I am really sorry to have deprived you of that Battersea snuff-box. I hope I have not disappointed you unbearably."

"Oh no," she answered. "I don't mind. It doesn't matter. It was not worth more to me than the price at which I stopped short. And I have many others—rather a fine collection. I'm a dealer. Dealers cannot afford the luxury of imprudence. They have to leave that to outsiders."

"I suppose you think I've been imprudent," Hailsham said, with a laugh.

"Well, yes," Tamar said. "Over that Dutch ship undoubtedly. A beautiful thing, I admit. But at the utmost worth about £120. And you have let yourself in for £200."

"Owing to that confounded little rascal," Hailsham said, his impetuous temper rising again at the recollection of the episode. "But I'll yet pay him out."

"Unfortunately it is not often possible to get the chance of paying out the strangers who spoil one's plans at sales," she said grimly. "I should be obliged if you would give me a hint."

"But this man is not a stranger," Hailsham retorted excitedly. "Anything but a stranger, I assure you."

"Ah, that alters the case," Tamar said. "Perhaps then an opportunity may present itself."

"Yes, it will present itself," he answered fiercely. "And after to-day's experience I will make doubly sure that it shall not be allowed to slip. As for the Dutch ship, I feel inclined to throw the wretched thing into the moat—anywhere. I never want to see it again."

"There is no need for you to see it again," Tamar answered, a plan instantly suggesting itself to her which combined business of the shop with furtherance of an acquaintanceship with Adrian Steele's enemy. "I'm a dealer, you know. Here is my card. '*T. Scott, dealer in antique jewellery, etc.*' If you want to get rid of that Dutch ship, I don't mind trying to sell it for you on commission."

"Upon my word, that's a good idea," Hailsham said, glancing now at her card and now at Tamar.

"I might be able to sell it for £120," Tamar continued dreamily. "Certainly not for more. But even then, deducting my commission of fifteen per cent., you would get back rather more than £100. You would thus stand to lose £100 instead of £200 by your imprudence. This might be better than throwing the Dutch ship into the moat."

Hailsham smiled.

"Yes, it would be better," he said. "But I must say I think your commission is rather high."

"Yes, but I never work for a low remuneration," Tamar replied indifferently. "It would not be worth my while."

Something in her independent aloofness carried weight with Hailsham, and he said:

"Very well, we will leave it at that. The Dutch ship shall be sent direct to you. Or better still, I will bring it myself. I should like to have a look at your snuff-boxes. I am beginning a collection of them myself. I will come and see what you have."

"As you please," Tamar said, yawning. "I have one or two rather good ones. One or two 'Vernis Martin.'"

"You don't mean it," he said with boyish eagerness. "Better for me, if I'd come to your shop instead of to this confounded sale."

"Better for me perhaps," Tamar remarked. "One never knows."

"Well, at any rate, I'll come now," he said, laughing. "And meantime, here is my card."

"It is a good thing for you that you are a writer of plays and not a dealer in antiques," Tamar said quaintly, as she took his card. "It is quite certain to me that you could not earn a living as a dealer."

"Ah, but you must not base your judgment on the episode of the Dutch ship," he said, smiling. "There are wheels within wheels as regards the Dutch ship. Perhaps I ought to say keels within keels."

"Ah," said Tamar softly.

Then she made a bold venture, hoping to learn some important detail to guide her.

"It would rather interest me to know the name of that little actor man who fought you over the Dutch ship," she said casually. "It seems somehow to be a familiar face."

"His name is Adrian Steele," Hailsham answered. "He is not an actor. But you have not made a bad shot, for he is in the theatrical profession. He is—or rather, I should say—was a dramatic agent."

"Was?" Tamar repeated. "So he is not one now?"

"His career is over," Hailsham replied emphatically.

"Over?" Tamar repeated.

"Yes, yes, over," Hailsham said, his temper rising. "He—"

At that moment Adrian Steele was seen descending the staircase, and Hailsham, not wishing to encounter him again, raised his hat to Tamar, told her he would soon visit her shop, and strolled out of the Great Hall. Adrian Steele watched him disappear, and then joined Tamar, whose face meantime had assumed a blank expression. His own face was slightly flushed. He was obviously annoyed at having found Tamar and Hailsham together. But he recovered himself at once and said :

"A most interesting ghost room upstairs. I have always liked ghosts. They have always struck me as being so reliable. They always do exactly the same thing in exactly the same spot. This one, I believe, invariably carries his cut-off head in his hands. You should go and see the room. Admirable oak panelling. Your favourite linen pattern. Altogether a most engrossing place this. I am grateful you sent me the catalogue. 'Your one and only courtesy.' Do you remember, Tamar ? Of course you do. By the way, have you got what you wanted from the sale ?"

"Yes, all except a Battersea enamel snuff-box," she answered. "Your rival over the Dutch ship got that. He came rather politely to apologize for having deprived me of it."

"Very polite," said Adrian Steele, his face clearing.

"I didn't really mind losing the snuff-box," Tamar continued innocently. "I told him so. But I should have been angry if he had marched off with my Doge's ring."

"The Doge's ring," Adrian repeated quickly. "You never pointed it out to me with the other things, Tamar."

"I thought you would want it, and run the price up," she said, half sulkily.

He laughed. His face lit up with affectionate amusement.

"The same Tamar—the same prudent, cautious Tamar," he said. "Ah, how well you know me—even after all these years. Yes, you are quite right. I should certainly have wanted that Doge's ring."

He stood looking at her with a strange wistfulness. His old love and longing for her came leaping back to him, and again he knew her for his true comrade and only possible counsellor. Once more a tempest raged in his spirit.

"How well you know me," he murmured. "How well we know each other. It ought to be easy enough to—"

He shook his head, turned slowly away from her, and without speaking another word began to examine the heraldic devices in the windows.

CHAPTER VI.

TWO or three days after Nell Silberthwaite's visit to Tamar's shop, she had to deliver at the Grey Friars' Hall the third of her London series of lectures on "Sweated Industries." She felt unequal to her task. The impersonality which the subject demanded for its successful exposition, had been stormed and beset by overwhelming personal influences of the past. Tamar's words echoed back to her: "*The past is a nuisance. What good has it done you? Weakened you. Well, I'm not going to be weakened.*"

Tamar was right in theory. Nevertheless Tamar herself had not been able to withstand the mysterious magic of the past. Nell saw her now, weeping with unshed tears in that dimly lit shop. She heard her voice charged with a grim despair, murmuring: "*Woe is me—woe is me.*" She saw her beat her breast. Yes, Tamar still loved Adrian Steele. And she, Nell, still loved him. Once again, after the lapse of many years, she felt herself caught and entangled by the old sensations of rivalry with and triumph over Tamar. For Adrian had shown that even now, after all these years, he had placed her on the higher plane. He had asked for her spiritual forgiveness, and he had paid back money to Tamar. Here indeed was cause for triumph. But she was soon ashamed of giving way to meanness, and did her best to check herself. But this return to past history brought stress and strain of spirit, and serious disturbance of brain serenity; and Nell was alarmed at her emotional weakness, angry over her mental instability, and indignant with fate for thus forcing her back into a network from which she believed she had for ever freed herself.

When Adrian Steele had lost interest in her as a modern product, and had deliberately ceased to lay his spell on her, she had escaped with a true thankfulness from this servitude of mind and temperament; and had, with a fine and determined courage, gathered her energies and gifts together, and entered on a long and patient apprenticeship for public service work. Adrian Steele himself had first directed her attention to the terrible sweating which went on in some of the trades; and she had never forgotten the day when he took her down to the East End, and showed her the homes and the lives of some of the sweated workers. The sights she saw, ate like acid into her brain, and she had vowed to give the best of her strength and mind towards helping in the great task of trying to solve some of these industrial problems.

Her marriage with Rupert Silberthwaite had helped and not hindered her in her plan of life. He had been an engineer of some repute; and, modern to his finger-tips, had ever been in the vanguard of those who wished to give women the justice of equal opportunity and scope for their abilities and ambitions in all walks of life. He wished to share generously, and not withhold grudgingly. When others, less fine than himself, had scoffed, he met their sneers with a quiet smile of wonder. So Nell had in her husband a true friend and a staunch comrade, who took the deepest interest and pride in her work, and had helped her in every respect to carry out her schemes. He died suddenly, and she found that, even in his will, he had not dissociated her from her work. His will had contained this one clause: "*I leave all my money and possessions to my dear wife Nell, for her work and herself.*"

Thus, in his death also, he had, with a true chivalry, paid her the tribute of recognizing that her work was not a mere adjunct to her life, but its very kernel. He had gone on his way, and she had missed and mourned him increasingly. He had known the history of her love for Adrian

Steele; and had, with added tenderness and pitying kindness, set himself to heal her spirit and help her to pass on.

She missed him now. She could have laid before him her distress of mind, her unworthy jealousy of Tamar, yes, even her reawakening love for Adrian Steele, and could have reckoned as ever on his generous understanding and wise guidance. Even as she mounted the platform that evening, and saw that big audience before her, she tried to strengthen herself by believing that she could refer the whole matter to him, and free herself, once again by his help, from the yoke of the past.

Perhaps this memory steadied her nerves; and probably also, knowing herself to be at such an *impasse* of depression, she made some special unconscious effort to gather together her disintegrated wits and concentrate them on her lecture. The result was that she gave one of her most brilliant addresses. But because of her heaviness of heart, she did not realize that she had done well; and the strain which she had put upon herself induced an after condition of increased despondency.

But before she left the hall her gloom was dispelled. John Noble, the famous playwright, had been present, and he made his way into the ante-room and came straight towards her, eagerly holding out his hand.

"Mrs. Silberthwaite," he said, "you have stirred me tremendously. I cannot tell you how you have stirred me. I have been uneasy about all these things for so long. But vaguely, you know. Looking on. Doing nothing. Taking no part. You have made me feel that I must take some part, and at once."

His words brought a flush of pleasure into Nell's face.

"You cannot imagine how you encourage me," she said. "I felt I had done so badly to-night. No nerve in me. No go."

"No one else felt that, I'm positive," he said earnestly. "It was a splendid address, and an inspiring one. It is true that you deal with facts; and facts can easily be turned into dry bones. But you present a living picture to the mind. You are bound to succeed in your work, because the presenting of a picture is the secret of all successful appeals. Yes, you have stirred me tremendously. I want to help with both hands. Here they are!"

All Nell's depression had died away. She looked radiant with happiness and pride.

"I can't tell you what your kindness and praise mean to me, Mr. Noble," she said. "We've so wanted the help of your name."

"Well, you have it now," he answered, "and

I'm ashamed that you have not had it before. But I assure you I should be still more ashamed of myself if I held back after your lecture to-night. I'll come to-morrow to the office, and if you can spare the time, I should like to ask several questions of you, and find out how I could best begin to serve."

"Present a picture," she suggested daringly. "Write a play, Mr. Noble. You would do it magnificently. You would take all the sordidness and all the misery, and kindle it into a great beacon which would reach even the blindest eyes."

"Ah," he said, smiling a little wistfully, "if I only could. But I should soon find out that I knew nothing. For it is one matter to feel strongly about a thing suddenly, and quite another matter to attain to the power of making others share that sudden enthusiasm. To do that, one must first be saturated with the idea. I should have to saturate myself as you have done, for instance. You have given years of your life to these subjects, haven't you?"

"Years," she answered.

"Well, I envy you," he said. "My puppets will die their natural death. They will fade out of the picture of life; but the picture which you present, will not perish. It will undergo the transfiguration for which you are finely and patiently working."

He stood for a moment silent, and then added with a smile :

"All the same, I shall have to think about that play. I should want a fearful deal of help."

"You should have it down to the very last shred," she said, laughing.

She went home delighted with the unexpected success of the evening. It was a splendid piece of good luck to have secured the attention and interest of this popular dramatist. His name alone would carry weight with the public; and even if he did nothing else except join the Society and pay in his subscription, he would be lending powerful and far-reaching aid.

The next morning she hurried off to the office with a light heart. Nothing but good news awaited her : more money, more members, more offers of active co-operation. She said to herself, laughingly, that John Noble had already begun to work his spell.

But suddenly she picked up a postcard which lay by itself on her desk. She glanced at it heedlessly, for its meaning did not at once dawn on her ; but when she read it again, she understood. It ran thus :—

"Have learnt something. Expecting you without fail this afternoon. T. SCOTT."

The postcard fell from Nell's hand. A change came over her spirit. The past leapt back. That little figure rose up before her unwilling eyes. He stood, with his old persistence, claiming her attention and her interest. The old dreaded disintegration set in. The old unworthy jealousy sprang up. Tamar had learnt something. Tamar had been working for him. And she, Nell, had learnt nothing. She, Nell, had been doing nothing for him. This was intolerable. She must do something. And at once. What could she do? Dare she go to him direct and implore him to tell her his difficulties? No, no, that would be of no use. That would only have the effect of sealing his lips. Could she seek out any one who knew him? But who *did* know him in her present world? Their worlds were not the same. Still, if Tamar had succeeded in learning something, she too could succeed. She was not going to be overshadowed by Tamar. If the past had to come back to her, she would keep her place in the past. No question about that.

Then her finer feelings prevailed, and she again became ashamed of herself for taking up that attitude towards Tamar. No, they must not be rivals at their time of life, and after this long interval of many years. They must be collaborators, not rivals. Tamar, too, had been the one to sound the generous note. She had heard something, and at once sent for her.

Nell smiled, and not unkindly. She had always liked Tamar, and it was so exactly like Tamar to order her to come. Tamar had always taken it for granted that no one except herself had any affairs to transact. So far as she was concerned, nothing of any importance was happening in the great world outside her dimly-lit shop. Kings might die or be crowned, revolutions might be making headway, the Church might be perishing, Ireland might be having Home Rule, women enjoying their hardly-won citizenship, comets might be losing their tails. Tamar, amidst all these events, remained unchanged, dateless, belonging, even as the jewels which she worshipped, to all and any time.

Well, Tamar had sent for her, and Nell would go. She would hurry off as soon as she could, and meantime she would try to think how she could best reach Adrian Steele. She longed to reach him. She saw him again, as she had seen him in her dream, on that mountain side, cut off from help, inaccessible. She turned instinctively to the mountain picture which he had given her, and which was the only one of all his gifts she had kept. Why had she kept it? Ah, she knew. Because of the mountain gloom, and the mountain glory which had been dear to them both. Because of the snow peaks of pure white loveliness which they had both loved, and which towered calmly and majestically above that low-lying valley where love and comradeship lay wrecked.

She was still absorbed in these thoughts when a knock came at her door, and the little Suffragette secretary, whose merry eyes were dancing with excitement, announced Mr. John Noble.

John Noble never knew from what a far-off distance, and with what a painful effort, Nell's mind travelled to meet him. But his very first action helped her back to practical life. With a pleased and a charmingly self-conscious little smile he handed her a cheque for £250.

"Laggards should pay the heaviest toll, Mrs. Silberthwaite," he said. "But I'm not going to be only a name. I'm going to be a reality. And I've been thinking about that play you've ordered. Upon my word, I believe I shall be able to write it if you will help me with your knowledge."

"Yes, yes, indeed I will. Let's begin at once," she said, all her enthusiasm returning to her with a bound.

She threw herself heart and soul into her task, answering his questions about the Trade Boards Act, clearing away his difficulties, and showing him the exact point to which the work of her Society had progressed. She dwelt now on the chainmakers, now on the lace trade, now the tailoring trade, now on the box-making, and now on the very worst feature of underpaid labour, the wage-earning of very young children; and when at times she stopped, fearing to tire him, he always said:

"Don't leave off, if you still have leisure. I want to learn all I can. I want to make up for lost time."

At last she ceased, and John Noble rose to go.

"This must be a mighty interest in your life, Mrs. Silberthwaite," he said. "You care tremendously, don't you?"

"Yes, tremendously," she answered.

"Ah, the impersonality of it," he said half dreamily. "The losing of the selfhood. That alone is a thing to be envied."

"Alas! one does not lose that, Mr. Noble," Nell said, shaking her head sorrowfully. As she spoke, her thoughts leapt back to Adrian Steele, and she glanced again at the snow-mountain picture.

His eyes followed hers, and he gave a sudden exclamation.

"Well, that's a curious thing," he said. "This is the second time to-day I've seen this identical picture. The Bernese Oberland range, isn't it?"

"Yes," she answered.

"I saw it in my business manager's office," he continued. "I had an appointment with him, which he had forgotten, oddly enough. I waited for him in vain half an hour or so, and meantime studied the mountains. Then I came straight on here. And here's the same picture. Now isn't that queer?"

For a moment she did not answer, and then, as a thought darted to her brain, she said impulsively:

"Mr. Noble, is your business manager Adrian Steele?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Adrian Steele gave me that picture," she said. "It was a duplicate of his own."

"Then you know him?" Noble asked, rather eagerly.

"I knew him very well many years ago," Nell replied. "I had not seen him for nearly twelve years until the other day, when he called on me."

Noble stood twirling his hat nervously in his hands. He seemed to be keeping back something that he wanted to say. At last he spoke.

"He has managed my affairs for a very long time," he said. "I shall always own frankly that I should have been nowhere without him, absolutely nowhere."

"I am glad to hear you say that," Nell said earnestly. "I always knew he was brilliantly able."

"Yes, brilliantly able," Noble repeated. "That's the word. If anything, too able."

He did not stir. He appeared to be caught in a network of distressing thought. All the bright eagerness with which he had been listening to Nell's lesson, had now faded into a sorrowful gloom.

Some secret prompting impelled her to speak in praise of Adrian Steele.

"I assure you," she said, "that, looking back now, I know that I, too, should have been nowhere without Adrian Steele. It has taken me years to recognize the debt I owe him. If I have reached even one of the most distant outposts of my goal, it is because he originally gave a clear indication of the way. He taught me how to work on modern lines. He was the first to plead with my brain for the cause of the poor. I hear him now telling me in his scornful way to use my 'academic brain,' as he called it, for the problems of the great world outside the scholar's study. I admired his splendid doggedness. I have tried hard to imitate it. I admired still more the driving force in him, the memory of which has many a time spurred me on to fresh effort and action. And I admired, above all, the generous, ungrudging way in which he gave himself out, sparing neither his mental nor his physical strength in the fulfilment of his task. The debt—"

She broke off and turned to her desk abruptly, wishing to remind herself that she was a business woman.

"You must really forgive me," she said. "There is no reason why I should trouble you with all this."

"There is every reason why you should," he said in a low voice. "You are doing both me and Adrian Steele a greater service than you know by reminding me of the debt which I, too, owe to him. I won't forget it. And you're right. It is only when one looks back, that one knows the true value of the whole debt."

He took his leave with a grave, preoccupied manner. When he reached the door, he paused.

"Can you perhaps tell me one thing," he said. "It is—"

He broke off.

Whatever the question was, he suppressed it, and passed out of the room. But his powerlessness to speak, and his sadness had told Nell more than words. Something had gone wrong between him and Adrian Steele, and that something had struck this kind man hard. What was it? What was it that had prompted her to record to this stranger her debt of gratitude to Adrian Steele? Why, as she spoke, had all remembrance of former injury been swept away in a wave of appreciation? She knew now. Instinct had told her that here was danger, and she had sprung up intuitively to ward it off. If she could do nothing else for Adrian Steele, it was at least something to have had the chance of ranging herself on his side. And there might be other chances too. This might be only the beginning.

She would be seeing John Noble again, and perhaps he, of his own accord, would reopen the subject of Adrian Steele. Meantime she was in the proud position of being able to report to Tamar that her day's work had, in its natural course, brought her in direct contact with some one who knew Adrian Steele, and had business dealings with him. Tamar might have something to tell her. But she also had something to tell Tamar.

A few hours afterwards Nell stood in Tamar's shop, examining a beautiful plaque of Limoges enamel, while Tamar was transacting some business with a fashionably dressed woman, rather closely veiled.

"No," Tamar said, with a bored expression on her face. "I have stated my offer. Eleven pounds twelve and sixpence for the four rings."

"Very well," the woman said, shrugging her shoulders. "But I cannot help saying that you drive a very hard bargain."

"Possibly," Tamar answered grimly, counting out the money. "But why come?"

The veiled lady received the money with an impatient gesture, and hastened away.

"These rich women lead one a dreadful life," Tamar remarked as she turned over the rings and held them up to the light. "They fight for their last farthing with their backs to the wall. Most annoying. That woman has been here for quite half an hour. However, the rings are rather good. This emerald isn't at all bad."

"Tamar, have you ever seen the inside of a large bell gentian—a blue one?" Nell questioned, still examining the Limoges enamel plaque.

"Flowers never interest me," Tamar replied abruptly.

"The blue and green of Limoges enamel always reminds me of blue gentians," Nell said. "What a splendid little plaque this one is, Tamar. If I were rich, I should want to buy it."

"I intend to sell that to-morrow," Tamar said slowly. "I've quite made up my mind to that. And moreover, to one of Adrian Steele's acquaintances."

"To one of Adrian Steele's acquaintances?" Nell asked in surprise.

Tamar nodded.

"Yes," she said. "I met him at a sale in the country. He is coming here to-morrow on some other business. We made friends over a Battersea snuff-box, and we are going to become still greater friends over a Limoges enamel. I shall let him have it cheap."

Then in a few dry words Tamar narrated the history of what she had herself seen and heard at Meyntoun Moat, and the duel of the two men over the Dutch ship. Nell listened with mingled feelings of jealousy and concern.

"So you see," Tamar said, "there's no doubt I've got an important clue to the situation. Adrian, like a fool, has landed himself into some sort of trouble with this playwright man, Hailsham. Probably been cheating him. Been found out. Well, I always feared he would be found out. He was curiously reckless at times. However, I shall learn more to-morrow. This Hailsham loses his temper, and talks. I shall know how to lead him on. The Limoges enamel and the Dutch ship will help."

"I too have a clue," Nell said.

"You?" asked Tamar crossly. "How could you have it, pray?"

Nell told her of her first meeting with John Noble at the Grey Friars' Hall, and of their subsequent interview at the office, when the name of Adrian Steele at once aroused in him feelings of great distress.

"I am sure something has gone wrong between them," Nell said. "There could be no doubt about that. And I could see that when Mr. Noble learnt that I knew Adrian Steele, he wanted to ask me some questions. But he is not a man who speaks easily."

"Well, I don't see that your precious acquaintance with him will be of the least use," Tamar said.

"At least I was able to defend him," Nell answered, with a proud little smile.

"What's the good of defending him?" Tamar asked scornfully. "That's no good to anybody. And probably he can't be defended."

"Well, I can only tell you that Mr. Noble thanked me for reminding him of his debt to Adrian Steele, and said I'd done both him and Adrian Steele a greater service than I knew," Nell said with spirit.

Tamar was silent. She too was suffering from an acute attack of jealousy. She tossed the new rings impatiently into a small box, and locked it fiercely. Nell noticed her irritation, but pretended to ignore it.

"Curiously enough," she continued, "it never struck me at first to connect the two men in my mind. I was so taken up with the delight of having secured a new and powerful friend for the work of our Society, that all other thoughts were in abeyance."

Tamar grunted.

"I've no sympathy with public service," she said. "None. Why do you want to mix yourself up with these silly sweated labour questions? It's a ridiculous waste of time and strength. No one need expect it from me."

"No one would, in his wildest dreams," Nell said good-naturedly.

A grim smile came over Tamar's face, and part of her sulkiness passed from her.

"I don't mind owning," she said in a mumbling voice, "that your meeting with this other playwright man *may* have something in it after all. I suppose I was jealous."

"I was jealous of you, too," Nell said. "When your postcard came saying that you had learnt something, I could have—well, I won't tell you what I could have done to you."

Tamar chuckled. She liked to hear Nell's confession, and understood it.

"A couple of fools—that's what we are," she said. "Fools to concern ourselves about his welfare, and fools to be jealous of each other."

"Fools to be jealous of each other," Nell returned. "I admit that with all my heart."

"Yes; and, don't you mistake it, fools to concern ourselves about him," Tamar said. "It's obvious we haven't any sense. If we had, we wouldn't let Adrian Steele come between ourselves and our own affairs—public service, precious stones, or anything."

There was a moment's silence between the two women. The little figure rose before them. Some of the happiness of the past and some of the old longing held them. It was Nell who spoke first.

"Nevertheless, we must save him if we can, Tamar," she said in a low voice.

Tamar gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"If we work together, we may be able to save him," Nell said. "Jealousy will cause loss of time and opportunity."

Tamar made no sign.

"We must try and not be jealous of each other again," Nell persisted. "I promise you I'll try, Tamar."

There was a pause.

"Yes, I suppose we must try," Tamar said dreamily.

She leaned over the counter, closed her eyes, and very slowly, with a painful effort, stretched out her hand towards Nell.

CHAPTER VII.

ADRIAN STEELE travelled up from Meyntoun Moat to London with his mind divided between the pleasure of having been with Tamar, and the anxiety of his impending difficulties. His meeting with Hailsham had shown him that Hailsham meant war to the knife, and that, even if his other clients could be conciliated or hoodwinked, this one man's fixed determination to destroy him would be sufficient in itself to hasten the inevitable crisis. Still, he by no means intended to capitulate to disaster.

He said to himself repeatedly that he would make a superhuman effort to control and guide this adverse chance, and that he would not give up the struggle until he was convinced that it was impossible to deal with the situation. Meanwhile, he must gain time. It was for this reason that he had shirked his appointment with Noble, and accepted Tamar's tacit though definite invitation to attend the sale at Meyntoun Moat. He could not help smiling to think that he had evaded in John Noble a less dangerous enemy only to encounter a fiercer foe at close quarters. Yet, on the whole, it was John Noble he feared most to meet; because, in addition to their business relationship, there had been between them a close bond of fellowship, which, as Adrian Steele knew, should have made treachery impossible. This thought haunted him during his journey. He reproached himself bitterly for not having spared his friend, and he passed through every phase of shame and regret, ending up, however, with increased concern for his own welfare and that of his wife and child.

Thus, burdened with business care, he arrived at his own home in Egerton Crescent and pressed the bell. The hall clock was striking eleven when the maid opened the door. To his surprise his wife stood in the hall, waiting for him.

"You up, Grace?" he said kindly. "Late for you, isn't it?"

Then he saw her face was pale, and asked:

"Why, what is it? You look scared. Has anything gone wrong?"

A sudden fear flashed through his brain that she had heard some rumour about his affairs. She seemed scarcely able to speak.

"Alpenrose has been taken fearfully ill," she gasped out. "Alpenrose—been taken ill. The doctor says meningitis. She cries for you."

He did not wait to hear another word, but pushing gently past her, ran up to Alpenrose's room.

"Alpenrose—my little Alpenrose," he cried, with a tender yearning in his voice.

Did Alpenrose know that he had come? There was a moment's cessation of the moaning. He turned peremptorily to the London Hospital nurse.

"I shall nurse her," he said. "This is my work."

"You shall help me," she said, with some attempt at maintaining her position of authority.

He glared at her a moment, and then pointed in his Napoleonic manner to the dressing-room. It was easy to see that he was master in his own house.

"Be within reach," he said. "And look well after Mrs. Steele. She is not strong."

He installed himself by the bedside of his little darling daughter, whom he loved better than anything on earth. His watchfulness did not relax, his care never failed, fatigue did not touch him. Each time that the nurse crept softly into the room, she saw the little figure sitting by the bed, like some lynx-eyed sentinel, motionless, yet ready for instant action. Every thought except Alpenrose passed from his mind. Tamar vanished, and all remembrance of his business complications was swept away by this one overwhelming anxiety. He concentrated all his will power, all his mental driving force, all his psychic insistence on the recovery of his child. He diverted deliberately in her direction the strength of his own brain and body. The sweat streamed down his face. Tenser and tenser grew the expression of his countenance. His frame quivered from the physical and mental strain which he was putting on himself. His wife, the nurse, the doctor all sought to relieve him as the weary, anxious hours went by.

"The child will not know," they urged; "and you are worn out. You must take some rest."

But they spoke to some one for whom, at the moment, outside life had ceased to exist. He did not hear them, did not see them, did not heed them. All through that long night, and to the middle of the next day, Adrian Steele battled in his own way for Alpenrose's young life.

Who can tell whether or not he helped to stem the tide of the on-rushing river of disaster? In any case, the child did not die. The little fair head ceased to move aimlessly from side to side. The moaning began to leave off. Alpenrose fell into a peaceful sleep. Then, and then only, he succumbed to his own fatigue, and slept for so many hours that the doctor, as well as his wife and the nurse, became anxious about his long-continued prostration. The doctor finally remained in the house, and stole in time after time to see whether all were well with him. At last he awoke, and found the doctor sitting by his bedside. His first question was about Alpenrose.

The doctor reassured him.

"All the same, I believe she would have slipped through our hands if you had not been here, Steele," he said generously. "You saved her. How, I don't know, and don't pretend to know. But you have half-killed yourself, and I've been anxious about you. We all have."

Adrian Steele shook his head.

"I am all right," he answered a little proudly; for he had always disliked any reference being made to his health or tiredness.

But he knew that, for the present at least, he had worn himself out; and he found, later, when he took his business papers and letters into Alpenrose's room, that his brain refused to answer to his demands, and that it was impossible for him to concentrate his mind on his affairs. He began to realize the acuteness of the agony through which he had been passing.

If he had lost Alpenrose, he would have lost everything. She was unutterably dear to him. He loved her with all the best part of his nature. He intended her to be all the things he had never been able to be—clear as a mountain-spring, truthful, open. Why had he never been able to be these things? Was it too late? If he could get his affairs in order, perhaps he could yet make an attempt to run straight.

He said the words aloud:

"If I can square my business matters, my little Alpenrose, I will try and never be dishonourable again, for your sake, and because you have been spared to me."

But what if he could not square them? He glanced at the child, shuddered a little, and covered his face with his hands. But of course he could square them. Of course he could. His brain had never failed in resourcefulness, and would not fail now.

His mind wandered back to the first occasion on which he had annexed the fees due to any of his clients. It was at Colchester, and he had kept back the returns of one matinee. He remembered now how pleased he had been with the idea, and the remembrance brought a smile circling round his mouth.

"Yes, I own I liked doing it," he said. "Yes, even though it was to Noble that I did it. I have always liked doing it."

The smile vanished, and his face took on an expression of defiance.

"I still maintain that I more than earned every single fee I annexed," he said. "I maintain that."

His eyes fell on his papers, and he was recalled from his defence of the past to the urgency of the present. How could he meet the situation? Again only one point was clear to him. He must gain time. Alpenrose's illness could help him in this respect. Thus, for instance, he could write to Noble and say that he had failed to keep his appointment because of his little girl's illness. This would make it clear that he had not shirked the interview, but that circumstances had prevented it. He would write the letter at once. At least that would be something done. He wrote:—

"DEAR NOBLE,—Very sorry not to have kept my appointment. My little daughter was suddenly taken very ill, and all other thoughts passed from my mind."

He read the words over, and shook his head. He had no heart to tell a lie in connection with

Alpenrose. He tore up the sheet, and began again :—

"DEAR NOBLE,—Very sorry not to have kept my appointment. I was persuaded by an old friend to go to an auction sale in an old country-house, and quite forgot you were coming to my office, probably because it has not been our custom to do business there. When I got home, I found that my little daughter had been taken very ill. We have had hours of intense anxiety, but the crisis has now passed, and I shall be at your disposal in a day or two."

He thought this would do, on the whole. He did not like to drag little Alpenrose in at all; but, for her sake and her mother's, as well as his own, it was absolutely necessary to postpone a meeting with Noble until he had been able to settle on some possible plan of campaign. Alpenrose's illness was a legitimate excuse for not attending to business matters for a few days; and he knew well that John Noble, kindest of all kind-hearted men, would harass no one who was in trouble and anxiety. So that, since no lie was being told, there was no reason why he should not avail himself of this respite offered by fate. Moreover, it was diplomatic to refer to his visit to the country. Hailsham, who was at the bottom of all this mischief, would be sure to see Noble and tell him about the episode of the Dutch ship. Yes, the letter could stand as it was. He addressed it, gummed it, and smiled as he thought of the Dutch ship.

"A real bit of prancing, that," he said to himself. "Dangerous, but necessary as a protest, and entirely enjoyable."

He suddenly remembered Tamar, and his face lit up.

"I wonder what she thought of it," he said. "She would indeed be amused and impressed, if she knew the circumstances of my defiance. Why can't I tell her?"

He rose from his chair, and stood looking out of the window.

"Why can't I make up my mind to tell Tamar everything?" he said aloud. "She and I are one. Nothing can alter that. Nothing."

Alpenrose stirred uneasily in her sleep, and he was back in an instant by her side, ready to feed her, nurse her, caress her, if she awoke. She opened her blue eyes; and swiftly, deftly, and with all the tenderness of a mother, he managed to administer the bird-like dose of jelly enjoined by the nurse. No one was so successful as he in the difficult task of feeding the little frail child, because it was to him that she always offered the least resistance. The next moment she was asleep again, clutching tightly the black doll which he had not allowed the nurse to take from her. He was secretly amused in remembering how he had fought for that black doll. Its presence represented a victory over all the most sacred traditions of hospital red tape. He returned to his papers and letters.

He found that already two of his other clients were on the scent, and had written asking for immediate interviews. These were Sanford, whom, so he computed, he had cheated out of nearly £6,000, and Cecil, whom he had defrauded of about £4,000. And there was a curt and rather pert little communication from a new young upstart, whose work he had taken to oblige Hailsham. But, of course, they had all been drilled by Hailsham. He knew that, apart from business, Hailsham hated him. He knew that Hailsham had never been able to forgive him for his intellectual contempt for those mindless but lucrative melodramas which the public loved.

"What was it I said?" he asked himself. "Ah yes, I remember: something about the plays containing much money and a negligible quantity of mind. Well, it was true."

He recalled the actual occasion on which he had spoken those words, and was still smiling when he began to examine some of his recent accounts. But the look of amusement soon faded from his face as he found himself confronted with the difficulties created by his systematic dishonourableness. At the moment the point engaging his attention was this. Could he doctor his accounts in such a way as to convince his clients that certain shortages of payment, which they fancied they had detected in their returns, were merely temporary arrears which would all be eventually collected and paid in as usual? He had £15,000 safely invested. What plan could he hit on for using it surreptitiously, allaying suspicion, and thus choking off further investigation?

He took one of Sanford's plays as a basis of what he vaguely thought he might do; and he tried to work out his plan, making copious notes which he at once destroyed. But his brain would not act. He became helplessly confused, and all his efforts to arrange his ideas ended in failure. Nevertheless, his usual perseverance did not forsake him. He wrestled relentlessly with calculations, with conflicting schemes of explanation, and with all possible and impossible subterfuges. But his mental agility was in abeyance, and his power of continuous thought arrested. He made no headway.

"The fact is, I must have help," he thought, as he finally leaned back in despairing fatigue. "I must sacrifice my pride and my secretiveness for Alpenrose's sake and Grace's sake, so as to give their names a fair chance of not being dishonoured. I must go and lay everything before Tamar."

"If any one in the world can help me, it is Tamar," he said.

"Will she?" he asked himself, in sudden doubt.

"Well, she sent me the catalogue," he answered himself. "That meant a renewal of our old comradeship."

"Can she?" he asked himself anxiously.

"She has the wisdom and the craft of the serpent," he reassured himself.

"Will she betray me?" he asked himself in sudden fear.

"Never," he answered himself steadily. "Never. Tamar and I are one. She will never betray me."

"Then I will go to her," he said; and he rose from his chair, signed to the nurse to take his place, and passed noiselessly out of the sickroom, carrying his letters and papers in a locked leather case.

Grace met him in the hall and put a detaining hand on his arm. Time had shown that these partners for life had nothing whatever in common except their love for their child; but she probably did not realize the distance between them, being, mercifully for her in this instance, limited in perception. And he, although he gave her no confidence, and no free pass into his inner consciousness, always maintained towards her an attitude of gentle consideration, which had the semblance of and did duty for affection. Perhaps it was affection. Who can tell?

"My poor Adrian," she said kindly, "you look worn out and so worried. I am thankful you have left the sickroom. I wish you had not all those worrying business papers to study. I wish I could help you. Can't I?"

"No, dear," he answered, smiling gravely. "They are—well—rather intricate—even for a business head."

"I was coming up to insist on taking your place, and to beg you to go for a stroll," she said. "But also to tell you that Mr. Noble has called. He is waiting in your study to see you."

Adrian became deathly white.

"Noble," he repeated with a shudder. "Noble here. I can't see him. I simply can't."

"No, of course you can't," she said, looking at him with anxiety. "I'll go instead, and tell him that you are absolutely worn out with Alpenrose's illness, and can see no one."

"Tell him I've written," he said in a far-off voice. "Stay, Grace, here is the letter."

Suddenly his courage came back to him, for he was not by nature a coward. He gathered himself together, and, apparently without effort, banished from his countenance every trace of worry and apprehension.

"No, Grace, I'll go after all," he said.

Without a moment's delay he made for his library, opened the door and advanced without flinching to meet, as he thought, Noble. He stopped short. He could scarcely believe his eyes. Surely there was no one in the room. No, there was no one in the room. No one. He was alone. Alone. He stood, arrested by the surprise and the unspeakable relief. Then he staggered to the armchair, sank into it, drew a long breath, and closed his eyes. A few minutes afterwards, when he had recovered himself a little, he looked up and noticed an envelope propped against the old clock on the mantelpiece. He opened it, and found that it contained John Noble's card, on which he had pencilled these lines:—

"*Won't trouble you to-day. Just heard from your maid that your child was ill. Only wanted to tell you that arrangements for new play in your hands as usual.*"

The card fell from Adrian Steele's hand. His head sank on his breast.

CHAPTER VIII.

TAMAR sat behind her counter studying her ledger, with a smile of quiet satisfaction. She had made several excellent deals lately, and she reckoned that the Dutch ship would bring her in a profit of more than £40. She had already arranged to sell it to another dealer for £142. She intended to pay Hailsham £120, less her commission of fifteen per cent., thus handing him over exactly £102. She tapped her foot, and congratulated herself that she was always able to make a successful commercial venture out of any circumstance whatsoever.

"That's being a genius, or being Jewish," she said. "Well, the one often implies the other. Now for the fourth cheque for Richard Forest's church. Let me see. Can I spare three pounds? No. Two pounds fifteen? No. Two pounds ten? Well, yes. And then there was a pound which I decided to send for those four rings the other day. Total three pounds ten. Conscience money. A large sum to send for conscience' sake. Why should I send it?"

Her cheque-book was lying on the counter, and she pushed it away from her impatiently.

"What's it to me if there *is* a hole in the roof, or indeed if there's no roof at all?" she said sulkily. "Why don't some of those rich bishops or archbishops see to the matter?"

But very slowly and reluctantly she drew the cheque-book towards her once more, and wrote out a cheque to the Rev. Richard Forest for three pounds ten shillings. Her face softened as she read his name aloud, and her thoughts centred for the moment on that desolate vicarage where that young fellow, with his spirit dwelling apart, unhelped and unencouraged save by the reality of his own ideals, stood patiently at his outpost, and not in vain. For the memory of him roused always a tender strain of harmony in her, oddly at variance with the discords of her complicated nature.

"I don't grudge it," she said, as she crossed the cheque. "At least, not now."

She wrote on a piece of paper: "*From T. Scott. For church repairs.*" She enclosed it with the cheque in an envelope, which she addressed. She immediately sent the old woman to the post with the letter.

"Before I regret it," she explained to herself.

She dismissed the matter from her mind, and turned her attention to business concerns. Hailsham was coming that afternoon, and she had yet to unlock two or three of her most tempting snuff-boxes, and put them casually on the counter, where his eye might at once light on them. She chuckled a little as she produced two of her favourites, an oblong, formed of plaques of Siberian onyx, mounted in chased and enamelled gold, and an oval Dresden, painted on all sides with landscapes in colours, and considered by connoisseurs to be a very fine specimen. The Limoges enamel, which she intended Hailsham to buy, was a small and exceedingly beautiful upright plaque of the Adoration of the Magi, in colours of green, blue, and bronze. Tamar left this also on the counter, at a suitable distance from the snuff-boxes.

She disliked extremely parting with this treasure, which she had hoarded for many years; but she knew well that any enthusiastic collector would be attracted by it, and would consider himself to be extraordinarily lucky if he obtained it at all.

For her own purposes she intended that Hailsham should have this chance; so that, if he availed himself of it, he might feel, with justice, that he had come off well in his dealings with her, and consequently be in a frame of mind which would help her in the task she had set herself, of acquiring information concerning his relationship with Adrian Steele. To obtain this advantage Tamar was willing to make the sacrifice of the Limoges enamel, and in this instance the loss of profit did not enter into her calculations. It was the loss of the lovely possession itself which sent a pang through her heart.

"For Adrian's sake. For no one else's, anywhere, or at any time," she said, staring at it steadily, and feasting her eyes on it in a last farewell.

She turned away from it with a sigh, and went into the inner room to console herself with putting some finishing touches to a small faked antique pendant. The shop-door bell rang three times before she answered it. Robert Hailsham stood waiting to be admitted. He greeted her, and glanced around the old shop, taking in the surroundings in a quick, interested survey.

"Well," he said, "and so this is your place. Why on earth haven't I come before? I've often stood and looked in."

"That's better than nothing," Tamar said quaintly. "Though it would not pay my rent."

He laughed and sat down on a chair by the counter.

"A real old-world place," he said with delight. "None of your modern burnished boudoir shops. Have you been here long, I wonder?"

"It all depends what you call long," Tamar answered indulgently, leaning with her elbows on the counter. "I was born here. It was my mother's business, and her father's before her. I never knew any other home, nor any other kind of playmates except the things in the shop. I never wanted any other."

"So you have literally had a whole life's experience with old-world treasures," he said, deeply interested.

She nodded.

"Yes," she said. "Before I was ten I knew more about precious stones than many a grown-up dealer. More about enamels too. My mother was an expert in enamels. Dealers as well as collectors sought her advice."

"And no doubt they seek yours now," Hailsham said, becoming more and more interested in her.

"Dealers occasionally do," Tamar replied. "But most amateur collectors think they know everything nowadays. Mercifully for dealers, they don't."

Hailsham laughed, and a pleasant, rather mischievous smile stole over Tamar's face. She was beginning to enjoy herself.

"Well," he said, "and now let us settle first about that wretched Dutch ship."

"Do you still want to get rid of it?" Tamar asked.

"Why, certainly," he answered. "I sent it to you for that purpose. I still hate the very thought of the thing."

"I have an offer for it for £120," she said. "Less my fifteen per cent. commission, you would receive £102 in exchange."

"A loss of £98," Hailsham said pensively. "A big loss."

"Yes, a big loss," Tamar agreed. "The price of folly, of course."

"I admit that," Hailsham answered, shrugging his shoulders. "But that little scoundrel angered me. I lost my temper and my judgment."

There was a pause.

"I understand, of course, that I have to pay for the luxury of losing my temper," Hailsham said finally. "But is this the best offer you can get me?"

"Yes," Tamar replied.

"Surely I ought to be able to get back twenty or thirty pounds more," he persisted.

"Well, why not try?" she suggested, as if the whole matter were of no concern to her. "You need not settle either one way or the other about my client's offer to-day."

"Upon my word, that's very nice of you," he said impulsively. "I'll just think it over for a day or two."

Suddenly he noticed the Limoges enamel plaque reposing temptingly on the counter.

"I say," he cried, "what a beautiful little bit of Limoges enamel you've got here."

"Yes, it's rather good," Tamar said carelessly.

"Rather good!" Hailsham repeated scornfully. "Why, it's simply splendid."

He took it to the light and examined it carefully, whilst Tamar went to the inner room to put the kettle on. She had decided that Hailsham should be invited to tea, and should be shown some of her choice stones, china, and other private treasures which were not for sale. When she returned to the shop, he asked her the price of the Limoges enamel.

"It has taken my fancy tremendously," he said excitedly. "I should like to buy it, if the price is at all within my reach."

Tamar held out her hand for it, and looked at it for a long time.

"I wonder whether the colouring *is* like the inside of a bell gentian," she said, half to herself, recalling Nell's comment.

"I don't know what a bell gentian is," he said. "But if the colouring is anything like this, it must be thunderingly beautiful."

She went on studying it without taking any notice of Hailsham. She was in fact struggling with her reluctance to part with this treasure. She longed to hurry away with it and lock it up in her safe. Hailsham, who was watching her, thought she was debating its value with herself, and would indeed have been surprised if he had known that his little adversary, Adrian Steele, was guiding the destinies of this coveted bit of Limoges enamel.

"Well," he said with a smile. "Is it perhaps priceless ?"

"The truth is, I have never priced it," Tamar said in a curiously strained voice. "I have always loved it, and kept it for myself."

He glanced at her with added interest, for there was no mistaking the note of pain in her voice ; and the distressed expression on her face dispelled from his mind any idea that she was feigning unwillingness, in order to enhance the value of her property.

"Ah, I must not deprive you of it, if that's the case," he said. "But I own I'm disappointed."

"You can have it," she said sulkily. "I give it up."

She added, still more sulkily :

"You can have it for £15."

"Fifteen pounds! Done!" he exclaimed in joyful surprise; and it was borne in upon him that, in spite of her claims to knowledge, she did not understand the value of Limoges enamels.

She let him think this. That was part of her plan, and a part of it which amused her immensely.

"Now," she said, "if you'll come into the inner room, I don't mind showing you some attractive jewels and antiques. You are evidently a real lover of these things, and not a mechanical collector. Ah yes, and here are one or two snuff-boxes which I put out for you to see. This one is rather rare—Siberian onyx—French eighteenth century. The South Kensington wanted that. They won't get it. Perhaps you'll bring it. I generally keep it in the safe."

Hailsham, who was brimming over with delight and pleasure, followed her eagerly, carrying the lovely little snuff-box in the palm of his right hand. As a collector, he was overjoyed at this unexpected opportunity of seeing her special treasures, and as an author, he was elated at the chance of learning more of her mind and character; for she appeared to him to have descended direct from the skies to furnish fodder for his next play. This thought, which had knocked softly at his brain on the day of the Meyntoun Moat sale, asserted itself now with greater insistence. And here, in her own shop, in her own setting, her countenance seemed to have some subtle, indefinable beauty which was more arresting than mere perfection of outline or feature. She was a Jewess. There could be no doubt about that. And she was a Roman empress as well. A little short, perhaps, but distinctly of that build. He knew that if he were a writer of fiction, he would never be able to describe her. He was right. Neither Hailsham nor any one else could ever have described Tamar's appearance, or her curious sulky charm.

As soon as they had settled down in the inner room, she unlocked the safe and produced various unset stones of startling loveliness, amongst them several opals which she dearly loved, a lumachella, and a rose-red tourmaline. She also took out two or three cases of jewelled rings of all sorts and sizes. Then, without any preliminaries, she opened to him her treasure-house of fascinating knowledge, and he sat entranced. When Tamar chose to let herself go on the subject of precious stones, she could be, as Adrian Steele had always said in the past, "superbly interesting—almost inspired." She had forgotten the existence of Hailsham, forgotten her plotting and planning, and was lost to everything save the ecstasy of wandering in those regions which to her were a true fairyland.

But suddenly, as she was fingering one of her favourite sapphires, an old teasing remark of Adrian Steele's thrust itself upon her remembrance.

"Transparency or no transparency, nothing will make me believe in that stone, Tamar. It is a bit of an old magnesia bottle. That's what it is, Tamar."

She heard his voice saying these words, and with her mind's eye she saw him pushing the beautiful sapphire contemptuously away with the rim of his eye-glasses. She broke off, recalled instantly from her far-off world, and reminded imperiously of the true object of her interview with Hailsham. She realized with sudden alarm that as yet she had learnt nothing from Hailsham about Adrian Steele, and that if she were not careful, the opportunity might slip from her, and that Nell Silberthwaite would get in front of her with that other playwright man. This would never do.

"Still, I have not really been wasting the time," she thought. "I have been tuning the instrument. But now I must strike the note which will make it respond."

She rang for the old woman to bring the milk for the tea, and poured out a cup for Hailsham, an unheard-of hospitality in her annals. She had the craft not to make any sudden change of bearing and behaviour. She showed him a specially fine ruby, and then unearthed some of her antique silver, amongst other things several Queen Anne rat tail snuff-spoons, which greatly took his fancy. Finally, she produced an exquisite sixteenth-century crucifix of gold, decorated with cloisonné enamel. She glanced at this, and nodded to herself.

"I got this some years ago at a sale in an old Catholic mansion in Somersetshire," she said dreamily. "I remember the sale well. And the place too. A beautiful thing, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes," he answered, turning it over delightedly in his hands.

"A place rather like Meyntoun Moat," Tamar continued, half to herself. "Not so perfect as Meyntoun Moat, though. But that was an exceptional old house, and an exceptional sale too."

"Well, so far as I am concerned, I hope it was an exceptional sale," Hailsham said, smiling good-naturedly. "And that brings me back to the subject of my folly and imprudence. Do you know, I think I'll decide to close with the offer of £120 for that Dutch ship, and have done with it."

"As you please," Tamar returned. "But why not take another look at it, and then think the matter over? You might feel inclined to keep it. It's good of its kind, and not too large. It is in this other safe. I'll get it out."

She half rose, but Hailsham prevented her.

"No, no," he said, with a short laugh. "I never want to see it again. As for keeping it, why, I should live in a perpetual state of irritation over the remembrance of the episode with that miserable little skunk, who isn't worth even a passing thought. No, I've made up my mind once and for all. I'll sell the Dutch ship, through you, for £120, less your fifteen per cent. commission, and wipe the loss off my slate."

"Very well," Tamar said. "I'll arrange the matter in a few days."

Then she took her plunge.

"I inquired about that little man amongst the dealers," she said. "People in my business have ways and means of getting information. I was warned not to have transactions with him."

"No, don't you risk any transactions with him," Hailsham exclaimed, roused at once. "He's dangerous, I can tell you."

"I was told," continued Tamar quietly, "that there is a rumour that he has got himself into difficulties with one or two of his clients. I forget the names. Names never mean anything to me."

"You didn't hear my name?" Hailsham asked excitedly.

"No," Tamar answered, shaking her head, and opening a little packet of mixed stones. "Certainly not. I should have remembered your name, because we were going to do business together. One doesn't, as a rule, forget business names."

He laughed at her remark, and said:

"Well, I don't mind telling you that I am one of those clients, and this will explain to you why I was so furious that he had the impudence to stand up to me over that Dutch ship. He knew perfectly well that I, at least, have found him out and that he's in my power. And yet he had the audacity to defy me—the audacity of a doomed man, I suppose."

"Doomed? What will happen to him then?" Tamar said, absent-mindedly, taking up a brooch, and beginning to remove one of the sapphires which she intended to replace by a 'doublet.'

"Oh, he will be prosecuted, of course, and convicted," Hailsham answered, watching her. "He's got himself into a perfect network. There's no escape for him; he can't get out. The cleverest counsel in the world couldn't get him out."

Tamar scarcely drew a breath. She was dreadfully anxious not to check Hailsham. She longed to ask a hundred questions. But she wisely refrained, and her self-control reaped a rich reward.

"May I ask what you are doing?" he said suddenly.

"Replacing a doublet with a real stone," Tamar said, with an innocent smile. "If you look carefully, you'll see the difference."

"I say!" he exclaimed. "How little outsiders know, don't they?"

"Yes," Tamar replied fervently, and with an inward laugh.

"But, to continue about Adrian Steele," Hailsham went on. "Could you possibly recall one or two of the names mentioned if you heard them again? For instance, Noble, Sanford, Cecil."

"No, I'm sure those weren't the names," Tamar said, shaking her head wisely.

"Well, there you see," Hailsham said excitedly. "The fact is, there are a whole lot of us. But I was the first to raise any doubts about him. He has had a long innings, though. He has been feathering his nest for years. But I found him out, and quite by chance."

Tamar longed to ask how he had found Adrian Steele out; but, having the wisdom of the serpent, she again refrained, and again was rewarded.

"It was simple enough," Hailsham continued. "It occurred in this way. I saw the fifth hundredth performance of one of my plays announced in the bills. 'Five hundred,' I said to myself, 'I didn't know it had reached that number.' So, out of curiosity, I looked up my returns, and discovered that I had only been paid for four hundred and seventy-three. After that I went into things."

"Naturally," Tamar said, in a matter-of-fact way. "Any one would."

"And now other people are following my example," Hailsham said. "A ball once set rolling, you know. Nothing can save him from ruin. There's no escape for him, except—"

He broke off and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I know what I should do in his place," he said half to himself.

Tamar did not look up, did not show a sign of interest. Her heart beat uneasily, but she went on steadily with her work; and Hailsham himself seemed lost in thought, as he played listlessly with a pair of saw-driven Georgian sugar-tongs which Tamar had not replaced in the safe.

After a long spell of silence, during which nothing seemed to be concerning her except the task on which she was engaged, Tamar took her second plunge.

"I don't pretend to know much about character," she said dreamily. "People have never interested me as much as precious stones—or any minerals, for the matter of that; but I could imagine that a man of that type would do things on a large scale. I suppose he has let himself in for hundreds of pounds."

"Hundreds!" Hailsham said excitedly. "Thousands are nearer the mark."

"Thousands?" Tamar repeated. "I didn't know that persons who wrote plays made thousands."

"Don't they, though," Hailsham answered, laughing.

He plunged into histories of successful plays which had had tremendously long runs in London, in the States, and in the Colonies. He explained to her about the handsome returns which popular dramatists received, and cited to her names which she had never heard, and circumstances which had never come within her ken. In ordinary life she would have been bored to extinction, and would probably have commanded him to leave off, or go. But her quick brain realized that she would glean some useful general information, if she listened carefully and patiently; and she therefore encouraged her unconscious victim by occasional nods of appreciative interest, or by some innocent question which deftly led him on to further details of the business side of the profession of play-writing. It was true he gave her no further particulars of his own affairs in connection with Adrian Steele. But she learnt quite enough on general lines to understand in what directions, and under what conditions, a dramatic agent might defraud his clients and not necessarily be found out at first. She saw the temptations to, and the opportunities for, dishonesty afforded by the circumstances, and the dangerous position in which Adrian Steele stood, now that some of his secret dealings had come, or were coming, to light. She bent over her task, apparently intent on the ring only, but congratulating herself with inward elation over the success of her interview with Hailsham, over the data with which he had involuntarily furnished her, and over the detailed report which she would be able triumphantly to make to Nell, who, in comparison with herself, had learnt next to nothing concerning Adrian Steele's affairs. At this comforting thought, a smile of quiet content lit up Tamar's countenance, and she felt that not in vain had she sacrificed her favourite bit of Limoges enamel.

"It was worth while," she said to herself. "It tuned the instrument."

Suddenly there came a ring at the shop bell. Tamar, who always disliked rising from her work, and never answered the shop door if she could press any one into the service, was just on the point of commandeering Hailsham, when she checked herself. Some impulse warned her not to send a deputy. She got up in her leisurely way, glanced round to make sure that she had locked up most of her valuables, nodded to Hailsham and passed out of the room, leaving the door ajar. When she opened the shop door, she understood why she had been prompted to come herself, for there at the entrance stood Adrian Steele.

"Don't come in, don't come in," she said in alarm. "I can't see you now. Come later."

"I can't come later," he answered. "If you send me away now, you send me away for ever. I want your help, Tamar; but it must be now—this moment. I'm in trouble, and I can't use my brain to think. Something has happened to my brain. I can't think. You are the only person who can think for me."

She saw at once the distress of mind and fatigue of brain written large on his face, and knew that she must admit him then and there, and do the best she could with the situation. Her ready resourcefulness, reinforced by her pity for him and by her pride at being thus asked for help, leapt to her aid. She stepped softly to the door of the inner room, turned the key of the lock, and thus made a prisoner of Hailsham. She stole back to the counter.

"Pass straight into the kitchen, Adrian," she said brusquely. "I have a client here who does not wish to be seen. I shall lose my deal if you spoil it for me."

"Of course I wouldn't for worlds spoil your deal for you, Tamar. That would never do, would it? But don't be long. You know I hate waiting," he said, with a smile.

She nodded, watched him safely out of the shop, and then, assuming a calmness which she by no means felt, she rejoined Hailsham, whom she found examining her favourite bits of Chelsea in the corner cupboard.

"I am sorry to have to disturb you," she said. "You shall see those another time, and the Battersea enamels too. But I have an eccentric client here who does not wish to be seen. I shall lose my deal if she comes across any one, and I have to bring her in here. I have left her in the passage at present. These people are most amusing. They come thickly veiled, and give false names. But I know them. I know this one."

"I'll be off," Hailsham exclaimed, catching up his hat. "It would never do to spoil your deal, would it? Especially after the splendid afternoon you've given me. I can't tell you how much I have enjoyed myself."

"I also have enjoyed myself," Tamar said.

"Next time you come I shall show you some other things."

"Meantime, off I go with my Limoges enamel," Hailsham said cheerily. "There are the three five-pound notes, by the way. Do you regret giving up your treasure?"

Tamar shook her head.

"No," she said with her curiously sullen smile, which had so much fascination in it. "And with regard to the Dutch ship, I'll send you the cheque for £102 in a few days, when I've arranged the matter."

"Or, better still, I'll come and fetch it," he said eagerly.

"Very good," she replied, with a friendly nod. "I shall expect you."

"Well, good luck to your deal," Hailsham whispered, as she led him into the shop. "Is she a duchess, I wonder? I say, what a good situation for a curtain!"

"Hush!" said Tamar, putting her finger up to her lips in indulgent warning.

The shop door closed after him. Tamar stood for a moment, waiting to be sure that the danger was over. At last the tension on her face relaxed, and she drew a breath of relief.

"He has come to me for help—to me, not to Nell Silberthwaite," she said, crooning to herself.

She went to the kitchen.

CHAPTER IX.

THE repairs to Richard Forest's church had begun in grave earnest, and the hole in the roof was being attended to at last, after much worry and delay. Richard Forest had written endless letters, and made innumerable journeys to the firm of contractors at Kineton, coming back always in an excited state of rage and disappointment. But now the worst was over, and he saw his efforts rewarded by the erection of a scaffolding inside and outside the church. He went about whistling happily, with a face so radiant with delight that one might have thought he had entered into a Promised Land. Old Mrs. Eustace found him gazing with ecstasy at the tarpaulin which now covered the terrible gap.

"Isn't it perfectly splendid?" he exclaimed joyously.

"Yes, sir," Mrs. Eustace answered, puzzled, but always unfailingly sympathetic. "Yes, sir."

She did not know what was perfectly splendid, but she did know that some one had to take an interest in the work now on hand, as well as in those trying early morning services which still continued to tax her loyalty to the utmost. Since there was no one else to meet this fresh demand, she rose grandly to the situation, and at frequent intervals during the day, in obedience to her young master's summons, abandoned the sacred precincts of her kitchen for those of the church. Skib, leaving his bone piously near the preaching-cross, generally crept in too; so that Richard was supported by the whole of his faithful little household.

"The villagers will care when they see their little church intact and beautiful, Mrs. Eustace," he said one afternoon.

"A miracle will have to happen before they care," she answered gruffly.

"Well, then, a miracle will happen," he said cheerfully. "That's simple enough."

"*Simple enough*," she thought. "Now, what does he mean by that?"

But she did not question him. She never questioned him, for she had found out that he was extraordinarily surprised and pained when she had not understood some of his remarks.

"Some one must pretend to understand the dear young master," she said to herself continually. And she had learnt to adopt towards him a mental attitude of silent acquiescence which, without her knowledge, was slowly ripening into a vague comprehension.

That same afternoon, for instance, when she was washing up the dishes, and thinking over his words, she reflected that he called all the trees and all the flowers miracles. She argued that if he called everyday things of everyday life miracles, he could not really think much of miracles, and that this accounted for him saying that they were simple enough. But, somehow, this explanation did not satisfy her.

"No, it isn't that," she said. "It's something else. I don't know what it is, but it isn't that."

The next day light came to her bewildered brain. She remembered that he prized and praised all the things which she called everyday things of everyday life, flowers, trees, green fields, clouds, waving grasses, sunsets, and silvery stars. She suddenly caught a distant glimpse of his mind and meaning. Then she understood that it was because he thought all these things so wonderful and miraculous, that he thought every other happening in life simple in comparison.

"That be it," she said triumphantly, wiping her forehead with her apron. "That be it."

At this moment of intellectual victory, Mrs. Eustace heard his voice calling her again into the church to share his raptures over the progress of the work. She hurried off excitedly, and took with her a letter which had come by the afternoon post.

"Yes, sir, the workmen be getting on, and no mistake," she said, gazing up at the roof. "I expect you've been frightening them, dear young master, with one of them shocking tempers of yours. I heard voices this morning. That I did."

"They were going to sleep, Mrs. Eustace," Richard said defiantly. "They deserved a good rating."

"And they got it," she said, with a twinkle in her eye. "Well, well, poor souls, they're making a good job of it, aren't they? We shan't know ourselves, sir. We shall be that grand. And I think them villagers will care. I think that miracle you spoke of will happen, dear young master."

The radiant smile which at once lit up Richard Forest's face more than rewarded her for the severe intellectual strain she had put upon herself.

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Eustace," he cried happily. "I am so delighted you agree with me."

He glanced at his letter, and saw that it was from T. Scott. His smile had passed into a perplexed expression of countenance, from which nevertheless a great tenderness was not absent.

"If there is a cheque inside," he said to himself, "this will be the fourth she has sent me."

There was a cheque inside, and a piece of paper with these few words written:

"*For church repairs, from T. Scott.*"

When the workmen had departed, and Mrs. Eustace had retreated to her kitchen, Richard Forest, according to his wont, knelt at his desk, closed his eyes, prayed, and meditated aloud.

"T. Scott has shown by her successive gifts that she did not regret her first gift," he said. "Thank Heaven for that. The spiritual impulse which prompted her to help me at the beginning, has not died down in her heart. She earns some money, unexpectedly perhaps. She remembers this lonely, dilapidated little church, and she is impelled to send an offering towards its restoration. Have I a right to question the source of her earnings? Have I a right to discourage in her these impulses of unworldliness which may lead her on to the large spaces of life and thought? Alas, I need counsel other than my own. It is not clear to me whether in rejecting these cheques I should not be doing a greater wrong than in accepting them and using them for a sacred purpose. Who knows, perhaps I am even torturing myself needlessly with doubts about her honourableness which have no real foundation in fact. It is true that she tried to drive a hard bargain with me over the pearl and ruby crucifix. But she repented, and gave me the benefit of her knowledge and experience. No one could no more. Is it fair on her that I should take it for granted that these cheques are necessarily the results of hard bargains, driven mercilessly with other people, in perhaps far greater distress than my own? No, it is not fair on her. I shall refuse to believe it. Better a thousandfold that I should be mistaken and misled, than that any word or action of mine should cause T. Scott to close the door of her heart against the knockings of her conscience. God will forgive me if my judgment has been wrong. But I should scorn to accept forgiveness from God or from any one, if I had sent her one step further out into the wilderness."

When at last he rose from his knees his face was calmer and his spirit serener. He went straight to the panelled room, closed the door, and took out from a locked drawer three of Tamar's cheques, to which he now added a fourth. He had cashed the first one for £19, Adrian Steele's cheque, which Tamar had given him in the church; but these others he had placed with the letters and papers which he prized. He had taken them out each day, turned them over, thought about them, and then, very tenderly, almost caressingly, replaced them in their niche, together with the half sheets accompanying them. These slips always bore the same legend: "*For the church repairs. From T. Scott.*" Nothing else. No word of greeting, no line of explanation, and no date. They were all for different sums, such odd sums too. One was for £4, 19s. 2d. Another one was for £7, 11s. 1d. Another one was for £6, 0s. 5d. And the last was for £3, 10s.

Richard smiled now as he looked at them. He had passed through great distress of mind over them all; but his battle was over for the moment, and he determined to endorse them and send them to the bank that very night. He signed his name to them all, and said: "*God grant that your gift may be blessed to you, T. Scott, and to the people of this village. And for my own part, I accept with a true joy the burden of any mistake which I may now be making.*"

He sealed them up in an envelope, and sat for some time thinking of Tamar, who since her visit to his church had more than ever pervaded his heart and brain. In some mysterious way T. Scott, as he always called her to himself, had become part of his life and of his gentlest concern; and in spirit he constantly crossed the threshold of her shop, and stood watching her anxiously with his mind's eye as she bent over the counter and conducted her business with her customers. Sometimes he pictured her in the chancel, gazing with sullen disgust at the deplorable condition of the church, and struggling in vain against her impulse of generosity.

But it was chiefly in her own setting that the vision of her rose before him; and although in so-called reality he had spent only a few minutes in that shop—troubled minutes too—nevertheless the place where she lived and worked, for good or for evil, had grown to be an endeared and familiar scene, easily conjured up by his imagination and not easily dispelled by his brain.

It was here that he saw Tamar now. Yes, he actually fancied that he saw her pushing that cheque-book away, and refusing to allow herself to part with any of her money. He heard her voice repeating the very words which she had spoken in the church: "*I assure you that I part most reluctantly with my money.*" He smiled happily as he witnessed her capitulation, and knew it to signify another step in the direction of unworldliness.

The picture faded, returned, remained, faded. Richard restored those slips of paper to their place amongst his treasures, and turned to the notes which he had been preparing for next Sunday's sermon. He did not for the moment feel inclined to work on it, and he laid it aside and began to examine a little water-colour painting he had lately finished of a blue vetch field which he had seen several months ago and dreamed of a few days ago. After he had dreamed of it, he did not rest until he had painted the memory of it.

He held up the lovely little picture to the light, and for a time seemed lost in the thoughts which it appeared to suggest to him. At last he put it back on the mantelpiece, but still stood looking at it with intentness. Then he murmured :

> "To see a world in a grain of sand,
> And a heaven in a wild flower."

His mind wandered to Blake as he spoke these words, and half absent-mindedly he opened a volume of the poems lying on his table, and turned over the leaves until he came to that wonderful outpouring, "*Composed while walking from Felpham to Levant.*"

"Ah, here it is," he said. "The double vision. I wonder what I should make of the double vision. I wonder whether I could paint that thought, as a thought."

He read some of it aloud.

> "With angels planted in hawthorn bowers,
> And God Himself in the passing hours.
> And before my way
> A frowning thistle implores my stay.

What to others a trifle appears
Fills me full of smiles or tears;
For double the vision my eyes do see,
And a double vision is always with me.
With my inward eye, 'tis an old man grey,
With my outward, a thistle across my way."

"I wonder, I wonder what I should make of it," he repeated, with a smile at the boldness of his intention. "Well, there's no reason why I shouldn't try one day when I'm in the mood. And William Blake, William Blake, you must just forgive my boldness. I can't help myself. I'm impelled that way. I'm—"

Richard broke off. He thought he saw a dim figure cross the room and fade away into vagueness.

"Ah," he said eagerly. "That strange presence once more. Am I never to be able to detain it —I who have no fears of this mysterious other world circling round us?"

He stood silent and motionless. He scarcely breathed. He waited in anxious expectation. He waited in vain. He shook his head mournfully, as if owning to his defeat. He tried to settle to his painting, and to fix his thoughts on this task which was always a joy to him. But for the moment he had lost all zest in it. He made another attempt to get on with his sermon, and with no better results. At last, hoping to allay the acuteness of his disappointment, he opened one of the old church books, and began to work doggedly at the task he had undertaken of deciphering the worn and precious old records. One of his predecessors had evidently had the same intention, but had wearied of the business and had stopped short after a few pages. Richard had determined to carry the matter through, and had become deeply interested in the intimate picture of the life in those bygone days presented clearly both by the entries of the births, marriages and deaths, and by the churchwardens' accounts. It was the churchwardens' accounts which were engaging his attention now. He deciphered the following:—

Largese to foure poore wretches.	4d.
gyven to thre wonded soljers.	7d.
gyven to traveler comying bye certificate	3d.
yteme of a ladere to ye roofe to fix with rodes Divers redes torne by ye fearfulle raging of ye winde	2s.
yteme for ye time in makynge accounts	2s.
yteme for ye monyes off ye saide accounts	3s.

Richard smiled at these last two entries, and leaned back in his chair.

"They took care of their own interests, those old fellows," he said with a laugh. "I see them. Yes, I assure you I see you, Abner Kindred, Richard Heberton, and Seth Woods. Well, now I must find out what you recorded in the next year. I hope plenty of largesses to other poor wretches, and no more damage to that thatched roof."

He turned over the pages and went on uninterruptedly, smiling now and again at the quaint words and spelling, until he came to the entry which had already engaged so much of his interest and attention, and which he had been intending to show T. Scott when she left him so abruptly.

It was this:—

Yteme off one faire and seemlie bible with claspes of brasse had off one Robert Girdellere off ye worshipfule Company off Stationers of ye City off London. 24s.

Richard stared and stared at it. It always fascinated him. Then, as he was dipping his pen in the ink, a curious thing happened. He felt a slight, almost imperceptible, tremulousness in the air, as when a delicate breeze rises suddenly on a still evening, touches lightly the frail grasses on the heath, and dies down once more into the encircling silence. He looked up instantly, but without any outward sign of eagerness or excitement. He saw that dim presence, undistinguishable as ever to his veiled eye, cross the room and begin to fade into the vagueness which always preceded its final disappearance. But, to his surprise and joy, this time there seemed to be an arrestment; and after a long interval of anxious waiting, the dim presence grew distincter and yet distincter, and Richard saw before him an old miserable derelict of a clergyman, in the dress of about the beginning of the nineteenth century, dull of eye, sly of expression, and obviously withered up in heart and spirit. He was carrying under his right arm, in a curiously furtive manner, a very old Bible, bound in brown leather, with brass corner pieces, a central boss, and brass clasps. With his left hand he tremblingly pointed to the church accounts; and at the same time these words were borne to Richard's brain strung to its highest tension:

"*Because you have understood. Because you have understood.*"

The vision passed away. Richard rose to his feet.

"Because I have understood?" he cried. "What have I understood?"

As he stood there waiting for an answer, suddenly the pitifulness of his own heart answered him.

"Poor old man, poor old man, poor old comrade," he whispered. "I believe that when you and the others first came here to this lonely little outpost, you meant as well as I now mean; but that the trial was too hard for you, as it may prove for me."

This is what Richard Forest had been saying to himself ever since he came to Herne. He had heard the bad records of the men who had preceded him, and knew that the position which he now held, had sunk into disrepute by reason of their continuous misdeeds. He had heard of neglect, indifference, apathy, ungodliness, drink, yes, and even of theft. But, although they had left him this legacy of dishonour, his thoughts of them had been tuned to pity and not to judgment.

He could see for himself how their natural faults of character had been fostered by the loneliness and grimness of the place; by the separation from all equal companionship of mind and spirit; by the necessity, inherent in every one, of finding an outlet of interests, good or bad, healthy or unhealthy. There were signs, to him pathetic signs, that one or two of them had at least tried the better part. There was the transcribing of the old registers, begun and abandoned: the carving of the communion table, begun and abandoned: notes for a historical treatise on the district, fragmentary studies in the dialect of the county, unused and cast aside with torn old hymn-books and psalters. He had, with his fine idealism, reverenced their early strivings and understood the underlying causes of their failure. He had vowed to himself, not once, but many times, that he would attempt to carry on their early strivings to a better fulfilment of what they themselves would have wished to be.

"And may some one be raised up to deal in the same manner with my early strivings and my failures," he said.

This had been Richard's attitude towards his predecessors. He was entirely unconscious of its gentleness, for it was part and parcel of his nature to dwell on the good rather than on the evil in people, on the beauties of a scene and not on any chance disfigurements. But now, as he heard echoing in his ears those words of the old clergyman, who had thus mysteriously visited him, he realized with a spiritual joyfulness the significance of their meaning. Yes, he had understood. His thoughts had therefore been granted a passport into that unknown, separated land, and the old man had appeared to him as a sign that his message of understanding had been received.

This was quite clear to Richard now. But it was not clear to him why the old man was carrying that Bible in that painfully deceitful manner, nor why he had pointed to the church accounts. There was no doubt in Richard's mind that he had pointed to the church accounts; and as to the Bible, he would recognize it again anywhere. An explanation flashed across his brain. He became exceedingly excited.

"The stolen Bible," he cried; "the valuable old Bible which disappeared years ago, and which—"

He broke off, rushed to the churchwardens' accounts, and put his finger on the last entry which he had been transcribing.

"This very Bible, this faire and seemlie bible with claspes of brasse," he exclaimed. "I see it all now. He stole it then—yes, he stole it—and he came—he came to tell me because—because I had—understood—because he knew that I—"

Richard sank back into his chair.

An hour afterwards Mrs. Eustace crept into the room to see whether all was right with the lamp, another of Richard's shocking habits being to allow the chimney to become black with smoke before he attempted to interfere with the disaster. He did not stir when she called his name and reproved him gently, as was her wont. She glanced at him, and noticed that his eyes were closed, and that his face was lit up with that amazing radiance which often filled her faithful heart with indefinable, anxious fears on his behalf. She stood by his side in silence. At last, to her immense relief, he opened his eyes at last and saw her.

"Mrs. Eustace," he said, in a voice which seemed to come from illimitable distance, "I have this evening been privileged to hold brief converse with one of the poor souls haunting this vicarage."

"Indeed, sir?" she said, with as much calmness and courage as she could summon, for she had secretly been dreading this inevitable moment when she would be obliged to hear definite news of the vicarage ghosts.

"Yes," he said, "and I feel so encouraged and hopeful."

"Ah, no doubt, no doubt," she said soothingly.

"Some day I will tell you," he added. "I should like to tell you. But not now."

"No, sir, not now," she repeated with fervour.

She hurried away, deeply thankful for this merciful postponement.

CHAPTER X.

WHEN Tamar had successfully manœuvred Hailsham out of the way she made for the kitchen, where she found Adrian Steele warming his hands by the fire.

"History repeats itself, Tamar," he said. "How many times in the past have I not come to warm my hands here, when you would not have a fire in the inner room; and how many times, needless to add, found the old woman asleep over her tea? There she is, you see. Here I am. And here you are. Apparently nothing is changed."

"Except that I do have a fire in the inner room now," Tamar said, with a ghost of a smile on her face.

"Ah, I'm glad to hear that," he said. "That is good news of a startling nature. How I wish that you could have prepared a second surprise for me, and introduced me to a really cheerful illumination. Never in my life have I seen such depressing gas, Tamar. Do you remember how I used to grumble at it in the old days? And you used invariably and very wisely to say: 'Why come?'"

"Perhaps I could equally well put the same question now," Tamar remarked grimly.

"Yes," he said, "that's quite true. You might. And I might make the same old answer. Do you remember it, I wonder?"

"*Necessity of spirit compels*," Tamar answered slowly. "Those were your words."

"Yes," Adrian repeated, "*necessity of spirit compels*. I needed you then, Tamar, and I need you now."

She had signed to him to follow her into the inner room; and when he stood there with her and glanced around at the well-remembered surroundings, of which he had at one time formed an important and a component part, he was overcome by memories and thoughts, and moved to the very recesses of his heart.

"Tamar, Tamar," he cried, holding out his hands, "why did I ever leave you? This was my home, my true place."

That was all he said, but his words were charged with love and longing, regret, remorse, tenderness and infinite trust. A light came into Tamar's eyes, and something in her soul broke through its confining barrier of ice.

"Take your old seat," she said, pointing to a little Jacobean couch which had always been indisputably his. "I don't mind telling you that I have often seen a vision of you resting there."

"Thank you, Tamar," he said gently.

"I haven't wanted to see it," she added.

"That I can perfectly understand," he said with a smile. "But you couldn't help yourself. I have so often been here in spirit."

He sank back in the couch, made no further remark, but fidgetted restlessly with his eye-glass cord. Tamar knew that he was struggling with his reticence, and for some time did not attempt to disturb him. But when she saw that he made no headway, and that every moment he looked increasingly worn and ill, she determined to take the risk of beginning.

"Is it so hard for you to tell me why you want my help?" she said slowly.

"Yes, Tamar," he answered.

"It is difficult for me to understand why you, with your own strength and pride of brain, should want any one's help," she said.

"Ah, but that's just it," he said. "My strength of brain has gone, and my pride of brain is broken."

"Probably you are only tired," she said. "You want a little rest, perhaps."

"No, it isn't that," he answered, shaking his head. "It's more than that. You see, when I got home from Meyntoun Moat the other day, I found that my little girl, my little Alpenrose, had been taken ill, from meningitis. I arrived just in time to help nurse her through the crisis. We nearly lost her."

He paused a moment, and shuddered at the recollection of the agony through which he had been passing.

"The anxiety has told on me, Tamar," he said. "I have lost the power of thought and concentration, at the very time when I need it to unravel some difficult business complications. But for the shock of little Alpenrose's illness, I might have worked through these difficulties by myself. I like to think I might have done so. This sounds, and is ungracious, but I know you will understand."

"Yes, I understand," Tamar said. "I don't bear you any grudge for not coming to ask my advice unless necessity compelled you. I should have been just as unwilling myself."

"I believe you would have been," he said.

"I don't mind how reluctantly you have come, as long as it is to me that you have come, and not to any one else," Tamar said.

"I could have come to no one else, Tamar," he said slowly. "I might have thought of one or two others with a passing thought, which would have ended always in you."

His words were as rare jewels to her, but she gave no outer sign of the value she placed on them.

"If my little darling Alpenrose had died," he continued, "nothing would have mattered. I should have let things take their own course unchecked. I should not have troubled even to attempt to straighten out my difficulties. But there was Alpenrose."

"Do you love her so much?" Tamar asked.

His face brightened up at once.

"I love her with all the best that is in me, Tamar," he said gently. "My little rose—my little Alpenrose. Look, here's this little miniature of her. Do you see how fair she is? Her eyes are gentian blue, aren't they? And she goes dancing about like the little fairy that she is. No, if she had died, nothing would have mattered. But, since she has lived, I must try to save my honour for her sake."

Tamar, who had been studying the lovely little miniature which he had put into her hands, now returned it to him.

"Children have never interested me," she said abruptly. "But you always loved them, didn't you?"

"Always," he answered wistfully. "And this one—my own little one—beyond the power of telling."

"Well, we must try and save your honour for her sake," Tamar said. "You—don't—"

She hesitated, but continued:

"You don't speak of your wife. Doesn't she count at all?"

"Oh yes," he answered, a little stiffly. "She counts. My wife counts."

There was a long period of silence, during which Tamar showed no faintest sign of impatience or weariness. She was busily engaged in thinking over the points which she had learnt from Hailsham, and planning how to conceal her knowledge from Adrian, and yet to use it for eliciting facts from him. Her heart beat with secret pride and excitement that he had come to her and not to Nell Silberthwaite. If he had not loved her, he would never have come to her. His own words echoed back to her: "I could have come to no one else, Tamar. I might have thought of one or two others with a passing thought which would have ended always in you."

She repeated them to herself many times, and basked in their meaning.

At last Adrian Steele drew some letters from his pocket, glanced at them, and then reluctantly handed them to her.

"Read them all, Tamar," he said, his face drawn and strained with the effort he was making to conquer his secretiveness. "They present the key of the whole situation."

They were Hailsham's letters, which had given the first signal of alarm that danger and disaster were at hand.

Tamar read them, studied them and sat staring at them.

"I suppose it's true," she said at length.

He nodded his head.

"Is he the only one?" she asked.

"No," he answered. "There are — many others."

"Are they all on the scent?" Tamar inquired.

"Two or three," he replied gloomily. "And the rest will follow."

"You must have enjoyed doing it," she said thoughtfully.

"Yes, I have," Adrian Steele said, brightening up a little. "How well you understand, Tamar. It is a comfort to be with you."

"You see, I should have enjoyed doing it myself," she said, with her sullen smile. "Of course, I don't know details. But, even as an outsider, I can imagine possibilities and openings of—a tempting nature."

He laughed softly.

"The one and only Tamar," he said; and he sank back on the couch with a sigh of relief that he had broken the ice and could now put his mind fearlessly in touch with Tamar's mind.

"This Hailsham," he said, "is the most dangerous of the band. Perhaps you remember that man at the Meyntoun Moat sale, with whom I had that duel over the Dutch ship. Well, he was Hailsham."

"Yes, I remember the man," Tamar said innocently.

"I had received his third letter, and it had upset me," Steele continued. "So when you sent me that catalogue, Tamar, that unmistakable symbol of your forgiveness, I thought I would go and forget my worries at Meyntoun Moat, and have a bit of our old comradeship again. And there I found Hailsham, to my surprise and disgust. So I did a bit of prancing over that Dutch ship—probably the last bit of prancing I shall ever do. And mightily I enjoyed it! It was stimulating to me to see him become more and more angry, as I became more and more cool."

"Yes, it was," Tamar said, with a laugh. "I enjoyed it myself immensely."

"Of course, he knew I was defying him," Adrian went on. "And when I walked off leaving him in possession of the Dutch ship at £200, I really felt I had had a good run for my money."

"Or rather you should say for his money," Tamar remarked, with a soft chuckle.

"Yes," Adrian said, laughing too. "That's more accurate."

"I was proud of you," Tamar said. "And now that I know in what relationship he stands to you, I'm still prouder of your coolness and courage."

"Ah, I thought you would be," he said, his face lighting up with pleasure. "I said to myself at the time that, if you knew the circumstances, you would—well, rather admire me for the part I was playing."

"You were right," Tamar said.

"Of course I was right," he said. "I know you just as you know me. We know each other—and love each other."

"Yes," Tamar said. "I suppose we do."

He smiled. It was so like Tamar to put it in that way.

"Hailsham has always hated me because I have despised his particular form of so-called talent," he said, after a pause. "That alone would make him extra dangerous. But so far as money goes, he is not the client whom I have—"

He hesitated. Tamar nodded encouragingly. He went on.

"Whom I have taxed—yes—I think that is the suitable and just word—taxed to the greatest extent. 'Taxed,' you understand clearly, Tamar, for valuable services which could not be paid for—well, in the ordinary way."

"I understand perfectly," Tamar said. "But now you must be quite frank with me, Adrian, and tell me whom you have 'taxed' to the greatest extent, for we had better go into the whole matter without further delay."

There was another long period of silence, but at length he made up his mind to disclose the details of his affairs.

"John Noble is the client to whom I might be said legally to owe the largest amount," he said. "About £15,000. But though I have had reason to believe that he too was on the track, perhaps I am mistaken after all. For he called at my house to see me this afternoon, and left a note to say that the arrangements for his next play were in my hands as usual. That doesn't point to distrust, does it?"

"It points to knowledge and forgiveness, I should say," Tamar remarked half to herself.

"To knowledge and forgiveness," Adrian repeated, staring straight in front of him.

Tamar did not heed him. Her thoughts had flown suddenly to Nell Silberthwaite, for an unerring instinct of jealousy whispered to her that this attitude of Noble's was due to Nell.

"She told me herself that Noble had thanked her for reminding him of the debt which he owed to Adrian Steele, and said she had done him a greater service than she knew," Tamar thought. "I depreciated what she had done, because I was jealous. But now it speaks for itself. Yes, she has done a big thing. A triumph for her over me when she learns it. Perhaps she need not learn it, though. Certainly not through me."

Later, a more generous idea took possession of her.

"Yes, she must learn it, and through me," she said to herself. "I shall hate telling her. But, if we are going to be fair to each other, she ought to be told. Besides, there is no reason why I should be jealous. It was to me, and not to her, he came for advice. Yes, she ought to be told. And Adrian ought to be told that he owes this service to her. But not now. It would thrust him back into himself at once if he knew that we had learnt anything of his affairs, except through him."

She was right. Very little would have been wanted to check his confidences even now, in this hour of his need. The effort of speaking about John Noble had been almost too much for him; and Tamar's remark, that perhaps Noble knew and had forgiven, brought back to him in a flash of painful intensity the memory of that friendship and close intimacy which he had ruthlessly betrayed.

"Let us pass on from Noble," he said, in a low, strained voice. "I cannot speak of Noble. I have always loved Noble, and yet I could not spare him. I have always loved him, Tamar. Why could I not spare him?"

With something like a groan of pain he covered his face with his hands; and Tamar, impelled by a true chivalry, stole out of the inner room to the shop where she sat motionless behind the counter: a sure sign that she was suffering. When she returned, she found that he had recovered his composure, opened his portfolio and arranged his papers methodically on the table, in the old neat fashion which had always been characteristic of him.

"Now about Noble," he said unflinchingly. "He may know, or he may not know, Tamar. But let us for the moment put him out of the reckoning, and consider those others. Hailsham I have 'taxed' up to about £1,700—perhaps rather more. Sanford and Cecil I have 'taxed' to the amount of £6,000 and £4,000 each. Here are their accounts as presented by me to them, and there are my own private versions of those accounts. You see I have kept two sets of accounts. A dangerous but an interesting habit.

Now, one of my ideas is that with the help of my own money, I might be able to—well, cover up tracks. You see, I've saved a large sum of money. It isn't as if I were penniless. I have saved £15,000—out of these taxes."

"Saved £15,000!" Tamar exclaimed, the Jewess in her roused to appreciation of the sum and concern for its safety. "But what a pity that you should have to sacrifice any of it. I should dislike doing so extremely, even in these particular circumstances. Very reluctantly have I parted with my money at any time, as I dare say you remember."

"Yes, I remember," Steele said, smiling in spite of himself. "I remember well."

"I should certainly never dream of sacrificing a farthing for any scheme, unless I could see clearly that it was worth while," Tamar said severely.

"No, I'm sure you wouldn't," he said, with a laugh. "If you did sacrifice your money for any scheme, one would at least be sure that you had made up your mind that there was very little or no risk involved. But with me it is altogether different. I know you think that all people who touch their capital are both insane and immoral. Perhaps they are. But I have no choice, Tamar. You will soon see that. A crafty and judicious expenditure of that money may save me—and may not. But I must risk it in either case. A year or two ago, if this thing had been sprung upon me, I am confident I could have averted the disaster. This last year I've been — well — I've been reckless and careless — especially with Hailsham. Yet I knew all the time that I was playing with fire, in his case. I have a suspicion that my brain got tired of continuous prosperity, and demanded from me a crisis."

"Well, you've certainly supplied your brain with one now, haven't you?" Tamar said, with a smile which had grave anxiety in it.

Then without further delay, she gave herself up to the task of studying his accounts, his notes, his statements and other papers relating to his dealings with his clients. She found that she was tremendously helped by the practical knowledge and general information she had gleaned from Hailsham; for she was able to question Adrian Steele in a way which drew from him definite facts and explanations such as he would never have vouchsafed on his own account.

She saw that he had been appallingly unscrupulous. He had eliminated matinées, cut off ending weeks of provincial tours, left out the whole returns from some of the obscure towns in America, and annexed, in many instances, the greater part of the fees for translation rights. As she got a stronger grasp of the complications, it began to dawn on her, with an ever-increasing certainty, that Hailsham was right, and that Adrian had become entangled in a mesh from which there was no escape. But she did not allow him to see the faintest sign of her amazement and discouragement. She used the very best of her clever resourcefulness to try and hit on some way of substantiating his claim that the deficits, especially in the more recent statements, were merely arrears and outstandings which were now in process of being collected.

She scribbled out schemes and rejected them, one by one, as impossible. With great reluctance she attempted to apportion that £15,000 in such a manner as to cover up tracks. But the situation appeared to her hopeless. And in any case £15,000 was not enough for that purpose. Yet not a single comment of doubt passed her watchful lips. On the contrary, she turned to him and said :

"I see plainly that I shall have to join the company of the insane and immoral, and encourage you to take out your capital."

"Ah, Tamar, I knew you would come round when you had got the hang of the thing," he said ; and he rose and walked up and down the room, looking now at a piece of Capo di Monte, and now at an old bénitier hanging on the wall. It struck her how curiously detached he had suddenly become from his own affairs. He seemed far more interested in the antiques.

He sat down after a time, and she noticed that he ceased to make suggestions, or to exert his brain to any great extent. Then it was that she realized with a tender pitifulness, which increased her reawakened deep love for him, that he was worn out, and mentally unable to cope with the disaster which confronted him. She remembered of old that he hated any allusion to his mental or physical fatigue; and she pretended to ignore his passiveness, and continued to behave towards him as if he were collaborating with her in this labour, instead of leaving it to her alone.

But when, later on, she asked him a question about one of Sanford's plays, which, to her joy, apparently had a clean record, and could therefore safely be sent in as an example of Adrian's 'honourable dealings,' she saw that he was fast asleep.

For quite half an hour she scarcely moved. She touched books, letters and papers with a noiselessness of which no one except herself would have been capable. At last, when the lapse of time had made it clear that he was in a deep sleep of exhaustion, she rose, crept like a mouse out of the inner room, and returned with a soft warm shawl which she spread over him. Then she fed the fire. She lifted each piece of coal with studied care, and glanced anxiously at Adrian to reassure herself that she was not disturbing him.

So Tamar watched over him, guarding him from all ill, as she would fain have guarded him from the disaster which she clearly saw was threatening his outer circumstances. There he rested, in his own place, in his own niche in the inner room; and as she bent over the little masterful presence, and looked at the keen intellectual face, she knew for certain that she had never banished him from the niche in her heart of hearts, and that the love with which she had struggled and battled these seven long dreary years had but been gathering added strength, against which no further resistance was possible. But she did not wish to resist.

She was thankful, thankful to give in at last. Yes, he had spoken true words. He and she were one. They were comrades by nature, meant for each other. They knew each other through and through, and no mere details of chance could alter this root fact, either for him or for her. Alpenrose, his little fairy daughter, might claim the purest, tenderest part of his heart: his wife might claim the inner shrine of the temple: Nell, or any other woman, might claim a secret altar within the sacred precincts; but she, Tamar, held the key which unlocked the clasped book where her name, and her name only, was written in imperishable characters. She knew that, as surely as she knew that his name was engraven in her heart, and set in precious stones found in rarest rock, and that no tyranny of soul and spirit which he had exercised on her in the past: no scorn and cruelty which he had shown her when he had wearied of the task of conquering her sullen temperament: no estrangement, however long drawn out: no memory of humiliated pride, and no triumph of mental rebirth could, in essence, separate her from him, or him from her.

They belonged to each other by reason of their natures, their outlook, their methods, their aims and ambitions. This very predicament in which he now found himself, might well have been hers, given the same conditions and the same possibilities: for their temptations, tacitly admitted by them both, had always been identical.

She shook her head sorrowfully for herself and her own dishonourable tendencies, as well as for those of Adrian Steele. She wondered whether in union, since they loved each other, they could have kept each other in check; or whether they would only have accentuated each other's failings, and prepared for themselves a double disaster. Or would they have been able to pursue their chosen course with added carefulness, and thus save themselves from the disgrace of ever being found out? Which would it have been? She could not say. But at least they would have been together, and if ruin were to have been their portion, they could have faced it side by side. Whereas now, he stood alone, and she stood alone. She had not even the right to share his misfortunes.

"But why shouldn't I make the right?" she said to herself almost fiercely. "Yes, I will make the right. If it's true that money can help to solve the problem, what is there to prevent me from adding some of my own money to that £15,000, so as to raise a sufficient sum at once to pay off all the arrears, and with accumulated interest too? There is nothing to prevent me—nothing, except my own reluctance to part with my money. But I could overcome that for his sake, if I could make sure that money would save and re-establish his honour."

This was her thought one minute, and the next minute her love had soared higher. She would sacrifice her money on the barest chance of rescuing him from his difficulties. And now her love took an eagle's flight: she would sacrifice her money on no chance at all that either he or she could see. So in this way, at least, she could link her life with his, if only for a passing crisis.

With an excitement which had something truly pathetic in it, she began to count up her considerable investments, and to plan how she could best realize on some of her valuable antiques. Yes, she would part with this, she would part with that. One or two of the dealers would only too gladly secure some of her treasures; and Bramfield, her jewel-merchant friend, would, of course, buy her rubies and her finest pearls. In the midst of her calculations, she had a sudden attack of misgiving, and turned again to Adrian's accounts and statements to satisfy herself that there was some faint hope of warding off the danger by money. But soon all personal concern was again swept away in sorrowful pity for his plight and in a passionate determination to stand by him at all costs.

"No, he shall not be allowed to lose hope as long as I can keep hope alive in him," she said. "He must be encouraged to believe that we can straighten things out. If I put my money into the venture, he will believe it."

She glanced at him, and she shuddered a little.

"No, he shall not be allowed to lose hope," she said. "If he loses hope, nothing remains for him except—"

She broke off. Hailsham's words came back to her: "*If I were Adrian Steele, I know what I should do.*"

"No, no—not that," she whispered; and she covered her face with her hands, in an effort to shut out the vision which rose before her.

The shop door rang. She heard it, and this time hastened to answer it, so as to prevent a repetition of the jarring sound which might arouse Adrian Steele from his sleep. She stole out of the inner room and closed the door. She found her jewel-merchant friend, Christopher Bramfield, in the shop.

"T. Scott," he said eagerly, "I thought I must just look in upon you for a few minutes. I want you to see this opal, which will delight your heart and eyes. I myself have never seen one that I like better. Isn't he a handsome fellow?"

"Yes," she said, taking it mechanically in her hands and holding it up to the light.

"And this red tourmaline," he said. "What do you think of it? Isn't it amazingly like a very fine ruby?"

"Yes," Tamar answered, without interest or enthusiasm.

"And here I have a few choice little rubies of finest water," he went on. "I know you love to see them all together."

He opened a little packet, and displayed about a hundred little rubies of extraordinary brilliancy. He poured them like a magic cascade on to a piece of tissue paper, and with a tiny pair of forceps separated them out from each other. At another time Tamar would have been thrilled with delight, for she dearly loved to feast her eyes on a glittering mass of precious stones. But to-day she just glanced at them, and nodded her head with listless approval.

"Aren't you well, T. Scott?" Bramfield said, staring at her in disappointment, for this was not the T. Scott to whom he was accustomed: the T. Scott who worshipped precious stones and whose greatest delight was to drop in at Ludgate Circus, where he had his offices, and sit enraptured, whilst he showed her diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and every kind of precious or semi-precious stone.

"Aren't you well?" he repeated.

She did not seem to hear or heed his question.

"Mr. Bramfield," she said dreamily, "if I want to sell some of my stones, I suppose you will take them from me, or arrange about them?"

"Sell some of your stones?" he asked in astonishment. "Well, of course, if you want to sell them, I'll do anything you wish. That you know well, don't you? But it's scarcely credible."

"I want to sell them," she said doggedly.

"Well, I'd better see them now," Bramfield said, making for the inner room.

"No, no," Tamar said hastily. "Not now. Don't go in there now. Some one is asleep there."

"Who is it?" he demanded.

"That's my affair, Mr. Bramfield," Tamar said proudly.

"I beg your pardon, T. Scott," he said humbly.

He replaced his jewels in his pocket, and was preparing to be off, when he suddenly fumbled in his coat pocket, and brought out a little box.

"By the way," he said, "Willoughby wrote, in response to my letter, that he *had* bought those rubies from a young clergyman by name of Forest. Here they are. They're not bad; but the colour is unequal, isn't it? And there are pretty bad feathers in them. Still I agree with you that they are attractive in their way. Well, I'll go now. And about the stones, you know I would do anything for you, don't you? But don't sell them. Take my advice. Keep them. If you are in difficulties, just remember that you have a friend who'd never fail you."

Tamar nodded sulkily, and Bramfield hurried off, but not without a puzzled and anxious glance towards that inner room. She watched him disappear, and stood for a moment contrasting his tall and handsome presence with that tired and broken little figure in the inner room. She had made her choice between Bramfield and Steele years ago, and had held to it unflinchingly, throughout every phase of her desolation. Nell had passed on and found consolation and strength in the love of another man; but she, Tamar, had never passed on. If any one could have helped her to forget, it was Christopher Bramfield, who had loved her, wanted her for his wife, and when she had refused him, remained her true and honourable friend. But she could not pass on. She had waited, unconsciously, perhaps; yet she had waited.

"Yes," she said aloud, "I have waited."

As she spoke, she suddenly became aware of the crucifix rubies which she had wished to possess, and which she was now holding unnoticed in the palm of her right hand. She looked at them, and her thoughts sped instantly to Richard Forest.

"Something set apart," she said.

She put the stones into her pocket-book.

"What would he say about all this cheating of Adrian's, I wonder?" she asked herself.

"Well, well, that's neither here nor there," she answered herself brusquely. "It's not his affair."

But she could not immediately banish Richard Forest from her mind, and her thoughts lingered awhile with him in that lonely vicarage, in that desolate little hamlet, cut off from the activities of the world. He had written to say that he had begun the repairs of the church, and that he hoped she would come and see what was being done with her gifts, which had made him exceedingly happy. She remembered this now, and she smiled.

"Adrian would be amused if he learnt that his cheque for £19 was helping to repair a church," she said. "But he would not grudge it to Richard Forest—if he knew him."

Suddenly an idea presented itself. That desolate little place would be a safe retreat for any one in trouble. How would it be to persuade Adrian to go there out of reach and in seclusion, whilst she tried to arrange his affairs? So far, one thing only was clear to her in the intricate problem confronting her. It was this: he must be prevented from seeing any of these people who were pursuing him. He was, in his present condition, too broken to hold his own against them. He must be urged to rest and recover himself in circumstances which would ensure him freedom from harassing interviews and hostile encounters. Yes, it was a good idea to send him to Richard Forest.

With a smile of tender protectiveness, Tamar stole back to her post. She fed the fire, and kneeling down, added another warm covering to the shawl which she had spread over Adrian Steele. The late evening wore into the night, and the night into the dawn. He still slept, and Tamar still watched with untiring and anxious care.

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN Adrian Steele awoke from his long sleep of exhaustion, he was at first amazed to find himself in the inner room of Tamar's shop. But gradually his ideas arranged themselves, and he remembered how utter weariness of brain had crept over him whilst he was trying to explain to her his complicated affairs, how he had heard her later questionings as in a dream, vaguely, and how, finally, he had heard some kind of murmur which did not reach him in any intelligible form. Then followed oblivion, from which he now emerged as the clock was striking the hour of five.

Yes, here he was in Tamar's home again, amongst all the antiques which had always interested him in the past. How natural it was to see them. How natural, too, to be resting on the little Jacobean couch. And there was undoubtedly Tamar bending over her roller desk. A comfortable fire in the room too: an extraordinary phenomenon, that. This, oddly enough, impressed him more than anything else in the situation. It amused him fearfully, but touched him too.

"She has been ruining herself in coals for my sake," he thought.

"Tamar," he said aloud.

Tamar rose from her chair and came to him.

"I'm glad you've awakened," she said. "I've been anxious about you."

"Did you think I was dead?" he said. "Well, you see I'm not. A tired, worn-out brain; not a dead body. But perhaps there is not much difference. Look here, Tamar, I want to say something to you. You have been ruining yourself in coals all the night, to keep me warm. I tremble to think what you've spent in coals for my sake. Thank you. Very handsomely have you behaved. I shouldn't have thought it of you, but I've been mistaken. One of my many mistakes, Tamar. And how about some coffee? I think I'd better make that. You were never good at making coffee. Other virtues you had, but not that!"

She smiled to hear his old teasing tone again, and pointed to the coffee-pot which she had put ready for his use.

"I knew you'd want coffee, and I knew you'd make that remark," she said, with a soft laugh.

"There is very little about me that you have not known," he said. "When I look back—well, it's no use looking back—or forward. I tell you I'm fearfully, frightfully happy to be here again. Let us enjoy this present moment. But we can't enjoy it without milk, Tamar. Now don't tell me that because you've been extravagant in coal, you must be stingy in milk! Shall I fetch it from the well-known empty larder?"

She laughed and nodded. She was frightfully happy herself.

He sprang up from the couch, and was passing through the kitchen, when he turned round and surveyed his surroundings.

"Tamar, you've got a number of new things which you must explain to me," he said. "And I must also demand that the iron safe be unlocked, and that you show me your own private precious stones, including that superb piece of magnesia bottle which you fondly believed to be a fine sapphire. By the way, did you put it in your book?"

"Go and fetch the milk," she said, with her sullen smile. "We'll unlock the safe when we've had some coffee."

He went off, and returned with a milk jug and some scones on a plate.

"Aha, I have found some old friends which will toast nicely," he said boyishly. "Many a time I've thought of these scones, Tamar, and regretted them exceedingly. They used to tempt me to eat when nothing else would. Do you remember?"

"Yes," she said, watching him closely as he began the preparations for breakfast, of which he appeared to have taken entire charge. She was thinking how amazing it was that he was able in this way to detach his mind from his anxieties and take his part in the set of circumstances provided for him at the moment, by fate.

She knew it, of course, to be only a merciful suspension, and realized that, at any minute, a peremptory knock of summons would come to the door of his brain. But meantime he was undisturbed and unharassed, and she was beyond all telling grateful and proud that she, and no one else, had been chosen to accord him this reprieve.

"Let's open the safe now, Tamar, before you turn sulky," he said gaily, in the midst of toasting a scone. "You used to have trays and trays of rings, and boxes full of enamelled watches, and an unfailing supply of cameo brooches for the Americans. I should like to see everything you have—rings and watches and vinaigrettes and necklaces and purses of beadwork and pomanders—everything—and above all, your stones, especially your rubies. Out with them, Tamar. Put them all on the table where we can see them properly. You always hated doing that, didn't you? And I always hated having to poke my head into the safe. That's right. Why, you have improved! You're quite obliging! Ah, there's my old friend, the piece of magnesia bottle! What a fine specimen! I should know it anywhere—even on the marble floor of heaven."

She did not speak a word as she brought out all her treasures and laid them on the table, but she was secretly enraptured to hear once more his playful teasing of her, which had been his own peculiar and characteristic form of making love to her. She had longed to hear it all these dreary years, and now that the music of it broke upon the paralyzing silence, she realized all it had meant to her in the past. Here was his gentle fun again, his boyishness, his lovableness, his charm, and added to this, his trust in her and his love for her and his happiness in being with her. There was no mistaking that. Adrian, as he divided himself between his 'domestic duties' and his delight over her possessions, was the picture of happiness.

"Here's your coffee, my Tamar," he said. "Made in my best fashion. Good gracious, what a beautiful pendant! I wonder where you got that from. And here's your scone. Now you can't find any fault with the toasting of it, so don't try. I say, that's a fine ring, and no mistake. One of your best rubies, I suppose. Why, I've forgotten the sugar. No, don't interfere, Tamar. You don't really think I need to be told where the sugar is kept in this establishment? Of course I remember that it's in yon black cupboard, in the ugly old ginger jar which I never allowed you to sell. Woe unto you if you've sold it now."

He opened the black cupboard, and there stood the old ginger jar in its accustomed corner. He took it in his hands, put it on the table, and turned round slowly to her.

"How was it I missed my way, I wonder?" he said, half to himself. "Can you tell?"

She made no answer. She pretended to test the hinges of an old porcelain snuff-box.

"I was a fool," he said, with intense sadness. "Yes, I was a fool, and did not realize that I had found my true home, my true mate. If I had realized it, all the tyranny of my nature would have broken down, and you would not have learnt to hate me."

"I did not learn to hate you, Adrian," she said in a low voice. "I have tried—and failed."

"Tamar, Tamar," he cried, "I have never really loved any one but you—none of the others really—neither Nell—nor—nor my wife—yes, I say it—I say it because it is true—true. You've been the one I've loved, and I have been mad to lose you—I—"

He broke off, for at that moment his leather paper-case fell down from Tamar's desk, with a thud, to the floor. He glanced at it, and his spell of forgetfulness came to a sudden end. He stooped and picked it up, and Tamar collected the scattered documents. A look of great pain and fear came over his countenance as he watched her. He seemed to shrink into even frailer form and tinier stature.

"I suppose you have made nothing of my—my impossible complications," he said slowly.

"Oh yes, I have," Tamar answered firmly. "I made a careful study last night of your position. I'm not sure yet, but I think I do see a way out. Mercifully there's your capital. I'm quite reconciled now to your parting with it. And I go farther. As you have not enough money saved to reimburse these 'taxes' of yours, I am ready to put some of my money into the venture."

"Your money, Tamar?" he exclaimed in joyful surprise.

She nodded.

"Your money?" he repeated excitedly. "If you are willing to do that, then you must indeed believe that there is a fair chance of dealing with the situation."

"Yes, I do believe it," she said. "You know perfectly well that I don't part with my money lightly. No one would get me to."

"You put fresh courage into me, Tamar," he said, holding out both his hands. "You make a new man of me. Last night I believed that I had had my innings, and that the game was up. But if you think that there may possibly be some solution to the problem, why, there must be. For after my own brain, which has failed me—yes, I know it has failed me—yours is the only other brain which I could and would trust. You wouldn't mislead me, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't mislead you," she said slowly. "I am prepared to raise three or four thousand pounds. I shall see it all back, with interest at 5 per cent., I am confident. No, rather say 6 per cent."

"Any per cent. you like!" he exclaimed. "The great point is that you believe there is a chance of squaring matters. If I can only get out of this network, I can soon pay off the loan. I can still make large sums of money, even if I have to run straight. And I intend to run straight. I made that vow to myself when I was battling for my little girl's life. Of course, any per cent.

you wish! How like you to think of that! But you are quite right. Business is business. Always the old Tamar, I see."

"Yes," Tamar said.

She had turned her back to him for the moment, and he did not see the expression of true sacrifice on her face as she accepted from him the usual imputation of avariciousness, which she had, on this occasion at least, deliberately assumed in order to mislead him. But she was rewarded by the success of her secret plan. He was reborn.

"Yes," she said again, as she took up one of his sets of accounts and glanced at it. "Business is business. But I tell you frankly that I should not consent to mix myself up with the monetary side of this affair, if you had not been able to show two or three clean records amongst the plays. This play of Sanford's, for instance, *The Guest*, and Cecil's *One Nail drives out Another*, and Hailsham's *Winning Number*. It is a good thing you took that precaution."

He smiled.

"I thought and planned it all out carefully at the time," he said.

The smile faded at once.

"I only wish I could plan now," he said. "I can't, Tamar. It's a most curious thing, but I positively can't. I feel—well, I can only tell you I feel outside my own skin. I could not make a plan to save my life."

"Don't try to do it," she said. "I'll plan for you. Now listen, Adrian. First of all you must go home and tell your wife that you were taken ill and were brought to my shop, where you remained the whole night. If she wishes to come and assure herself of facts, she can do so. The only thing you need not tell her, unless you wish it, is that we are known to each other. I don't suppose she has heard of my existence from you, so that this item would seem to be unnecessary. But that is for you to decide. Needless to say, if she comes to see me, she will never learn from me that you are anything to me, except a stranger brought to my gates. Unless, of course, you wish otherwise."

"No, no, I don't wish it otherwise," he said gravely. "It is better so. 'A stranger brought to your gates.'"

Tamar nodded in a businesslike fashion, and dismissed the matter from her mind. Grace evidently did not count in her estimate of the importances of life.

"And now we come to something far more vital," she continued. "If your little child continues to recover, I want you, in a few days, to go away out of every one's reach. For a few days you'll be able to refuse to see people, for the simple reason that you have serious illness in the house. And afterwards, I am convinced, it would be safer for you not to risk running across any of the band. I lay great stress on this. You are not at your best, in fact, you are at your very worst, and you might be taken at a disadvantage, and might injure your own cause."

"Yes," he said, "I know that. And I suppose that's why I dread seeing any of them. If I felt more fit, there is nothing I should enjoy so much. Nothing, Tamar. But at present there is no prancing in me. All the same, I can't go away. I could not leave my little child. I could not dream of leaving Alpenrose. That would be quite impossible. Entirely impossible."

"Very well," Tamar said, making up her mind secretly not to press him. "But promise me that you'll see no one and do nothing until you've heard from me. Don't answer any of these letters until you've heard from me. Promise me that. It would relieve my anxiety."

"I promise, gladly enough too," he answered. "I'll see no one, and I'll do nothing. But it is certain that I have definitely joined the great company of irresponsibles, isn't it, Tamar?"

"Don't be absurd," Tamar said, turning away.

He covered his eyes with his hand for a moment.

"It isn't absurd," he said at length, "and you know it. I've joined that company, laid down my burden, and you've taken it up for me. But there is this amount of difference between me and most of them. I know what you are doing for me with that clever brain of yours. I know, my Tamar. In no way have I deserved it. That must be obvious to you as well as to me."

"Those who need each other, have to seek each other out," Tamar answered.

"Then in time you would have sought me out?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, I suppose so," she said, "especially if—like yourself—I had got myself into difficulties."

"Ah, that's the test," he said, "the test of one's love, one's fundamental love and imperishable trust. And you're sure you would have come to me?"

"Yes—not willingly, but—I—should have come," she answered. "You—you may make your mind easy about that. I should have come because — because I could not have helped myself."

"Thank you for telling me," he said gently, and he stood watching her wistfully as she sorted out from his papers the special documents she wanted and put them in the top drawer of her desk.

He came near to her.

"Tamar," he said, "I know you love me, but you have not said so once."

She looked up at him.

"I love you," she said.

He came nearer to her.

"Tamar," he said in a voice that trembled, "never once have I held you in my arms. Might it be now?"

"Why not?" she answered, as though to herself. "Why not?"

So for the first and last time in their lives they stood folded in each other's arms, in a silence which had something of sacredness in it.

The next moment he had gone.

The clock was striking eight when Adrian Steele pressed the bell at his own front door and passed into his home. He found his wife and the whole household in a state of great agitation over his mysterious absence. His wife had been sitting up all night, and as soon as the early morning had come, she had telephoned to the doctor to consult with him what should be done to find Adrian. They both agreed that he must have been taken ill, and had probably been received into one of the hospitals. They were telephoning to several of the hospitals when he arrived amongst them, looking haggard and ashen, and apparently at his last gasp of strength.

"Yes, you are right, I have been taken ill," he explained. "I suppose I must have collapsed in the street. No, I haven't been to an hospital. I appear to have been conveyed to a second-hand antique jewellery shop, and the owner, a Jewess, watched over me. I understand I passed from a long unconsciousness into a long sleep. When I awoke, she gave me coffee, and here I am, restored and in my right mind."

"Not restored," the doctor said, shaking his head. "You ought to go away for a change, Steele. You're worn out."

"Yes," Grace said, half crying as she spoke. "He has half killed himself over little Alpenrose."

"Nonsense, nonsense," Steele said gently. "I admit I am not myself. Brain fatigue. That's all. It will pass. Apparently I have to sleep after one of these attacks. I assure you I could sleep for hours now, doctor. Most curious. My brain won't work. Nothing could make it work. It shuts up like an oyster. I try to think, and I can't."

They got him to bed, but not until after he had satisfied himself that Alpenrose was going on well. He sat by the child's bedside for a little while, guarded her with all his wonted tenderness, caressed the black doll, kissed the little darling hands he loved so well, and when he was alone with her, whispered some confidences to her, the import of which was known only to himself.

"Yes, little one dear," he murmured, "it will be all right this time. Tamar will see me through. She won't desert me. She'll see me through. And there won't be another time, Alpenrose, my sweet. I've promised you that. I'll have a clean, snow-white record after this. Like an untouched Alpine snowfield. It will be all right this time."

As he bent over the child, the expression on his face was one of ineffable nobleness and purity, free from all touch of craft, contrivance, treachery, deceit. His love for Alpenrose had ever brought out the best in his nature, and the best in him was triumphant now, transfiguring his countenance, lifting him up on wings, wafting him to the temple of ideals, opening the inner door of the secret shrine for him to enter and seek renewal. If his picture could have been painted at this moment, it would have been the presentment of some fine and lofty spirit, attuned to the music of distant vision. And who can say that it would have been a false portrait of him, since it was true of him when that side of his complex character was in ascendancy?

His wife led him away, and he tried to allay her fears about him, and to make light of what he called his 'temporary surrender to inexplicable fatigue.' She spoke with gratitude of the kindness and care shown him by the dealer in antique jewellery, and told Adrian that she should make a point of writing and calling at once to thank the Jewess. She asked for the name and address of his friend in need, and Adrian Steele smiled imperceptibly as he breathed the words, "T. Scott, Dean Street." He thought that he would give a good deal to be invisibly present at that interview.

He knew that Tamar would be impersonal and impervious, and that Grace would never guess from her manner that he had been anything else but a 'stranger brought to her gates.' He knew that Tamar would be at her worst, sullen and disagreeable, and that Grace, whilst remaining grateful, would nevertheless be relieved to find this curious person devoid of all attractive charm. He knew all this, and the imperceptible smile strengthened itself into a perceptible expression of amusement which lit up his tired face. But it passed away as he gave his wife instructions that if any one called to see him on urgent business, the hospital nurse was to receive the visitor and explain to him that there was very serious illness in the house, and that Mr. Steele requested him to write rather than seek a personal interview.

"Why the nurse, Adrian dear?" Grace asked. "Why not I myself?"

"Because a hospital nurse is the outward and visible sign of illness in the house," he answered firmly. "And I wish it to be known that there is illness here; not mine, but the child's. You understand, dear, not mine, but the child's. This is my wish. Will you have it carried out?"

"Yes, of course," she answered, a little uneasily.

As she was nearing the door, she turned round and went back to his bed, and knelt down by his side.

"Adrian," she said nervously, "are you then expecting any one to call on urgent business? Are you by any chance in trouble? I thought you seemed so upset the other day when you heard that Mr. Noble was here. I beg of you to tell me. You must know that there is nothing I would not do for you. You've always been good and kind to me. But sometimes—sometimes—I—I—wish—you—you would confide in me more."

He stroked her head soothingly, and was silent for a moment. He was thinking of what he should say to her. He at last decided that it would be better to tell her a minute portion of the truth, in order to allay her suspicions and gratify her love.

"Grace dear," he said, "it has never been my habit to confide in people. Reticence has ever been part of my nature. It does not imply distrust in you, of all people. It does not imply anything. It stands merely for a temperamental necessity. But since you ask me, I will tell you frankly that I have had a really annoying *contretemps* with one of my clients—not John Noble. This troublesome client of mine is one of these upstart bounders, you know, who get a swollen head from a sudden and undeserved success. He is disappointed because his returns do not reach his exaggerated expectations. Until I have decided whether or not to sue him for libel, of which I have ample proofs, I want to avoid being questioned on the subject by any of my other clients. I might myself say libellous things which would destroy my own case. Do you see? So that it is better for me not to see any one for a day or two. That is all. Meanwhile, I'll rest and recover, and little Alpenrose's illness offers a legitimate explanation of my invisibility. Don't be worried about me. I shall be quite myself in a few days, and more than able to deal with any business annoyance."

"My poor Adrian, and you have been bearing this trouble as well as Alpenrose's illness," she said, with pity. "No wonder you're worn out."

"I assure you, I never thought of it once during the time when the child was in danger," he said truthfully. "But now that the crisis is over, one has to look round."

"Thank you for telling me," she said, as she rose to leave him. "You have made me very happy by taking me into your confidence. And be sure, dear, that all your instructions shall be carried out in the way you wish. I quite understand. Try and not worry about that man. When you're stronger, you will think of the wisest thing to do, and do it wisely."

After she had gone, Adrian Steele lay thinking of her and of the gulf which, unknown to her, stretched between them, little Alpenrose being the fairy bridge over which they passed, he consciously, his wife unconsciously, to reach each other. Well, life brought that. It could not be helped. He dismissed Grace without effort from his mind, and his thoughts sped to Tamar, and lingered lovingly in the inner room, where he and she had spent so many hours of comradeship, and where, for the first time to-day, this very morning, they had stood folded in each other's arms in a passionate love which sought expression too late — too late. Why had he discarded her when, after much battling, he had won her love in the past? What devil in him had ever prompted him, out of sheer masterfulness, to compel a reluctant heart to love him, and then to turn aside as one having no concern with the havoc which he had deliberately contrived ?

He thought of Nell, whom in the past he had wished to dominate because she was a modern product, on which he had not until then had the chance of trying his devastating influence. He had called Nell 'his best psychological experiment' until he met Tamar, whose sullenness had interested and attracted him from the first. Where had he first seen Tamar ? Ah, yes. At a sale near Westleton, in Suffolk. He remembered telling Nell that he had made the acquaintance of the very rudest person that ever walked this earth. He smiled now as he recalled his old remark about her : "*Manners for minerals only. No one else need apply.*" He laughed gently, tenderly over all his old memories of her, and he knew it to be true that he had always loved her and understood her, and that his only home was her obstinate and sullen heart. He had cared for Nell in a way ; but not in this way. No, his feelings for Nell, in spite of his unkindness to her, had been those of fundamental regard and reverence. Though he had tried to wreck her, he was fully conscious that there was something in her which he could not reach, some idealism kept intact from all hurtful influence. To this idealism he looked up wonderingly, as to a star: distant, unreachable, but clear shining in the firmament of his life. And when he went to see her once more, after the lapse of many years, he had again caught a glimpse of the light which lit up her spirit, and a feeble glimmer in his own spirit had signalled to that far-off beacon in reverent recognition, made more reverent by a better knowledge of life and character.

He knew that he had to thank Nell for that faint remaining glimmer; and he thanked her now, and mingled her memory with other beautiful and purifying thoughts, the snow mountains which they had both loved passionately, the Alpine glow, the glacier rivers, the ice cathedrals, the snow-laden pines, the spring flowers. How often in the past they had talked of, and read together of the mountains.

The mountains, the mountains. He was seized with an intense longing for them. And why shouldn't he go to them? If it should prove that he needed a change, and Alpenrose continued to recover, why shouldn't he go to his own little favourite mountain village, lovely little Wassen, with its church perched on a hill, and its wild and lonely walks leading over the mountains and far away? Tamar had said that he ought to go away. Well, and why not there? No, no, of course he must not go out of England. He must be within reach of Tamar. She would want to consult him, to refer things to him. She would spare him all she could, but it would be necessary for her to see him. No, no, of course he must not leave England.

At last his tired brain gave out and he fell asleep and dreamed, not of Tamar, nor Nell, nor business, but of the Alpine glow which fired the trees with a golden red radiance and covered the snow-white mountains with a mantle of mystic purple light. He must have dreamed too of the spring flowers, for more than once he murmured something about "*the first little soldanella.*"

Meantime, below, in the drawing-room, Nurse Elinor was receiving James Knebworth Cecil, who had called to see Adrian Steele on urgent business.

"Mr. Steele would be very much obliged if you'd write," she said. "We have very grave illness in the house — the little daughter — we have nearly lost her—from meningitis."

"Of course I would not think of asking to see Mr. Steele personally in these circumstances," Cecil said. "I'll be off at once. Thank you, nurse. Be sure and express my regrets. And tell Mr. Steele that I will write."

He hastened off, disappointed at the failure of his visit, but genuinely vexed with himself for having intruded on a household of sorrow.

CHAPTER XII.

JOHN NOBLE arrived at Mrs. Silberthwaite's office one morning about eleven o'clock, and was received by the little Suffragette clerk, who was greatly concerned to have to tell him that Mrs. Silberthwaite was out.

"Great powers," she thought to herself, "supposing now that he has come to pay in another handsome subscription — another two or three hundred pounds — perhaps even a thousand? When these generous people once begin, one may expect anything. If he departs, his enthusiasm may depart also. He must not be allowed to go away. I must detain him and his cheque-book. Right sure am I that his cheque-book *is* in his left pocket. I see it with my mind's eye."

Aloud she said, in her bright little independent way:

"I can't be quite sure, but I don't think Mrs. Silberthwaite will be long. Would it be asking too much that you should wait a little?"

"No, it wouldn't," he answered, smiling at her. "It is a most moderate request. Would that every one's requests could be of that temperate nature."

Joan Neville's eyes danced with inner glee.

"Aha!" she said to herself. "He little knows that with my mind's eye I am staring at his cheque-book in his left pocket."

Aloud she said demurely:

"I will get some of our literature for you to glance at. We have just printed five new pamphlets. If you will excuse me, I will fetch them."

"Heaven forbid," he said. "I can't read any more pamphlets for the present. If I do, I assure you, something serious will happen to my brain."

She laughed an indulgent little laugh.

"Oh, we all feel like that at first," she said. "It soon wears off. The mind gets easily accustomed to pamphlets, as to other misfortunes."

"I am quite willing to take your word," he answered, much amused by her. "Meantime I prefer to talk with you, if you can spare a few moments from all that severe-looking correspondence. What are you doing just at the present, for instance? I like to know about people's work."

"I am acknowledging subscriptions and

contributions," she said cheerily. "A stimulating task."

"Upon my word, I really think I must stimulate you still further," Noble said, laughing. "Suppose I hand in my cheque at once, instead of waiting for Mrs. Silberthwaite to receive it. I have something else for her."

"We have already had one handsome cheque from you," Joan Neville remarked innocently. "You don't mean to say that we're going to have another handsome cheque?"

"Yes, I do," he replied, and he drew his cheque-book from his right-hand pocket.

"Aha!" she thought, "my geography was wrong, but my instinct was unerring! Well, geography doesn't matter in this case!"

"You see," Noble said, as he took the pen which she offered him, "the pamphlets which have half broken my brain, have also half broken my heart."

He wrote a cheque for £250, and handed it to her. Her face flushed with pleasure and pride. She could not have been more delighted if some tremendous personal benefit had been conferred on her.

"You also care for the work you are all engaged on?" he said.

"Of course," she answered proudly. "Any

one would care who worked with Mrs. Silberthwaite. She brings out all the best of one's ability and enthusiasm."

He showed her by a nod that he understood.

"And I have always been interested in these subjects," she said a little shyly. "My father trained us in them."

"Why haven't I been interested in them?" he asked regretfully.

"Ah, that's more than I can tell you," she answered, and she was proceeding to write him a receipt, when a woman of the so-called working class came into the office.

"Mrs. Silberthwaite is not here yet," Joan Neville said, nodding at her in a friendly way. "Perhaps you will wait in the other room, will you, Mrs. Carton? You'll find a book of Paris fashions there. That will keep you quiet, I know!"

Mrs. Carton, who had a bright, good-tempered face, laughed and said:

"Yes, it will, Miss Neville. Dearly do I love them fashions. Fairyland ain't in it."

"Well, you'll find the very latest," said Joan Neville, with a twinkle in her eye. "The very latest."

When Mrs. Carton had left the room, she turned to John Noble and said:

"That woman is a sweated worker in the box trade. If she works about fourteen hours a day, she can earn about seven shillings a week. What do you think of that?"

"Why did you send her away?" he asked. "Why can't I speak to her? I should like to speak to her. If I'm to help, I ought to begin to learn at once. In fact, I have already learnt a lesson of cheerfulness from her."

"It seems to me the poor nearly always are cheerful," Joan Neville answered. "Anyway she always is. When I am feeling particularly depressed, I always hope Mrs. Carton will come into the office. Up, up, go my spirits at once then, and I'm ready for anything. I'll fetch her back."

She rose from her desk in a leisurely fashion and passed into the next room.

"Mrs. Carton," she said, "if you can spare a few minutes from the Paris fashions, perhaps you will kindly return. The gentleman here would like to be introduced to you."

"Fancy you a-tearing me away from my one and only pleasure, Miss Neville," Mrs. Carton remarked cheerily. "Yours is a cruel heart, and no mistake. This is a good number, miss. But don't the women look sillies, poor afflicted things. This poor imbecile, for instance. Well, well."

"Come along," urged Joan Neville. "This gentleman is a writer of plays. He wants to talk with you. And if you're not careful, he'll put you in a play, Mrs. Carton. A three-act play, perhaps."

"Well, he might do worse, poor creature," she replied, following Joan Neville into the outer office.

John Noble, who heard her, laughed, got up, held out his hand, and said:

"Yes, I certainly might do far, far worse! And how do you do, madam?"

"Nicely, sir, nicely, considering the state of trade, which isn't no state at all," she answered. "And how do you do, sir?"

"Well, I think I might also say nicely, considering the state of trade," he replied, and they both smiled, and entered into an acquaintanceship which was full of interest to the playwright and of gratification to the sweated worker. For Noble drew her out in a surprising fashion, and treated her with exactly the same deference which he would have shown to one of the fine ladies in his own plays. And as he learned from her the details of her day's work, and recognized for himself the unconscious courage of the woman and her entire freedom from bitterness of spirit, his wonder grew apace, and with it his respectful admiration and his fixed determination to work for the Society.

"Why aren't you bitter?" he asked. "It

would positively relieve my own feelings of shame if you were angry and soured."

"Ah, I'm sorry I can't oblige you, sir," she answered. "You see, all we've got as our stock in trade *is* our good spirits. No use being God's grizzlers. We leave the grizzling to the high and mighty. They can have it all to theirselves and welcome, poor imbecīles."

"Yes, yes, you are right," he said earnestly. "That's the right word—imbecīles!"

So earnest and interested was he, that he did not know that he had repeated her pronunciation of the word. But Joan Neville thought it sounded very quaint coming from the lips of a distinguished playwright, and looked up from her stimulating task of acknowledging subscriptions and smiled.

"A bad thing he paid his handsome subscription in before Mrs. Carton came on the scenes," she reflected. "He might have given twice the amount now he has seen a live specimen of the sweated class. I must again fix my mind's eye on his cheque-book and wrest a few more hundreds out of it. What a beast I am! Beastly, but businesslike! But that's what I'm here for: to promote the interests of the Society, and leap upon my prey like a fearsome tigress."

Whilst she was taken up with these fierce and secret designs, John Noble continued questioning

Mrs. Carton, who was trying to explain to him how isolated a class the sweated workers had been for years and for years, and how, in fact, they had been imprisoned in their own conditions.

"We could not reach out to nobody," she said, "for there was nobody."

"I suppose no friends from the outside world ever came into your life until you met Mrs. Silberthwaite ?" John Noble asked.

"One friend only," she answered. "That was years ago. It was him who brought Mrs. Silberthwaite. I remember him well, and should know him anywhere."

Then she told him of a little thin man who had come down to Bethnal Green and Homerton and sought out the sweated workers—the box-makers, match-makers, trouser-makers, boot-makers, and many others—and had brought comfort and kindness to many a despondent heart, in the days, too, when it was not usual for people of his class to be interesting themselves actively in the affairs of the poor. They never knew where he came from, and he was always mysterious and formal, but wonderfully faithful in carrying out all he said he would do on their behalf. And for years he had paid the rent for three old women over seventy-five years of age, until one by one they had died ; and he himself had had them buried at his own expense, and had been present at each of the funerals.

"Faithful to the end—that's what he was," she said. "The old box-maker had a name for him, and that's what we all called him by, 'Mr. Trustworthy.' I often see his little figure before me. Tiny he was, and thin. And he wore an eyeglass with a piece of black ribbon about half an inch thick."

"Did you say he brought Mrs. Silberthwaite?" John Noble asked pensively.

"Yes," answered Mrs. Carton. "He took her round to see our work and where we lived. I remember what he said when they came to the old box-maker's room. She'd been ill, and I was there helping the old soul."

"What did he say?" Noble asked. "I should like to hear."

Mrs. Carton coloured a little from sudden shyness, and said:

"Perhaps I can't give it quite right, but I think he said, 'Well, and what do you think of our superb England now? Have we any right to set our hearts on mountains and snowfields until we see all this changed?' I never forgot it because it sounded so queer. It *was* queer, wasn't it?"

Joan Neville tapped her forehead.

"Sounds uncommonly like 'Looking down on snow-white plains of mountain mist caught in purple light,'" she thought to herself.

"Well, after that, we never saw him no more," Mrs. Carton said. "Dead himself, I expect."

"I scarcely think so," Joan Neville remarked. "A little gentleman answering to that description, and undoubtedly addicted to mountains and mists, called in here the other day. He did not appear to be dead. He appeared to be alive—and masterful."

"All the better for the world if he isn't dead," Mrs. Carton said earnestly. "Wouldn't I just love to see him again and thank him, too. And all this time I've been thinking him dead and gone."

"No, he isn't dead," John Noble said. "You'll be able to see Mr. Trustworthy again—and thank him."

He got up, and stared into the fire.

"*Faithful to the end*," he said to himself. "*Then why could he not have been faithful to me?*"

For a moment or two he seemed to have lost his bearings and to be wandering about in some distant region far away from the brave sweated worker and the cheery little secretary. But at last he found his path back again, and turned to Mrs. Carton with a challenging sort of mischievousness:

"I write plays about the high and mighty," he said, "about the people you call God's grizzlers, you know. I wonder whether you would care to come and see one, *The Abingdons.* I could at least promise you the very latest thing in Paris fashions."

Her eyes beamed with delight at his kindness, and at the prospect of the pleasure he offered her.

"I'll come, grizzlers or no grizzlers!" she said. "And I don't suppose the poor imbeciles are near so bad in a play, are they?"

"Perhaps not," he laughed. "They have to be rounded off to fit the picture. Now you must give me your address and I shall send you the tickets, without fail."

To the surprise both of himself and Joan Neville, Mrs. Carton turned away from him, covered her face with her hands, and left the room, weeping silently.

John Noble looked at Joan Neville questioningly.

"It's the kindness and the courtesy," the little secretary explained gravely. "Misfortune they can bear."

She paused a moment, and then she said cheerfully:

"There is Mrs. Carton's address. And I am afraid you ought to have these leaflets and pamphlets. This one, for instance, actually deals with her trade. 'Box-workers and Trade Boards.' I think you would like to read that, wouldn't you now? And this one, 'Report of a Conference on a Minimum Wage.' And this one, 'Home Work and Sweating.'"

"You seem bent on my destruction by pamphlets," Noble said.

But he held out his hand for them, and repeated her words unconsciously:

"*Misfortune they can bear.* Yes, that tells its own tale."

Then Nell Silberthwaite came into the office.

CHAPTER XIII.

"I THINK there is some one else waiting to see you," John Noble said as he followed Nell into her private room. "A sweated worker. Her time is more valuable than mine, poor woman. I can wait."

"Oh, you mean Mrs. Carton," Nell said. "She was coming to-day to help me with several points in one of my lectures. But it is all right about her time to-day. We arranged matters with her so that she could afford to take a day off. It's a holiday for her too, and she will be quite happy waiting. My secretary will look after her."

"Well, no doubt she will amuse herself with the Paris fashions," Noble said. "Your bright-eyed little secretary seems to have provided her with truly acceptable entertainment."

Nell laughed.

"My little secretary generally has brilliant ideas about making every one happy and contented," she said. "I don't know what I should do without her in the office. She's so capable and cheerful."

"Yes, she strikes me as that," John Noble said, smiling.

"I literally kidnapped her from the Suffrage," Nell said. "She had been one of the Suffragette organizers, and I knew her temperament and training would be splendid for our work. And she herself had always been connected with the Labour Movement. Her father had worked for it. Otherwise I could not have persuaded her to come to me."

"I seem to have entered suddenly into a new world, Mrs. Silberthwaite," Noble said, leaning back in his chair, "and at a moment, too, when I have needed to be rescued from my rut."

His eyes wandered to the mountain picture, and immediately the thought of Adrian Steele drove out all other thoughts from his brain.

"I understand that it was Adrian Steele who first took you to the sweated workers," he said. "Mrs. Carton was telling me that he had been their first friend from the outside world, and that he brought you. At least, I concluded it was he. It could have been no one else, from the description and the circumstances."

"Yes," Nell answered. "It was he. If you remember, I told you that he first showed me the path which I should tread. I owe a very great deal to him, Mr. Noble. I wish with all my heart I could help him in his trouble. I know he is in great trouble."

"You have helped him," John Noble said, looking fixedly on the ground.

"I? How?" Nell asked impulsively.

"By reminding me of what I also owed to him," Noble answered. "You see—"

He shook his head and broke off; but seeing Nell's anxious, inquiring expression of countenance, he put his own feelings aside and tried to minister to her distress.

"You see, he has been—well, there is no other word—dishonourable in—in some of his business dealings," Noble said gently. "I am one of those whom he has—disappointed. But, since seeing you the other day, I have made up my mind irrevocably that no harm shall come to him through any word or act of mine. One less to pursue him—that's all. Still, it is something. And such as it is, he owes it to you."

"No, no, rather to your mercifulness," Nell said, deeply touched.

"A wounded spirit often forgets to be merciful, much less just," Noble said, with a sad smile. "That's where you've come in. No, it's your bit of service, and you cannot disown it."

"I don't want to disown it," Nell said. "You cannot think what it means to me to know that I too, in my way, may have helped Adrian Steele."

"Why should we care, I wonder?" Noble said. "You care evidently, and I care. Why should we care?"

"I don't know," Nell answered, with bowed head. "I never have known."

"That sweated worker, Mrs. Carton, told me that he had been a true friend to some of the poorest, and faithful to the end," Noble said. "And I ask myself why could he not have been faithful to me to the end, since I loved and trusted him. Mr. Trustworthy they called him. Trustworthy. Why could he not have been trustworthy to me? I can't answer my own question, but perhaps you can, Mrs. Silberthwaite."

"I can only tell you that he never could run straight," Nell said in a low voice. "Even in those past years it was so—in everything, without rhyme or reason."

John Noble nodded his head silently, and seemed buried in saddest thought. Nell saw that he was suffering, and that his spirit was wounded. She longed to be able to say something which might lessen some of the bitter pain through which she, too, had passed in her own time. And at last she took courage.

"Mr. Noble," she said very gently, "I should like, both for his sake and yours, to say just this one thing to you. It may sound foolish enough, but from all I know of Adrian Steele's nature, it is true. It does not follow that because he has deceived you, he has not loved you. You dare not say to yourself: '*This man has deceived me, and therefore he has not loved me.*' No; you have to say instead: '*This man has loved me, and yet has deceived me.*' There is a difference. There might be balm to you in that difference, or there might not. But I want you to learn direct from me, who knew him intimately for several years, that the secret scheming of his brain was not in harmony with, but always at war with, the disposition of his heart."

John Noble looked up.

"Yes," he said, "there might be balm in that thought. Thank you, Mrs. Silberthwaite."

He stretched out his hand to her, in gratitude for her words, and she took it in silence.

"Believe me," he said, "I will do all I can to shield him."

"I know you will," she answered.

"And now I must show you what I have been trying to do for your sweated workers," he said, with a smile of distinct pride. "I've sketched out a play, and I want to ask you if you think there is anything in it. It is based on what I learnt from you the other day and from your lecture.

Of course I am only making a dash at the subject, as I know so little of it, and I'm sure I have heaps to learn. You asked me to present a picture. Now you shall tell me whether this is a picture—an impressionist picture, as it were. If it isn't, then I'll work at it until I have made it one. You must listen for all you're worth, and pull it to pieces as much as you like!"

Then he read her the outlines of a story of the tragedy of poverty. It was called simply *Poverty*. He had touched in lights, brought out effects, accentuated values, gauged possibilities in a way possible only to a great imaginative artist, at the same time a profound student of human nature. There were, of course, many defects, the result of his inexperience in this field, but he was conscious of them, and desired only to be put right in his mistakes and strengthened on his weak points. For, as he laughingly said, up to this moment his attention had been more or less directed on those members of society whom Mrs. Carton called God's grizzlers, and he therefore had to learn a new code, a new outlook.

He was boyishly happy over this, his new venture, and received Nell's remarks with an eagerness which had in it the simplicity of a true greatness. In fact, he rushed at her criticisms with an embracing sort of welcome which spoke volumes for the sincerity of his service.

He had been there nearly two hours before he rose to go. He arranged another interview with Nell, and he told her he intended meantime to redraft the play and bring it to her for stern revision and correction.

"You remember you promised to help me down to the very last shred," he said. "Those were the conditions."

"Yes," she laughed; "we'll all help you. And I'll take you down to see some of the workers in their own homes. Or, better still, Mrs. Carton will go with you to visit some of her own friends. Also, we are getting up a Sweated Industries Exhibition at Edinburgh next month. That would help you, if you could spare the time. You would learn more in this way than from anything we could tell you here in the office, or from any pamphlets."

"Ah, I'm relieved to hear you say that," he said. "And I hope you will protect me from your little secretary, who has attempted to compass my life with pamphlets."

They laughed and passed out into the outer office, where they found Joan Neville smiling at his words, which she had heard as the door opened. Merrier than ever looked her dancing eyes, and more engaging than ever her bright personality. John Noble made a secret resolution that he would not allow this unexpected bit of sunshine to fade out of his life.

"I've put myself under special protection," he said. "No more pamphlets for me—unless I take this one about the Edinburgh Exhibition. Yes, perhaps I'd better have it."

"I'm afraid I can't spare that one," Joan Neville remarked severely. "That's just the one I can't spare. I'm sorry."

But he defied her and put it in his pocket.

"Good-bye," he said. "And what has happened to my other friend? Is she still studying the Paris fashions?"

"No," Joan Neville answered. "She got tired of them, and went out to distribute some pamphlets. She does not dislike pamphlets. She says they are perfectly harmless things, and that no one need read them."

"Ah, that's true enough," he said, with mock gravity. "I had not thought of that. She's a wise woman, that. You see, being a writer myself, I have cherished the absurd tradition that people do read what is written. But perhaps they don't, after all."

He left them with that, and Nell learnt of the second cheque for £250, and Joan Neville was told the exciting news of the play *Poverty* which he had begun to write for them. They were full of his kindness, his generosity, his enthusiasm, and of the immense influence of his name and active co-operation, and they agreed that this had been a red-letter day in the annals of the Society.

"Next time he comes, I hope he will write a cheque for £500," thought Joan. "I shall be seriously annoyed with him if he doesn't. If he doesn't, I shall look out all the dullest pamphlets for him, and they will frighten him so much that he'll be thankful to come to terms immediately. Alas! how grasping I am becoming. And at my age, too! It's positively shocking. Well, at least it's impersonal. That's all you can say."

But Nell, alone in her room, could not say that she was feeling impersonal. She stood in front of the mountain picture, and, even in the midst of her delight over John Noble's splendid helpfulness to her work, remembered chiefly that he had promised that no harm should come to Adrian Steele through any word or deed of his. This at least would be something definite and satisfactory to tell Tamar, and Nell at once became buoyed up with triumph to think that she it was, and not Tamar, who had been able to avert some of the danger threatening Adrian Steele. Yes, it was she, and not Tamar. But, instantly ashamed of her mean-spiritedness, she reminded herself sternly that Tamar and she had agreed to be collaborators and not rivals, and that what they both had to do, was to place their separate opportunities of service side by side, without distinction or claim.

"All the same," she said, suddenly rebelling against this virtuous code, "I am glad it was myself and not Tamar. One can't help being mean-spirited. And I don't care if I am. I've never been able to drive Adrian out of my heart. And never shall. Nothing has banished him. Neither my marriage, nor my work, nor anything. And it's all a pretence to say that we leave the past behind us. We carry it with us, burden or no burden. We don't leave it behind us. No, I've never been able to get him out of my heart. And I never shall."

She paced up and down the room, leaving her box-makers and her chain-makers, and the whole procession of sweated workers, to fend for themselves. She was unable to keep her thoughts from Adrian Steele. She thought of his little masterful presence, his stubborn personality, his charm, his deceitfulness, his passion for power, his ruthless abandonment of all who ceased to serve his purpose, his mental tyranny, his curious code of self-justification, his wonderful gift of up-lifting, stimulating, his reckless expenditure of energy and strength over his work, his large grasp of affairs, his patient attention to details, all that was great in him, all that was small in him, and all that was unforgettably lovable in him—that mysterious something in him which tugged at the heart-strings of herself and Tamar, even after all these long years—yes, and at the heart-strings of John Noble too, and of Mrs. Carton and of every one to whom he had meant something of love, of friendship, of comradeship, of kindness.

She had told him, when he came to ask for her forgiveness, that she had forgiven him years ago; but the moment of her true forgiveness had not been when she had passed on and recovered herself, but now when she *passed back*, lived over again those days of love, disappointment, and humiliation, realized that she had never recovered herself, and yet could hold out her hands in yearning and tender protectiveness. If Adrian Steele could only have known it, this was the moment when the white snows of forgiveness fell upon the mountains and transfigured, as though by magic, the sharpened forbidding peaks.

Whilst she was still held by these thoughts, the door was opened gently, and Joan Neville appeared, her face rather flushed, and a gleam of danger in her bright eye.

"I did knock several times, Mrs. Silberthwaite," she said. "Please forgive me for disturbing you, but a woman—well—a—a sort of rude tigress—that's all I can call her—insists on seeing you. I asked her to state her business, and she answered most insolently that it was her affair, not mine. She refused to give her name, and she had not a card. She isn't human in her manner. The rudest person I've ever seen in my life. When I asked her if she wished to pay in a subscription to the Society, she abused our work in the most insulting terms."

"Show her in," Nell said. "I think I know who she is."

Tamar was immediately shown in by Joan Neville, who was still dancing from suppressed rage, and murmured to herself as she closed the door:

"Another moment, my own treasure, and I should have strangled you. Beware."

Nell had placed a chair for Tamar near the fire.

"You look cold, Tamar," she said. "Do sit down and warm yourself."

"So these are your premises," Tamar remarked, glancing around in a detached sort of way.

Nell put some coals on, and stirred the fire.

"And here you conduct this absurd public service work of yours," Tamar said. "Antisweating indeed. Why shouldn't people sweat if they want to?"

"But they don't want to," Nell said indulgently. "That's the point, Tamar."

"Well, you know what I think of it," Tamar said grimly. "It's ridiculous waste of time. If you try to do anything for anybody, you only get kicks. Senseless waste of time. I've no patience with it."

"We all waste our time in some form or other," Nell said good-temperedly. "It's just a matter of personal choice, you know, Tamar. Make an effort not to be hard on me."

"And that absurd little clerk of yours imagined that I had called in to pay a subscription," Tamar said. "I should like to see myself paying in a subscription here."

"So should I," Nell remarked with fervour. "Uncommonly I should like to see it."

Tamar laughed, with a soft little laugh which betokened amusement, for she never resented a shaft directed against herself.

"Your absurd little clerk offered me a pamphlet on 'The Minimum Wage,'" she said. "I told her that no wages I ever paid could be minimum enough for me; and I gave her a bit of my mind about the work of societies like this."

"Well, we shan't actually die of despair because you don't approve of us, Tamar," Nell said cheerfully. "And as for the work itself, quite apart from the aim and object of it, it has been the greatest help to me in my life. It has been to me what your book on precious stones has been to you."

"If it has been to you what my book has been to me, then all I can say is that it has been a failure," Tamar remarked. "Yes, a failure. I thought I had passed on with that book. I haven't."

"I too thought I had passed on," Nell said. "I threw myself more and more into this work you despise and—"

"And you married," Tamar reminded her roughly.

"Yes, I married," Nell said, "a noble-hearted man with a fine sympathy to match his fine intellect."

"I could have married," Tamar said. "But I waited. I waited alone in that inner room."

A secret joy lit up her face as she spoke, and Nell gazed at her in astonishment.

"You waited," Nell repeated slowly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say," Tamar answered. "I waited—for Adrian Steele. And he came."

"But you repulsed him," Nell said. "I was there when you repulsed him."

"That may be," Tamar replied. "But he came again. He knew he could come."

Then in a few words she gave Nell a bare but honest account of Adrian's visit to her. She described how he brought all his papers and accounts, and how, after a great struggle with himself, he had explained to her his business complications and asked her help and advice. She said quite frankly that she did not think he would have confided in her or any one except for his broken-down mental condition, which was the result of his terrible anxiety over his little daughter's sudden and nearly fatal illness. She did not dwell on her re-awakened love for him. She did not speak of the long night watch in the inner room. She was silent about his words of regret, of longing, of trust, of love. She kept back all the details of those happy hours, the memory of which had become precious and sacred to her for evermore. But it was clear enough from her manner, the tone of her voice, and the strangely softened expression on her countenance, that the Tamar who had stubbornly refused a few days ago to take up the threads of the past, was now caught and held by the iron bonds of an old, deep, and passionate love.

Nell listened, and a tempest of despairing jealousy broke loose in her.

"Tamar, Tamar," she cried in her bitter anguish, "I can't help myself—I'm deadly, deadly jealous of you."

"You've had other things," Tamar said roughly. "What do you want with this thing?"

"Yes, yes, I know I've had other things," Nell returned. "You needn't remind me of that now. But other things aren't this thing. Ah, why didn't he come to me with his difficulties—you took him from me before—and now you've taken him from me again."

"It was his doing, and not mine," Tamar said in a low voice; "his free will, his own choice."

"Don't you see that makes it worse?" Nell cried, "and that I can't even hate you for it—I haven't even that comfort—I who would have done anything for him—anything—in his hour of need—in—"

She leant forward over her desk, and her head sank lower and lower until it rested on her outspread arms. She sobbed in an abandonment of grief.

Tamar watched Nell for a long time in silence. She was trying to persuade herself that the matter did not concern her. But apparently she was not successful, for she rose at length and touched her on the shoulder. There was no response. She touched Nell again.

"Look here, Nell Silberthwaite," she said, "I'm going to tell you something I rather hate telling you. You *have* done something big for him, and something definite. Something far bigger than I've done, and I envy you for it. That playwright man, Noble, is evidently going to stand by Adrian Steele; and considering that he has been cheated out of at least £15,000, his forbearance is remarkable. He has written to Adrian to say that he is placing his new play as usual in Adrian's hands. Now this is through you, I'm sure. Your bit of valuable help. You've choked off one of the worst dangers, by honest and straightforward means, and I tell you I envy you the opportunity you've had, and your use of it. When I think of my underhand methods with that blusterer Hailsham, I—well, I don't stand well with myself in comparison. You've a right to take comfort. Don't go on grieving in that inane fashion. You'll make yourself ill. If we are going to save him at all, we shall need all our wits, for I assure you his own brain has lost its old resourcefulness. He's ill, worn out. Come now—that's right—gather yourself together like a sensible woman doing so-called useful public service work. I don't mind owning that perhaps I've been rather disagreeable about your work. Perhaps it does do some good. And certainly it has been of use on this occasion, since it brought you in contact with Noble. I think you must have pleaded for Adrian with what he'd call 'superb ability.' Yes, I repeat it, superb ability. A man does not readily give up his chance of recovering £15,000, if I know anything of business. You ought to be proud of yourself, I tell you."

The rough comfort brusquely administered, together with Tamar's frank acknowledgment of Nell's help, had the effect of restoring Nell to something approximating to self-control. She raised her head, passed her hand over her eyes, and with obvious effort kept back the sobs which had been tearing her.

"Thank you, Tamar," she said, when she had regained sufficient command over herself for speech. "You are at least generous in your triumph. Please excuse my—my weakness."

Tamar waved her hand, in indulgent dismissal of Nell's outbreak, and said kindly enough:

"It was only fair to tell you. If Adrian had been more easy to handle, I should have let him know to whom he owed Noble's mercifulness. As it is, he believes, or pretends to believe, that Noble is not on the scent."

"Let him believe it," Nell said. "It will appear so. John Noble has been here to-day, and he promised of his own accord that no word or deed of his should embarrass Adrian in his difficulties. 'One less to pursue him,' he said. Those were his words."

"So you knew already that John Noble was going to spare him," Tamar said sullenly. "I need not have troubled to tell you."

"I think it was most generous of you to tell me, Tamar," Nell said warmly. "It makes all the difference to me to hear it from you."

Tamar's face softened. She was pleased with Nell's appreciation.

"One less to pursue him," she said after a pause. "Yes, that's the whole trouble. There are so many of them. He has been cheating people right and left for years. I don't feel at all sure that his honour can be patched up even by Noble's mercifulness, or even by a wise expenditure of money. I think in some instances we can cover up tracks altogether, and in others we may be able to make it worth while for the authors to refrain from proceedings. But that man Hailsham, for instance. He has only about two thousand pounds at stake, but he is bent on personal vengeance. I don't believe any sum would buy him off. And he's the leader of the band."

"Have you tried to buy his silence?" Nell said slowly, as she spoke pondering the matter.

"No," Tamar answered. "I intend to. But so far I've only attempted to form a general vague plan of how to cover up the more recent frauds."

"Well, I will gladly find the money to start off with Hailsham," Nell said.

She was amazed and almost frightened at the effect which her words produced, for Tamar's face flushed with anger, and her eyes shone with a sudden dangerous gleam.

"The money is my affair," she said fiercely. "If money has to be given, no one shall give it except me. I shall sell out some of my investments. If necessary, I shall sell my jewels, my choicest pearls, and my rubies."

Nell held her breath with astonishment.

"How you must love him," she said involuntarily.

"You think that proves it," Tamar said, glancing at Nell half defiantly, half proudly.

"Yes, Tamar," Nell answered. "You have never been famous for wanting to part with your money, have you?"

"No," Tamar said. "You're right. My fame has not been in that direction."

The thought evidently amused her, for she continued:

"I daresay you remember the remarks Adrian Steele used to make on that subject."

"Yes, I remember well," Nell said, smiling in spite of herself at Tamar's naïveté. "He would be astonished if he knew. But he would also be stimulated, because—"

She paused.

"Well?" Tamar put in. "You can say what you like. I don't care."

"Because—well, for the simple reason that—knowing you to be—well—cautious with your money, he would be encouraged to think you—believed in the venture," Nell said, a little hesitatingly.

"Yes, and that is exactly why I shall risk the money," Tamar retorted. "In fact, I've told him I'll risk three or four thousand pounds at a charge on him of six per cent. I made a point of the percentage. That made him believe at once that I saw good business in it."

She got up suddenly and turned her back on Nell.

"Tamar," Nell said gently, "I think you are—splendid."

"Nonsense," Tamar said gruffly, without turning round. "I'm what you are—a fool. Fools, both of us. I've said it all along, and I say it even now, although I wouldn't change my folly for any one else's wisdom. Where do we come in, really? Nowhere in the scheme of things. There's his wife. And this child of his with the absurd name, Alpenrose. Why do we care? He isn't yours, he isn't really mine, he's theirs. That's the simple truth, if we had any sense. But we haven't. All the same, we've got to save him, if we can. And his courage must be kept up somehow. Otherwise he'll—"

She broke off and shuddered. Nell, sitting at her desk, shuddered too. The same fear dominated them both.

"Listen, Tamar," Nell said, after a painful silence: "if you will not let any of my money be used, you will at least tell me what I can do in other ways. Since it was to you that Adrian came for advice and help, I have no right to force myself into your councils, but you must not leave me out in the cold. It hurts my pride fearfully to have to ask this favour of you. But it would break me up to know nothing and do nothing."

Tamar at last turned round. Her face was pale. There was no anger in her eyes now.

"You don't suppose I'm such a duffer as to want to dispense with your help," she said. "You've done the biggest thing yet, as I told you, and you've put your finger on the right nail about that Hailsham man. I'll try and explain the whole matter to you, but I warn you that you've got to be ready to swallow an enormous dose of dishonourableness. Adrian probably believed that I could swallow it without—well—without much difficulty. He would not have thought that of you. He always put you on a higher plane. Perhaps that will be some comfort to you."

Nell shook her head.

"No, it isn't any comfort, Tamar," she said simply. "Codes count for nothing when one's heart is torn."

Some remark rose to Tamar's lips, but she checked it, and at once began giving Nell the outlines of the situation in which Adrian Steele stood. She impressed on Nell that in his present mental condition he was of no use to himself or them, that they must think and plan for him, and that the safest thing was to get him away out of every one's reach until the crisis was tided over, or the crash came. She advised Nell to see John Noble again as soon as possible and urge him to use his influence with some of the others, Sanford or Cecil, for instance, and so prevent them from taking action—at any rate for the present. She herself would make an immediate attempt to silence Hailsham. She said she believed there might be some bare chance of dealing with the difficulties; but what she most feared, was fresh revelations from unexpected quarters, which would nullify all their efforts, and precipitate the crisis.

Nell was deeply shocked and stirred by the history of Adrian Steele's dishonourableness.

"How could he do it—how could he do it!" she kept on saying, shaking her head sorrowfully.

It was curious to note the difference between these two women who both loved Adrian Steele and were trying to save him. Tamar was frankly fascinated and even stimulated by the temptations to which he had succumbed, whilst Nell was horrified by them and endured untold miseries in hearing of them. Her very suffering was a proof of Adrian's wisdom in having made a choice of Tamar for his counsellor and director. Yet even Tamar herself shied once, and gave utterance to a curious remark which completely mystified Nell. She said:

"I must pay out conscience money for him. Something towards the boarding of the pews."

"What did you say?" Nell asked in amazement. "Something about pews?"

"Nothing, nothing," Tamar replied crossly, and passed on quickly to further important details which at once engaged Nell's attention and demanded from her the utmost limit of her moral forbearance. She fought most bravely with her outraged feelings, and tried hard to take a purely business view of the whole set of circumstances. Tamar, who knew that she was suffering, could not help admiring Nell's dogged attempt to blot out everything from her mind except Adrian's welfare.

"She too loves him," she thought jealously. "She is doing battle with all her moral codes for his sake. That's the biggest sacrifice a person of her nature could make for any one."

In the midst of her attack of jealousy the door opened, and Joan Neville came into the room, bringing a letter which she put into Nell's hands, at the same time casting an indignant glance at her enemy.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Silberthwaite," she said. "But I've knocked several times, and the letter is marked 'Urgent.'"

The letter was from John Noble. It ran thus :—

"*I have just seen enclosed paragraph. I want you to know that I am at once denying it and having a paragraph put in all the papers stating that my new play is in his hands. But this is the sort of thing that may frustrate the efforts of all those who would wish to screen him.*"

This was the paragraph :—

"It is rumoured in dramatic circles that Mr. John Noble, whose affairs have always been managed by Mr. Adrian Steele, has now made a change in his business agent."

Nell handed the letter and paragraph to Tamar, and they looked at each other with strained faces, and in silence.

CHAPTER XIV.

HAILSHAM had for some time been actively engaged in investigating his affairs and mastering the details of the frauds which had been perpetrated on him by Adrian Steele. Much to his astonishment, John Noble, although obliged to admit that he too had been defrauded of large sums, rigidly refused to take any steps to recover his money.

He had all along been most reluctant to believe any of Hailsham's allegations against Steele's honourableness, and he consented finally to examine his returns, rather for the sake of vindicating Steele's name, than of satisfying any uneasy doubts of his own. His discoveries had shocked and wounded him beyond all telling, and in the first moments of his bitter disillusionment, he might possibly have been persuaded to prosecute the friend who had betrayed him, but for his interview with Nell Silberthwaite. After that morning, Noble remained immovable in his determination to shield Steele as far as he could.

But there were several others who were willing to follow Hailsham's lead, and who were quietly furnishing themselves with the necessary substantiation of their suspicions. It took some time, of course, to collect facts and the corroboration of those facts, and Hailsham himself was waiting for further advices from America and Australia, when he would have his case complete, and then could bring an action against Steele which would mean a full disclosure of Steele's methods and practices. Hailsham was fiercely determined that his former business manager should be shown up.

He was vindictive by nature, and it was nothing to him that his position had been made for him by Steele's unerring judgment and untiring vigilance on his behalf. He only saw that he had been disgracefully cheated. At the back of his brain he knew, too, that, intellectually, Steele had always despised him, and had laughed secretly at his gallery gifts. Hailsham hated him for that quiet but supercilious contempt, and was in consequence doubly bent on vengeance and the recovery of his money. This very morning as he was studying the returns of one of his earlier plays, *The Winning Number*, he recalled the comment which Adrian Steele had made on it, and saw the thin lips curling into an almost imperceptible sneer.

"*Yes*," Steele had said, "*there is money in this play—much money. Not too much matter. And a negligible quantity of mind. It ought to be a superb success.*"

Hailsham had never forgiven nor forgotten those words : "a negligible quantity of mind." He was convinced that Steele had always included all his plays in that one category; and the sting of the implied scorn was as acute now as on the day when it had touched and wounded his self-esteem. A series of "superb successes" had never removed this secret stigma from his pride, and he was brooding over the re-awakened insult and consoling himself with the legitimate if relentless thought that Adrian Steele would soon be having his deserts, when he caught sight of a letter which had escaped his attention. He opened it eagerly, and the angry clouds cleared from his face. It was from T. Scott, who asked him, if possible, to come at once, as she had a specially good offer to make to him.

"Some unexpected good offer for the Dutch ship, I suppose," he said to himself, smiling with pleasure at the prospect of seeing Tamar. "Well, I'll go off now, and only too gladly. Thankful to change my thoughts to another subject and get away from this wretched little scoundrel for a while, and delighted to have a talk with T. Scott again. A most haunting personality. Can't get her out of my mind, and don't want to."

He turned to the Limoges enamel plaque which hung over his writing-table. He had separated it from the many other pieces of china and enamel which filled his room, and it stood out by itself as a distinctive and dominating object of peculiar interest, even as Tamar herself.

"A most beautiful piece," he said aloud proudly. "Nothing has pleased me so much for a long time. And the circumstances, too. She didn't know its value, though! She would never have let me have it for £15. Why, it's worth at least £60. A curious slip for her to make. Well, I suppose the cleverest dealers sometimes cheat themselves. And she's undoubtedly sharp and clever, and has a keen eye to business. A most mysteriously attractive woman. Yes, I'll go to her now."

He gathered up his papers and locked them in his desk, but gave a final glance at the returns of *The Winning Number*."

"Rather curious," he said thoughtfully. "There is no flaw that I can detect in these accounts. Two matinées, extra flying matinées, entire length of tours, translation rights, and everything else faithfully stated and paid. If I had looked at this play only, I should be inclined to think I had maligned him. A good thing for me, and a bad thing for him, that I studied them all."

He dismissed the matter from his mind, and started out to see Tamar. He determined to secure for himself, if possible, that Siberian onyx snuff-box, which had greatly taken his fancy and which had been haunting him almost as much as Tamar herself. He knew that he would have no rest until it was transferred to his own beautiful little collection of snuff-boxes, and he was prepared to pay a large sum of money for it. Sooner or later he knew that he would, in self-defence, be obliged to commit this extravagance, and he reasoned with himself that he might just as well indulge his fancy now. Besides, it might be snatched up by some one else. Or T. Scott might relent, and allow the South Kensington Museum to have it, and then it would be lost to him for ever! And what a chance lost, what a permanent regret gnawing at his heart!

For no enthusiastic collector, having once set eyes on its beauty, could ever forget that Siberian onyx snuff-box. He saw it now, dancing before him, oblong, formed of plaques of Siberian onyx, and mounted in chased and enamelled gold. An entrancing little treasure! Yes, he must have it. T. Scott must give it up to him. He must coax her somehow. He must tempt her with an absurdly large sum of money. But have it he must! He rehearsed what he should say to her, and laughed delightedly as he thought of the interesting interview in store for him. Would she drive a hard bargain with him? Well, he must have it at any price.

But, by the time he approached the shop, the snuff-box had retreated into the background of his thoughts, and his heart beat with excitement at the prospect of seeing her personally. Tamar had a fascination over men which was all the more powerful because it was unconscious. She might plot, scheme and devise in a hundred ways; but she did not plan to be fascinating. Her attitude to Hailsham had been exceptional, undertaken entirely on behalf of Adrian Steele. There she had deliberately arranged to please and propitiate; yet that which reached him, was not the charm she put forth consciously, but the underlying and elemental part of her nature, charged with a mysterious magic which defied analysis. He felt it now at once, as he entered the shop and found her bending over the counter, fingering some rings and bracelets brought by a tall, military-looking man.

"No," she said, even more curtly than was her custom. "I don't want any of these things. You can take them away."

The man made no remonstrance, but just nodded and went off rather quickly.

"Stolen goods, I feel sure," she said, nodding to Hailsham as to an intimate.

"How do you know?" Hailsham asked, interested at once.

"From the man's manner," she answered. "He was a receiver."

"And what tells you that, I wonder?" Hailsham questioned. "What on earth tells you that?"

"Instinct, or genius perhaps," she answered with a slight smile, which faded away into an expression of uneasiness as she remembered the task she had taken on herself of trying to buy off this man's purpose directed against Adrian Steele. For the first time in her life Tamar was nervous, and her heart began to beat so violently, that for a moment or two she could not find the strength to move or speak, but stared at Hailsham with an unasked question on her lips.

"You look tired," he said. "Do you feel ill?"

"I am never ill," she said, controlling her nerves with a great effort and gathering her courage together. "A little neuralgic, that's all. Shall we go into the inner room?"

"Ah," he said as he followed her, "we shall be nearer that Siberian onyx snuff-box after which I am hankering. I remember you put it back in the safe. Can I see it again?"

Without a word she unlocked the safe, opened it half way, and handed him out the beautiful little snuff-box, which he took eagerly and began to examine with enthusiastic delight. The collector's rapture lit up his face; and oblivion to all outer circumstances possessed his whole being. Tamar, watching him like a lynx, saw the signs she knew so well from long experience, and said to herself that the snuff-box was as good as sold. But she was too anxious and troubled to feel any elation, and the one thought in her mind was how she could best lay her proposition before him. Suddenly it struck her that the snuff-box itself would help her out with her scheme, and she determined to include it in the offer which she was going to make to him.

"If you like it so much," she said, "it will be easy enough for you to gratify your wish when you have heard the offer I have to make to you."

"Ah," he said, looking up, "that offer of course! About the Dutch ship, no doubt. How clever of you! You've done a better deal with it than you expected, I suppose?"

"It isn't about the Dutch ship," Tamar said bluntly.

"Well, what is it?" Hailsham asked pleasantly. There was a pause.

"It is about Adrian Steele," Tamar said.

"Adrian Steele," Hailsham repeated, putting down the snuff-box on Tamar's desk, and turning to her in amazement.

"Yes," she said. "I may as well tell you at once that, in the past, I used to know Adrian Steele."

"You used to know Adrian Steele?" Hailsham repeated, as in a dream.

"Yes," Tamar said quietly.

"And you have been allowing me to believe all this time that he was a stranger to you?" Hailsham asked impulsively.

"Yes," Tamar answered with great calmness.

"Perhaps you will tell me why?" Hailsham asked with increasing excitement.

"Because I wished to learn from you certain facts which it was imperative for me to know," Tamar replied.

"And did you learn them?" he said.

"Yes, thank you," Tamar answered regally.

"Upon my word, you are cool, and no mistake," Hailsham said with a short laugh. But even in the midst of his surprise and disconcertedness, he could not help being influenced by her quiet imperiousness, which seemed to claim a rightful place for her amongst those people privileged by nature and birth to do as they please, without let or hindrance.

"To proceed," Tamar said, without taking any notice of his remark, "I desire to offer you the sum of £3,000 in settlement of your claim on Adrian Steele. Will you accept it?"

"Do you know," Hailsham exclaimed, "I don't think you realize at all how you take me by surprise."

"Oh yes, I do," Tamar said, with one of her sullen smiles. "Don't imagine for a moment that you are the only astonished person in this matter. I assure you, I take myself much by surprise also. I should never have believed it, if I had been told a fortnight ago that I should offer any one £3,000 in settlement of Adrian Steele's affairs."

"But why should you offer it now?" he asked excitedly.

"Three thousand pounds," Tamar continued, "and the Siberian onyx snuff-box. I throw that in—and gladly, since you like it so well."

"I must really ask you to explain yourself," Hailsham said, a little impatiently. "I don't understand the situation. You tell me that you know Adrian Steele. Well, am I to understand that he has empowered you to make this offer on his behalf?"

"No," Tamar said emphatically. "The offer comes direct from me. Adrian Steele has no means of knowing that I am acquainted with you."

"Why don't you explain yourself at once?"

Hailsham said, still more impatiently. "Why do you keep up this absurd mystery?"

"There would not appear to be much mystery about the money," Tamar said with provoking quietness, pointing to a batch of papers on her desk. "Here are certificates and securities for £3,000. Central Argentine Railway, Johannesburg Municipal, Canadian and Pacific, and some others. You can examine them now. Take them and look at them now."

He shook his head angrily. He almost refused to see them.

"You know perfectly well that I am not referring to the money," he said, with blustering brusqueness. "I'm referring to your relationship to Adrian Steele. What are you to him? What is he to you? What impels you to stand up and offer me £3,000 in settlement of my claim on him? That's the first thing I want to learn, and you'll just have to tell me."

"I stand rudeness from no one," Tamar said slowly. "Rudeness has always been considered my own speciality. If you can't put your questions in a civil tone and without losing control of your temper, you'd better go—and at once. The negotiations are all off."

She stood immovable, with her eye fixed on him. He capitulated to her.

"I am really sorry," he said humbly. "Really very sorry, believe me."

She accepted his apology with a slight, almost imperceptible inclination of the head, the formality of which seemed to warn him that he would have to be on his guard, if he wished to remain in her shop.

"Perhaps you would allow me to put the question in this way," he said. "What concern have you practically with Adrian Steele's affairs?"

Tamar remained silent for a moment, making a final search for the right idea to guide her words. She had been purposely beating about the bush in this vague fashion so as to gain time for reflection. And now a sudden conviction took possession of her, and a brilliant thought leapt into her clever brain. It was no use telling Hailsham that her concern was that of some one who loved Adrian Steele. She would have more chance of gaining her ends if she represented herself in another light. Why had not she thought of that before? But it was not too late. She took the plunge deliberately.

"The concern of an old enemy," she said in a low voice.

Hailsham's face brightened immediately. It was obvious that he was enormously relieved.

"Of an old enemy," he repeated eagerly. "Then you too have a grudge against him?"

"Yes," she said grimly. "I want to get him in my power. I want to pay off old scores. I intend to pay off old scores."

"Ah, but that's what I want to do," Hailsham exclaimed, "pay off old scores, mental as well as monetary."

As he spoke, a vision of his little scornful enemy rose before him, and those contemptuous words echoed in his ears: "a negligible quantity of mind." They revived in his mind the stinging remembrance of Steele's habitual disparagement of his plays, from an intellectual point of view. Once again he saw those thin lips forming into an indulgent sneer, and the keen face assuming an expression of subdued amusement. "A negligible quantity of mind." No, by Heaven, no. No one except himself should deal with this mocking little scoundrel. Not for £30,000—not for £300,000—not for all the art treasures in the world. He would handle Adrian Steele himself, and without mercy.

The vision faded. Hailsham looked up and saw Tamar watching him with an interest which seemed to have great kindness in it.

"I realize that I ask a great deal of you," she said. "You probably feel that you would rather do anything than part with your revenge?"

"How do you know that?" he asked impulsively.

"Because I should feel the same," she answered with a smile. "I, too, should hate to part with my revenge."

"By Jove," he said, "you do understand."

She nodded.

"I have had bitter experience," she said dreamily. "You spoke of paying off mental scores. So you, too, must have experienced his intellectual contempt. I don't remember whether I showed you my book on precious stones. Well, I wrote it as a vindication to myself of my own powers, which he had always depreciated. I never rested until I had finished it."

Hailsham drew a deep breath of satisfaction and relief.

"Ah," he said, "don't I just understand, too."

He stretched out his hand in sign of comradeship, and Tamar pressed it in grave silence.

"I should like to see your book on precious stones," he said.

She took it from the bookshelf and put it into his hands, and whilst he was glancing at it, she quietly produced from the safe one or two of her finest stones and her most valuable pearls. When he looked up from the book and saw them, he gave an exclamation of delighted surprise.

"You prepare for me one surprise after another," he said. "You make me a most astounding business offer. You appear in the unexpected rôle of a fellow author. And without any warning you disclose the most beautiful stones. I wonder what you're going to do next."

She did not speak. She examined her pearls.

"And you are willing to pay the sum of £3,000 to get him into your own personal power," Hailsham remarked thoughtfully, after a pause. "A heavy price for revenge."

"Oh, don't imagine that I shan't get it all back," she said quietly, "every farthing of it—and with a commission of at least 12½ per cent. I see good business in it as well as revenge."

"What an extraordinary woman you are, upon my soul!" Hailsham said, with a puzzled smile on his face.

"I am a Jewess," Tamar said with dignity. "A Jewess never forgets an injury and, at the same time, never neglects to take the opportunity of doing good business."

The puzzled expression on Hailsham's face changed into one of added interest and admiration, for Tamar looked magnificent in her pride, as she claimed, without flinching, the special characteristics of her race. She waited a moment, and then went on:

"Seven years ago Adrian Steele played havoc with my life. For seven years I have waited. Seven years. That's a long time. And now comes my opportunity. I naturally grasp at it. What have you to say to my offer? I admit I have used you. Well, what of that? You've been using me probably—studying me for one of your plays, perhaps. And rightly so. I don't grudge it to you. If people don't use their opportunities in life, they're fools. At any rate, in this instance, neither you've been a fool nor I've been a fool. I wanted to get information out of you, and I got it. You wanted to learn something about me as a dealer in antiques and as a woman. Well, you've seen my choicest treasures and you've learnt something at least of my nature. It seems to me that so far we have not done badly."

"I am afraid I can't deny that I have been studying you," Hailsham said frankly. "You've interested me fearfully. I've never met any one like you before. But, in justice to myself, I want to say that what began in mere curiosity, has already passed on to real and genuine personal regard. Will you forgive me for taking the liberty in saying this? I can't help myself."

"You needn't try to help yourself," Tamar said, half sullenly, half encouragingly. "I don't mind owning that I, too, have changed in my attitude towards you. I began by making use of you, and I shouldn't be surprised if I ended by—"

"By loving me, T. Scott!" he exclaimed with sudden passion. "Say that—say that!"

She never flinched.

"It's too early to say that," she answered with an indulgent smile, which nevertheless had something authoritative in it. "You'll spoil things between us if you go on in that ridiculous fashion."

"Forgive me," he said, controlling himself. "I beg of you to forgive me."

"I forgive you willingly enough," she replied, with a soft little laugh. "But meanwhile we're wasting time, and I have to go out and attend a sale of Old English silver plate at Christie's. Perhaps you'd like to come with me, by the way. Now will you or will you not accept my offer—£3,000 and the Siberian onyx snuff-box?"

"It is a most unheard-of proposition," Hailsham said, getting up from his chair and leaning against the mantelshelf. "I really don't know what to make of it."

"It is a good business proposition," Tamar answered. "You told me yourself that you have been defrauded of nearly £2,000. You will get your money back and make £1,000."

"But you have only my word for it that I have been defrauded," he said, turning to her. "You must trust me enormously."

A curious smile came over her face.

"I have no doubt that you are trustworthy," she said. "But to begin with, no one would think of entering on a prosecution unless he had definite facts to go on. And it goes without saying that I should want those definite facts—all of them."

"And when you've got them, what are you going to do with them?" Hailsham asked.

"Keep them hanging over him," she answered slowly. "Allow each one to descend on him, one by one, one by one. You needn't fear he won't be punished."

Hailsham stood lost in thought. After all, why should he not accept this offer? He was fond of money, and lived the sort of life which needed a lot of money. Here was £1,000 thrown at his head for nothing—except silence. A bribe to pass on his carefully prepared revenge to some one who was as hostile as himself towards Adrian Steele, indeed more so, since, according to T. Scott's own words, she had certainly been nursing her anger for seven years. Why shouldn't he let her deal with Adrian Steele in her own way, and drop the matter himself, with £1,000—no—

£3,000 to the good, no further trouble about the matter, and the Siberian onyx snuff-box and her regard, her friendship, her gratitude—perhaps her love—into the bargain? It was years since a woman had exercised such a fascination over him. Why shouldn't he accept her offer? Why shouldn't he do this to please her, to gain favour in her eyes? After all, John Noble was not going to prosecute. What should prevent him, given these favourable conditions, from following John Noble's example?

All these arguments passed through Hailsham's mind, and he felt desperately tempted to accept Tamar's offer. He was so entirely dominated by her personality that, for the moment, he was conscious of no resentment at the way in which she had used him, probed him and turned him inside out. Indeed, her calm frankness in owning up to her conduct, had even impressed him as something fine and great. He admired, too, her discerning cleverness which recognized and understood the author's instinct in him to study and analyze an unfamiliar type. And in addition, the fierce hostility which they had in common against Adrian Steele, linked her to him in a close tie of fellowship. Finally and firstly, T. Scott, the woman, held him: the Jewess, the Roman Empress whom his pen would never be able to describe. He was, in short, under the subtle magic of her spell, in surroundings which, to an enthusiastic collector, were in themselves enchanted ground. Her presence there, in her own setting, completed the enchantment of the atmosphere. She was that atmosphere, and that atmosphere was herself. In his coarse-grained and rather commonplace nature ran a fine thread of unalloyed artistic appreciation which Tamar had at once detected. She held him by that thread, as well as by her own mysterious and compelling charm.

He was at the point of yielding to her extraordinary proposal, and allowing her to carry out the punishment and destruction of Adrian Steele in her own way, when suddenly there came a ring at the shop door. Tamar, contrary to her custom, and probably because she was excited and triumphant at having brought Hailsham thus far, hurried off to answer the bell. Perhaps, too, she was anxious to keep the coast clear of any inopportune visitor, and deemed it wise to run no risks of a chance call, for instance, from Adrian Steele himself. In her haste she forgot to roll back the top of her roller desk, and lock it.

She also forgot to restore her jewels to the safe, and lock that. It was the first time that she had ever omitted the precautions enjoined on her by her mother, and hitherto carried out by her with a sort of sacramental faithfulness. She was destined to pay dearly for her negligence.

Hailsham had no intention of prying, for he was as honest and open as the day. But it suddenly struck him that he might just as well have a look at those certificates which T. Scott had pressed on him for inspection, and on which he had at the moment rudely refused to bestow so much as a passing glance. What had she said they were? Ah yes, Central Argentine Railways and Johannesburg Municipals and Canadian Pacifics. Good investments, all. There they were. There could be no harm in looking at them.

He advanced to the desk, took them from the top of a pile of other papers, and was just going to examine them, when his eye was attracted to a letter which had been covered up by the certificates, but now lay before him, staring him full in the face. He gazed at it, at first half stupidly, and then with sudden recognition.

"My own handwriting," he exclaimed. "My own handwriting. Well, that's odd."

"Why, it's one of my own letters—to—Adrian Steele," he cried. "What on earth is it doing here?"

It was his letter to Steele announcing, in a few words, his intention to investigate his affairs. He snatched it up and found, to his utter astonishment, that it was attached to a detailed statement of the returns of his play *The Winning Number.* On the top was written in Steele's handwriting these words :

"*You will find this flawless.—A. S.*"

"Great powers," he gasped out. "So that's it. She has been duping me."

A realization of the truth swept over him like an avalanche. The colour mounted to his face, and an almost uncontrolled anger to his brain. In a flash he saw that T. Scott had been trying to trap and trick him, and that she was Adrian Steele's confederate and not his enemy. Fool that he had been not to take it in from the beginning. Everything pointed to this explanation of her attitude towards him. She had encouraged him to come to her shop, shown him her treasures, fostered his enthusiasm, got rid of the Dutch ship for him, let him have that valuable Limoges enamel for a mere trifle, cajoled him, humoured, enticed him—and all for this—to get him in her power—yes, to get him in her power and then wrest from him, with another bribe, the right of dealing with Adrian Steele's business frauds. Confederates—that's what they were—not enemies. Confederates—allies. Why, she had told him herself that she had wanted to get information out of him. Fool that he had been—why didn't that alone warn him? Yes, yes, and he remembered now that he had never once mentioned to her the exact amount of the unpaid returns due to him from Steele. Never once, because his statistics were not complete. He had spoken vaguely of hundreds of pounds. He remembered that well. Nothing more definite than that. So that it was from Steele himself that she must have learnt the approximate figure of £2,000. Fool that he had been to allow himself to come even for a moment under the spell of her influence. Well, he was free from it now, and she should hear what he thought of her.

He threw the papers back on to the desk. He dashed into the shop, where he found Tamar alone, making some entry in a book.

"A treacherous, designing woman, that's what you are," he shouted, almost beside himself with rage. "A confederate of Adrian Steele's. A well-matched pair, the two of you."

She leaned with her elbows on the counter. Her face showed no sign of perturbation.

"How do you know that?" she asked calmly, as if the matter were of no concern to her.

"You should not leave your desk open," he retorted excitedly.

"No, you're right," she said still calmly, though a sudden and terrible fear seized her. "It's never safe."

"Oh, don't imagine I've been prying amongst your damned papers," he shouted. "I lifted up your certificates which you yourself asked me to examine, as I made up my mind to accept your offer—yes—to accept it—fool that I was, and there I saw a letter in my own handwriting to Adrian Steele, staring me in the face. Perhaps you remember what it is."

A slight tremor passed over her face. She remembered that she had forgotten to lock up in an inner drawer one or two of Adrian's papers which she had been studying just before Hailsham came. But she maintained an outward composure, and ignoring Hailsham, strolled casually into the inner room, where she stood before her desk. He followed her and snatched up his letter and the accounts of *The Winning Number.*

"There!" he exclaimed. "You can't deny that my letter and the statement of *The Winning Number* testify against you."

"No, I can't," she said.

"You can't deny that you've tried to entrap and deceive me," he went on.

"No," she answered, "I can't."

"And that you are his friend and not his enemy," he continued.

"No," she replied, "I can't."

"Then, pray, what have you to say for yourself?" he demanded fiercely.

"Nothing," she said slowly. "Nothing, except that I have played—and lost."

The intenseness with which her few words were charged, checked his power of speech. He glanced towards her and watched her raise her right arm and hand, which were trembling with suppressed but obvious rage and fury against him and herself. She pointed to the shop door.

"Go," she said in a low hoarse voice. "I hate you. Do you hear me? Go, before I kill you."

He saw the dangerous glare in her eyes, and the malevolent expression on her countenance.

He fled, as from the spring of a tigress.

CHAPTER XV.

EARLY that same evening Tamar received this letter from Adrian Steele :—

"TAMAR,—The doctors report favourably on my little Alpenrose. They appear now to regard me, and not her, in a critical state of health. They insist that I should go away for a change ; and as their views chance to correspond with your wish that I should remove myself for a time out of the reach of embarrassing encounters, I have made up my mind to go. Needless to say, the doctors suggest Brighton. How like them, Tamar ! Have you ever met a doctor who didn't say Brighton or Cairo ? Has it ever struck you that they make their suggestions in alphabetical order ? Brighton, Cowes, Davos, Eastbourne, Folkestone, Grindelwald, Hastings, and so on ? It is an excellent plan, and saves unnecessary use of the intelligence. Brighton would be full of embarrassing encounters for me, wouldn't it ? I smile when I think of all the theatrical people I should run across there. No, I must choose some unfrequented spot unknown to the profession. I liked that place Kineton where you stopped for the Meyntoun Moat sale. That's where I feel inclined to go. I think you stayed at the 'Prince Rupert,' but no doubt you will send me a line. An interesting country that, Tamar. I see from the guidebook—an excellent one, by the way—that the old manor house of Longford is not far off. I must visit it. This would appear to be a better programme than Brighton, and a safer one. I hope to return restored to my usual standard of superb intellectual perfection. Meantime, it is not altogether an unprofitable experience to have one's brain power feeble and slow. It should make one better able to understand and tolerate the ordinary brainless person with the dull, fish-like eye. How I have ever abominated that type! And now, to be honest with myself and you, I believe that in a strict census, I ought to be included in that fearsome category. But only temporarily, surely! And meantime your clever brain works and thinks for me, I know. I shall struggle through somehow, with your help. I suppose, being a person not addicted to poetry, you don't know those words of Browning: 'Out of the wreck I rise, past Zeus, to the Potency o'er him.' Well, they rather haunt me. 'Out of the wreck I rise.' Good-bye, Tamar of mine."

The letter fell from Tamar's hand, and she sat motionless for a few minutes. Her eyes were rather dim. Then she took her pen and wrote as follows :—

"Am thankful you are going away. Feel sure we shall save the situation if you get back your thinking powers. Don't go to the 'Prince Rupert.' When you get to Kineton, take a trap to Herne Vicarage. Am writing to tell the young clergyman, Richard Forest, a friend of mine, to receive you instead. You can pay him for your board and lodging. He will use the money for church repairs. It is very lonely there—and very safe. None of the playwright people will be strutting about there. You can rest and recover yourself in Richard Forest's company. You know that I, as well as you, have always hated clergymen. But he is something set apart. Being a clergyman could not injure him. It will be good for you to be with him. I don't mind owning it was good for me, and that I haven't lost the good from it. Have only seen him twice, but each time have felt sure he is something set apart. What, I don't know. He will expect you to be interested in the repairs of the church. Possibly also, in the vicarage ghosts. Ghosts have never attracted me, but I remember you've always pretended to like them. Shall come down in a few days and consult further with you. Meantime, get rested. Your brain was always resourceful, and will be again. Even at your worst you could never qualify for the company of the dull people with the fish-like eyes. Must tell you I believe you owe it to Nell Silberthwaite that John Noble has stayed his hand. Perhaps you could write a line to her—or—or see her before you go. Yes, see her. Should like you to, on the whole. Noble came to her office about some absurd sweated business. He noticed the snow picture and they spoke of you. He'd just come from your office. She told him she'd known you years ago, and that she owed a great deal to you. Noble said that reminded him of all he owed to you. A good thing he did remember it, isn't it? Anyway, *he* is out of the field, of his own accord. With contrivance, the others will be also, for I have a fine scheme maturing in my mind over which I laugh softly in this inner room. No, am thankful to say I don't know anything about Browning or any other poet, but those words will be true of you, I'm certain. Am as sure of that as I am of the difference between a genuine and a faked antique. That reminds me your wife came to-day to thank me for my kindness to 'a stranger brought to my gates.' She insisted on buying a faked antique pendant, though I tried to guide her taste and offered her something genuine, at a lower price, too. Could see she was anxious to reward me for my hospitality to you. Made an unfavourable impression on her. Was at my worst. You know what that is. T. SCOTT."

To Nell Silberthwaite she wrote :—

"Have failed with that playwright man, Hailsham, and through my own fault. Cannot speak of it until I have recovered from my fury with him and myself. T. SCOTT."

To Richard Forest she wrote :—

"A friend of mine, Adrian Steele, is coming into your neighbourhood. He was going to the 'Prince Rupert' at Kineton. Am asking you to take him in instead. The money could be used for the church repairs. He wants quiet and peace. He has had a great deal of trouble lately. He knows a fine Norman font when he sees it. Is rather a good all-round antiquarian. Show him your fresco. He does not dislike ghosts.

"T. SCOTT."

Her expression of countenance softened as she read what she had written to Richard Forest.

"Something set apart," she said aloud. "That's what you are, Richard Forest."

She addressed the envelope, and then stared at it.

"What would you do if you knew the lies I've been telling this afternoon, Richard Forest, and all in vain?" she said aloud. "I think I know what you would do. You would kneel down in that lonely little church and pray for me. An absurd thing to do, of course, but I wouldn't resent it from you."

She gummed down the envelope.

"Adrian will rest in your company," she said aloud. "I send him to you, Richard Forest, as to a healer."

She shut up the shop, went out, posted her letters, and wandered aimlessly about in the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER XVI.

JOAN NEVILLE looked up from her desk in the office and saw Adrian Steele standing before her.

"Ah," she said to herself. "Looking down on snow-white plains again. But how changed he looks. Is he going to faint? A good thing I can count 'first aid' amongst my many wonderful attributes."

Aloud she said:

"Good-morning. Mrs. Silberthwaite is here, and disengaged. If you will kindly take a seat, I will tell her."

"I prefer to announce myself," he said, with just a touch of hauteur which at first awed and then irritated little Joan Neville.

But the next moment he had appeased her, for he turned to her with a penitence which was irresistible, and said:

"The traditional privilege of an old friend and comrade, you know. Mysteriously but very definitely precious, like all threatened privileges."

"I understand," she said, smiling too; and she rose and held the door open for him to pass into the passage leading to Nell's room.

After he had gone, she stood thinking about him.

"One could never forget him," she said. "Never. One might want to. But one never could. And why, I wonder?"

She shook her head solemnly, gave up the problem, and returned to her work; but she glanced once or twice towards the door, and her mind travelled through it to meet that little masterful figure which continued to haunt her with an unreasonable persistence.

Meantime Adrian Steele knocked at Nell's door, with an old familiar rap which he had always said was his only musical composition.

"A symphony," he had always said, "short, but, of its kind, superb."

Nell's voice bade him enter, and he saw for himself the glad welcome on her face.

"It's delightful to hear once more your only musical composition, Adrian," she said, the colour mounting to her cheeks.

"You see I have not forgotten it. It's still superb, isn't it?" he said, smiling.

"I'll be off, Mrs. Silberthwaite," Mrs. Carton said, turning round from a cupboard from which she was taking a large number of pamphlets and leaflets. "They won't want more than this lot at the meeting."

She came forward with her burden, and met Adrian Steele face to face. The pamphlets dropped to the ground.

"It's Mr. Trustworthy," she cried excitedly. "I should know him anywhere. You're him, aren't you? Oh yes, you're hisself, and no mistake. We've never forgotten you down there. Our first friend. The first one that cared. Mr. Trustworthy. That's what we always called you behind your back, because the old box-maker—you remember old Mrs. Perkins?—one of them three you buried, well, she was always saying: 'He's trustworthy, he is. Trustworthy.' I can hear her poor old cracked voice now."

"I can hear it," Adrian Steele said in a low voice, which was almost a whisper.

He stood with bowed head and closed eyes, his hands folded over each other and pressing into his breast. In that one moment he passed through a purgatory of remorse. Then, with an effort of will, he controlled his emotions and opened his eyes. He gave Mrs. Carton a friendly smile of recognition, and stooped down to help her to pick up the pamphlets. She was puzzled and awed by his silence and his manner, and glanced at Nell half questioningly as she left the room.

When the door closed, he strolled towards the mantelpiece, and contemplated in silence the snow mountain picture which he had given to Nell more than fifteen years ago.

"And so John Noble recognized the picture, Nell?" he said without turning round.

"Yes, Adrian," she answered.

"Tamar told me," he continued. "She told me that I owed it to you that John Noble has—"

He paused.

"—Has entrusted me with his work as usual," he added.

"Tamar is a generous soul," Nell said warmly.

"Tamar is—Tamar," he said gently. And Nell heard, with a pang of jealousy, even at that moment, the love accents in his voice.

"I want to thank you, Nell," he went on. "It was good of you to—well, what shall I say—testify for me."

"No, no, it wasn't," she said. "There was not anything good in it. Your name came up in connection with the mountain picture, and something impelled me to tell him of what I myself owed you. You know what I owe to you; my career, my life's work, the biggest debt that any one could owe to any one. My husband seconded me most unselfishly, most splendidly. But you showed me the way. He knew I thought that. He was content that I should think it, because he was above all paltriness and pettiness."

"Every one has been generous except myself," Adrian said. "Well, it is at least something to know that you think I carried the lantern, and showed you the toilsome way which you are treading so bravely. Perhaps I did, and perhaps I did not."

A glimmer of playful mischief came into his eyes as he said after a pause:

"At any rate, I rescued you from the academic abyss. Of that I have no doubt whatsoever. Think of it, Nell, but for me, you might at this moment be editing Plato or Aristotle."

"You speak of such work as if it were a calamity," Nell said, with a laugh.

"Not a calamity for those possessed of a mind academic and academic only," he answered. "A fulfilment for them, and a right fulfilment. But there were other voices whispering to you as well—the call of suffering, hopeless poverty in the world outside the seclusion of the study, making itself heard softly but persistently. It would have been a crime for you to turn to it a deaf ear—wouldn't it? Events have proved that I was right in my diagnosis. About this matter I am proud of myself, and with justice. You've done splendidly."

She shook her head and remained silent. She longed to beg him to talk, not of her but of himself. But she dared not. She remembered him of old. With tragedy and disaster confronting him, it was entirely characteristic of him that his mind should perversely choose to dwell on any subject rather than on his own personal affairs. So she was not specially surprised when he began to speak of the mountains.

"Yes, Nell," he said, as though he were continuing some conversation about them; "I have always loved the mountains, even before I learnt to know and share your deep delight in them. Do you remember when we first read together Ruskin's chapters on the 'Mountain Gloom' and the 'Mountain Glory'? Do you remember that passage in which he speaks of them as 'these great cathedrals of the earth, with their gates of rock, pavements of cloud, choirs of stream and stone, altars of snow, and vaults of purple traversed by the continual stars'?"

"Yes," Nell said; "and I have so often thought of the ending words of the 'Mountain Glory.' You were fond of them, in spite of yourself, you used to say. Do you remember them now? 'These pure and white hills, near to the heaven and sources of all good to the earth, are the appointed memorials of that Light of His mercy that fell, snow-like, on the Mount of Transfiguration.' "

"That fell snow-like," he repeated half to himself. "That fell snow-like."

"You used to tell me, didn't you, Nell," he said turning to her, "that you were often able to dream of the mountains when you had the heart-hunger for them?"

"Yes," she said, her face lighting up. "I have seen the snow peaks and the distant ranges as in a vision. And the Alpine glow covering their ideal whiteness with that mysteriously beautiful purple garment."

"Ah," he said eagerly, "I saw that the other night in my dreams. I wandered about in my favourite haunts, through the wild and lonely Meienthal, with my face set towards the Sustenhörner. My eyes delighted in that vision of splendour. It faded, of course. But in so-called real life I have never seen it more superb. And my joy did not end with it, Nell. You'll understand me, because you would have felt the same. The winter changed, with a wave of the magic wand, to early spring, and I stooped down and picked my first star gentian, and my first little soldanella. Then I woke, alas!"

"Before you had gathered a spring anemone, with its soft glittering tufts of hair," Nell said.

"What a shame! Well, I'll show it to you here in this Alpine flora book, which has just been sent me from Zürich. Here it is. Isn't it a lovely picture? Doesn't it make you see the snow melting away and disclosing whole velvety fields of them. And here's the wee soldanella. And here's the little star gentian."

She had taken the book from a shelf, opened it, and placed it in his hands. He turned over the leaves in silence, nodding when he came upon his favourite flowers. At last he arrived at the plate which, amongst other Alpine shrubs, included the Alpenrose.

"Alpenrose," he said, and a tremor passed over his face. He put the book down on Nell's desk.

"You know," he said dreamily, "I called my little daughter Alpenrose, because I wanted to believe that she belonged in name, in being, in spirit, to the white snow-land where the mountain peaks stand for the far-off altars of our far-off ideals. Alpenrose has been ill. We nearly lost her. We wrestled with death for her young life, and we won it. But with half my heart, I think, it would almost have been better if she had died. You see—I have—"

He broke off. Nell waited breathlessly. She would have given anything on earth if he had at that moment opened his heart to her, confided to her his difficulties and anxieties and confessed his secret sadness. But he gave no further sign of wishing to unburden his mind to her. He stood, as she had, once not so long ago, seen him in her dream, remote, inaccessible on the mountain side, cut off from all retreat. Tamar could reach him. She could not. She had to solace herself then and ever afterwards with the cold but snow-white memory that he had cared to show her a glimpse of the soul within him, and to speak with her of the wonderful things in Nature dear to them both, and symbolic to them both of spiritual life. No one could rob her of this. Not even Tamar.

Suddenly he took the Alpine flora book again from the desk, half absent-mindedly, half mechanically; but his face became eager and interested as he opened it and looked once more at the many beautiful coloured plates.

"What a splendid page of gentians," he said. "And this thistle—a noble fellow, isn't he? Yes, that's his name, I remember: *Eryngium alpinum*. Ah, and here are the primulas. What a lot of them! And here is the sweet little soldanella again. Wait a moment. I must just see what they have to say about the flora of the Meienthal. Here it is: "*Meienthal bis zum Susten*"—beginning of course with the *Ranunculus glacialis*. I remember that was particularly beautiful in the Meienthal, up towards the Susten Pass. Let's look up his plate. Here it is—a very fine one too! Now I wonder whether they mention my little favourite village, Wassen. Bravo, here it is, with a fat list attached to it too, Nell. I'm proud, but not surprised; for I tell you I've never seen the Alpine pasture flowers grow so richly anywhere as there. Never in my life did I see such forget-me-nots as on the slopes round Wassen. It's at the entrance of the Meienthal, you know. And it has its church perched on a steep little hill which dominates the valley. And it owns a raging torrent river, and a most entrancing group of mountains, mercifully despised by climbers and neglected by tourists. I have always loved it. That's where my Alpine heart is. Yes, this is a gem of a book, Nell, and no mistake. You were always clever at unearthing the right book for the right subject."

"Take it, Adrian," she said impulsively. "I shall be so happy if you will accept it from me."

"It's just as well you've made the offer," he said, with a twinkle in his eye. "For, upon my word, I don't think that I could part with it, once having seen it. I will take it away gladly and most thankfully, as authorized plunder."

She smiled at his words, and at the faint reminder of his old playful manner. But when she glanced at his face, and saw the stress and strain of spirit written large there in spite of all his efforts of concealment and his conscious or unconscious evasion of impending trouble, a cry of real distress and concern broke from her involuntarily, and would not be repressed.

"Adrian," she cried, in a tone of voice charged with every kind of tenderness and pitifulness, "all will be well with you yet, I'm sure. You'll rise out of this trouble—I know you will."

He shrank into himself a little as if he feared the close approach of some unseen danger threatening him, but he nodded his head in quiet assent and said vaguely :

"Yes, Nell. Why not ? Stranger things than that have been known to happen in a man's life—or death."

As he spoke, his eyes sought the mountain picture and rested there. Nell stood silently by his side, and her eyes, too, travelled to the snow peaks, and remained there in steadfast but dim vision.

So they parted.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHEN Richard Forest received T. Scott's letter, heralding the arrival of her friend, his face flushed with pleasure and he said aloud, as though addressing Tamar herself:

"Of course I shall make your friend welcome. And, T. Scott, I am so pleased that you have thought of sending him to me. I will do my best for him, and try to cheer him if he is in trouble."

The unexpected situation presented no difficulties to his mind. Richard was always ready for the unknown in every direction, and doubts about details were negligible pettinesses which did not affect his large outlook. But it did occur to him that perhaps Mrs. Eustace might be harassed at the prospect of entertaining a stranger in their simple household, and he spent some time in considering how he should break the news to her.

But when he went into the kitchen and found her making a ginger pudding—an unfailing sign that she was in a specially kindly frame of mind—he knew that all was well, and that he might exact from her anything he liked. Ginger pudding had been added to his category of symbols.

"Mrs. Eustace," he said, "I am expecting a gentleman to come and stop for a few days. He comes to-day. I suppose we can manage all right?"

"Mrs. Eustace left off kneading the dough, gave a sigh of great relief, and smiled. To herself she said:

"Now there'll be somebody for him to introduce them ghosts to instead of poor me. My prayers is answered."

To Richard she said:

"Of course we can manage all right, dear young master. You leave it to me."

"He is a stranger to me," Richard said. "In fact, I know nothing else about him except that—well, that he doesn't dislike ghosts."

He smiled as he spoke, and added a little wistfully:

"Perhaps that poor forlorn old clergyman I told you of, will appear to us whilst he is here."

"Yes, sir, let us hope so," Mrs. Eustace replied fervently.

"It has been a great disappointment to me, Mrs. Eustace, that he has not so far revealed himself again," Richard said sadly. "I have watched and waited for him day after day, and in vain."

"Ah," murmured Mrs. Eustace sympathetically. "That you have, I'm sure."

"Well," said Richard, "I suppose I must be patient. I ought to feel, and indeed I do feel, that already a great privilege has been bestowed on me."

"Ah yes," murmured Mrs. Eustace again, nodding her head solemnly.

"Not every one is so blessed," Richard said. "These manifestations don't come to every one, you know."

"No, sir, indeed not," replied Mrs. Eustace cheerfully.

"Well, I must be off on my rounds," Richard said. "I shall be in as soon as I can, Mrs. Eustace, and if Mr. Steele arrives during my absence, you'll look after him, won't you? I wonder whether he will be interested in the church. I think he will be sure to, don't you? I understand that he knows a good Norman font when he sees it. That surely implies a definite interest in churches; for, you see, he must have studied and compared fonts."

"Ah, no doubt," Mrs. Eustace said, trying to put on an antiquarian expression, which was really rather successful.

Richard hurried away, but returned in a few minutes accompanied by Skib, who was barking joyously whilst his master whistled a tune to him.

"It is rather jolly having a visitor, isn't it, Mrs. Eustace?" he said boyishly. "I know it's absurd of me, but I'm quite excited. I do hope he won't find it too lonely. You'll give him my room, of course, and I'll go into Miss Margaret's."

Mrs. Eustace shook her head.

"No, sir," she said firmly. "That you shan't. You must keep your own room. You'd be sitting up all night waiting to see Miss Margaret's ghost. And what with the old clergyman in the daytime, and Miss Margaret at night, there'd be nothing of you left."

"As you please," he said laughing. "But you know, Mrs. Eustace, I don't have to sit up at night to feel her presence. I feel her everywhere. All day long in the panelled room. I should be lost and lonely if I didn't know for certain that she was near me all the time. Otherwise what would become of me?"

"Dear, dear," thought Mrs. Eustace, wiping the perspiration from her forehead after he had gone. "What will become of the dear young gentleman, anyway? That's what I say to myself. A good thing a visitor's coming. Some live person. Some one not dead. And yet he keep on saying people don't die. I should like to know what they do do then."

She sighed and gave the problem up as hopeless, but said aloud :

"Anyway, some live person is coming. And perhaps he'll feel inclined to go to the early morning service instead of poor me."

Cheered considerably by this comforting reflection, she went blithely about her preparations for the arrival of Adrian Steele, who little knew the mental, physical and spiritual welcome awaiting him in the lonely hamlet shut away from the outer world, and could not guess of the exhilaration which the mere thought of his visit was bringing to the old woman and the young clergyman at this desolate outpost. If he had known, he would probably not have understood. Only those who have been forced by circumstance to live in solitudes, cut off entirely, or even partially, from their fellow beings, can realize the vitalizing effect of unexpected companionship. Up goes the pulse by magic, and a magician's bridge is built, too, over all separating differentiations of mind and temperament. The bridge, frail in its construction, may break after a time ; but the heart-beat has gained renewed strength, which will last out for many a long day, and which, even in its decline, can be reinvigorated by memory.

Richard, riding on his bicycle to visit one of his sick parishioners, was already uplifted and stimulated by the prospect of a fresh experience in acquaintanceship. His interest in the repairs of the church, his painting, his studying of the mystic philosophers, his patient vigils for the reappearance of the old reprobate clergyman, his quiet happiness in knowing himself to be linked with the invisible and only real world—all these joys of the spirit were forgotten for the moment in the human pleasure which awaited him: a pleasure all the greater, too, because he owed it to T. Scott.

She had continued, as before, to enclose cheques to him, on and off, accompanied always with the brief sentence, "*For the repairs of the church;*" and after that one great struggle with himself, he had accepted them as her offerings of self-discipline, her efforts of self-denial, her corrections of avarice.

He had no means of knowing that owing to his influence, T. Scott's very code of dishonourableness was at least undergoing some modification. But he would not have been surprised, for he had thought of her so much, and prayed for her so constantly in his lonely little church, that it would have seemed only natural to him that a message should reach her in some form or other: not from him, indeed, but perhaps through him.

And now it was a source of real delight to him that she had entrusted her friend to his care, and had thus added a personal and intimate touch to their impersonal intercourse. Buoyantly happy, therefore, was Richard Forest. Very beautiful seemed the world to him on this spring morning. The birds sang symphonies to him, such as he had never heard before, and the trees and hedges had put on a most delicate fairy-like garment, which Nature had chosen specially for him out of her secret wardrobe. She had coaxed the sun to give out added light and warmth, and had rallied the sky to deck itself in cloudless azure blue, deepening here and there to a sapphire tint. All this Nature had done for her child whom she loved, and who loved her with a passionate devotion and who interpreted her wonders and secrets with unfailing clearness of vision. Richard glanced around with delighted eyes, and Blake's words on the Spring rushed to his remembrance :

> "The hills tell each other, and the listening
> Valleys hear ; all our longing eyes are turned
> Up to thy bright pavilions ; issue forth,
> And let thy holy feet visit our clime."

When he reached home, Mrs. Eustace met him at the vicarage gate with the news that the visitor had arrived and was waiting for him in the panelled room. Richard hurried in, and found Adrian Steele standing staring at one of his Blake illustrations : "*The lost traveller's dream under the hill.*"

"What a remarkable painting," Adrian Steele said to him. "The artist who did this, must know and love Blake through and through. Who is he, can you tell me?"

"I am he," Richard said shyly, flushing crimson as he spoke.

Adrian Steele looked at him, and Tamar's words echoed back to him: "He is something set apart."

"I am indeed fortunate in having been sent to you," Adrian said gently. "I too love Blake."

"Do you?" Richard said, his face radiant with pleasure. "Well, that is splendid for us both."

So there were no preliminaries to be gone through, and no barriers to be broken down. When Mrs. Eustace came an hour or two later to tell them that dinner was ready, she found them knee-deep in books and sketches, and with happiness written large on their eager countenances.

"Ah," she thought, "all is well with the dear young master now he has got some live person to play with. Perhaps he'll forget about the old clergyman's ghost. Perhaps it will go right out of his head, and we shan't hear no more about it, thank goodness!"

But her hopes were not destined to be realized, for when, later on, she served up and brought in the ginger pudding, she heard Richard say:

"No, I'm not as lonely as you might think. You know, I always feel presences around me; and last week, to my joy, I saw one of them—an old clergyman. I must tell you about him later, for I learn from T. Scott that you do not dislike so-called ghosts.

"I should have no fear of them if I saw them," Adrian Steele answered. "On the contrary, I should be deeply interested."

"Ah well, let's hope he's the one who will see them," thought Mrs. Eustace, hurrying away.

"And T. Scott has also told me that you know a good Norman font when you see it," Richard said. "There's a very fine one in my little church. I thought we might go and have a look at it after dinner."

Adrian Steele nodded his willing consent, and when Richard took him into the little church he showed due appreciation of the Norman font, and was greatly pleased with the Elizabethan pulpit and the rood screen, both of which he saw had suffered cruelly from long neglect. He delighted Richard's heart by noticing the very graceful effects caused by an intersection of arches, and his quick eye detected an old window of which the clergyman was deeply proud. He found out of his own accord everything of antiquarian interest in the little tumble-down church, and with a kindness which did not betray its underlying purpose, he laid stress on the redeeming features of the place, and appeared entirely unconscious of the all-pervading signs of ruin and decay. He wandered about, putting his finger now on this, now on that. He was delighted to see in the chancel a small brass of a tonsured priest with a chalice, and took a note of it in order to look it up in a book on monumental brasses. As for the remains of the old fresco on the wall of the right aisle, he could scarcely drag himself away from the spot, and insisted that with patience and great care more of the fragments of painting could be made to reveal themselves.

"I may be wrong," he said, "but I can't help thinking we shall find something concealed here, on this bit of surface. I suspect it hugely. But don't let me be excommunicated if I'm wrong."

But he was not wrong, and Richard and he laughed with boyish glee and triumph when, after patient and delicate labour with hammer and chisel, they removed a fine layer of plaster and discovered a faint-coloured fragment of an angel's wing.

"I must go and bring Mrs. Eustace to see it," Richard said excitedly; and off he dashed in search of that much-enduring lady, who returned with him immediately to the scene of action.

"Well, well, that is a nice surprise for you," she remarked soothingly. "And harmless, too," she thought to herself. "I don't mind how much the poor gentlemen scratches up of that sort of thing, bless their hearts."

For some little time Adrian Steele and Richard devoted themselves whole-heartedly to this task, and their comradeship grew apace over the interest of the work. There was something pathetic in Richard's frank pleasure in having a companion of Steele's culture and calibre; and Adrian Steele himself made no attempt to hide his thorough appreciation of his new friend and new circumstances. He let himself go, and revealed all his charm and the best part of his nature.

"And now, what about the registers and the churchwardens' accounts?" he asked gaily. "You surely mean to show me them, don't you? And I expect you've got an old Bible tucked away somewhere, haven't you? Do you know that twice in my life I've fished out an old Bible from the depths of oblivion and restored it to dignity and honour? My last find was an Authorized Version, 1611; but my first was a Coverdale first edition. What do you think of that?"

Richard's eyes sparkled.

"I say, what a find!" he cried. "Well, I wish you could fish one out here. We had an old

Bible: I believe it was a Geneva first edition, for there's a curious entry dated 1578 in the churchwardens' accounts, which I will show you in the panelled room. I keep the registers and accounts there for safety. I dug them out of the depths; but, alas! I found no Bible. The tradition is that about a hundred years ago it disappeared mysteriously—was stolen, in fact. No one knows by whom, except—" He hesitated, and then added, with a flush on his face: "Well, except perhaps myself."

"And how do you know?" Adrian asked, his eager attention at once arrested.

Then Richard told him with simple directness of the visit he had had from the 'presence' of the old forlorn clergyman. He described him in detail, and described the Bible with its blind-tooled leather, its brass clasps, corners, and central boss. Adrian listened with intense interest. He saw that the vision had been a real experience to Richard Forest, who evidently did not regard it in any way as extraordinary or amazing.

"You see I had been writing out the churchwardens' accounts—writing out that very item," he said. "My mind was therefore unconsciously prepared for him. He knew that, and came."

"You must show me the entry," Adrian Steele said. "The date of the first Geneva Bible certainly is 1578. I happen to remember, because I've been studying that wonderful Bible collection in the British Museum. You ought to see it."

"I have seen it," Richard said, "and that's how I have been able to confirm my belief that the stolen Bible was a first edition Geneva. It is a most curious entry. I leapt on it at once when I first began to copy out the old records."

"Ah, so you're copying out the old records," Adrian said. "I can help you at that job. I've got famous eyes for the mysterious handwriting of former days. Nothing baffles me in that line."

"I'll give the task over to you most willingly," Richard said, smiling. "I'm not at all good at it. But it had to be done, because these records are too precious to be lost; and, like the little church itself, they are in a sorry state of decay."

"Yes, the church is pretty bad," Adrian said, commenting on it for the first time. "The clergymen who came before you have not cared much, I should think."

"No, they did not care," Richard said sorrowfully. "That's obvious. But," he added eagerly, at once pleading for them, "they had no one to help and encourage them. Conditions were against them. I'm not surprised that they lost heart."

Adrian noted how loyally he ranged himself on their side. Whatever they had been, and whatever they had done, they at least had no hard judge in their young successor.

"However," Richard said cheerfully, "things will soon be better now. Restoration, of course, is out of the question; but the repairs, as T. Scott insists on calling them, as if the church were an old boot, are well in hand. You notice we have nearly finished mending the roof; and we are going to have all those green-grown flags taken up, and concrete put down first, to shut out the damp. Then, when the floor is level, we can build up the pews afresh. You see, the boarding has given way in lots of places. That has worried me a good deal, even more than the hole in the roof. Well, we are going to have all this done, and many other little improvements, too, owing to T. Scott's kindness."

"T. Scott's kindness?" Adrian repeated in astonishment. "Why, where does she come in?"

"She comes in everywhere," Richard said, his face lighting up. "The repairs are entirely her affair."

And he told Adrian the story of the jewels, of Tamar's visit to the church, and of the cheques she had been sending. He left out, of course, all mention of T. Scott's original attempt to deprive him of the right value of the ruby and pearl crucifix. But of his own accord Adrian guessed that Tamar had been paying out 'conscience' money, and when he heard that his own cheque for £19 had been handed over intact for the same purpose, he laughed secretly and said to himself:

"So my Tamar has been having an ecclesiastical rise out of me. It must have amused her mightily to think that I was helping to restore a church. Well, after such a crisis as that, anything could happen to me. I could even become an archbishop!"

At the thought he nearly laughed aloud, but he suppressed his merriment and said:

"That £19 was an old debt of mine to T. Scott which, I am ashamed to say, I neglected to pay for years. I am glad that she used it for such a good purpose. I never thought that I should live to take part, even indirectly, in the restoration or even 'repairs' of a church—I of all people. But—well, in this instance, I'm honestly glad."

"Thank you," Richard said, with one of his radiant smiles. "That adds to my gratitude over T. Scott's kindness. But tell me why you say 'you of all people.'"

Adrian was silent for a moment, and finally said:

"I stand outside the religious world, by temperament and by choice."

"So do I," Richard said cheerfully.

Adrian stared at the young fellow.

"But you are a clergyman of the Church of England," he said slowly.

"Dogmas and doctrines have always appeared to me of inappreciable importance," Richard said. "In some instances they are convenient channels for dispatching the larger message, that's all."

"The larger message," Adrian Steele repeated dreamily, and again his eyes rested on Richard Forest.

"Ah," he said with a half smile, "no wonder they've caged you up here in this lonely little hamlet. That's the only safe place for a person like yourself—from their point of view, I mean. But wouldn't I just like to get hold of one of your bishops or archbishops and nail him down here in this isolated life for a few months. He would soon, in self-defence, want to effect a radical change in the church system, in order to prevent himself from becoming bored to death. Yes, I'd like to make him 'do time' here."

"Why, that's exactly what T. Scott said, standing on the same spot too, in the chancel," Richard laughed. "Now isn't that curious?"

"No," Adrian answered, "it is what any sane, unfettered outsider would think. No other thought would be possible. It has been haunting me ever since I came; and no doubt it haunted T. Scott too, and made her feel—"

He broke off. With his mind's eye he saw Tamar standing there, moved to kindness and generosity by the larger message. The expression on his face softened to a great tenderness.

"Yes, yes," asked Richard eagerly, "what do you think it made her feel?"

"And made her feel that she, in spite of herself, must do something to lighten the load of loneliness, and to show that at least some one had a decent sense of concern and responsibility," Adrian said.

Richard's face shone. For a moment he was silent.

"Yes, but we have to remember that there always has been and always will be lonely sentry duty to perform," he said at last. "And it isn't nearly so trying for me as for others. You see, I have always been a dreamy sort of fellow. I have never been without companions of the spirit. And my painting alone means a great deal to me. By means of it I am able to express to myself, at least, what I think I see underlying everything that meets the eye. Any one who has that resource in him, is more independent of outward circumstances than those not so graciously blessed in that respect. My predecessors here were in that plight, poor fellows. I believe the desolation and lifelessness were too hard for them. They were wrongly chosen for the place to which they were sent."

"Exactly," Steele said; "and that is just one instance of the utter carelessness, indifference, and futility of the Church organization. I'd like to see the present Church system shaken to its very foundation. I'd like to see all the lonely little parishes connected up, not only in name but in reality, with a strong thread of interwork and intercommunication, and a constant intercourse with headquarters. No opportunities then for the inhuman dying down of energy and interest. All human beings want stimulus to keep up the best in them; and why the unfortunate clergy should be supposed to have to do without it, is more than I can understand. Yes, I'd like to shake the whole fabric to pieces, beginning with the archbishops."

"Yes, I'm sure there ought to be great and radical changes," Richard said earnestly.

Suddenly he laughed with boyish glee. Something had tickled his fancy.

"The poor archbishops!" he exclaimed. "Don't I see them! They must evidently expect no quarter from you."

"They would get none," Adrian laughed,

greatly amused by the young fellow's merriment. "I have no sympathy with the rich ecclesiastics, from Wolsey onwards. Nor with the popular preachers either, petted and flattered by the public."

"Oh, but come, you ought to pity *them*," Richard said simply, "for theirs is a dreadful fate, fraught with severe temptations. I could imagine no worse fate. I have always prayed to be delivered from it."

Adrian glanced at him, and saw the look of intense earnestness on his face.

"I sincerely hope you will be," he said gravely.

"But victims though they are, they are nevertheless spiritual sacrifices," Richard added, "and in a sacred cause."

"Ah, I must confess I have never thought of them in that light," Adrian said, smiling in a slightly puzzled way. "I have always thought of them as people who have 'gone under,' as I have. I wish I could look upon myself as a spiritual sacrifice."

"You would not be conscious of being one," Richard said. "They are not conscious either."

"Well, at least I am conscious that I'm not one," Adrian said with a short laugh, which had a sardonic ring in it. And the next moment he regretted he had not repressed it, for he felt it had jarred on Richard. He immediately experienced the same emotions of penitence which invariably assailed Mrs. Eustace when she had pained her young gentleman. It was a far cry from Adrian Steele to Mrs. Eustace; yet he proceeded to make amends in exactly the same fashion as herself, correcting the discord with added tenderness and mellowed understanding.

"You see," he said gently, "you present to me a somewhat unusual train of thought. Perhaps these people are spiritual sacrifices. Perhaps we all are. Perhaps because of our downfall, some others are rising higher towards some distant ideal. If that is so, then there is sense in our 'going under.'"

"But people don't go under," Richard said eagerly, his face brightening up at Adrian's words.

"Don't they?" Adrian asked indulgently, as though to a child.

"Of course not," Richard said cheerfully.

"Then what do they do, I wonder?" Adrian asked with still more indulgence, rather curious to know what form the young fellow's answer would take.

"Oh, they rise out of the wreck somehow or other," Richard said. "No one could doubt such a simple thing as that."

Adrian started. That line from Browning:

"Out of the wreck I rise, past Zeus, to the Potency o'er him!" leapt to his mind and his lips. But he gave the words no utterance. They aroused in him a vague remembrance of the difficulties which he knew, in his heart of hearts, were going to overwhelm him. He shuddered a little, and seemed suddenly to shrink away into nothing, and Richard saw that his clever, intellectual face had become drawn as if with some acute pain.

"You're tired," Richard said kindly. "I'm afraid I have been dragging you about mercilessly. Come along. Let's go back to the house and ask Mrs. Eustace to give us tea at once. That will revive you. You look worn out."

He put his arm through Adrian's and led him back to the panelled room where he installed him in the armchair.

"You must rest, you know," he admonished. "T. Scott said you needed rest."

Then off he dashed to the kitchen to hasten on the preparations for tea.

"I'm afraid I've been tiring him, Mrs. Eustace," he said penitently. "I really thought he was going to faint. I wish you'd take a look at him and tell me whether you think he is all right."

They found him leaning back in the armchair, fast asleep and breathing gently.

"Poor soul," whispered Mrs. Eustace, "he's tired out. Now when he wakes up, don't you, directly he opens his poor eyes, go and introduce him to the old clergyman's ghost. Mind what I say, dear young master. He don't want no shock, and ghosts is a shock, and no mistake. Not to you, perhaps, dear young master, but to others, not forgetting my poor self."

"I'll remember," Richard said humbly. "I do wish I was not so inconsiderate. What with that and my tempers, I wonder you put up with me."

"If you was perfect, there wouldn't be no putting up with you," Mrs. Eustace said gravely. "But you ain't, by no means."

Richard laughed gaily, nodded at her as she disappeared from the room, settled down in his chair, and began to work out the first of a set of ideas which had seized him for the illustration of Wordsworth's 'Ode on Immortality.' From time to time he glanced at the sleeper, and having satisfied himself that all was well with his guest, forgot about him, and became immersed in his engrossing task. For he dearly loved these exercises of the spiritual imagination, which both fostered and gave expression to his innate idealism.

Once he thought he felt Margaret's 'presence' hovering near him and looking over his shoulder at his impressionist sketch of '*The imperial palaces whence he came.*'

"It's not bad, Margaret, is it?" he murmured. "I think it does give some idea of far-off, dimly-remembered splendour. What do you think?"

Another time he looked up and saw some dim form pass through the room and fade into nothingness.

"The old clergyman," he said to himself. "Ah, well, some day he will reveal himself to me again."

The time sped on, and at last, after nearly three hours' sound sleep, Adrian Steele awoke, refreshed and restored. He looked around him, and realized his surroundings with a quiet pleasure which had something healing in it.

"Now," thought Richard, who saw that his guest had come back to life, "I'll remember what Mrs. Eustace enjoined on me, and not breathe a word about 'presences.' Not a word."

But he did not get a ghost of a chance to carry out his resolution, for Adrian, without any preliminaries, said:

"Most extraordinary, but I have dreamed about your old Bible stealer. I saw him with my mind's eye just as you described him: old, demoralized, furtive. I saw the Geneva Bible too, with its brass clasps and corners. The old fellow seemed to be standing near me, here."

Richard held out bravely. He went on with his sketching, and did not allow a word to escape him, although he was greatly excited.

"I liked him," Adrian continued. "I thought there was great charm about him—something rather pathetic too. I wonder what he did with the Bible. It would be interesting to know. I say, wouldn't it be thrilling to be able to trace it, and restore it to the church?"

This was too much for Richard. He had to break his penitential silence.

"Yes," he said excitedly. "That's what I hope to do—with his help. Some day he will help me. I'm convinced of that. And I should tell you, no wonder you've dreamed of him. He has been here. I felt his presence."

He was going to add: "And my sister Margaret's too."

But he restrained himself, remembering his promise to Mrs. Eustace.

"Well, the old man certainly pervaded my dreams," Adrian went on. "I saw him everywhere: in the chancel, in the pulpit, by the font, near the witch's grave, here, standing by this armchair, and where else do you think—in T. Scott's inner room. I said: 'Tamar, don't you see the old man has a valuable Bible to sell? It's a first Geneva Bible, 1578. Why don't you buy it? There he is standing against your desk.

Don't you see him? Why don't you secure it before the British Museum or an American millionaire gets hold of it, and why not make an effort of generosity and give it back to Richard Forest's church'?"

"And what did T. Scott say?" Richard asked eagerly. "I should like to know what she said."

"Oh," Adrian answered with a smile, she said: 'Don't be a duffer. There is no old man and no Geneva Bible. And you'd better go and have a cup of coffee and a scone, and then perhaps you'll talk sense.' I laughed and woke. It was so like Tamar."

Richard laughed too.

"Well," he said gaily, "since we are on the subject of the Bible and the old man, I must show you that entry. Look, here it is. I feel convinced that this was the Bible the old man was carrying. Nothing would persuade me to the contrary."

Adrian read it and would have become immersed in the old records then and there, but that Mrs. Eustace insisted on an adjournment for what she called 'suppery tea.' When she had satisfied herself that the visitor had eaten well and, in spite of his frail appearance, had a good set of nerves of his own which would not be scared by things, the mere thought of which made her hair stand on end, she left them to their devices, but not before she had ascertained, in Richard's absence, surreptitiously from Adrian, that he intended to be present at the early morning service.

"I suppose you wouldn't be thinking of going to the early morning service at seven-thirty to-morrow, sir?" she said tentatively.

"I hadn't thought of such a tragedy," Adrian answered, smiling at her.

"Ah, that's the right word, sir," Mrs. Eustace said, hugely delighted. "It's a tragedy. It's one of the dear young master's many obstinacies, begging his pardon. No live person comes, except poor me, with my old bones."

"And why do you go?" Adrian asked, much amused.

"Some live person must go and encourage the poor young gentleman," Mrs. Eustace said reproachfully. "But it's a trial, at my time of life too, sir. That it is. He's that obstinate, is the young master."

"Supposing you stop at home to-morrow with your old bones, and I go," Adrian said confidentially. "You can take an extra little morning doze. I always wake early, and it won't be any trouble to me to get up and take part in the tragedy. Now mind, that's a compact. You stay, and I go. There is no sense in two doing the work of one. Now, that's settled, isn't it?"

They had no chance for further furtive conversation, for at that moment Richard, who had been giving Skib his supper, returned to the room, and Mrs. Eustace, with a new hope in her heart and a decided twinkle in her eye, vanished from the scenes, and was not visible again that night.

But the men lingered on late into the night, talking on all manner of subjects: on life: on so-called death and the wrong fear of death, and the misleading accentuation placed on its importance: on immortality: and on the new knowledge which might in time break down the barriers between the living and the dead. The more they talked and discussed, the more attracted Adrian Steele became towards the personality and mind of this young fellow who appeared to be endowed with truly spiritual instincts, a large outlook, a simplicity of heart, and a remarkable, though entirely unconscious unworldliness. Of course he had faults. His face was the face of a man who could never be cured of illusion, and at times it was eloquent of an unyielding obstinacy. Mrs. Eustace had alluded to this obstinacy. Adrian himself had detected it in Richard's own accounts of his unsuccessful dealings with his parishioners; and he also perceived in him a strange want of imaginative consideration for other people's mental serenity: a want, born probably of his curiously detached mind. Richard, too, alluded frankly to his own angry outbursts of temper, of which lately the workmen repairing the church had had the benefit, instead of the long-suffering Mrs. Eustace. But his very failings gave a healing power to his spirituality which would have been lacking if he had been less human. His value lay in the secret that he was 'something set apart,' as Tamar said, and yet within easy human reach. He awaited 'presences' eagerly at one moment, and at another, with no less eagerness, he fed his dog. At one moment he was working at symbolic illustrations, and at the next he was laughing joyously at some bit of Adrian Steele's quaint fun: some sly hit at the Church, some subtle poke at the poor archbishops.

Adrian wondered what would become of him in the future. Would the Church turn him out when he was discovered to be a man to whom a definite religious belief was a matter of 'inappreciable importance'? Or would the Church, in its dying condition, reach out thankfully to such as he was, recognizing at the eleventh hour that it could only renew its life by the large help of large minds, to which boundaries of thought were unknown barriers? Whatever the fate in store for him, it was not likely that he would found a sect and become a Pope on his own lines. That was something far removed from his natural bent. And his own wholesome fears on the subject would probably preserve him from becoming a popular preacher, always supposing, of course, that he had the gift of preaching. Adrian rather supposed he had, and sketched out to himself the sort of sermon Richard would preach: imaginative and mystic, yet resonant with a pervading human chord. Well, he would be able to judge when he heard him. But meantime he believed that Richard would not have been entrusted by fate with the larger message, if he had not at the same time been given the power of imparting it.

He certainly imparted a healing peace to Adrian Steele that night, not so much by what he had said, but by what he was, and by what he unconsciously stood for. Calm thoughts, old ideals, lost hopes, frustrated renewals, regrets, 'shadowy recollections,' 'truths that wake to perish never,' crept one by one into Adrian Steele's mind, and guarded well the entrance, so that no hostile forces of outside circumstances might enter and play havoc with the truce of God.

Thus Tamar's belief was justified. She said: "Adrian will rest in your company. I send him to you, Richard Forest, as to a healer."

The next morning Adrian Steele was waiting outside the vestry door at a quarter past seven. To his surprise Mrs. Eustace came hurrying up with the key.

"I couldn't stay away," she explained. "The young master might have been hurt."

"In other words," Adrian said with a smile, "the faithfulness of your heart got the better of the oldness of your bones."

"That's it," she answered, nodding her head approvingly. "And a good thing it did, too, for the young master's a bit late. He always rings the bell hisself. Perhaps you could, could you?"

"Perhaps I could," said Adrian, delighted by the suggestion, and he followed Mrs. Eustace into the church and began to pull vigorously the rope which she pointed out to him.

"Wouldn't Tamar be amused!" he thought.

"Now go sensible about it," Mrs. Eustace remonstrated, "else you won't have no strength left. That's better. Why, would you believe it, here's two live women coming to the Early. The first time since we've been here. And the young master late! Well, well I never! That'll do for the ringing. Now you go and sit yourself down, near the lectern, where he can see you."

Adrian obeyed humbly. He sat in the first row of the pews, and Mrs. Eustace took up her usual position under the shelter of the pulpit. The two women, who seemed rather nervous, as if they were doing something of which they were ashamed, in attending the service, hid themselves in one of the end pews, near the font. The minutes sped on, and still no parson appeared. At last it dawned on Mrs. Eustace's mind that the young master had overslept himself. The idea tickled her immensely, and some tears, born of silent laughter, coursed down her cheeks.

"Won't he just be in one of his tempers with me because he's angry with hisself!" she reflected.

But when a few more seconds went by, and he still did not appear, she began to be anxious lest he were ill, and made up her mind to go to the house and see what was the matter with him. At this moment, however, she heard his quick steps on the path and little black Skib's bark of greeting outside, and knew that all was well. She subsided into herself, more amused than ever by this unexpected gap in the young master's hitherto unbroken record of painful punctuality.

"Perhaps now he'll learn hisself that the Early *is* a little trying," she thought triumphantly. "Four in the congregation, and no clergyman! Well, if that isn't funny, nothing is!"

Richard meantime dashed into the vestry, threw on his surplice, and had great difficulty in restraining himself from dashing into the church. As it was, he hurried in, in a most undivine fashion, looked flushed and exceedingly cross, and not at all in a suitable religious condition to pronounce a blessing on any one, let alone a whole village.

But after a time his face cleared, and he gathered himself together and succeeded in reading the service with a fair amount of serenity. When it was over, however, he showed that he had by no means recovered his equilibrium, for he rushed into the kitchen, and proceeded to vent his wrath with himself on Mrs. Eustace, who was composedly stirring the buttered eggs.

"What on earth were you thinking of not to wake me when you saw I was going to be late?" he demanded. "I'm more angry than I can say. Just on the morning, too, when there were worshippers from the outside—the first time, too, since we've been here. I'm exceedingly displeased. All along, you've been most trying about these early morning services, Mrs. Eustace. It was the least you could have done to take the trouble to come and wake me for once. But just because I've never required you to do that for me, you didn't bother yourself about the matter at all. I believe you let me sleep on, on purpose. It was too bad of you, and I'm surprised at you."

"You mustn't be angry with Mrs. Eustace," Adrian Steele said, suddenly appearing in the kitchen. "I'm the fellow that you must be angry with. I kept you up so late last night."

"Did I put salt or sugar on the buttered eggs, dear young master?" asked Mrs. Eustace with a detached innocence. "I get that confused when you lose your temper. As I have said many times to myself, if tempers send any one to Paradise, my dear young master will be sure to go."

Richard looked at Adrian, and they both laughed and ran off to their belated breakfast, Richard suddenly ashamed of himself, and Adrian most amused by this truly little human episode, delighted with this exhibition of the young clergyman's outburst of anger, and rather proud of the important part he himself had played as bell-ringer in the morning's tragedy.

"My religious career has indeed begun in earnest," he said. "I help to restore a church. I discover an angel's wing. I help to weed the churchyard. I ring the bell unaided. From bell-ringing I become bishop by easy and obvious stages."

And he thought to himself:

"Well, certainly Tamar has prescribed a thorough change for me, and decidedly less dull than the Harley Street alphabetical list."

Time after time his mind returned to her, remaining with her longer than it was able to remain with any one or anything belonging to his personal and business life. Grace, Alpenrose, Noble, Nell, Sanford, Cecil, Hailsham existed for him as in a dream only. He had received a short letter from Grace, forwarded from the 'Prince Rupert' at Kineton, where he had given his address. She had written that Alpenrose was going on splendidly, and that there was no need for him to be anxious.

But he was not anxious, not because his love for his child had lessened, but for the simple reason that his mind, half numbed and paralyzed for the time, refused to make the effort to concern itself with any circumstances or interests except those immediately encompassing him. Tamar was, in a way, part of the present atmosphere, and as such, she entered into everything that took place in the surroundings to which she had sent him. When he went doggedly on with the task of examining the frescoed wall, he thought of Tamar.

"She would be interested," he said to himself. "She would be rude, of course, and pretend at first to think nothing of my angel's wing. But she would eventually give in. I see her sulky smile of capitulation."

When he was working in the churchyard, helping Richard to weed the paths, he paused in his labour, rested at the base of the moss-grown preaching cross, and thought of her.

"Tamar would say that weeds were just as good as flowers, and that we were fools to break our backs," he said to himself, smiling. "Perhaps we are, Tamar."

From his position there he glanced around, his eye resting now on the witch's grave which Richard was trying to "reclaim," now on the rather fine old tower, now on some ruined cottages abutting on the churchyard, two of which showed the ribs of their roofing in distressful fashion, and now on the hills in the distance.

"A most desolate set of surroundings," he said to himself. "But not as bad as Brighton, and, as Tamar would say, safer."

It was astonishing with what easy adaptability he was able to throw himself into that solitary life. Not only did he weed the paths, mow the grass in the churchyard, and pay unremitting attention to the frescoed wall, but he even followed Richard's example by dashing into the kitchen on all occasions to drag Mrs. Eustace, whom he had canonized with the title of Saint Penelope, to his varied scenes of triumph and activity. At intervals he copied out the churchwardens' accounts in his minute but clear handwriting. He studied the fragments of local history, and the desultory notes collected by one of Richard's predecessors, and pieced them together with a painstaking care and skill which excited Richard's envy and Mrs. Eustace's admiration. He took the deepest interest in Richard's paintings, sketches, and designs, examining them over and over again, trying to discover for himself the veiled meaning which he knew pervaded the simplest subject.

He read and re-read Wordsworth's 'Ode on Immortality,' and made out a list of the lines which he believed that Richard would choose for illustration. These were one or two of them :—

> "The earth and every common sight
> To me did seem
> Apparelled in celestial light."
>
> "Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
> Which brought us hither."
>
> "Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower."

He was delighted when he learnt that some of his guesses were right; and disgusted at some of his wrong shots. He asked whether Richard could make a symbolic illustration of that line which haunted him: "Out of the wreck I rise, past Zeus, to the Potency o'er him!" He was thrilled with interest when

Richard dashed to his table and made a few wild strokes which he called guiding thoughts.

He unearthed from a drawer some exceedingly beautiful illuminated letters, also Richard's work, intended for an illustrated text of the Book of Ruth, and would not rest until he had persuaded the young fellow to show him everything that he had done in that direction also.

He asked many searching questions, and learnt much concerning the 'presences' by which Richard believed himself to be surrounded, and with which he felt himself to be in communion. He ended by waiting patiently for, and expecting to see, both Margaret and the old Bible stealer.

Much to Richard's delight, he invented a realistic and wonderful story of how Tamar's grandfather had bought the stolen Bible and sold it to a rich recluse, in whose library it had lain for years in company with a Coverdale, unseen by any eyes but his. Then at his death it had passed into the possession of the family, one of whose members would, in due time, guided by the repentant spirit of the old clergyman, bring it to Tamar's shop. Tamar, also guided by the spirit of the old clergyman, would bring it direct to the church where it had belonged. Adrian called this story a psychological family sequence, and elaborated all the details in a convincing way which would have persuaded any hearer of its eventual fulfilment.

It was curious how he harped on that old Bible stealer. Time after time he returned to the subject, and Richard, always willing to speak of presences, repeated faithfully the story of the old man's visit, described his appearance, and the details of the binding of the Bible. Adrian made a remark, the significance of which Richard only appreciated afterwards. He said that for years nothing had appealed to his imagination so much as the thought of that forlorn old reprobate crossing the barrier to reveal himself in the act of his sin to Richard *because he had understood.* He did not attempt to explain why the story affected him thus profoundly. He told, in fact, none of his own feelings, and confided no circumstances of his own life. About Tamar, of whom Richard spoke constantly, he was equally uncommunicative.

If Richard had wished to learn from him any intimate information about her—a purpose far from his mind—he would have been woefully disappointed. Once only, when Richard was talking of her and his face was lit up with a love and tenderness which attempted no concealment, Adrian let himself go. He held his hand out to Richard, closed his eyes, and said in a low voice which betrayed deep emotion :

"I, too, have always loved her."

So six days passed away, and during this time all the imperative claims of Adrian Steele's private and professional life were kept miraculously at bay. But the end of this amazing spell of apathy was bound to come. The wonder was that it should have lasted so long.

It came, of course, swiftly. He had brought with him Nell's Alpine flora book, but had forgotten about it until the fifth morning, when he showed it to Richard, who became as enthusiastic as himself over the flowers, and said that if he had to make a choice for a subject, he would certainly choose to paint a field of gentians and soft velvety anemones emerging from the snow.

"I don't suppose I could do it," he said. "But it must be a heavenly sight."

"It is," Adrian answered dreamily.

After that he gazed long and earnestly at the beautiful plates, and a great craving took possession of him to see the country which he loved so passionately. Heart-hunger for the mountains and the snow peaks seized him. Stronger and stronger grew the need of his spirit. But not a single word of what he felt escaped his lips. He kept the secret of his pain and longing locked in his breast. In the afternoon of the next day, Richard was called away to the deathbed of an aged woman, and Adrian went out for a long walk by himself.

He wandered about with no set purpose, taking any road upon which he chanced, and found himself at the entrance of the first field leading to Meyntoun Moat, where he had, at Tamar's invitation, attended the sale and renewed his comradeship with her. He strolled on until he came to the house itself, with its moat, its bridge, and its fine old fortified walls.

His natural interest in old buildings prompted him to ring at the gate-house and try to seek admission. He waited for some little time, but at length was admitted by the man in charge, who left him in peace to saunter where he pleased. He was proceeding to examine some of the many curious features which had delighted him on the occasion of his first visit, when suddenly, without any warning whatsoever, in the great dining-room, a vision of Robert Hailsham rose before his mind's eye. The scene of the Dutch ship enacted there between them thrust itself on his remembrance. He saw the rage on Hailsham's face, and the vindictiveness in his eyes. Then other forms passed before him in a quick procession: John

Noble, with sorrow on his countenance, Cecil, Sanford, Faversham, Bruce, Chalfont, and the rest.

"I accuse you," each one said as he passed. "I accuse you."

With a start Adrian Steele awoke from his long spell of apathy and irresponsibility. The truth flashed upon him. There was no hope for him. Nothing could save him and his from dishonour. He might pretend to think that it could. Tamar might pretend. But it was only pretence—pretence—pretence. He knew. Tamar knew. Every one knew. All the world knew. He rushed out into the great empty hall with its musicians' gallery, and flung his arms over his head.

"Ruined, dishonoured, ruined!" he cried, as though to an audience—"Alpenrose dishonoured—Grace dishonoured—do you hear me—even my little Alpenrose dishonoured. Dishonoured, I tell you—what do you think of that for a man's record?"

He fled from the scene, driven by fear and horror.

He found his way to Kineton, to the 'Prince Rupert,' where he learnt that he would have to wait about an hour for a train. He asked for pen and ink, and he wrote the following lines to Richard Forest:—

"Richard Forest, I go to meet, in my own way, a disaster confronting me. I thank you for the larger message. And I thank you for what you have unconsciously been to me these four or five days. I shall never see you again in this phase of life, but my 'presence' will be able to visit you, beyond all doubt, because, to quote the words of the old Bible stealer, *because you have understood.*

"ADRIAN STEELE."

He left the hotel, and walked restlessly up and down the platform of the station, until the train came and bore him away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TAMAR sat in the inner room listening silently whilst Christopher Bramfield was urging her not to sell any of the jewels she cared for so much.

"T. Scott, I beg of you not to part with any of them," he said. "You will always regret having done so. This fine emerald, for instance, velvety and without flaws. You can't mean to let that go. The thing's impossible. You're out of your senses. And this lovely pearl, what a shape it has, hasn't it—you surely can't want to give that up? And this string of pearls. Why, I can't believe you're going to sell that. I don't understand you—upon my word, I don't. I assure you I feel like saying that I'll have nothing to do with the business. Do let me persuade you to put them back in the safe. If it's money you want, T. Scott, you know you have only to ask me to lend you some, and I'll do so gladly. But don't part with your treasures in this irresponsible fashion. Do take my advice. Come now, I'm going to put them back in the safe myself."

He rose as he spoke, and Tamar rose too and put a detaining hand roughly on his arm.

"I intend to sell them," she said fiercely. "Let them alone. If you won't see after the matter, then I'll see after it myself."

He laughed a little uneasily, and shrugged his shoulders.

"You know I'll do anything for you," he said. "But don't say a few months hence that I did not remonstrate with you."

He added hesitatingly :

"I fear you are in some difficulty, T. Scott. How I wish you'd tell me. What has happened to you ? What has come over you ? You look fearfully bothered and almost ill. I've been worrying about you ever since I saw how little you cared for those stones I brought the other day. I never saw you so indifferent in my life. You've got something on your mind. What is it, I wonder ?"

"That's my affair," Tamar said brusquely, but not fiercely this time.

"Yes, I suppose it is," Christopher Bramfield said, with a half sigh ; "though I never cease to wish that your affairs were mine and mine yours. Well, well, I'll take the emerald and the string of pearls and sell them for you. I'll give you a receipt for them now."

She watched him write out a receipt, and place the stones and the string of pearls in his case. He took a long time over the process, for he had caught a look of hesitancy on her face, and he hoped she might still relent and restore her treasures to their accustomed place. But except for this one faint sign, she gave no indication of the sacrifice she was making, nor did she vouchsafe a single word on the subject. She stood, as Bramfield had so often seen her stand on other occasions when he had tried to persuade or guide her, dully determined and doggedly silent. But after he had gone, she sighed heavily and beat her breast.

"My beautiful stones," she murmured, "my beautiful stones."

It was a lament which came from the depths of her heart, for she was passionately attached to all the stones of her beautiful little private collection, and she had sacrificed two of the finest, as well as the string of pearls which had been her pride and joy, for Adrian Steele's sake. But she had made up her mind that no money except hers should be offered to any one of his clients, and on examining some of her investments and inquiring into their current market value, she had found that she would have to supplement their total, if she wished to raise a sufficiently large sum of money to buy off, say, Sanford, Cecil, and some of the others. For this was the only scheme which appeared to her to contain any possibility whatsoever of success. She felt no certainty that even then Adrian's honour could be saved, but she was grimly resolved to be prepared for the eventuality.

She tried to cling to the hope that although she had failed with Hailsham, Nell might be able, through John Noble, to succeed with the others, perhaps even with Hailsham. Anyway the money should be ready, her money, no one else's.

Everything must be tried. No handle must be left unturned. Project after project must be contrived, even up to the brink of the precipice. If Adrian had to go under, it would not be because there had been no one to think, to plan, to scheme for him. In her great love and anxious concern for him, she had risen above the humiliation of her defeat and disappointment, and when the freshness of her fury with herself and Hailsham was over, she had gone to Nell.

"So you see I have failed," she said, after she had told the pitiful story. "But perhaps if you make an attempt, with your more honourable methods, you may succeed, Nell Silberthwaite. I rather envy you for them, as I told you before. However, we have to do things in our own way, and with our own materials. Suppose now you try your luck with Hailsham. If you can't do anything else with him, at least get him to delay prosecuting until we're dead certain that the rest of the band can't be bought off. Try to get a personal interview with him. He's a blustering commonplace creature with the mind of an oyster, but he has enough intelligence to know the difference between you and me. That alone may help matters. Yes, go and see whether you can succeed where I've failed. I don't mind now whether it's you or myself."

"Tamar," Nell said, deeply touched by her unselfish impersonality, "whether you've failed or not failed, remember, for your comfort, that you are the one to whom Adrian came for help. You're the one to whom his heart turns. Nothing can alter that fact for you or for him."

"That's what I've been saying to myself all along," Tamar answered. "But I didn't expect you were going to remind me of it. Yet I might have known you would. I don't mind telling you that I think you've been generous to me."

"And you've been generous to me," Nell said. "You sent him to me the other day. I shall always remember that, Tamar. You could very easily have been silent about my part if you had chosen."

"I wanted to at first," Tamar admitted. "And then I didn't. You see, I've never disliked you."

Nell smiled.

"One of Adrian's old speeches about you comes floating back to my memory," she said. "This is it: 'If Tamar likes a person exceedingly much, she will probably tell you that she does not altogether dislike that person. Only about precious stones will she speak in more flattering terms. Alas, would that I were a precious stone.' Do you remember, Tamar?"

Tamar nodded. A faint smile flitted across her face, too, but faded at once.

"Well, I'll try to arrange through Mr. Noble about seeing Hailsham," Nell said after a pause, "and I'll come and report to you."

"And I'll get all the money ready, and I'll take another look at his accounts and see whether I can make anything of them," said Tamar. "At present, as you're aware, he's numbed and paralyzed, and isn't facing things. But when he awakes, we must be able to convince him that he has a good chance of righting himself. If his brain has recovered its power, he will do the rest."

Nell remained silent. She knew, as well as Tamar, that they were leading a forlorn hope, and that when Adrian awoke, he too would know. But they did not confess this to each other, and they parted after a long detailed consultation, in which eventual failure was never even mentioned as a possibility. Every source of influence was to be tapped. No effort was to be spared.

That was two or three days ago, and this morning Nell had written to say that Hailsham was out of town, but that she hoped to secure an early interview with him directly he returned, and that she would call in during the afternoon, as she had several things to report. Mr. Noble wished to see Tamar and learn from her some of the details about Sanford's affairs. Meantime he sent the message that he rather believed that Sanford could be persuaded to remain quiescent; but he was not sure.

So after Christopher Bramfield had gone, Tamar, dismissing from her mind the memory of her sacrifice, looked out the double set of Sanford's accounts, and began to calculate roughly to what extent Adrian had taxed this particular client. She was deep in the tiresome and intricate task, and had lost herself in renewed amazement over the elaborately worked out scheme of continuous fraud, when a ring came at the shop door, and she had to rouse herself to answer it. To her amazement she found Richard Forest standing in the shop. He looked the picture of distracted bewilderment.

"You here!" she exclaimed, with kindness and astonishment in her voice. "Why, what's the matter with you? You look half out of your senses."

"T. Scott, I am out of my senses," he said excitedly. "He's gone—disappeared in my absence—wrote this letter at the 'Prince Rupert'—took the train—disappeared—look at it—read it—what does he mean—gone to meet a disaster confronting him—in his own way—what disaster—can't you explain it—we were having such a happy time together — I liked him so tremendously, T. Scott—and then for him to go off like this—suddenly—without any warning—if only I could have seen him and spoken one word to him—tell me what it all means—I must know."

Tamar, who had turned deadly pale, took the letter and read it.

"It means that he has awakened," she said slowly. "It means that he has fled from—"

"From what, from what?" Richard interrupted. "What has he fled from?"

"From prosecution for frauds committed by him," Tamar said, almost inaudibly.

"It isn't possible," Richard cried. "I'll never believe it of him. Never."

"You'll have to believe it," Tamar said in the same low voice. "It's—it's the truth."

"T. Scott, T. Scott, what are you telling me?" he cried in an agony of spirit.

He flung himself on a chair, and covered his face with his hands. Vivid reminders of hitherto hidden import flashed now like lightning across his mind. He recalled the intense, almost morbid, interest Adrian Steele had taken in the derelict old Bible stealer. He remembered how constantly Adrian Steele had inquired about and dwelt on the histories of the other clergymen who had 'gone under' in that desolate life, and with what a painfully strained manner he had quoted those words from Browning: "*Out of the wreck I rise, past Zeus, to the Potency o'er him!*" and asked whether they were not suitable for symbolic illustration. These and many other thoughts held Richard Forest in bondage, whilst Tamar leaned with her elbows on the counter, turned to stone, and staring vacantly at Adrian Steele's letter with its message of impending and inevitable doom.

It was thus that Nell found them. She stood in the centre of the shop, and glanced in deep anxiety and alarm from Tamar to Richard and from Richard to Tamar.

"Tamar," she cried, "what is it? Has anything fearful happened? What is it? For Heaven's sake speak—say something."

Tamar showed no sign that she saw Nell or realized her presence, but answered in a voice which had no resonance in it:

"Adrian has gone—disappeared."

"But where—where?" Nell asked impetuously.

"How should I know?" Tamar answered without stirring.

"Can't you tell me anything? I know he has been staying with you," Nell cried, turning imploringly to Richard Forest who had now uncovered his face. "I beg of you to tell me. He is an old friend of mine, too, and very, very dear to me, unspeakably dear to me."

"I know nothing except what his letter tells us," he said with great gentleness. "Here it is. Please read it."

Nell read it. It fell from her hands; and she, too, became like Tamar, stunned, paralyzed.

It was Richard Forest who roused them both to life and action. He sprang up suddenly, his natural dreaminess converted by magic to some inspired purpose, and his face aglow with a strange smile of rapture, as though he saw and were being prompted by some distant vision veiled to other eyes.

"Well, we must search for him," he cried. "We must search everywhere, and never, never rest until we've found him. You, his old friends, will be able to give the lead. But I shall come with you—I must come with you in your search."

"You will come with us?" they both repeated, half in wonder at him and half in joyful surprise.

"Why, of course," he answered. "I arranged for all that and wired to an old friend to take my place. Do you imagine that I could stay behind eating my heart away in inaction—I who have had him with me these few days and entered into a comradeship with him which nothing in any phase of existence can break. What do I care about his frauds and his failings? I only know him as I found him. Of course I shall go with you. And we'll never give up the search until we find him."

He had sounded the chord which set their brains and hearts in vibration again. He had broken in upon their dull despair, and won their instant gratitude and confidence by ranging himself instinctively on the side of the man whom they both loved. Nell, who had only seen him for a moment before when he came to sell the crucifix, and had only heard vaguely from Tamar that Adrian was stopping with him, felt at once the noble attraction in him which had drawn Tamar to him from the beginning, and had stirred in Adrian an impulse of imperishable trust. They began immediately to consult about what was to be done, and of course the first plan which suggested itself, was to make inquiries at his own home; and since Adrian had been last in Richard Forest's company, it seemed only natural that he should be the one to bring the news that his guest had disappeared and had left behind him a disquieting letter.

"Yes, you'd better go there," Tamar said. "But he's not likely to be there. I suppose he spoke to you of his wife and his child, Alpenrose?"

"He gave me no confidences, and I didn't want them, T. Scott," Richard said simply. "He spoke of no one except you—and then only once. Some day I will tell you what he said."

A tremor passed over Tamar's face. She turned away.

Nell came to her help.

"Yes, you'd better go to his home," she said to Richard Forest. "But it's true he is not likely to be there, because you see—well, you see he couldn't be there—if—if he couldn't face things. If I didn't know the circumstances, I should have come first of all to Tamar and expected to find him here—in the inner room. And failing that, I should have gone to the mountains."

"The mountains," Tamar repeated crossly. "And why the mountains?"

"Because he loved them, Tamar," Nell said. "He loved them passionately."

"Yes, yes, he loved them," Richard said. "He talked a great deal about them, and always with an intense yearning, especially the last evening he was with me. He had with him an Alpine flora book which we studied together."

"It was my book," Nell said involuntarily.

"Yours?" Tamar said fiercely. "Yours?"

"When you sent him to me," Nell said, "he took it away with him as what he called 'authorized plunder.' We spoke about the mountains, and the mountains only. He said he hungered for them, and had been dreaming of the snow peaks and the Alpine glow. And—"

"Well, well," Tamar said impatiently.

"And I remember he said that his Alpine heart was in a little village called Wassen, in or near the Meienthal," Nell went on.

"He never told me that," Tamar said sullenly. But she recovered herself at once and added:

"Well, the great point is he told one of us. For I don't mind owning that this is a sort of clue."

"Instinct tells me that he has gone to the mountains for refuge and shelter," Nell said; and as she spoke a vision rose before her of Adrian and herself standing in silence looking at that mountain picture and parting in silence.

"Yes," she repeated, it's to the mountains he has gone, Tamar. I feel increasingly sure of it. And to that little village he loved, with its church perched on the hill: 'forsaken by the tourist and scorned by the climbers.' Those were his very words about it. It's to little Wassen he has gone."

"That's the place he described to me," Richard said. "I remember well about the church. It's there that we must go. I'll run round to his home first to make inquiries and give the alarm, and then we'll be off at once. There's no time to be lost. We must follow him at once before—"

"Before it is too late," Nell said, with bowed head.

"It is too late," Tamar said in a low voice. "Don't you know that?"

"No," Richard said firmly. "I refuse to know it. We shall find him and reach out our hands to him—and not in vain."

They did not gainsay him, for they glanced at him, saw the amazing radiance on his face, and were kindled by the idealism of his spirit, of which it was the outward and visible sign.

That same evening they started for the mountains.

END OF PART I.

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

"ACH, Herrgott, it's Herr Steele!" cried old Frau Anderegg, as a carriage drove up to the little green-shuttered hotel in Wassen. "Frida, Christian, Johann, quick, quick!"

She shook Adrian Steele's hands times without number, interspersing all her remarks of welcome with frantic cries of "Frida, Christian, Johann! Quick, quick!"

In less than a minute the whole family had rallied round him and borne him triumphantly into the house. It was easy to see that they all loved him.

"Our first visitor," they cried, "and our most welcome one!"

"Thank you, thank you," he said, his face wreathed in smiles. "Why, Frau Anderegg, you don't look a single month older — not a month. But Frida, on the contrary, has grown up, in very truth. Never did I think she'd grow up! And pray, what has she done with her pigtail? Ah, Johann, you'll need to have another photograph taken of you at your carving, I plainly see. And Christian, dear old Christian, he looks broader and stronger than ever. I might even say handsomer! But I won't! Upon my soul, Frau Anderegg, the grandchildren do us credit—don't they? Quite unexpectedly too! Well, well, it's good to be amongst you all again. It's good to be here!"

He stepped back impulsively to the door and glanced round him, at the dwarf chestnut trees guarding the hotel, at the green tables and green seats and green boxes with plants. To the left the snow mountains, the Windgelle graciously unveiling its glittering snow peak to bid him welcome. In front of him the sweet pasture meadows stretching down to the edge of the headlong river. Fragrance from the flowers wafted from all sides. Music from the cowbells mingling in discordant harmony. Sunlight catching the windows of the old brown châlets on the mountain slopes opposite.

"Ah," he said, "I have always loved it!"

"Yes, yes, you have always loved it," the old Frau said, putting her arm through his. "But you can look at the mountains later. You must come and rest and eat. I can see you're tired. But the good air will soon restore you."

Then he gave himself up to all their affectionate care, and was soon enjoying a splendid meal of trout, schnitzel, and potatoes, glorified by a bottle of best Sassella.

Meantime the news spread in the village that Herr Steele had come. It penetrated to the recesses of the schoolhouse, exciting and delighting the hearts of the teachers, the holy sisters, Gertrude and Alusina, who forthwith dispatched two of the children to the Meienthal to gather alpenrose.

"You remember," they said to each other, "he always liked the alpenrose better than anything."

"We must invite him again to beer and black sausage," comely Schwester Gertrude laughed. "Na, that was a merry afternoon when Christian Anderegg brought him to visit us."

"Yes," laughed little Schwester Alusina. "And do you remember how he tried to teach us English, and we learnt to say, 'We beg your very much pardon! Very much pardon!'"

The news was not very long in reaching the grocery store, where the good Frau immediately began to interview her stock of chocolate and kröpfli cakes.

"He will want a lot for the children," she said with a smile, which was a curious mixture of tenderness and business. "I must telephone at once to Goeschenen for some more supplies."

She was not indiscreet in the precautions she took, for Adrian Steele soon arrived at the shop, and bought her out of house and home.

"You know, Frau Bergen," he said, "I have always maintained that this is a dangerous region, unless one is well armed with sure weapons of defence!"

Thus he settled down in the little village, and was welcomed by the villagers as an old friend whom they knew and trusted.

When he fled to Switzerland, he was guided by no definite plan, except that of reaching the region which he loved. But even on his journey, dimly outlined ideas began to take form; and that first night, as he lingered on the balcony of his bedroom, and drew in long, deep breaths of the invigorating air, and watched the stars, and listened to the rushing of the impatient river, an overwhelming sense of the finality of things swept over him, and he stood, even then, as a man might stand to hear and receive his sentence of dismissal. But sheer bodily fatigue intervened, and he slept and rested dreamlessly.

In the morning he was up early. He took

his breakfast in front of the hotel, at a little green table near the chestnut tree which had always been considered his special property, and was always fiercely guarded for him by the whole household. He drank his coffee, greeted the villagers as they passed, was introduced to Lilie, Vergissmeinnicht and Nora, the leading ladies of various companies of cows changing their pasturage, and heard all the news of the family from Frida, Johann, and Christian. Christian produced the stick which Adrian had given him some years ago, and on which Adrian had himself cut and burnt the words: "*Immer will ich Christian unterstützen*."

"I suppose you are going off to the Meienthal," he said. "Here's my stick for you. But don't dare to let anything happen to it. I value it, I can tell you."

"To no other human being on earth would Christian lend it," Frida said, "not even to his Schätzlein, Herr Steele."

"I feel the honour deeply," Steele said, as he took the stick and examined it. "Yes, Christian, I was always proud of this performance of mine, my one and only achievement in carving. And of course I'm off to the Meienthal. But I must have a look first at the meadows, and see close at hand what the flowers are doing. They looked lovely as I came along yesterday."

"You'll find the flowers rather behindhand," Frida said. "Why, fancy, we had snow three days ago. It's the longest winter I ever remember in my whole, whole life."

"What a valuable record of length!" Adrian remarked, with a smile. "Why, Frida, you might have lived centuries instead of minutes!"

"All the same, it is the longest, severest winter we've had in these parts for many long years," Christian said, laughing. "And now there's a touch of Föhnwind. But it'll pass off. We had a threatening yesterday and it came to nothing."

At that moment the old Frau appeared on the scenes.

"Ah, you're off for your favourite walk, I suppose," she said. "Now don't go too far, and don't be out too long. Such fearful long walks you always take. Now mind, Herr Steele, come back in good time."

They watched him as he passed up the village, and waved to him. Then they went back to their work; and he, climbing one of the lower slopes, feasted his eyes on the jewelled loveliness of the flowered meadows, and saw that the forget-me-nots and ragged robins were richer than ever in colour, that the cowslips, pansies and daisies were mingling in rich profusion with the grass of the pastures, and that all the varying shades of yellow and purple contributed to a vision of beauty which did not fall short of the ideal picture which haunted his memory.

He lingered there for half an hour or so. He found it a little difficult to leave the village and its immediate surroundings. He loved all its features, its church, its sentinel mountain, the little Windgelle, its river, its valley, yes, and its railway. He did not think the railway had spoilt it. It interested and delighted him to watch the trains toiling up the steep ascents, now disappearing into the seclusion of tunnels when things were too much for them, and now emerging triumphantly for a while and calling out with shrill shrieks: "Hurrah! another stage of the journey done! Aren't we just clever?"

"Supposing I don't go to the Meienthal to-day," he said to himself. "Supposing I stay here to-day."

But some inner voice answered:

"You must not stay here. You must go to the Meienthal."

He sighed and rose from the bank where he had been resting, and started for the Meienthal up the steep side road, a bridle road only, to the left of the old stone fountain in the centre of the village. Fidio, the baker's dog, seldom allowed any one to go to the Meienthal without his company, and having stretched himself and yawned, he accepted a mouthful of kröpfli, and decided to bestow the favour of his presence on this stranger. Was he a stranger, though? Well, well, Fidio was getting old, and his memory was beginning to fail him; but, as he went along over the rough stones, forgotten thoughts returned to him, and he waited for Adrian Steele by the first crucifix—a quite unusual attention for him to show to any one—and licked the hand of his old friend.

"Ah, Fidio," Adrian said, as he stooped down and patted the old dog, "many and many a time we've gone this walk together, when you were younger—and I was lighter-hearted."

He paused awhile and looked down at the sweet scenes which he had left, and then he turned his back on little Wassen and set his face towards the Sustenhörner, glimpses of which he already saw in the distance. They beckoned to him with all their white magic, and he said aloud: "*I come, I come.*"

On he went, now over an open and grassy expanse where some cows were grazing, and where he found, in the person of a small fair-haired boy, the first of his chocolate and kröpfli clients; now over rocks and stones, caressed by lovely little rills; and now through the thickening forest which shut off the view of the mountains. This was the region of the alpenrose, and he climbed up the rocks to the left of him, and gathered for himself some of this well-loved treasure. It was already coming into bloom, and the sight of it filled his heart with tenderest longings.

"My little Alpenrose," he cried in sudden agony. "Am I never to see you again?—oh, it isn't possible—it isn't possible—it's an evil dream—it can't be the truth—it shall not be the truth."

He threw himself down and wept, long and silently. What were the thoughts which overwhelmed him? Remorse for what he had done, or regrets at having at last to pay the penalty of what he had done? Who could say? But when he raised his head after his spell of bitter suffering, he saw an old woman with her basket on her bent back, standing beside him and shaking her head gravely.

"Hast thou also lost some loved one?" she said. "See, that little cross on that rock marks the spot where my grandson met his death this winter. I look at it as I pass, and I weep always. Hast thou also lost some loved one?"

"Alas, my good mother," Steele said, "I have lost all my loved ones—all."

"My poor son," she said pityingly. "And thou hast dropped all the alpenrose too."

"Let it lie," he said. "I don't need it. I have no heart for it. And so your grandson met his death here?"

"Yes," she said. "It was late at night and he had been drinking. But he was a good boy: faithful and true."

It flashed through Adrian Steele's mind that the young man's life and end were to be envied. And he knew well that it was the representative story of many of the crosses and crucifixes which dotted the wild Meienthal. Well, far better that than his own record of sustained treachery and deceit.

"Good mother," he said gently, "be thankful always that he was faithful and true. That's what matters most."

He slipped a franc piece into her thin old hand, and she bade him stand to receive an old woman's blessing.

He stooped to pick up one single sprig of the alpenrose, and passed on his way. He glanced at the carpet of anemones, moss, ferns, and pink-flowered whortleberry beneath the pines and larches, and lingered once to look at some golden saxifrage fringing a fairy pool; but he longed to come out into the open and see the mountains, and he hastened his steps and did not rest until the forest stood behind him, and the mountains were spread before him in all their entrancing loveliness.

Some of the gloom lifted from his soul. The play of light and colour, the clouds, the sunshine, the glittering snow peaks, the bracing air, the beauty of the surrounding scenery filled him with rapture.

"Ah," he said, "it's good to be alive, and in this heavenly air. The cold crispness of the winter not gone. The fierce heat of the summer not come. The light still soft and recalling memories of snow-laden skies. And not so much as a thought of that uncompromising glare."

He crossed a huge, dirty-brown avalanche, preceded by Fidio, who had darted on in front, in order to reassure him that there was no danger. A few yards higher up, he crossed the slender bridge which seemed but a frail pathway over the raging, tumbling Meienreuss beneath.

"A man might end his life here, easily enough," he thought.

The sunshine was jewelling the snow-white surf of the great waves with diamonds of finest water—not yielding in beauty even to the diamonds which the sun shows us in the glittering snow plains.

"Jewels for Tamar," he said, with a half smile. "Priceless ones, too."

As he spoke her name, the thought of her swept over him with sudden overwhelming force.

"Tamar, Tamar," he cried in an agony of spirit, "is it true, must it be true, that I have to leave you when I have only just found you? Yes, I know it's true, and you know it too."

For he realized with increasing clearness that he had to disappear, for little Alpenrose's sake, for his wife's sake, for his own sake. Tamar would understand that there was nothing else for him to do. She would not think that he had again forsaken her. She would know. And it dawned on him that she had known all along, and that she had been willing to sacrifice her money—the thing she valued most on earth—in order to hearten him and thus delay the inevitable end.

"Oh, my own Tamar," he cried again, "am I never to see you again to thank you for this great love which I have never deserved, but which is mine all the same, and which makes me feel not alone in this hour of desolation?"

On the other side of the river he found two little goat boys taking care of a flock of goats, some of which were disporting themselves by the waterside, and others were strolling on their way up the valley in one long thin line: a picturesque sight Adrian had always liked to see. One of the boys darted forward to greet him.

"I remember you," he cried delightedly. "Do you remember me? Wilhelm, the naughtiest boy in the school?"

Adrian smiled at the little eager face.

"I remember that the holy sisters always said Wilhelm was the naughtiest boy in the school," he said with mock gravity. "Far, far too naughty for chocolate and kröpfli!"

"And you said perhaps the chocolate and kröpfli would make me better!" the boy laughed.

"Well, perhaps it did, and perhaps it might now," Adrian said, fumbling in his pocket. "Who knows?"

The boys danced gleefully round him as he produced the traditional dainties, and were soon busy munching them, and yodelling in between.

"If you look hard," Wilhelm said, wishing to entertain him, "you'll see sheep on that big *lawine* yonder. That fell two years ago. Two men were killed. Don't you see the cross lower down? I see it distinctly. It's near the first sheep. Do you see it? I don't want to be killed by a *lawine*, do you? A lot of them this year higher up on the left. You'll notice them as you go. Shall I come and show them to you?"

Adrian shook his head.

"I shall know them," he said. "Stay and mind your goats, Wilhelm. Don't let them fall into the water. That one with the white tuft is a daring chap, isn't he? Why, the dog has gone! Call him back for me, Wilhelm."

"Fidio never goes further than the bridge," the boy answered. "No use calling him. We'll call if you like, but you'll see you will have to go alone."

They laughed as they watched the old dog quietly retracing his steps, ignoring entirely the shouts which were hurled unsparingly at his head.

"You'll have to go alone," Wilhelm said. "I told you so."

"Yes," Adrian answered, and he took up his stick, nodded good-bye to his companions, and passed on.

Wilder and wilder grew the country. The trees on the lower slopes had disappeared. Stone and grass everywhere. A barren region decorated only by brooks innumerable. But always the Sustenhörner beckoning with ever-changing loveliness: always the magic of the mountains casting its spell on those to whom the mountains stand for something more than meets the outer eye.

Breezes straight from the glaciers to which he was now coming nearer, were borne to him. He felt strong and invigorated, ready for any effort of body or brain.

"Surely I have been exaggerating the danger of my position," he said. "I begin to believe that even now I could go back and put everything straight. If I can do this, there is no reason why I should disappear. If I can save my honour and theirs, I have the right to live. And I want to live. I will live."

Thus torn between new-born hope and former acceptance of impending doom, he arrived at Meien. The children were just out from school, and when he saw them, his heart leapt out to them in tender kindness, for he thought at once of his own little Alpenrose. He singled out the little girls nearest to her in age, patted their heads, and began with them his distribution of all his remaining chocolate and kröpfli. Out came the schoolmistress to welcome him, and he stood with her amidst the group of happy, excited little ones, talking to them, laughing with them as only one who loved children could possibly do.

"And your own little girl whom you called Alpenrose?" the schoolmistress asked. "You know you promised to bring her one day."

"Ah," he said, turning away, "I shall never bring her now. I have lost her."

The words escaped him before he knew, and the sound of them echoed back to him as a final answer to the new-born hope. It died forthwith.

"Come and rest in my house," the schoolmistress said gently. She saw the change of expression on his face, and knew that the memory of his great sorrow had struck at his heart.

But he pointed to the little church, and she nodded her head, dispersed the children with a wave of her hand, and held the church door open for him to enter. Then she left him, as she thought, to mourn his little dead child. He sat there and mourned, not Alpenrose, but his own dead self—that dead self which had once had a fair name, a clear record, and fine ideals and ambitions.

Alas for one's dead self—alas for the flaws in one's nature which were the cause of the wreck.

"The wreck," he said aloud.

The word brought back the remembrance of that line of Browning's which he had urged Richard Forest to illustrate. He spoke it in a whisper.

"Out of the wreck I rise, past Zeus, to the Potency o'er him."

And what had Richard Forest said? Adrian spoke that in a whisper too.

"People don't go under. They rise out of the wreck, somehow."

He saw Richard's face before him. He heard his voice. He felt his healing presence.

When he rose, he stood for a moment with bowed head, and said:

"John Noble, I ask your forgiveness."

He had reached the door of the church when he heard the children's cries and the sound of their laughter. He waited until the school bell rang, and they were safely in school again. He had not the courage to encounter them a second time.

He called at the Alpenrösli Inn, where he had always been wont to have his cup of coffee and his chat with old Sebastian Ogi and his wife, who had lived there many years. In former years, long since past, Sebastian had been a guide, until an accident had crippled him for life. But he was not too old nor too frail to know the signs of the weather, and he told Adrian Steele that they were in for a sudden change, and that he believed there would yet be a whole crop of avalanches in the district.

"You see," he explained, "we've had very late snow this year. It's the latest and heaviest winter that I remember for years. Think of it, the Furka Pass not open yet. And now, with the Föhnwind coming, things will happen, I tell you."

"Ach, Herr Steele, then you will not go far," the old woman said, as she poured him out another cup of coffee.

"No, I'll not go far; not too far," Adrian answered, smiling at her.

"Oh, you'll be able to go a good step yet," Sebastian said. "No danger for a long way yet. But if you get as far, don't branch off to the Kalchthal, for instance. I wouldn't answer for you there. The Stücklistock and the Hintere Sustenhorn are very generous with their *lawinen* there."

"I'll remember," Adrian said, and he asked a few questions about the winter months, and learnt a great deal he had never known about the different kinds of avalanches. It struck him as he listened, how strange it was that he should care to add to his knowledge now, at this juncture.

"Habit, I suppose," he thought. "I have always craved to know. Well, I could write a very creditable paragraph or two now on the difference between *Staub*, *Schlag*, and *Grund Lawinen*. I see I have never properly distinguished them before. It's a good thing to have them clear in one's mind, even at the eleventh hour. I wonder whether Nell has them clear. Probably. There is nothing about the mountains that she does not know."

As he thought of Nell, it passed through his mind that she would be the only one who would guess that he had gone to the mountains. Many and many a time he had told her, half in jest and half in earnest, that it would be his wish to die in the snow mountains, to the sound of Chopin's Nocturne in C. minor. Yes, Nell would know. And she would know that he had come to Wassen, for he remembered now that he had spoken of it to her as the home of his Alpine heart. He rose instantly, impelled by a new fear.

"I must hasten on," he said to himself. "There is no time to lose."

"Not the Kalchthal, remember!" the old Frau called after him.

"Turn back at Färnigen, or stay there, if they tell you to," Sebastian Ogi said.

He nodded, smiled at them cheerfully, waved his hand, and went on his way.

Now he was getting nearer and nearer to the mountains. They were becoming more entrancing too, because more elusive. Thick gray clouds, the colour of a dove's breast, tore across them, now obscuring them altogether, and now leaving them free to reveal themselves in momentary visions of splendour. These lovely glimpses of them filled Adrian's heart with added love and longing, and again he said: "*I come, I come!*"

He passed through Färnigen without stopping or making any inquiries about the changes and chances of the weather. He knew for himself now that the Föhnwind was doing its appointed work on the mass of accumulated snow suspended in high stations.

"My poor Grace," he said, "when you hear my history, you will thank the Föhnwind as I thank it. A mantle, Grace, that's what it will prove to be—for you—for me—for Alpenrose."

Ah, there were gentians at last, the little ones, with the white star eyes. What a glad sight! What a pity that the spring was so late! Such a handful of flowers, and yet how sweet to see them singly, each of them harbingers of the waiting myriads. And now, higher up, patches of snow on the green pastures, encircled by tiaras of white and purple crocuses. Well, well, that alone was worth coming to see! Which was the whiter, the snow or the crocus? Ah, and here was snow surrounded by yellow flowers. What were those yellow flowers? He ought to know. Aha, a soldanella! He stooped down and picked it.

Then he looked back for the first time, and saw that he had come a long way. How far off everything seemed. How like a dream everything seemed to him in the life he had left. How detached he had become from time and space and circumstance. How the relativities had changed. How far away he had journeyed from every one—

except Tamar. A smile of infinite tenderness came over his face.

"Tamar, Tamar," he called aloud. "I'm calling to you."

He stood and waited until the last echo of the words had died into silence, and with it the last yearning of his heart.

He pressed on.

Death. Well, why not death? Fear of death? Certainly and absolutely not. The fear of death had been manufactured and fostered by the priests for their own purposes of power, as scares were manufactured and fostered by the press. No, not fear, but wonderment, intense curiosity, the thrill of new experience, the joy and pride of fresh knowledge. The personal discovery by oneself, alone, unaided, of a country about which there had been no authentic information. Imagine that. Surmises of every differentiation: theological, philosophical, ethical, scientific, spiritual—but only surmises.

And now he was going to know.

So with his face set towards the mountains, now revealing themselves, now concealing themselves, Adrian Steele went forward.

CHAPTER II.

THE hours went by, and Adrian Steele did not return to Wassen. All the family Anderegg were a little worried, for the Föhnwind had been blowing hard and strong, and the inhabitants knew well that, as Sebastian Ogi had said at Meien, things would happen. But they did not become definitely anxious until the postman arrived from Meien and brought the news that the avalanches were falling, and that the Susten Pass was said to be blocked. He himself had heard from the schoolmistress that Herr Steele had been at Meien, but more than that he did not know. They telephoned at once to Meien, and learnt that he had not come back there. They communicated with Färnigen, and were told that Johann Almer, the woodcutter, had noticed a stranger gathering flowers about half a kilometre from the hamlet. The people of the Stein Alp Hotel, at the foot of the huge Stein Glacier, in answer to inquiries, said that he was not there.

Night came, and he had not returned. Old Frau Anderegg wept silently. Frida sobbed without ceasing. Johann could not settle to his carving. Christian went about with strained face. A search party was arranged, and as soon as it was light in the morning they started off on their journey.

They searched for the whole day, and found no trace of him. He seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth.

Then Sebastian Ogi said :

"Try the Kalchthal. We warned him not to go there, but he was always a daring one, and he liked that wild part. He came down that way once from the Sustenjoch."

They went there, and high up in the valley they found a huge avalanche, freshly fallen. The white monster lay across the track, with its head resting on the rising ground on the other side of the track. In its passage, it had mown off groups of firs and larches, and their trunks could be seen scattered pell-mell amongst the rocks and ice. It was extraordinarily thick, and its size alone baffled all their attempts to make a successful search.

"Even if he is here, we shan't find him now," Peter Müller said. "We must leave him."

So they gave up the impossible task, reluctantly, but wisely, for they had discovered no clue to help and guide them.

But Christian Anderegg was not satisfied, and the next morning, without saying a word to any one, he returned alone to the avalanche; and considerably higher up, on a boulder, hurled there no doubt in fury by the blast, he saw his stick—"*Immer will ich Christian unterstützen.*" He seized it and brought it home. He could not speak when he showed it to them.

They knew then for certain that Adrian Steele lay there, somewhere, entombed beneath that white impenetrable mass.

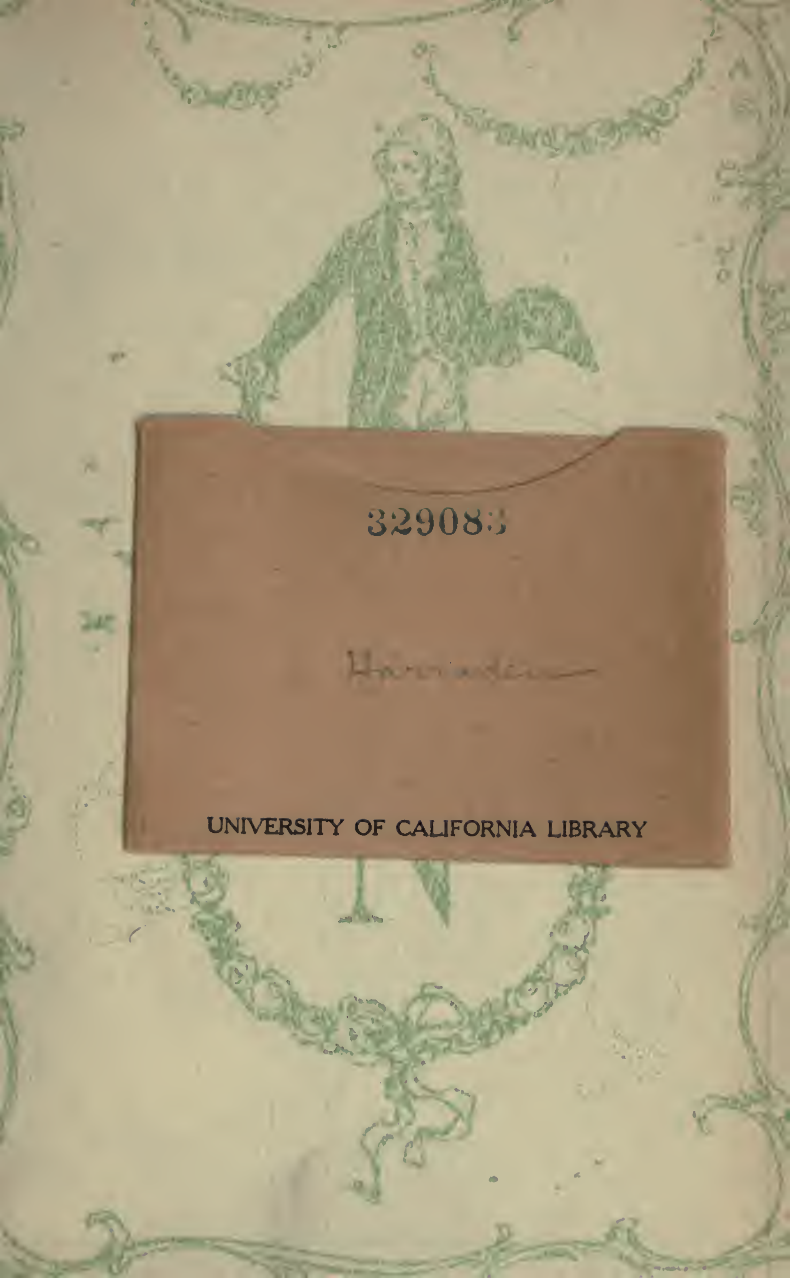
"We shall find him in September," the old guide said.

THIS BOOK IS DUE ON THE LAST DATE STAMPED BELOW

AN INITIAL FINE OF 25 CENTS

WILL BE ASSESSED FOR FAILURE TO RETURN THIS BOOK ON THE DATE DUE. THE PENALTY WILL INCREASE TO 50 CENTS ON THE FOURTH DAY AND TO $1.00 ON THE SEVENTH DAY OVERDUE.

DEC 29 1934



329083

[illegible]

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY