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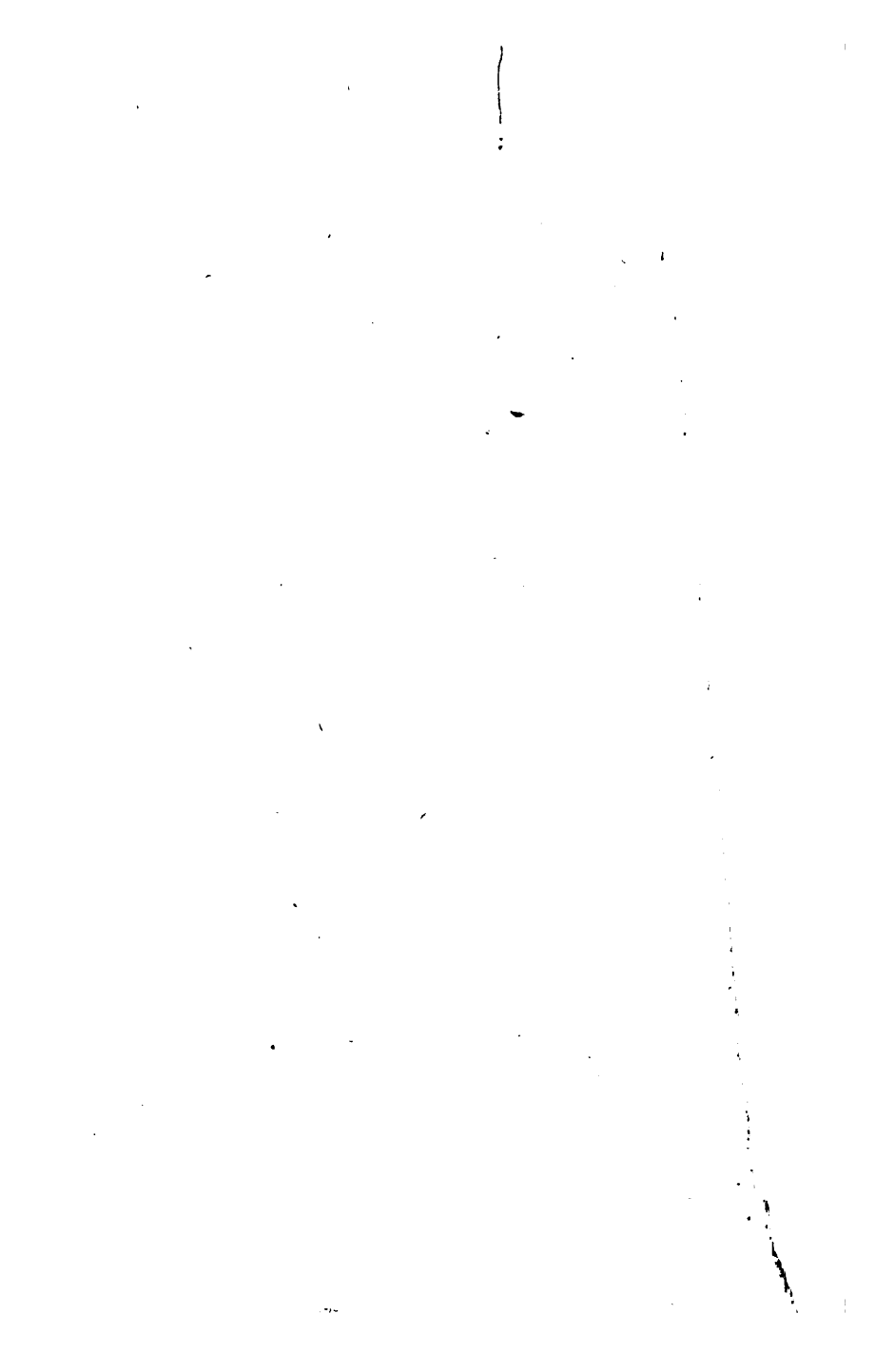


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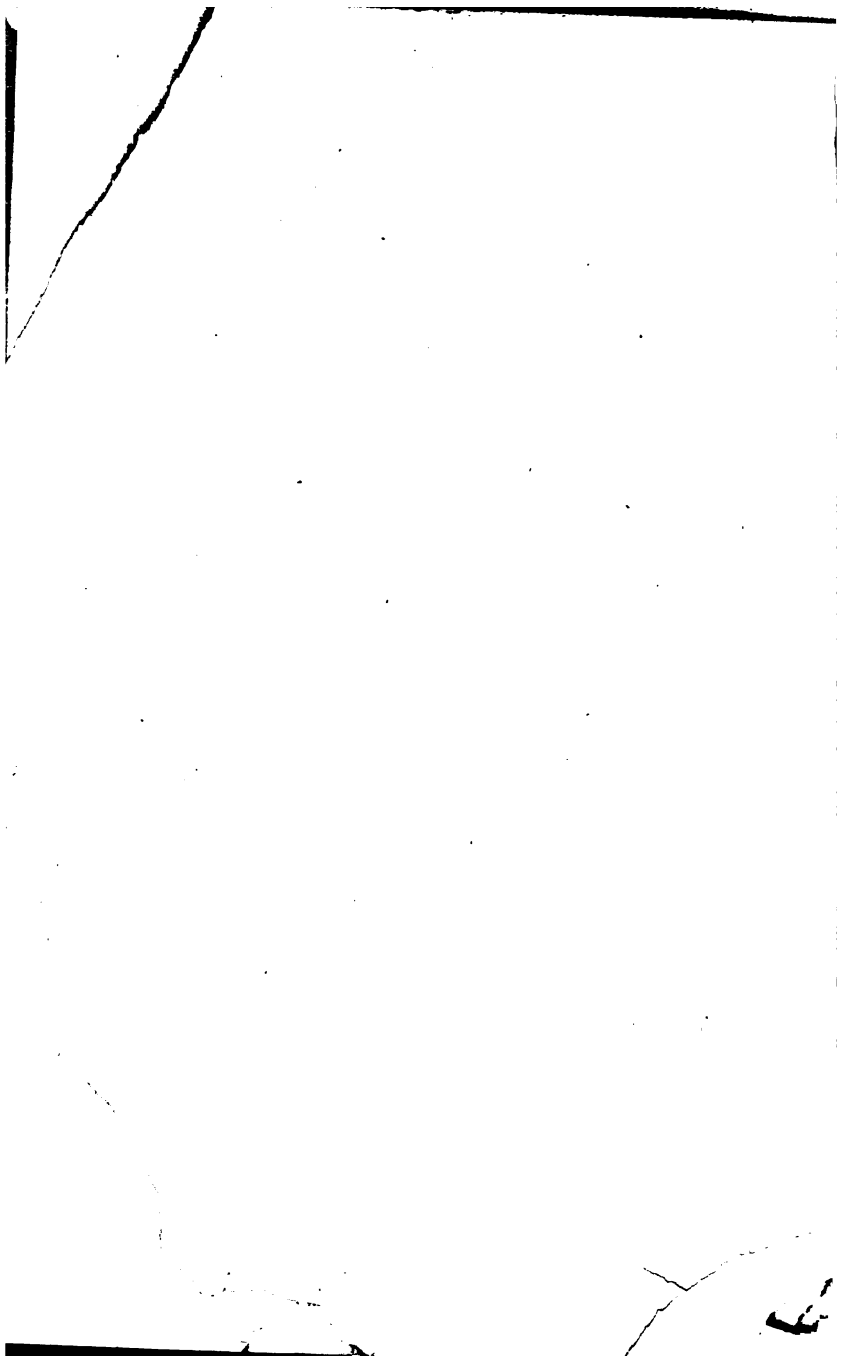
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Bryan
MS







THE ADJUSTMENT

Hope evermore and believe, O man,
for e'en as thy thought
So are the things that thou seest;
e'en as thy hope and belief.

Go with the spiritual life, the higher
volition and action;
With the great girdle of God, go
and encompass the earth!

A. H. CLOUGH.

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Stressborn, still standing by the fire, turned almost with an effort and saw her.

See chapter VII.

THE ADJUSTMENT

BY

MARGUERITE BRYANT

AUTHOR OF

"ANNE KEMPBURN, TRUTH SEEKER," "CHRISTOPHER
HIBBAULT, ROADMAKER," ETC.



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To E. K. G.

Do you remember on a sunlit sea,
One summer day, you gave a gift to me?
Can you trace here your gift, although disguised,
And tracing know it was a gift I prized?

Long in my mind it lay, until at last
The robe it wore slipped back into the Past;
So I redressed it; will you take from me
The gift you gave me on a sunlit sea?

1925

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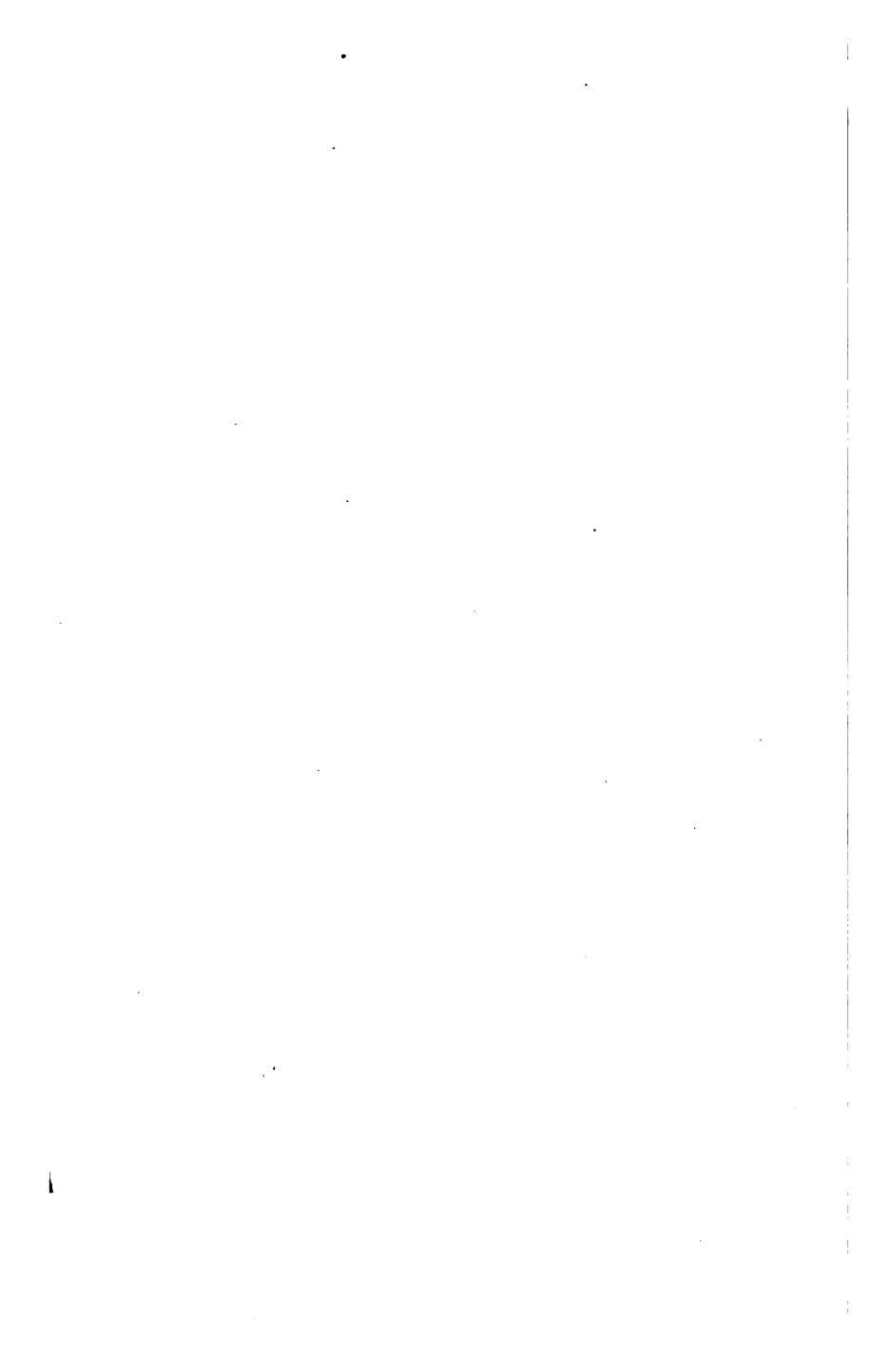
NOY VON
JULI
1880

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PART I
HER FATHER



THE ADJUSTMENT

CHAPTER I

IT happened many years ago, but some people may still remember the consternation that fell on a certain section of society when the *Morning Post* announced in a brief paragraph the marriage of "Rachel Hilberry, daughter of the late George Hilberry of Torrens, Wiltshire, with Rudolph Massendon, second son of the late Sir Victor Massendon, and brother to the present baronet." All the people mentioned in the paragraph were well known in their respective circles, but a conjunction of such circles would have seemed an impossibility to the several members of the same, had not that surprising announcement declared such a conjunction not only possible but actually achieved.

Rachel Hilberry, the orphan, and heiress to a notably rich "Friend," inherited more than her money from the honest, upright, if somewhat narrow-minded race of good business men behind her. She was well known—or her signature was—in the philanthropic world and though one might seek her vainly at Charitable Bazaars, Concerts, and such fashionable amusements, the remotest corners of her wide estates knew her well as did the small industrial centres from which sprang the fortune she dispensed with such serious care. It could not be said with truth that her circle was in any way a limited one, but it was certainly not the same circle in which Rudolph Massendon shone with such meteoric brilliancy, a little touched with luridness per-

haps, but still a splendour that was very attractive to exactly the circle of which he was the centre — as Rachel was of hers.

That such orbits should cross seemed, as mentioned before, about as likely as that Saturn should engulf the gentle moon, or Mars fall upon Urania. Still it did happen and happened like this.

Rudolph's immediate environment having become a little overheated from some indiscretion on his part, he decided it was a favourable opportunity for him to carry out a wager with regard to cross-country riding which had been made some time previously. The ride was to last three days, and to be over ground that was familiar neither to Rudolph nor those concerned. The question of trespass was a negligible one to the rider, indeed the bet was concerned with the evasion of such questions, so on the last day of the ride, when Rudolph picked himself out of a deep hidden ditch that lay beyond a thickset hedge and proceeded with far more concern to pick out his damaged horse, the question that he had just ridden over some acres of growing wheat, and was now in a well-fenced field abutting on a small farm, did not trouble him in the least. He was troubled over his horse's sprained shoulder, and after a moment, also concerned by the numb helplessness of his left arm. He was making remarks to the horse as to what he thought of concealed ditches like the one that had brought him to grief, when he became conscious that he was being scrutinised by a girl on horseback who had entered the field through a gate a few yards away. His hat was already removed by the fall, but he stood up straight and made her a little bow so prettily that the absence of his hat was hardly noticeable. Rudolph had very pretty manners, whatever else he lacked.

"I'm awfully afraid my horse is hurt," he said modestly. "Could I get help at the farm there, do

you think?" Not a word as to the trespass you perceive, but also not a word as to his own injury.

And so Rachel Hilberry and Rudolph Massendon's orbits crossed. Nobody expected the marriage to turn out a success, unless it were Sir Vallory, Rudolph's long-suffering brother. He said very little, partly because that was his way and partly because he liked Rachel almost as much as he loved his scamp of a brother. People said afterwards that he should have prevented the match. Why in the name of goodness should he? It was a chance in a thousand for Rudolph.

The astounding part of it was that Rudolph did reform. For a whole year and five months his former friends and haunts knew him no more and Rachel's estate benefited. It would appear that there were administrative talents lying dormant in him; he was no fool, and he loved Rachel. Then, in the "Back Behind Land" Christina took it into her head to get born and selected this particular couple to be her sponsors on her earthly pilgrimage.

Things were dull at Torrens for a time. Rachel herself thought Rudolph wanted a change and sent him off to London.

Reformation had probably not had time to become a settled habit, also it was very unlucky that Sir Vallory was out of England.

Rudolph came back at the end of June, and felt what a nice, clean, refreshing place the country was. How good it was to lie half awake in the early morning hours and listen to the sound of the swinging scythes, the larks and rooks, and to feel the sweet air pulsing in at the wide open window. He went down to breakfast sure that he had made a great mistake of late, and that London was a beastly hole.

Rachel was not there, though he could see she had been down. The post had brought a previous even-

ing's paper, which she had opened. He took it up with a vague wonder as to who had sent them the rag.

The Hicley divorce suit was still the leading interest. Rudolph smiled a little cynically as he noted it, and then ceased to smile and frowned instead. The startling headlines and the paragraphs themselves were all outlined in blue pencil. Even Rachel, though as a rule one might be sure she would not have glanced at such a case, could not but have seen it.

It was absurd, of course. Somewhere in a far-off corner of his brain it still seemed absurd that his name had actually occurred, but it did not make pretty reading.

So *she* had been fooling him through these last few weeks. She had re-taken him in the old net in order to save this other man, of whom he had not even condescended to be jealous. He had been a little amused, indeed, at the ease with which he had renewed the old episode. He had not thought her so clever. This devil of a maid who had given them away was acting on instructions, of course. His name only spoken once, as if by accident, and the girl was censured for her indiscretion, but there it was. Coupled with her evidence it was all too clear for misinterpretation, for any one even remotely acquainted with the Hicley ménage.

Rachel came in as he read, but she remained by the window and did not come back to the table, but stood looking at him with an expectant air. He called out a morning greeting to her, but he did not put the paper down. He helped himself to toast regardless of the fact he had a piece already. All the while his mind kept beating out one persistent question which he could not answer. "What am I to say to her? What am I to say to her?"

Rachel spoke at last, her quiet, serious voice just touched with surprise.

"Why aren't you angry about it, Rudolph?"

"About what?" he answered lamely.

She did not think it worth while to reply to that, and he picked up the paper he had dropped.

"About this?"

She came a step nearer, with a sudden tense look in her face.

"It is worth being angry about, Rudolph. They have said — unspeakable things. — It's wicked — these papers!"

"Yes!" he muttered mechanically, at grip with a thought — "She doesn't believe it, then!" And he looked at her.

She stood quite still, waiting; waiting for him to deny it all. If he did she would believe him, though all the world should shout the truth in her ears. That is how it was with her, that was her way of loving.

But it was true! That is, the outlined details of the ugly story were true, if not all the deductions drawn therefrom by the eager papers, and ghosts and vampires who frequented the divorce courts. His fertile brain forged a dozen little lying explanations of it all — ways out of it. But she only wanted one. His hot foaming anger at a cowardly lie!

She was so still and white, her whole being waiting for the words that must come. Doubtless he only waited because he did not want to frighten her.

Rudolph stood up, squared his shoulders and gave the little backward jerk of his head that his masters had known well in him as a boy, when he had been greatly daring and was cornered.

The man was an expert liar. Vallory always said he was born without an appreciation of truth.

"Rudolph!" she called out sharply.

"It is true," he said with his eyes on her face. He kept them there rather than acknowledge to himself the agony was unbearable.

"It was only a few days ago, and you came down here straight from that?" She spoke slowly like one trying to solve an impossible riddle. "But you couldn't have done it — it's not possible. That other man that was accused? — now they say it was you — you all the time! And up to this last week —"

How could he explain to her that the clever, subtle devil of a woman had dragged him blindfold into a net, that she had spent the last weeks in telling him with mocking pleasure that he had escaped. What good was it to tell her anything? There was no explanation possible.

"How could you love her? How could you?" It was a bitter cry and he broke in sharply.

"I hate her like — hell —"

"I can't understand — I don't see." Still the same pathetic cry.

"No, of course, it is impossible for you to understand."

Then quite suddenly she broke into the anger she had so passionately desired him to show — fierce, wild, white anger of a woman tumbling over some shame that was neither understood nor deserved. Every word burnt itself into his mind in indelible letters. He did not remember that she was not in a condition to weigh her words or know their full meaning, and she was only conscious that she felt for him an inexplicable dread, fear that he should touch her, and a desire that she might not see him again. She said this horribly plainly.

At that he snatched at her hands and tried to draw her to him.

"No, no, Rachel," he pleaded. "Don't send me away, don't." But she pulled her hands from him with a sharp little cry and shrank back from him.

He let go swiftly enough then, and stood waiting

till she had finished speaking broken, unmeaning sentences and broke into bitter crying. He rang the bell that would summon her maid and went quietly out of the room, and so out of Rachel's orbit altogether.

CHAPTER II

IN whatever degree Christina may be said to be responsible for the original calamity, she did her best to compensate for it in after years.

She grew from infancy to childhood and childhood to girlhood with more than the usual allowance of sunshine and less than the usual measure of tears, and as she grew, it might almost be said her mother grew with her. For after two years of stunned, benumbing misery, Rachel awoke to the miraculous fact of her two-year-old daughter — that morsel of intelligent life given into her hands to train and develop.

To develop for what? That was the first bitter question that assailed Rachel. To live a useful, harmless, pure life, and then to meet some crushing, shattering blow that would turn light into darkness?

Rachel shivered as she looked at her darling. Somehow she must be guarded from such a fate as had been her mother's. Rachel was too truly a religious woman to be entirely embittered by her great grief and too humble and loving by nature to miss its lesson, though it was long years before she fully learnt it or found a better balm than Time's for her sorrow. When, however, that time did arrive she had travelled far from the plain bald faith of her girlhood, had refound the essential truths of it enlarged and glorified, and life itself no longer a broken, maimed thing, but a space of time that was still full of beautiful possibilities and would yet yield fruit of joy and happiness.

She did not understand all at once, she did not even

know just when each step of her way became clearer and easier, but certainly as Christina grew so Rachel's soul grew also.

Rudolph had spoken the truth of her. She had not understood. She had allowed her horror and fear of things that were to her unspeakable to include the individual and cast out pity and love for a blank empty space of Time. So she had failed in her dealing with one she was pledged to help, who indeed had needed her help as surely as one drowning. She recognised the full force of her mistake at length and had done her best to remedy it by trying to find Rudolph, who, however, refused to be found by her or his brother, either then or later, so that she had to live with the knowledge of her great failure ever with her, till the deeper knowledge that became hers softened the abiding pain of it.

One thing was certain. As far as possible, it must be managed that she and Rudolph, and not the little curly-haired mite toddling about the wide smooth lawns playing with the sunbeams, should bear the bitter fruit of the past.

To this purpose, then, Rachel shaped her life, endeavouring to arm this growing atom of humanity so that the bitterest experience in the world should never rob her of faith or make her wholly bankrupt in joy.

Christina grew up and Love was the Law of Life that surrounded her. Love, and pity for all that would not be embraced by that law. Evil, unhappiness and ugliness were synonymous terms to her. Good included wisdom, knowledge, and joy. All the trouble of the world was due to not rightly understanding God's purpose and was matter for pity. The only thing to be really feared was the failure to follow what one's understanding told one was wise and good. Some such creed or faith did the child make to her-

self out of all she heard and learned, and she found nothing in her surroundings to contradict the Law of Life as expounded by her mother. It was at least a good foundation on which to build in later years.

They lived always at Torrens and Christina had no friends beside her mother and the cottage people round, with the exception of a rare visitor in the person of Sir Vallory Massendon, a silent, apparently absent-minded man much concerned in the mysteries of starland and the heavens, but beloved of both Christina and her mother.

Christina regarded her mother as the fountain of all necessary knowledge and the vice-regent of that protecting Power that surrounded her, and which was as real to her as the air she breathed or the wind that fanned her cheek. She was a healthy, happy, natural child with an immense joy of life, of fresh air and movement, and Rachel in that dear companionship kept marvellously young, and as far as outward appearance went the past had left nothing but a blessing behind it. But inwardly there remained with Rachel an abiding memory of a sunny June morning and a note of passionate entreaty in a voice that was so little used to pleading.

She spoke of Rudolph to no one, not even to Sir Vallory, to whom Rudolph had gone, when he left his wife, in the vain hope of aid. The two brothers had quarrelled as desperately as any two men could quarrel when one was entirely on the right side of things and the other entirely on the wrong. Like Rachel, Vallory had intimated that he never wanted to see Rudolph again, and unlike Rachel, he never altered his mind, or, at least, never owned even to himself that he had.

Christina grew up in the belief that her father was dead. No one had distinctly told her so, but there was a child in the village living with the widowed

mother who appeared in a similar predicament as regards a father. This child had once told Christina that her mother cried if she spoke of her dead father, and though Christina could not imagine her mother so doing, still she refrained from asking any questions with a sort of instinctive delicacy that was very characteristic of the child.

It was not until she was sixteen that she ever heard her mother mention this unknown father.

Christina had inherited Rudolph's passion for horses and was a fine horsewoman. She was riding one day and her mother, watching for her return, saw her enter the gate leading her horse by the bridle.

"I am afraid he has hurt himself," she called out when her mother came to the door. "He put his foot in a rabbit-hole, poor fellow!"

Rachel had to wait till the horse was seen to, before she heard further particulars, or could assure herself with her own eyes that Christina was no worse for the fall.

Mrs. Massendon looked at her daughter attentively as she sat opposite her eating her tea and telling of her little adventure. Christina's hair was red-brown. Mrs. Massendon's was pale gold. The child's blue eyes were the same as her mother's, but the straight nose, the smiling mouth, her olive skin with its faint warm flush and above all her voice, were singularly like Rudolph's. It had struck Rachel forcibly when she had called out to her about the horse — as, indeed, it had before — though she had put the thought away from her as not productive of happiness. But to-day she laid hold of it, played with it a little in her mind, and then said, almost without intention:

"You are very like your father sometimes, Christina."

Christina gazed at her with widely opened blue eyes and then jumped up and looked in the glass.

“Am I? Altogether, or in little bits?—my eyes are like yours, anyhow, Mother.”

“It is your voice more than anything. I wonder if he would know you if you met?”

“Mother!”

The girl turned to her with great amazement. Rachel came to a rather momentous decision.

“Your father is not dead, my dear, at least to the best of my belief he is not.”

Christina slipped on her knees beside her mother and rubbed her cheek against her sleeve. She said nothing, however.

“It happened not long before you were born,” said Rachel slowly. “We—quarrelled—and he went away.”

It was difficult to think of her mother in connexion with a quarrel, and all Christina could say was:

“Wasn’t he an understanding person?”

By which she meant did her father understand and interpret life by the laws of love as she knew them. Her mother’s answer was even more surprising than the previous statement.

“It was I who did not rightly understand things then, Christina.” There was a note in Rachel’s voice that was new to the girl.

“Dear, darling mother!” she cried. “If you didn’t understand—which I can’t believe, he didn’t either—I’m sure it wasn’t your fault!”

“The cause of it all was not my fault,” answered Rachel steadily. “But I did not do my best part to help matters, so they went dreadfully wrong:—yet it was through all that I came to understand things,” she added musingly. “It’s all very wonderful, child. ‘Who knows the ways of the world? How God will bring them about?’”

She was silent a little. It seemed strange to her that she had told Christina after all these years, yet

she was conscious of a sense of relief. It had been so simple, too!

"It was right you should know that much, Christina — that your father is alive — for I am sure he is — and that we had quarrelled and parted, because in years to come, I feel you will have to do something for him to make up to him for what I failed to do. And you will tell him I said this, Christina."

"But if I meet him, you will be there, too," protested the girl.

"That I do not know."

"Where is he?" asked Christina quickly.

"I do not know."

"But you know he is alive?"

Mrs. Massendon was silent a moment.

"I have only one reason for thinking so," she said at length; "he has something of mine which I am sure would have been sent back to me, if he were dead. He changed his name, we know, and we believe he is in London, but even when we thought we had traced him about ten years ago, the letters came back. Vallory was always against any attempt to find him."

Christina gave a little gasp. It was too bewildering to think of Sir Vallory as connected with this suddenly heard-of father. She gathered swiftly that he must be Sir Vallory's brother, though she had never called the latter uncle, or even wondered over the similarity of their surname. Sir Vallory, indeed, though hardly a familiar figure to her, was undoubtedly a real one, while this newly discovered father was a dim, remote person less real than the dead man she had mutely accepted without question.

There was a silence between the two for a short space. Then Christina said:

"I am not sure that I want to see him, Mother."

Rachel quickly put her arms round her.

"Don't say that, little girl. It is the great hope of

my life that you will meet him, that he will need and want you as much as I do myself. I did not love him well enough, Christina; not so well as he loved me. He gave me a great proof of it, even then, when it happened, but I was so blind I did not see it. And so he just went out of my life."

"Mother, you are crying!" exclaimed Christina in tones of horror. "Please don't. Oh, I shall never like him if I think it makes you unhappy even to think about him. Please don't talk of him any more. Besides, if he did go out of your life, he did not go out of God's plan, did he? So it must be all right, really."

"It will be," said Rachel, clutching at the faith she had taught her child. "Only I made the road longer and harder for him. Never, never, Christina, let the thing that is done stand between you and the person who did it. Our actions are so often not a part of our true selves, that it is not safe to judge by them. Always give Love a chance, my dear, for Love is so great a thing that it never confuses the deed with the doer, it just understands."

That much only did Christina hear of her father's story. For though Rachel spoke of him again at long intervals, she said nothing more as to the cause of the quarrel, but only reiterated her wish that the father and daughter should meet. For three years more their life went on in the same even grooves and though Rachel was conscious that a change must come, in all fairness to the developing girl, still she made no attempt to force events, but rather waited in quiet confidence that the moment for change would come, and when it did, she must be ready to take it.

It was shortly before Christina's nineteenth birthday that the momentous moment came.

It was May, and Torrens was at its best. Laburnums and pink mayes showed up against the walls of yew that shut in the soft green lawns, the bowling

greens and long alleys that surrounded the old manor which had been Christina's one and only home. Torrens and the Hilberry estate, as it was called, lay in a lap of the South Wiltshire Downs, a green oasis of meadow and wood set in the plain grey of the swelling lines of the Downs. To the north across the river — Downs, bare and desolate; to the south — Downs fringed with beech woods and outlined with a great ridge of wild woodland; to the west, the long narrow valley with its many cottages and its few mills, and two little townlets where old trades were carried on, fostered and watched over by the Hilberry estate. Eastward — Downs, rising and sinking with scattered villages and old churches, a land of barrows and strange formations that spoke of the long, long time it had seemed to men that this was a desirable place in which to live and die. And north, east, south, and west, it was the Hilberry estate with a river running through that swarmed with trout, and woods that swarmed with living denizens, unhaunted by keepers; woods that knew no echo of gun save in the pursuit of the destructive rabbit by irate farmers, who carefully concealed from their excellent landlady the number that were exported yearly to the London market.

Torrens stood in the middle of the estate and was sufficiently far from neighbours to allow Rachel considerable freedom in the ordering of her life without risk of offending weaker brethren.

Here, then, in May when Torrens was at its very best, came Sir Vallory, snatching some hours from his beloved heavens and intricate calculations, to lie idly in a long chair on his sister-in-law's beautiful lawns and to watch her moving as a very part and soul of the place that so exactly stood for her. They sat on one of the grassy terraces, Rachel occupied with some embroidery and Sir Vallory doing nothing at all with a very laudable air of satisfaction. They were await-

ing Christina's return to do some entirely unimportant thing they could quite well have accomplished without her. She had gone to the village about a mile away to enquire about a sick woman.

"And you will have a sick girl on your hands, if you do not take more care," Sir Vallory had said severely. "The idea of allowing her to walk all that way in this heat."

"The sun never hurts Christina," Rachel answered composedly.

"She is invulnerable to heat as to cold, I suppose?"

"Don't you really think that there is a great deal of imagination in putting so much to the account of the weather?"

"I won't argue, Rachel. Go on talking about suffragettes or Clothing Clubs, or whatever it was—that is, unless you have made up your mind to tell me what is really distracting you."

Rachel looked up in surprise.

"How could you tell?"

He laughed in his slow, drawling way.

"My dear Rachel! Why, your mind has been elsewhere ever since this morning's post."

"You see everything you are not meant to see."

"I apologise. Please, it was quite unintentional, but you are so delightfully transparent."

"I shall be glad to talk to you about it."

"If you weren't so inconsistent, Rachel, you would not be half so interesting."

"If there is one thing," began his hostess, but was interrupted.

"One thing you are *not*, it is inconsistent. Of course, it is because you pride yourself on it it is so amusing. No, I won't tease you; go on, tell me about the letter which you have not even shown the child yet."

She shook her head at him reprovingly, but she

really did want to consult — or rather tell him, what was in her mind, concerning the morning's news.

"The letter was from my sister," she said slowly, dropping her work on her lap and leaning her chin on her hands.

"I know — Esther, who married against your father's wish and went off to South America."

She wondered silently at his remembrance of a fact that he could hardly have heard of more than once, and that years back, but she was relieved not to have to explain further.

"Yes, Esther. She is living in the Argentine. Her husband has property there. It was not a happy marriage, I fear." She stopped, really she knew so little about her sister's life at all that she wondered if she had the right to say even this much.

"She is very ill. She should have an operation, they say, but it is difficult there, and even then the doctor tells her plainly it only means a few more months of life. How can he expect her to get better when he puts such an idea in her head. But the worst is that she is so terribly alone."

Sir Vallory made a mental note that Esther's husband was no good and did not count.

"And she wants you to come out to her and stay till the end, I suppose?"

Rachel turned to him with a perplexed air.

"Christina does that sort of thing, too," she said meditatively. "I wonder just how you do it?"

"Merely by jumping into another person's shoes."

She considered this a while.

"Yes, I see. I wish I could do it. Esther, then, wants me to go to her, though she does not say so right out. It must be dreadful to be alone as she is." It was an experience that had been hers, but Rachel was never inclined to draw on her own past for illustrations of other people's troubles.

Her eyes were very sad; even if she lacked imagination, as Sir Vallory hinted, she could conceive of the desolation that Esther had painted in few words, and her heart was always atune to the note of another's trouble.

"She does not mind the fact that she may die, but it is the being alone," she concluded.

"And the difficulty is Christina?" he suggested, feeling that they were not making much progress.

"Yes, Christina. I can't take her out there on such an errand."

"Christina ought, by all the laws of polite society, to be out in London now, blossoming in hot drawing-rooms and under electric lights."

"We have electric light here," replied Rachel simply. "And really hot rooms are more harmful than hot sun, you know."

"I see," returned Sir Vallory gravely. "Well, what do you propose to do?"

"Christina is not quite like other girls."

"No, I am one with you there." His tone was a little dry.

"I have felt for some time that she ought to be away from here, getting wider experience of people and life."

"And you really think she will find them in Tierra del Fuego?"

Rachel turned to him in surprise.

"Why, no, that is just it. She ought to be in London, as you said, or with different people."

"And it is your duty to stay and take her, Rachel." He did not at all approve of this going away scheme, and he meant to make as good a fight against it as he could, though the result was a foregone conclusion.

Rachel did not take any notice of his remark.

"I wondered if Lady Losford—" she began.

"It's too bad," protested her brother-in-law. "I

have been looking forward for years to the spectacle of Christina and you facing the world of London society. You are bent on defrauding me."

She looked at him with a faint little smile.

"You own it would be a spectacle."

"For London and me."

"But you never go out at all; you have often told me so."

"I should then."

"Very well, then you can take care of Christina."

"Heaven forbid!"

"Heaven will do most of it! I only thought you could report to me."

"I have positively no experience. You said Emily just now."

"Do you think Lady Losford would take her?"

He appeared to be considering the point of his cousin Emily and Christina, but in reality he was racking his brains to find some objection that would hold water enough to frustrate the whole scheme.

"Even if I were to stay," she went on, answering his thoughts in her usual way, "I should be no use to Christina in London. I could not face it, Vallery." She sat upright with her hands clasped tightly in her lap. There was genuine distress in her eyes. Rachel was a very brave woman, but probably the bravest of us have some little secret fear at which we draw the line of courage. This was Rachel's, and it explained Christina's long-delayed introduction to a wider world than "Torrens."

Sir Vallery grasped in a moment just what was meant by this reluctance to face the world which on her account had shut its doors in the face of the man who had so wronged her. Any pity or consideration shown to her meant condemnation of the man who had been his brother in days long gone by. Here, too,

lay the secret of Rachel's attitude of isolation maintained during all these years. Even this coming separation from her beloved daughter was more possible than the other evil.

"You do not think Lady Losford would like it?" she asked hurriedly.

"She would be charmed — I was thinking of Christina."

"Christina will get on with any one. The point is that she must have opportunities of meeting all kinds of people."

"She will only see one kind with Emily."

"I had thought four months with Lady Losford and four with the Chancelys'."

"I don't know them."

"No, that is just it. They would be different."

He raised his eyebrows slightly.

"An advantage?"

She grew a little pink, and bent over her work again that he might not see her face.

"Mrs. Chancelly is an old school friend of mine. She was very kind to me once — when Christina was born. I have corresponded with her from time to time. They are rich, if that is any balm to you." There was a gentle raillery in her voice.

"The family consists of?"

"A girl about Christina's age and one son."

"That's Number Two," he announced with displeasure. "I suppose you have forgotten Richard?"

"What Richard? And what do you mean by Number Two? There is only one son."

"And Richard makes two." He had a trump card now, or hoped so. "Seriously, Rachel, do you contemplate leaving Christina at her susceptible age to the dangerous infection of love only too likely to be rampant in the vicinity of two charming young men? I speak from personal acquaintance with Richard,

Emily's godson and protégé. No doubt Mrs. Chancely will speak for her son in similar language."

Rachel continued her work untroubled.

"I do not think that Christina is very susceptible, but any way if she does fall in love my being here won't help or hinder her."

"She may get married before you return," he threatened indignantly.

"I don't think so, unless the return is much delayed. One can never tell."

"You contemplate it calmly."

"My dear Vallory, I have considered the possibility for nineteen years. And really I hope she will fall in love, because until she does she cannot understand so much that must be understood."

"Oh, if it's part of her education I give it up!" he groaned; "but the whole thing is topsy-turvy. It is you who ought to be finding out possible troubles and difficulties and needing reassurance, instead of me."

Rachel went on working in silence, then she said quietly:

"You don't think, then, that since God has given me something to do the other side of the world, it is His business to look after Christina while I do it?"

"I don't understand anything at all about it, but I am quite sure you do; so we will leave it at that," was his hurried response.

"And you will see Lady Losford directly you return?"

"Here's Christina," he answered quickly; "and Christina agitated, too."

Christina ran to them across the grass, and her urgent voice reached them before her swift feet.

"Mummie, Mummie, there's a poor woman just outside the gate who's very ill. I told Rogers to bring her in, but he says you wouldn't like it — old stupid! She's so bad, Mummie."

Rachel was already by her and Sir Vallory watched them go swiftly across the lawn and down the drive.

"Oh, you dear impossible people!" he murmured. "I suppose I shall have to go after you and see you are not too grossly taken in."

He sauntered slowly down the drive in their wake, and outside the Park gates found a little group bending over a woman lying on the grass. A labourer's wife from a cottage near was bathing her face, there was a bicycle leaning against the wall, and Mr. Hughes, the rector, was mopping his face and endeavouring to explain matters to Mrs. Massendon with a worried air.

"So good of you to come out in this heat! The poor woman? Oh, yes, very sad. Heart attack, I should think. She needs immediate attention, but what can one do? One can't expect any of the cottage people to take in a tramp and look after her. I have sent for a cart so she can be taken to Warminster."

"That is six miles away," said Rachel as she bent over the sick woman. "It would be much quicker to bring her up to the house."

"But surely," he stammered, "you couldn't take her in. Why, one knows nothing about her?"

"She does not look like standing a long drive."

The woman who was helping raised her head and said:

"I'd have taken her in, but I've six children and my husband, and two rooms."

"You are a good woman, and I wish you were my tenant," Rachel replied quickly. "But it's all right. Roger — (the gardener Christina had summoned had appeared by now) run into the lodge and ask your wife for a mattress and two sheets, and Christina, run home and tell Mrs. Winch to get the little ground floor bedroom ready, and then telephone for Dr. Streeter."

The promptness with which the two set out to fulfil

her orders was a surprise to Sir Vallory. Roger returned with the demanded things before he had determined in his own mind what was to be done with them.

"We shall want four men," Rachel said. "You, Vallory; Mr. Hughes, and Roger — and there's a bicyclist coming down the hill. So lucky! that will save time. Will you stop him, Vallory?"

Sir Vallory found himself arresting the career of a tourist cyclist by standing in the centre of the road and waving wildly.

What Mr. Hughes thought is not known, but two minutes later, the four men were walking with properly broken steps up the long drive, Roger and the amazed cyclist in front, and the stout rector and the tall Sir Vallory behind. Once the latter stole a glance at the perspiring Mr. Hughes and was almost sorry for him; then he regarded the back of the captured tourist and smiled. He carefully did not look at the sick woman they carried. Rachel, who had disappeared into the lodge, now ran after them with her arm full of blankets, which she put over her charge as they went.

"It looks like heart collapse," she said.

At the door of the house others came out and relieved them of their burden, and the three men found themselves standing in the cool hall mopping their brows and looking a little sheepishly at each other. Roger had disappeared. Sir Vallory felt called on to play host and offer some sort of explanation to the stranger. He judged that Mr. Hughes must know by this time something about his sister-in-law's little ways.

The stranger, who proved a Cockney of the most decided type, declared with much heartiness that he was proud to have been of use to them, and evidently regarded Sir Vallory as master of the place. It did not seem worth while disabusing him of the idea.

Sir Vallory suggested they should adjourn to tea on the lawn, but the traveller shook his head.

"Must get on, you know. So many miles a day, or I shan't get my tour done — very kind of you, I'm sure, but no; I'm for the road. Tell —" he hesitated, — "the lady I'm glad to help; no trouble."

"I'd have liked to stop well enough," he owned to his best friend afterwards, "but it wouldn't do. I could see that with half an eye. Real toffs they was and no mistake, and that tramp woman taken in as if she were one of themselves! But that's different to giving me tea."

The rector, being left with Sir Vallory, made a few commonplace remarks, and then, to the other's intense relief, he, too, said he must be off. So when Christina reappeared ten minutes later, she found only Sir Vallory gazing abstractedly out of the window.

She said she would give him tea out on the lawn, that fresh tea had just been taken out.

"Mother will come when the doctor has been," she added.

"She will want tea as badly as we do," grumbled the guest.

Christina sighed.

"Yes, but she can't leave. I am so glad Mr. Hughes has gone."

"How uncharitable of you!"

"I suppose it is," she acknowledged ruefully, "but I am afraid it is the truth."

The subject troubled her while she served tea, and she presently reverted to it.

"Sir Vallory, I wish you would explain to me why Mr. Hughes is like that to us? It's no use asking mother; I know just what she will say."

"Like what? So stout, or so busy, or what?"

She moved her hands impatiently.

"No, no; not that! I mean why does he think we

are not Christian because we do not think just as he does?"

"I should think he thought you were a bit too realistic!"

Sir Vallory spoke in his dry voice that Christina could never understand; she knitted her brows.

"But that is absurd. He ought to have known that the poor thing must come in here. What makes me angry is that he pretends to be surprised!"

Sir Vallory did not himself think the rector's surprise either feigned or exactly inexplicable, but he realised the futility of saying so. As a matter of fact, Mr. Hughes ought indeed by this time to have known the eccentricities of his rich parishioner better than to be surprised at anything she did. Mr. Hughes was never quite clear in his mind about Mrs. Massendon. He entertained grave doubts as to her orthodoxy, but she was goodness itself to all around, and the somewhat poor living was made by her into a reasonable one. So she was not a woman to offend. Yet she certainly held curious views on life, and Mr. Hughes was of opinion it was a great mistake to hold views differing from the rest of the world. "It was so unfair to others, and complicated life," he would urge pathetically, when the subject of Mrs. Massendon's orthodoxy came up, as it did sometimes, at a mild gathering of the clerical world for the ostensible purpose of tennis or tea. Sir Vallory cared nothing for her orthodoxy. He called her Quixotic and absurd, but he thought her little short of a saint, indeed superior to any of the saints that survived in his somewhat hazy recollection.

CHAPTER III

IN spite of all the care that was bestowed on her, the tramp woman was so ungrateful as to die. "It was only what one might expect," said Sir Vallory. Still the poor thing had died, thinking she was falling asleep in Heaven — well content and a good bit surprised to find herself there.

After this event was over, Rachel broke the news of her intended departure to Christina.

How Christina took it and just what passed between those two closely knitted friends is no part of this tale. It lies between them. Three weeks after Rachel's discussion on the lawn with Sir Vallory, Christina and her mother were in London together, certain introductions had been made and Christina was trying bravely to assure her mother that she was only too anxious to prove that the nineteen years of teaching had not been thrown away.

"I am not afraid, I am not afraid," whispered Rachel again and again, as if she gained assurance by the spoken word. "Follow all they wish for you, unless your heart says no. And take each day as it comes."

That was the sum of her parting advice to her dear child, and if it were not what most mothers would have said, neither had Christina's training been like that of most girls.

Then came the terrible day of blankness which Christina insisted on spending at Torrens by herself.

Lady Losford complained to Sir Vallory that the girl would doubtless arrive with eyes as red and a face as pale as if she had passed a week in funerals. But

Lady Losford was wrong. Christina turned up as she had promised, a little quiet maybe, and a little shy, but evidently of a mind to take interest in her new surroundings and with no trace of tears to mar what Lady Losford acknowledged to be the sort of beauty one would expect in Rudolph's daughter. She did not say this to Sir Vallory, of course, but she did say it and said it with a sigh. She would have passed Rudolph in the streets and bestowed less attention on him than she would on a crossing-sweeper, but she regretted him none the less even after all these years.

No. 6, Queensburn Square was a house that never lacked visitors of the right sort — the right sort being those particularly and peculiarly agreeable to Lady Losford, who had reduced the practice of exclusiveness to a fine art worthy to be extolled in these democratic days. No girl could have had a better send-off into the swim of Society than from such a house. It was in itself a guarantee of success.

Lady Losford, being childless and possessed with a kind and generous heart, had stood as worldly godmother to at least half a dozen girls, and all six had married early and well, and to all appearances happily.

"Money is not everything, but impecunious young men should be kept out of the way of the sentimental *débutante*," Lady Losford was wont to say.

Her godson, Richard Sefton, being in no way impecunious, was allowed to make himself useful to the protégées of his kind friend, and there were people unkind enough to say that Richard had reached the mature age of twenty-seven still unappropriated, because the display of attractive possibilities had been too much for any one man. This was hardly fair to Richard, who was sufficiently modest to believe that he had so far had no chance of obtaining permanent favour in the eyes of any of these many "jolly" girls that his godmother chaperoned so deftly. Richard

was an orphan and the owner of considerable estates in Hampshire as well as a most desirable house, which served Lady Losford as a country residence where, at stated seasons, she entertained Richard's friends — and her own — and weeded out his acquaintances with a tact that was so astute that Richard had used to imagine "Mamsey" was the most cosmopolitan of hostesses, and allowed him a free hand with his week-end parties. In return for this Lady Losford gave him the run of her house in town, saying she liked to have a man there. He had his own rooms and did pretty much as he liked with her. Her friends said she spoilt him outrageously, but he took spoiling kindly and for the rest was a wholesome, honest young fellow, very loyal to the bread he had eaten, and with the clean, open-air instincts of the average young Englishman.

He could make nothing of Christina at first and fought shy of her, finding innumerable pretexts for visiting Bashford Hall. Lady Losford made no attempt to stop him, she even conveyed the idea she favoured his absence. She hardly mentioned Christina to him beyond remarking that it was serious work to have so young a charge on her hands.

"She is not so very young, is she?" said Richard.

"I think she looks so," was all the reply he got, and he took the trouble to see if his opinion tallied with Mamsey's when he next encountered Christina.

Lady Losford made many discoveries on the first day of Christina's advent, and she poured them out to Sir Vallory when he came to enquire for the well-being of his niece.

"She is amazingly adaptable or I should be in despair," Lady Losford informed him with a resigned air. "She really knows nothing whatever about life except the things one would not expect her to know. As to poverty and illness and ugly things like that,

Heaven forbid I should be the one to enlighten her. Only yesterday she emptied her purse into the lap of a—" Lady Losford paused. "— A — creature in the Park, and wanted to know why there was no one looking after her when she looked so ill and unhappy. I believe she thought the Park-keepers were meant to do it; she proposed calling one. Happily, she seemed to think it was an isolated and unusual case."

"How did you get out of the difficulty?" asked Sir Vallory, with recollections of a certain tramp woman in his mind.

"I told her that it was someone else's business to see after the woman, and that there were plenty of places and people for her to go to — so there are, you know," she added sharply, though Sir Vallory had said nothing. "Plenty! But I am afraid to drive anywhere but in main thoroughfares, or speak to my pet crossing-sweeper, lest she should want to ask him to dinner."

"That would be embarrassing."

"Don't be ridiculous, Vallory, be sympathetic; you saddled me with her."

"Don't you like her?"

"I mean her to marry Richard," answered his cousin with a defiant air. Sir Vallory put the tips of his fingers together and studied the carpet. "Richard is a very fine young man," insisted Lady Losford.

"I am sure of it."

"And it is a very good match for her. Rachel could hardly expect her to do better after her deplorable bringing up."

"You find it deplorable?"

"My dear Vallory, what does Rachel expect?"

He gave a little laugh.

"Nothing, except that one day Christina will fall in love and marry."

It was on the tip of Lady Losford's tongue to say

she wondered Rachel could tolerate the idea, but she refrained and continued her plaint instead.

“It is the things that the child talks about in such an ordinary way that are so disconcerting. I hope I am not an irreligious woman, but I do feel there is a place for everything. Still I allow she takes a hint very readily. When I told her it was not quite fair to talk to people about certain things on which they might think differently from herself, she seemed to see the point and said she supposed it was like talking French to the village children, which was apparently a crime she once committed. She doesn't say these things on purpose, it's merely as if she were talking about bread and butter! Well! I shall marry her to Richard,” concluded Lady Losford finally, “as soon as she becomes a bit more usual. Aren't you going to wait to see her?”

But Sir Vallory was not in the least anxious to see Christina in the process of becoming “usual,” and he disappeared from her horizon entirely for the next few weeks.

It was certainly fortunate for Christina that she had fallen into Lady Losford's hands, otherwise the gulf that separated her from the rest of mankind would have become too suddenly and appallingly apparent. Lady Losford took the line of explaining as little as she possibly could to her, and leaving her to disentangle her daily perplexities in her own way. Happily, Christina's sense of humour — which she did not inherit from her mother — was sufficiently strong to carry her through many shoals and over dangerous quicksands where otherwise she must have come to rather bad disaster from the social point of view. She was so much more the result of environment than the outcome of any definite plan of education, that she was really unaware that there was a fundamental difference between her outlook on life, and the world's

in general. Such differences as she did notice, she regarded as a traveller may regard the custom and usages of the country where he happens to find himself, mere outside differences that were interesting and amusing to meet, but of no great importance in the whole scheme of things.

It was through the Mrs. Lothar episode that she came to have any definite idea of Lady Losford's ideas of social life.

Mrs. Lothar had come to call in deep distress because those nice people, who had taken the flat over hers, had proved to be awful frauds who really lived in Tooting, and must be dropped immediately.

"And I introduced them even to you," almost sobbed Mrs. Lothar. "It's too awful! Lucky you did not ask them to call."

Lady Losford smiled; she was not in the habit of extending her hospitality to casual acquaintances.

"It is all the worse because the man is worth knowing, he is such a judge of china; and he was going to give Flora an idea of the value of her Spode. It would have saved her the cost of a professional, you know. Do you think one might ask him to give it still?"

Christina could not restrain her curiosity any longer.

"What is the matter with Tooting?" she asked. "Isn't it respectable, or isn't it sanitary?"

Mrs. Lothar looked at her in amazement and then burst into such fits of laughter that Christina had to join.

She got an explanation later on from Lady Losford, which bewildered her more than Mrs. Lothar's assertion that one couldn't know people from those sort of places.

Lady Losford, it seemed, divided humanity into five classes, into which every one fell on first intro-

duction to her without any knowledge of the fact on their part. There was the poor class, the servant class, the middle class, her own class, and Royalty. She was invariably kind to her inferiors — that is, the three lower classes; never contemptuous of them, though they were — and they knew it after one interview with her — her inferiors to whom she liked to be kind, and if her kindness was ill returned as sometimes happened, she remained unruffled. "What can one expect? It is just their way," was her remark, and she would be equally ready with a kindness on the next occasion.

This was all very amazing to Christina, who had been brought up in the belief that all were one great family in different periods of development, each learning different lessons in life, each equally valuable in the estimation of the great Father of all.

She confided her perplexity to Richard one morning, on the first occasion he accompanied her on her ride in the Park. But Richard was no help at all; he merely thought his godmother's point of view ordinary and commonsense, and that anyway, it was not the kind of thing for Miss Massendon to bother her head over. He had decided it was a pretty head by this time, and did not altogether regret his deferred departure that morning. Christina had asked him so frankly on the previous night to ride with her that morning that he could only yield with a good grace. He soon found that whatever his godmother's protégée did not understand, she knew how to ride, and he mentally reviewed the Bashford stable with an eye to an approaching visit there, when Lady Losford felt a little weary of London.

Christina returned to breakfast in the best of spirits. It was a late June morning and though later on it would be hotter than was pleasant, the morning air which Christina seemed to have brought in with her

made the somewhat sombre dining-room feel almost festive.

She had changed into a linen gown and looked the incarnation of charming youth, though she shook her head and laughed when Lady Losford said so.

“‘Charming’ belongs to nice things like pot pourri and lavender, and miniatures and old china, and I am not a bit like that,” she protested.

“If you are going to be a purist in language, you must supply your own adjectives.”

Christina considered.

“Well, then, I feel clean. Not starchy, stiff cleanliness, but nice, fresh, linenny cleanness. Don’t you love it?”

“It has its charms,” remarked her hostess gravely.

“But you — you are just charming, especially in the lovely grey thing last night. Don’t you like to be told how nice you look?”

“You call me pretty things just because I let you do just what you like,” Lady Losford returned mournfully. “Directly our tastes and ideas cease to agree, you will call me a despot — they all do.”

“Then we’ll go on liking the same people and having the same tastes,” cried Christina.

“I ask nothing better.” She paused and then after awhile said: “But these Chancelys, for example?”

Her keen eyes took in every expression on the girl’s face.

“I have only seen Mrs. Chancely for half an hour, so how can I tell what she will be like?”

“No doubt dislike would be too strong a word since they are not people — quite of ourselves. No doubt they are most worthy people, but why your mother —”

Christina jumped up and pretended to put her hands to her ears.

“You mustn’t! You mustn’t! You mustn’t!” she cried laughing. “Mother always has a reason.”

"My dear, do not be so impulsive." Though she smiled, she experienced a shock of anxiety. She was much opposed to the "Chancely scheme," as she called it, and had long wished to know just in what regard Christina held her mother's wishes—they were in no way orders—on this point. She knew now and changed the subject a little hurriedly.

"Did you enjoy your ride this morning?"

"Yes, considering it was London. We found some palings that had been put up for sheep and we jumped them till the Park-keeper stopped us."

"We?"

"Richard. He stayed up till the second train to ride with me. I asked him last night; it was very kind of him."

Lady Losford was silent a moment, then she asked: "What do you think of Richard, Christina?"

"Oh, he's ever so nice," cried the girl enthusiastically. "You know I have never known any young man before at all, and Richard is so much nicer than any other I've seen since I came here. He is so sane and strong and comfortable." This was not a remark that fitted in with any previous experience of Lady Losford with regard to the mind of a girl, and she considered it for some time, but remained unenlightened in the end. Still her eyes softened when she next looked at Christina, and she said thoughtfully:

"Yes, he is that; strong and comfortable. You have discernment, my dear."

But Christina was thinking of something else then, and made a remark so astounding that poor Lady Losford was nearly guilty of the indecorum of spilling her last cup of tea.

"I wonder," said Christina thoughtfully, "when I see the thousands of people passing by, if I shall ever pass my father, or if we shall meet really."

"Heaven forbid!" gasped the elder woman.

Christina looked at her anxiously.

"But mother hopes heaven won't forbid it; she wants us to meet."

"Never with my consent."

"I wonder what will happen then, if you ask heaven one thing and mother asks another. I suppose God will do which He thinks best all round; I can't help hoping it will be mother's wish, you know."

That was quite beyond Lady Losford. She got up and feebly suggested it was time for Christina to go to her Italian lesson.

CHAPTER IV

RACHEL'S original plan for Christina to pass four months with Lady Losford and Mrs. Chancely in turn was abandoned by general consent. For Lady Losford grew unusually weary of London by the end of June, and very desirous of accepting a sister-in-law's invitation to Wales, while Mrs. Chancely wrote plaintively to Christina begging her to give them a little bit of "the season" instead of delaying her visit till autumn. This idea appealed to Christina more than the thought of a prolonged visit to complete strangers, and she got her way after some opposition. It was arranged in the end that she should pass July with the Chancelys, and rejoin Lady Losford at Bashford in August.

It must be confessed that Lady Losford consented very unwillingly; the chief thought that influenced her was that the sooner Christina found out from actual experience the unsuitability of staying with these good people the better. The Chancelys, on the contrary, were delighted. The day of Christina's arrival at Merton House, Regent's Park, was an event in the annals of that prosperous mansion, and every one, from the sprightly Mr. Chancely himself, to the boot boy, knew it.

Mrs. Chancely was one of the kindest of good women. She was most honestly pleased that her old friend should wish to confide her daughter to her charge. She considered it in the light of a privilege, almost as an honour, and perhaps her maternal heart glowed in a furtive manner when she remembered that

Walter fortunately would not be away on the business that called him so often to those foreign places she secretly hated so much.

"We cannot perhaps give her all the luxury that she has been accustomed to with her titled friends," remarked Mrs. Chancely to her daughter. "But I do want her to feel comfortable."

Mabel Chancely resented this attitude. She saw no reason to grant even the possibilities of superior comforts to Lady Losford, openly, and she said so rather plainly.

"It's not the place, but the people I am thinking about, Mabel," Mrs. Chancely sighed.

"We know plenty of quite nice people," Mabel insisted. Her conversations with her mother consisted largely in protesting against attitudes of mind towards matters she secretly deplored herself.

"There are the Bibleys and the Smithsons and Sir Matthew Arnott and Mr. Tennent," she reminded her mother.

"There!" cried Mrs. Chancely. "Walter has never told me if Mr. Tennent is coming to-night or not."

"Just like Walter," remarked Mabel crossly.

"I am sure that Walter has a great deal to think about, and he is young and cannot be expected to know how it upsets a dinner not to be sure of the right number."

"Why didn't you write to Mr. Tennent yourself?"

"I thought it would look so formal — as if it were a real dinner, and, you know, it is only ourselves."

"And the Talbots and Aunt Marion and Mr. Tennent."

"My dear, you can't call your father's sister anything but one of ourselves, and the Talbots are our oldest friends."

"And Mr. Tennent?" insisted Mabel unkindly.

“ Well, dear, he is a very agreeable young man and Walter’s friend.”

“ Young?” Mabel spoke a little scornfully, as she turned to take a fresh vase to arrange with the pink roses that were so costly and made so good a show for the money.

It was distinctly understood that Miss Massendon’s arrival was not to be celebrated by a dinner-party, but merely by “ a few friends to dine.” Mabel had been opposed to the idea from the first. She was sure Lady Losford would not have asked friends on the first evening. But Mrs. Chancely, though she never resented her daughter’s criticisms, also rarely attended to them. Mr. Chancely was always pleased with the excuse for a dinner — which was not to say that he did not dine sumptuously every night of the week, but the pleasures of the table were enhanced to him by the number of people who enjoyed them with him.

“ Couldn’t you just telephone to Walter and ask him what Mr. Tennent said?” suggested Mrs. Chancely after a little pause, during which time she had been engaged in wondering whether or not she should use the exhibition table linen. It was reserved for special occasions, and although she herself felt this to be a very special one, she feared that Mabel and perhaps her husband were of another opinion.

Mabel thought for a moment.

“ I’ll ring up Mr. Tennent himself, and then he will let Walter have it for forgetting to tell you.”

“ But can you? Do you know where to find him?”

“ Peregrination Club,” she murmured thoughtfully.

“ I often wonder what it really is.”

“ It means a Club for men who take walking tours, my dear.”

Mabel looked at her mother with a ghost of a smile.

“ You think Mr. Tennent looks like a man who

takes walking tours?" she asked, as she went over to the telephone.

"Tell him I forgot to ask Walter," put in Walter's mother hastily. "It's quite true, darling. But I'll go away, the telephone always makes me so nervous."

She hurried away to put out the second best table linen with regrets, but with the approval of her conscience.

Mabel had never called up Mr. Tennent before, and for some reason or another she felt suddenly embarrassed. It seemed possible that he might consider it a liberty. She had plenty of time for this uncomfortable idea to sink in, for, though the Club responded quickly enough, it was some time by telephone measure before she heard the easy pleasant voice answer her.

"That you, Mr. Tennent? Yes; it's Mabel Chancely — about to-night — Walter forgot, as usual, to tell mother — I wish you would talk to him — yes — thank you, you do — Never asked you at all? He promised to see you on Thursday, and ask if you could dine to-night — quite informally. We have a girl coming to stay with us — a Miss Massendon — what? Did you speak? The wire is all wrong, I think — Yes. Massendon — Wiltshire people, I believe. She is the daughter of an old school friend of mother's. Can't come? Well, we shall never forgive Walter. Oh, yes, she is going to stay here. Hold the line? Certainly."

There was a long pause. She wondered curiously what Mr. Tennent was doing. She would have been still more mystified if she had known he was solely occupied in drinking a whisky-and-soda, and swearing quietly at the syphon, which had misbehaved in the way syphons will at times. He drank it with great deliberation, and by no means as a man who is keeping a young lady waiting, and when it was finished, he

still lingered a while before returning to the interrupted conversation.

"Oh, they wanted to ring us off," Mabel told him drily, "but I held on. Well, can you come? — Yes? that's all right. Mother will be relieved. Eight o'clock then — Good-bye."

She rang off and put the telephone back slowly. There had been nothing the matter with the wire, which indeed had been singularly and even indecorously plain. She merely told her mother, however, that Mr. Tennent would come, when that good lady bustled in anxiously.

Mrs. Chancely breathed a sigh of thankfulness as genuine as it was audible.

"Why are you so anxious to have Mr. Tennent?" Mabel asked her suddenly, in the midst of her vague ruminations as to which dinner service should be used.

"I thought you liked him, Mabel. He hasn't proposed to you or anything like that, has he?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Walter thinks a great deal of his opinion," remarked her mother wistfully. There was nothing she would have liked better than to take Mabel into her confidence as to her real desire to obtain the omnipotent Mr. Tennent's approval of the expected guest, but Mabel was never very sympathetic where Walter's interests were concerned, and a little scornful of the influence of the elder man over her too susceptible brother, so Mrs. Chancely kept her own counsel and watched her daughter finish her flower arrangements, offering her unstinted praise in place of an answer to her question.

She returned eventually to the subject of Miss Massendon.

"I have told Eliza that as Miss Massendon is not bringing a maid, she is to wait on her entirely and let anything else go."

"Perhaps she doesn't like a maid."

"Well, Eliza is there, if she does."

"And who is to maid you? I can't spare Jane, she has to do up two dresses for me."

"My dear, I don't want a maid. You know as well as I do, it only worries me. It's different with you young things that have been used to it all your lives, there is no reason you shouldn't, but in my young days we were more used to waiting on ourselves."

Mabel carried her flowers away and the rest of the speech was lost to her. She arranged the vases about the drawing-room with a certain eye for effect, and rearranged several sofas and chairs. The room was large and comfortable, and on the ground floor, looking out into the garden with its trim walks and neat beds full of plants that flowered with the regularity and symmetry one would expect in Mr. Chancely's possessions. It did not entirely please Mr. Chancely's daughter and she frowned a little as she stood at the window. Her feelings as to the expected visitor were decidedly mixed. In one sense she was pleased. She had made up her mind that Miss Massendon was really the right sort; and the main difference between her mother and herself was that Mrs. Chancely, while adoring the right sort, was always convinced that any of their new friends were of this particular category, especially if introduced by her son or daughter, and therefore lived in happy belief that her harmless desire was gratified. But Mabel was different. Her instinct ran to something finer and more intangible in the way of social ambition than contented the rest of the family. The point that really troubled her at this moment was whether, if Miss Massendon fulfilled her expectations, she would feel too completely a stranger in the house that prepared so valiantly to welcome her.

"She'll be nice about everything, of course,"

thought Mabel; "but if she is too nice, I shall hate her."

She felt the preparations were too much; that Miss Massendon would see through them and know they were preparations, and to Mabel with her hypersensitive instinct, this was worse than no preparation at all.

About three o'clock Lady Losford's quiet brougham drove up to the door, and Mrs. Chancely in a flutter of excitement hurried down to the drawing-room, and with difficulty restrained herself from hurrying to the hall in informal haste. But she knew this was not correct, so reserved herself till the door opened. She had already met Christina. Mrs. Massendon had introduced them before leaving England, but they had not met again since that afternoon.

Christina was a little shy, a little surprised at the warmth of her greeting, but much relieved by it. As she emerged from the motherly embrace she saw Mabel standing by, watching her with curiously intent eyes.

"You are Mabel," she said, holding out her hand. "I have so wanted to know you. I've hardly ever known a girl my own age." Then she hesitated, for Mabel, who was in point of years just one twelvemonth in advance of her, was in appearance at least four years her senior.

Mabel's greeting was stereotyped in the extreme. Mrs. Chancely insisted on escorting her visitor up to her room, or rather rooms, for the best suite in the house had been reserved for her.

"And the little study, as we call it — though I am sure no one studies here now —" explained Mrs. Chancely, "that is to be your own sitting-room, my dear, because I know young people like to have time and place to themselves, and very natural, too."

"But, Mrs. Chancely, I don't want to take possession of your house like that," protested Christina, who

for a whole month at Lady Losford's had pined for just such a luxury of privacy.

"It's not putting us out, dear. The only thing that can do that is if I felt you were missing any of the things to which you have been accustomed. And we aren't going to make a stranger of you, even to-night just a few quiet friends are coming in, so that you'll know the people you will meet most often." She left her to herself then, and presently Mabel appeared and found Christina had dismissed the maid and was putting her own things away.

"I hope your mother won't mind," she said apologetically. "But I've never had a maid of my own, and I do like to know where my own things are."

Mabel proffered assistance and was invited to sit on the bed and talk.

Mabel asked her if she had been to Ranelagh and was told yes, and that she had also been to St. Paul's.

"Are you High Church?" asked Mabel at once.

Christina stopped in the act of putting her hat away.

"High Church?" she said thoughtfully; "that's when one has lots of music and incense and anthems. Lady Losford went to a church where there were ladies in the choir, and the minister used to say: 'Let us now sing Hymn number ——.' I always used to wonder what would happen if someone said, 'No, let us sing number so-and-so, instead.'"

Mabel stared at her.

"I should have thought that Lady Losford would have been High Church."

"Why?"

"Oh, nearly every one is now — it's the thing, isn't it? It's more fashionable."

Christina put a dress away without saying anything.

"Which do you like?" persisted Mabel. She was not asking for mere idle curiosity, but nothing could bring Mrs. Chancelly to see the importance of attending

a church that was in the fashion, and Mabel had to submit to the very dull and certainly unfashionable place of worship her mother attended unless there were visitors who were like-minded with herself. To-morrow was Sunday, so Mabel felt with reason that this important point should be settled without delay.

"I really do not mind which it is," Christina said with annoying indifference. "I liked St. Paul's."

"That is too far, except on special occasions. I suppose you are a free-thinker, most people seem to be now."

Christina looked doubtful. At Lady Losford's she had not been questioned as to her private beliefs.

"I don't know quite what you mean. Every one's free to think as they like, aren't they?"

Mabel looked properly shocked and then frankly explained the situation to her visitor.

"So you see if you do not mind either way, you might just as well say you like High Church best, and then we can go to St. Jude's."

Christina looked even more puzzled.

"But you see I don't mind," she repeated. "I am sorry. But perhaps we need not go anywhere to-morrow."

Mabel hastily changed the subject.

"What are you going to wear to-night?"

The visitor, glad to get on less intimate ground, offered two dresses for inspection.

"You really want me to choose?" Mabel was hardly able to credit such personal abnegation on so important a subject. "Then I choose the white with that wonderful border. Where did you get it?"

"I don't know. Lady Losford gave it to me."

"A Jane Smilin, I am sure!"

Christina was unflattered and no wiser.

"We got it at a shop, I think," she said doubtfully.

It was a new shock to Mabel, who lived under the

impression that the right people did not go to shops for their clothes. "Perhaps it will not look so very 'chic' on, after all," she thought as she dressed herself that night.

But when Christina made her entrance into the drawing-room, Mabel was forced to concede that the frock looked very "chic" indeed, and that the wearer of it, in spite of her curious nonconformity to the laws of the right people as interpreted by the Chancely family, was very much the right person to wear the frock.

"Who are we waiting for, my dear?" enquired Mr. Chancely, who had been so busy making bare-faced compliments to the visitor that his wife hoped the lateness of the dinner-hour would escape his notice.

She explained hurriedly that Mr. Tennent was the culprit.

Mr. Chancely turned to Christina.

"Now, my dear young lady," he began — Mabel, hearing, turned away in despair. "My dear young lady, take a piece of advice from me. I am a man of some experience." He put his eye-glass to his eye as he spoke, and looked at her quizzically, "Don't you ever marry a man who is late for dinner. You take note of all the nice young men you meet out, and jot down in that little book I am sure you keep like all wise young women, 'So-and-so late for dinner at such and such a house. Mem. Refuse him.'"

Christina thought him the quaintest person she had ever met, and she laughed, thereby arousing a flicker of suspicion in Mabel's troubled breast. Walter Chancely, who had not taken his eyes off Christina since she came in, ventured to remark that she might give a fellow a second chance.

"Second chances are like second days' cooking, a waste of good things. Depend on it, Miss Massendon, that there are plenty of good men in the world who can be in time for dinner."

The servant opened the door and announced Mr. Tennent. He made proper apologies to his hostess and even lingered a little over them, as if in no hurry to meet his fate as to a partner.

“Mr. Tennent, Miss Massendon.”

Good Mrs. Chancely did her duty with a little flutter of pride; Christina was such a very desirable young person to introduce to a man who had the reputation of being a bit of a connoisseur, according to Walter’s testimony. Walter often complained that the girls she collected were not good enough for some of his friends.

Mr. Tennent’s ready tongue seemed to lose its easy knack for the moment. Mrs. Chancely was sure he was impressed. It had taken a little manoeuvring to make it possible for him to take Miss Massendon in to dinner. But by careful management it was arranged, and quite naturally, as the good lady told her husband after. Her sister-in-law Mrs. Chancely was there, and Dr. Talbot and his wife, which with their own party made a nice little set, and none of the guests were aware that they had actually been asked with a view to making the taking in of Miss Massendon by Mr. Tennent inevitable.

The latter’s easy flow of talk came back to him as they proceeded to the dining-room.

“Don’t you think the Chancelys should be given a medal for having a house with a drawing-room on the ground floor, Miss Massendon? You know it is one of the most difficult tasks to accomplish safely — taking one’s partner down to dinner when there is a narrow staircase to manipulate; more reputations have been lost and won on the staircases of London than on any battlefield in Europe.”

“But what is the precise difficulty?” asked Christina laughing. “You see I do not know sufficient staircases to appreciate the point.”

“Fashions and trains have something to do with it,

and turns. The man who first invented the diabolical stair with a turn in it ought to be hanged, if he hasn't been already. There is only one thing in the favour of the staircase, that it gives one a better chance of knowing one's companion before dinner."

"Is that an advantage? We are round there, Mr. Tennent. I helped Mabel put the cards."

"The advantage of course depends on circumstances," pursued Tennent as he seated her. "It puts one on guard or sets one at ease."

"And you have had no time for either to-night?"

"Yes, I worked it in. You can if you are practised and quick."

"Do tell me which?"

"On guard," he assured her solemnly.

"But why? What have I done?"

"You have let me know you are not of this mortal realm, but descended into it from some remote and glorious spot called the Country."

"Oh, but I have been three whole months in London."

"Impossible! and met so few staircases?"

His kind of light talk was familiar to Christina now, though she felt she had never met it to such perfection as to-night. She would have been greatly amazed had she known it was all being listened to, not only by Mabel, who sat opposite, but by the whole party collectively and individually. Tennent generally talked nonsense, though occasionally they did not discover it, but he had never shown himself such an adept as to-night.

Christina, who had expected to feel a little shy and strange, enjoyed herself immensely. She felt singularly at home with this light-hearted person, who seemed bent on making her laugh.

"For what false accusation have you been banished from your native paradise to our arid waste?" And

then, without waiting for her answer, he put up his hand. "No, don't answer, let me imagine it was pure curiosity on your part!"

"Can you dare to accuse an outcast from Paradise of curiosity?" she demanded.

"Certainly human nature is much the same whether one lives in Paradise or the other place."

"Then one would be at home in either."

"I should be," he returned promptly. "Especially the other place. Don't take that dish, Miss Massendon, there is a better one coming."

"How do you know?"

"There is a menu."

"I never can remember to look at it," she confessed.

"What's that about a menu?" demanded Mr. Chancely.

"Don't take any notice of him, I entreat, Miss Massendon. He only wants to distract your attention from me in order to tell us which of the dishes he chose himself."

Christina glanced shily at her host to make sure he was not offended by this impertinence, but he only laughed good-naturedly.

"You mustn't take Mr. Tennent seriously, my dear; it's only his little way."

Christina did not need assurance on that point, but she wondered why he had called her "my dear," and if that were only one of Mr. Chancely's little ways.

"Every one has 'little ways,'" murmured Tennent's voice at her side. "That's his; don't listen to him; take notice of everything I say." Then in quite a different voice he said: "Why, did you say, you came to live in town?"

"I did not say anything about it," Christina remarked quietly, "but I don't mind telling you in the abt. I am in London because my mother has gone

1."

"Most satisfactory," murmured Tennent hurriedly drinking some wine. "A question of health? So many people go away for their health now," he added apologetically, "that really one wonders if there is any left in the country." He was talking sheer drivel, and she wondered if it were another of his "little ways" to ask questions and then not to wait for the answers.

"Do you mean to eat any dinner at all?" she asked presently, seeing a fourth plate ruthlessly whisked from him untouched.

"I am eating a most superior dinner. I have the appetite and digestion of an ostrich."

"Then that must be a popular fiction. I don't believe you know you have not eaten anything?"

"You are just fishing for compliments."

"I am not!" cried Christina indignantly. "I am only concerned for your welfare."

"Am I the rule or the exception?"

She looked puzzled.

"I mean do you take an interest in every one's welfare that takes you in to dinner, or am I a privileged person?"

"I expect it is just general kindness," she returned lightly.

"Life is full of disappointments," he sighed. "It has been the dream of my life to meet someone who would on first sight recognise my merits sufficiently to take me under their wing."

"You talk a great deal of nonsense, Mr. Tennent."

He looked at her with an air of disappointment.

"Don't you like it?"

"Yes," she admitted, "at dinner."

"I will remember."

When the feminine portion of the party retired to the drawing-room, Christina managed to slip away into the adjoining conservatory and sat there in the semi-

darkness. The rooms seemed to her hot and over-lighted and she was glad to be alone for a few minutes. She was conscious that this was all very different from Lady Losford's, that these kindly people had a different way of looking at things in general, and a different way of expressing themselves, but she made no comparisons as to what was good form and what was not; she would not have been able to tell, indeed, so neglected had her education been on these important points. Nevertheless, she did recognise the fact that Mr. Tennent belonged more nearly to the particular sort of people with whom she had spent the last months rather than to these. That, no doubt, explained why she felt so much at her ease with him.

She did not in the least resent his coming out to her in the conservatory, and was only rather glad it was not Walter Chancely, as then she would have chosen to return to the hot, light room, and it was really much nicer out here with the flowers.

"That was very clever of you," said Tennent calmly seating himself by her side, as if it were an assured thing she was waiting for him.

"What was clever?" she asked, readjusting her position.

"Your coming out here so that we could talk." He spoke with a cool assurance that would have made her angry in another man, and he looked at her as if he would read her inmost intention despite the dim light.

"I don't mind talking to you in the least," she said frankly, "but I did not come out here for that purpose; and won't they want you for bridge or something?"

"They may," he answered indifferently, and his eyes dropped before hers. "Do you play bridge, Miss Massendon?"

Christina shook her head,

"No, Lady Losford thought at first I had better have some lessons, and then she said it would be more original not to play at all. I don't quite know what she did mean."

"It was quite sensible of her."

He got up and opened the door of the conservatory and looked out into the night. A low railing divided the garden from the road which led through the Park into the Marylebone Road. They could hear the persistent voice of London offering her multitudinous songs to the night, and the glare of her eyes shone across the blank space.

The cool fresh night air seemed to steady Tennent, who had found either the flowers or the dark or the company a little too much for his usually casual manner. In all that vast conglomeration of human interests there could hardly be a more peculiar one than the particular one he was himself enjoying. He wanted at once to escape from it and to enjoy it, and enjoyment — if it could so be called, was only possible by talking nonsense for which he was extremely indisposed.

"What a wonderful voice it is," said Christina at his elbow.

He had not seen her come, and he started.

"London?"

"Yes. At first it frightened me. But after a bit I got used to it and it began to mean something."

"What does it mean to you?"

He listened almost breathlessly for her reply, which did not come at once. She was listening to her "voice."

"Hark! It is so very clear to-night — The march of humanity to God."

Instinctively he moved a step back from her.

"Is it that to you?"

His manifest wonder awoke surprise in herself.

"But is it not so? Every one knows it if they let themselves think. We are getting somewhere, you know, nothing stays still."

"Some humanity is going in quite an opposite direction, I expect."

She looked distressed. He knew it though there was no light to see it by.

"Now you are talking the funny, foolish nonsense again."

"I am not, I assure you. I was never further from it in my life."

She sighed and gave a little impatient movement with her hands.

"Then it is just habit. Where can we go except to God? Only some of us go the wrong way round."

"Is that it?"

"You know — if you will let yourself know."

She spoke very quietly. No one could possibly have accused her of speaking for effect or with intent to sermonise. She had merely stated her thoughts on a particular subject as frankly as she would have spoken them on the question of the last play, only with a far greater sense of certainty.

"It is a good, long way round for some people, Christina," he said drily.

She was silent for a full minute.

"How did you know my name?"

He had made a slip and made equal haste to remedy it.

"Miss Chancely mentioned it to me the other day," he said deliberately. "I beg your pardon, but it suits you so well — and I am an old man and therefore claim a momentary privilege."

He was hoping she would not question Mabel Chancely on this indiscretion. With most girls he would have been certain to have been found out, but Christina's own extreme truthfulness was a safeguard.

She would not imagine he could want to lie about so simple a thing.

"And I have known her about two hours," he thought. "Good heavens, I had better get out of this, while I can safely!"

"We ought to go in," he said with reluctance. "It's ever so much nicer here, but it is pandering to the selfishness of mankind, on which I heard Miss Chancely holding forth at dinner."

Christina returned to the drawing-room with him in so entirely unembarrassed a manner that he derived the most complete satisfaction from observing the scrutinising glances that met her. Either she was a profound mistress in the art of doing what she liked, and seeing only what she chose to see, or she had an innocence that was completely beyond the range of vision of the Aunt Marions and Mrs. Talbots of the world; nothing midway could have accounted for her entire failure to see the criticism with which she was being regarded. Tennent devoted himself for the rest of the evening to cultivating Miss Chancely, senior. This lady was a person of influence in her brother's household; she sat on Mabel continually and had no sympathy with her thirst for things not pertaining to her, but rather a contempt for what was so unfortunate as to be without the ken of her immediate cultivation. It was often a matter of real grief to her that she could not extend the hand of friendship to some nice individual, on account of the appalling size of her visiting list.

"Someone must be left out," she would complain plaintively, "I am quite sorry about it." And she really was.

But you conformed to the ideas of Miss Chancely's circle if you came within its orbit, and Christina had failed to do so. She determined to give her sister-in-law warning that there would be trouble with this

young lady, if she did not take a firm line from the beginning, though how any one knowing Mrs. Chancely could imagine her taking a firm line was difficult of conception.

Yet she left after all without fulfilling her laudable intention. Mr. Tennent had engaged her in so enthralling a conversation that Christina's shortcomings were forgotten. "He is a most intellectual talker," she told her brother afterward.

As to Mrs. Chancely, she was only delighted that the girl should prove such a success.

"I was not quite sure of Mr. Tennent till to-night," she confessed. "But any one who saw him talking to Miss Massendon — Christina, I should say — would know he was a thorough gentleman."

This was to her husband, not to Mabel luckily. Mr. Chancely chuckled. He knew a great deal more of these intricate matters than either his wife or daughter credited. Whatever he was, he chose to be that particular thing and no other. He was very content with it, be it noted.

"Don't ask Tennent too much," was his advice, "or you won't leave Walter a chance."

"Oh, my dear, who said anything at all about Walter? I am sure I didn't," exclaimed his wife, with a sudden access of colour.

But again Mr. Chancely only chuckled and gave no explanation.

CHAPTER V

CHRISTINA did a great deal of thinking in those days, and when alone her face took to itself a new gravity. She was becoming aware of the strength and weakness of the armour in which her mother had clothed her. The difference in outlook between herself and Mabel Chancely, for example, was too marked to escape notice, and the recognition of it forced a certain shy reserve on Christina that did not tend to help in a rapid development of a friendship between the two girls as Mabel had furtively hoped. With Mrs. Chancely she was friends at once and she liked Walter's affection for his doting mother, though she arrived at no definite idea of him as she had done of Richard Sefton. Mr. Chancely presented her with a serious difficulty. She had never really disliked any one before and her conscience was troubled. She inflicted upon herself the penance of accepting his overtures in as friendly a manner as she could compass, and telling herself they were meant to please.

Also, at this time perhaps, because she was beginning to feel the real miss of her mother more acutely, Christina found herself dwelling much on those vague hopes Rachel had expressed as to the remote possibility of her meeting her unknown father, who apparently might be somewhere in this vast world of London. With this hazy idea in her mind, Christina took to scanning the faces of the passers-by with new interest. She took to observing the people seated next her in trains, in theatres, in galleries, even in the streets. She had no very clear ideal conception as

to the type of man for which she looked, for there had been no picture of him visible at Torrens, but the possibility of passing him — remote as it was — lent a tinge of subdued excitement to life.

On the whole, she found her footing much more slowly with the Chancelys than she had with Lady Losford, and would have found it still less easily if it had not been for Mr. Tennent, with whom she had every opportunity of becoming better acquainted.

It had been all very well to warn Mrs. Chancelly not to ask that gentleman to the house too often. But it was not so easy to avoid it. He seemed to turn up wherever the Chancelys went in a surprising way, and though he divided his attention with careful impartiality between the two girls, Mabel, at all events, was not deceived as to the real point of attraction.

Mabel had never been able to make up her mind about Mr. Tennent. She considered him an attractive man bordering on middle age, and had sentimentally credited him with a story, and the desire for a woman friend, a rôle which she felt quite capable of sustaining. Tennent, however, never treated her as otherwise than a girl, and her sentiments towards him had become crossed with an unrecognised threat of pique. She was impatient of her brother's hero-worship of the man and at the same time a great deal puzzled over Tennent's good-humoured toleration of a boy at least eighteen years his junior. Tennent had been a fairly constant visitor for the last two years, but Mabel, unable to conceive that Walter offered sufficient charm to account for the visits, and equally unable to believe in her father or mother's powers of attraction, had allowed herself to play with the idea that Mr. Tennent found her not unpleasing.

It was quite clear now that he found Miss Masendon's company even more to his liking, and had fallen into the way of dropping in at odd hours, and

planning little outings, in which, of course, she was included, but which attentions could be dated from Miss Massendon's arrival.

It surprised her a good deal that Christina should find him so much to her liking, and she rallied her on the subject one day.

"I do like him," Christina protested with a worried air. "I always feel at home with him, and he understands."

Mabel flashed a suspicious glance at her. If there was one thing of which she felt sure, it was that Mr. Tennent was not a man with whom one could feel at home. She suspected him of being the kind of man who always meant more than it was safe to understand, though in the two years she had known him, he had never transgressed by so much as a look the most perfect propriety. It is to be feared, however, that Mabel took credit to herself for this and congratulated herself on preserving the line of perfect friendship.

"He is very amusing," she remarked after a pause.

Christina gave a faint sigh. She fell to wondering whether Mr. Tennent could explain Mabel to her as he explained so many things that were desperately puzzling.

Mrs. Chancely began to grow seriously uneasy at the failure of her innocent little scheme, and caught Walter one day as he was going out. She asked him somewhat timidly if it were wise to bring his friend, Mr. Tennent, so often.

"He doesn't wait to be brought," Walter returned rather drily. "Are you afraid he is going to run away with your heiress?"

"It's such a responsibility," sighed his mother.

Walter laughed.

"You need not worry over Tennent anyhow," he assured her; "he's not a marrying man to begin with,

and he's old enough to be her father. Any one can see he just thinks Miss Massendon an amusing child."

This satisfied Mrs. Chancely, who had a pathetic belief in Walter's knowledge of the world far exceeding her faith in her wide-awake husband's sagacity, which was just one of those unaccountable follies into which fond mothers are apt to fall.

Walter, however, was not left in peace. That evening, his father proposed billiards after dinner, and in intervals of sufficiently bad play to make Walter's temper a little short, remarked with elaborate carelessness:

"By the way, where and when did you first meet Tennent? I was trying to remember last night, and couldn't?"

"I met him three years ago in Barcelona when I went out about that export business for you. I never told you at the time what happened, because Tennent asked me not to. He couldn't bear being thanked for anything, but I'll tell you now, and then perhaps you will let me, and him, too, alone — you and the Mater!"

Chancely Senior helped himself to whisky and soda, and said he wasn't aware the Mater was interested in Tennent.

"There was a row in the town, and I got mixed up in it like a fool, not understanding these beastly foreign places don't have decent rows like we do, and a man tried to do for me with a knife, and would have done, if Tennent had not got in at him first."

"But what on earth did the brute want to attack you for?"

Walter answered impatiently.

"Because I *was* in the row — in the streets — I told you it's just their beastly foreign way. Tennent hauled me out of it and we went back to the hotel and chummed up. He had been out of England for a long time, and I suggested his coming back with me

and staying with us. He wouldn't. He laughed and said I was a young fool, and that he might be a swindler for all I knew — and what about my people then? Of course I told him that was all rot, so then he promised that if he did come to England he would let me know, if I'd promise on my part not to go blabbing about our little adventure."

Mr. Chancelly screwed his glass into his eye very firmly.

"Well, now I call that most interesting, Walter, my boy! And you have kept it all to yourself all this time, and he, too — Well, well! I'd do the same. An interesting man, very. What was he doing at Barcelona?"

Walter said he didn't know and didn't care, either; Tennent had saved his life and that was enough for him, if it wasn't for his father!

"Quite so, quite so!" his father assured him heartily. "Of course it is one of those things that place one under a life-long obligation. I am glad he likes coming here so much. He must be a man with plenty of friends."

"I don't think he is," said Walter rather unwisely. "He doesn't seem to know any one very intimately, though in a way he knows lots of fellows. Most of them seem precious glad to know him, too."

"No wonder! I have always found him a most agreeable companion, most agreeable — but don't let him have it all his own way with the little missy, eh?" He gave his son a meaning nudge and a bland smile that nearly maddened Walter.

But that was the end of the matter as far as Walter was concerned. He was unaware that his father took a profound interest in the study of the Peerage and similar books during the next few days, though the result, so far as giving any enlightenment on the name of Tennent was *nil*.

Walter, however, was uneasy at what he felt was a betrayal of his friend's confidence, and resorted to the expedient of confession to relieve his mind.

"What a memory you have," said Tennent in his quiet, sarcastic voice. "Do you mean to tell me I not only saved your life but bound you to secrecy? It sounds quite romantic! I had forgotten all about it."

This was true, though Walter found it hard to believe.

"I suppose I mustn't ask why you broke faith — that's the right way to put it, isn't it — after so many years?" asked Tennent, who made a very fair guess at what had happened.

Poor Walter's embarrassment was so apparent that Tennent took pity on him.

"We will call it belated gratitude. And, by the by, Walter, I am sorry, but you are not eligible for the Peregrination Club after all."

"What a beastly nuisance!" Walter looked vexed for the moment, and then recovered himself enough to say: "But thanks all the same for trying. It was awfully good of you."

"To tell the truth," said Tennent, who had never even entered Walter's name for membership, "the Club isn't what it used to be, so you need not worry over it. There are too many members now it is a bore to meet."

"You belong anyhow."

"I'm thinking of resigning. If you want high play, aren't you dining with the Childers to-morrow night? You can play as high as you like there and it's all square."

"Of course!"

Tennent looked at him quizzically.

"No 'of course' at all, young man. Don't make any mistake about that."

"One's own friends," stammered Walter.

Tennent laughed.

A few days later he was again dining with the Chancelys. It was a larger and more important dinner than usual. There was a rising Member of Parliament, who was already marked for a place in the next Cabinet; a Member of the Board of Education; an Archdeacon, besides other people of importance in their own circles. What Miss Chancely called serious conversation ran high and even at times bordered on brilliancy. A heated discussion on the right and wrong of religious versus secular education was commenced. The subject was at first practically in the Archdeacon's hands, and he succeeded in converting (for the time) the wavering M. P. when Tennent joined in. The result of this was that the balance of parties was entirely upset. The Archdeacon lost one of his most decided supporters, and even Miss Chancely, who was most orthodox in her views, declared afterwards that there did seem to be two sides to the question. Christina was the only person who found nothing to say on the subject or on Mr. Tennent's dealing with it.

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Considering what a frequent visitor he was, Mr. Tennent showed a very poor memory for facts, even if they were often mentioned to him. He could not seem to grasp that on Tuesday Mabel Chancely went to her singing lessons and Mrs. Chancely paid a duty visit to her aged mother-in-law. This lapse of memory landed him in the Chancelys' drawing-room on the Tuesday after the dinner, where presently Christina joined him.

"I am quite tired of telling you the days that Mabel and Mrs. Chancely are engaged," she remarked, "Didn't they tell you no one was at home?"

"They said Miss Massendon was in."

"I am not sure I wanted to see you, though." She leant her head on her hand, and regarded him with troubled eyes.

"I knew that. You would not speak to me the other evening after dinner. I want to know what is the matter."

There was a little pause and then Christina said slowly: "Why did you do it?"

"Do what?" he demanded provokingly. "Talk to you?"

"No — speak as you did at dinner."

Tennent assumed an air of injured virtue.

"I was under the impression I spoke very well and to the point."

"You spoke a great deal too well; that was it. Why did you?"

"Did you want me to speak badly?"

"You converted Mr. Chancelly and Mr. Loundes. He will probably support the new bill now. Before that he was prepared to stand by the Archdeacon."

"I didn't know the Archdeacon was a friend of yours," returned Tennent penitently.

"I never met him before."

"Nor that you were so interested in the bill."

Christina raised her head and looked at him.

"I know nothing about the bill," she said distinctly.

"I don't care in the least which side you support so long as it's the side in which you really believe. But you said all that just to be clever, not because you believed it."

"You can't expect me to give myself away by acknowledging you are right, Miss Massendon? And after all, why should you care?"

She got up and walked over to the window.

Tennent remained where he was and watched her as she stood there, with the strong, white light falling on her through the silk-curtained windows. She

looked strangely dim and indefinite in her white dress. The high light tones of the room and the crossed reflections of two mirrors all aided to the effect of unsubstantiality. Tennent felt he was playing with a fancy of his mind, but it was a fancy that held him in momentary bondage.

There was only raillery, however, in his voice when he spoke to her.

"You have not explained why you should care?"

"I don't know, except we are friends and I like you. I don't think you care much about convictions, but you have a few, nevertheless, and what you did was a kind of lying."

Her voice dropped. Tennent's smile became a little fixed.

"Does that trouble you, too?"

"It's not like you."

"Oh, wise young Daniel! Now how did you discern my leading characteristic so quickly? It so generally escapes observation."

"You are laughing at me, Mr. Tennent," she said mournfully. "And really you don't mind at all."

She sat still in the window-seat, playing with the tassel of the blind.

"I do mind," Tennent returned, getting up and coming over to her. "No one has taken me to task for so many years. But I do speak the truth occasionally, Miss Massendon. Go on scolding me, please."

"I wish it were any good. It seems to me such a dreadful thing to have the power to talk like that cleverly about things, and not mean it — to be able to make people think black is white. Aren't you afraid?"

"I should be, if you were listening."

"It's not me or any one else. It's yourself."

She refused to discuss it further. Tennent carried away with him an abiding impression of her slight

form melting into hazy outline against the light. He came much less frequently to the Chancelys', and one day told Walter he was going to Paris and should not be back till the autumn.

CHAPTER VI

CHRISTINA went down to Bashford at the end of July under the escort of Richard Sefton, who met her at Waterloo and took her over from the charge of Mrs. Chancely with a cheerful alacrity that sent that good lady home in gloomy despair as to the success of her little matrimonial projects. Christina found she was singularly pleased to see Richard again. The meeting seemed to set a longer period to their acquaintanceship than time would warrant. There was pleasure in looking at his kindly frank eyes and strong, well-built form; and he was so capable and reliable. Christina, who had never travelled alone, found him an admirable buffer against the minor ills of life. On his side, Richard was surprised at his own delight in meeting Christina, and was pleased to think he was to be her host for the next two months.

Bashford was a much more important place than Torrens. It was a large Georgian house set in the midst of a great park, and with a lake stretching out before it like a jewel set in green enamel.

Christina felt very distinctly that it was a home-coming, and Lady Losford did her best to foster the idea. There were not to be too many guests and they were to be the right ones. Outwardly, it was all part of the beautiful ordered life that had been hers from childhood, full of gracious kindness and courtesy, and exempt from the mingled pettiness of the crowded round of life in London. There appeared to be no obstacle at all to Lady Losford's plan for Richard's future happiness. Every one recognised what was intended, and every one smiled at Richard's

dociety in the matter. Christina alone did not see what was so plain to the rest of the little world.

Richard took her all over the estate, and was at once amused and amazed at her interest and knowledge of things pertaining to farm cottages and the like. She would talk of Torrens and how matters were ordered there, in a way that taxed his credulity that any estate could hold together under such a rule. With the end of August there was much talk of partridge shooting, of guns and guests, and rival methods of driven or walked-over partridges. She had seen near the keepers' houses, the piles of coops that had served for nurseries for the pheasants now teeming in the woods, and merely wondered why they hatched so many chicken. For Christina was as ignorant of sport as it is possible for a twentieth-century lady to be. There was no sport at Torrens and the doings on the neighbouring estates were too remote to affect her. Beyond the idea that men liked shooting and killing things, and it was just one of the things they did because they did not understand the universal law of love, Christina had the vaguest idea what it meant. She imagined the keepers were for the purpose of looking after the woods, and in some indefinite way she connected the number of pheasants with the number of keepers. She remarked to Richard once as they walked through the park that they had not nearly so many pheasants at Torrens.

"Your mother does not preserve, does she?" he asked.

Christina considered awhile, then remembered things she had heard and read.

"You mean hatch out pheasants under hens? No, we go in for chicken a good bit. The village people are always glad to buy them. They cannot get much meat."

This was equally puzzling to Richard, who only said

that chicken were jolly little things, but one could not shoot them.

"One wouldn't like to, but I suppose one could," she answered thoughtfully.

Richard shuddered.

"We have heaps of other things in the woods, though. Foxes and badgers, and all sorts of birds. Haven't you owls?"

Richard thought not and changed the subject.

He would return from such walks rather disturbed in his mind as to how long it would take to lead Christina into a more rational frame of mind in these matters. But he had no serious misgiving as to her getting over her unfortunately defective education. The very faint uneasiness he felt was quickly allayed at the sight of her slight figure moving through the rooms, or roving over the lawns. She matched the home he adored as no other woman had ever done in his mind, and he watched her with a curious heart-aching longing that made him alternately indignant with himself for his delay, and half angry with her for her apparent lack of comprehension of the real situation.

Lady Losford counselled patience and felt inward satisfaction that Christina had got over her way of saying surprising things, and that now her simplicity was merely a pretty adjunct to her other charms. She refrained from speaking of the Chancelys, or betraying any interest in the girl's experience with them; and Christina did not volunteer any information. She thought sometimes of Mr. Tennent and hoped he would be back in the autumn, in spite of Walter Chancel's gloomy prognostications. She had no particular desire at present to meet any other of her late circle of acquaintances, not from dislike of them, but merely that they seemed so far removed from this

familiar country existence to which she had returned rapturously.

For her content and happiness, had she been able to analyse them correctly, amounted to just this, that she was once more in the country and the restraint and formality of town life were gone. Rachel would have recognised more danger for her in that very contentment than in the deepest confusion of soul in other circumstances. It was so much like her father's way of accepting the pleasant side of life without question or misgiving.

At the end of the month Richard was entertaining a large and varied house-party for the exigencies of sport, and it left him less time to see Christina, who felt a little shy and out of touch with most of the new guests, though she did her part in a creditable manner in helping Lady Losford entertain them. The newcomers all brought extensive retinues in the way of chauffeurs and maids, and chose their own methods of spending the day, with very little regard for the convenience of their hostess.

One morning Christina decided that a solitary walk would be a great source of relief to herself, and, finding Lady Losford did not want her, she slipped out while the rest were wrangling over their respective plans, and went into a distant wood which she had visited with Richard a week or so back.

The woods, with their chequered shadows and soft stir of life, were very restful. She followed a little path that led right through the heart of them. Broad green drives branched out of this for the convenience of shooting, if Christina had known it, but to her these were only beautiful silent roads down which she might steal strange fancies, or where at moonrise fairies might dance, or the woodland people hold revel. Here the hazel wands grew straight from the "quaint mossiness of aged roots," and yellow spikes of mullein

held their own in the thick reaches of greenness that had swallowed up the children of the spring. Presently she came to a place where a group of Scotch firs lost itself in the midst of these younger woods standing out above the small oaks and hazels. Here on high they caught the winds of heaven and turned them into song. Christina sat down under a tree and listened to what was going on in the silent, busy world round her. Two pigeons cooed an accompaniment to the trees' song. A squirrel came and peeped at her and ran back up a fir tree with a little scratching sound. Then two rabbits came out and played prettily, unmindful of her. Later on, to her delight, a hedge-hog trotted by, clearly on business bent.

Christina was very happy; she wove verses to herself out of the pine-trees' song, and deep down in her heart she was glad that these were Richard's woods; when he was not so busy, she meant to bring him here again, and show him all the things that pleased her most.

Presently something stirred faintly in the leaves near her, and she rose to see what it was.

It did not take very long to find the cause of that faint disturbance. Close to the path a trap had been set, and in the trap was a hedge-hog, caught by a tiny paw; it had evidently made many futile efforts to escape, for the paw was twisted and mangled, and the little thing lay on its side.

Christina gave a cry and fell on her knees beside it.

"Oh, you poor darling, don't struggle so," she cried. "It will hurt far more; keep still and I'll let you out."

It was easier said than done. Christina was entirely unversed in the ways of traps, and her distress did not help her. Then she suddenly withdrew her hands and knelt up.

"I can't do any good by getting in a fuss," she told herself severely. "What I have to do is to *look* at

this horrible thing and see how it works. The poor mite will think I am leaving it, but it is the right thing."

She clenched her teeth and made herself examine the trap with care. She saw how it worked but did not gather that putting her foot on it would release the spring. She looked round for a stick and, after finding two which broke in her hand, she with infinite difficulty broke a hazel wand from a bush, and inserted it in the trap. She had to use both hands for this, and it was only after much difficulty she did open the trap sufficiently far to leave room for the poor little wounded paw to get free if it could. But apparently the prisoner had been held too long to be capable of dragging itself away, and Christina, with both hands engaged in keeping the trap open, was in despair. The stick was not very securely wedged in and it needed pressing down, but she freed one hand and carefully moved the broken, crushed foot from the teeth. The hedge-hog rolled over on its side and Christina's hand slipped. The trap sprung too and caught her finger.

She gave a little gasp and for a second contended with an impulse to tear herself free from the painful bondage. She felt rather sick for a minute and then pulled herself together. "I have to get out of this," she told herself with trembling lips. "The hedge-hog didn't know as much as I do, and quite likely the poor thing has been here all night."

The very thought of it brought back the feeling of sickness, so she looked round to see if she could reach the stick which unfortunately had fallen away from her and was just beyond reach on the farther side of the trap. She would have to make up her mind to move, for she was unaware she could easily have moved the trap. At last she got the stick in her hand

and with great care and immense difficulty she forced the teeth open. It was all she could do to hold it so, and the worst of it was she felt just as the hedge-hog had felt, that it was not possible to move away. There was no one to help her, however, so just as her right hand lost its grip on the stick, she dragged her finger out. For a little time she sat there on the grass, the finger wrapped in her handkerchief, and rocked herself to and fro. It seemed incredible that a small thing like that should hurt her so much. Then she got up and looked for the hedge-hog, which was at last making efforts to move away.

"I wonder how long you have been there?" she whispered. "I do hope that you don't feel things quite so much as people do."

The hedge-hog she had seen earlier, which had evidently been looking for its mate, had gone off in the opposite direction, and after watching the efforts of the poor invalid for some moments, Christina bent and picked it up, and, rolling it in her dress, she carried the wounded animal further down the path in the direction the first one had taken, turned into the wood for some yards, and finally let it roll off her lap as tenderly as she could. She had the satisfaction after a few minutes of seeing it crawl slowly and painfully away. She also turned homeward. Her hand hurt very considerably, but the wrath in her heart hurt far more.

She did not stop or pause to consider till she was in the hall again, and here found Richard, and Lord Atterly and his wife, with him.

They exclaimed at sight of her.

Christina turned straight to Richard.

"Richard, a dreadful thing has happened. Someone — I suppose a keeper — has been setting traps in the wood."

She kept her hand out of sight, but she had to stop speaking because it hurt so much that she nearly lost the thread of what she was saying.

"Yes, yes!" cried Richard, sharply alarmed at her tragic white face. "What has happened?"

"I found it caught. It must have been there quite a long time—perhaps all night—it's too horrible! I shall dream of it."

"But what was caught?" they all cried, crowding round her.

"The hedge-hog," she sobbed, suddenly weak, and collapsing under the strain of her own pain and the distressing memory.

In their relief they all laughed.

"Is that all?" Lady Atterly exclaimed. "Why, I thought at least one of Richard's pedigree setters was caught."

Christina turned on her. "Turned on her" is the exact expression, for there was something of the spirit of a trapped and wounded animal on her, though these good people not knowing of the hidden hand were amazed.

"All! What more do you want? A dog, or a hedge-hog, or anything else that has life and a nervous system and can feel! It was there trapped, I tell you, its poor little paw nearly torn off with trying to get out. That's how it does feel—as if one must tear one's self away!"

In her excitement she had pulled out her hand with its blood-stained handkerchief, and Richard made a shot at the truth.

"Good heavens! She's let it out, and caught herself! My darling!"

He had her in a chair and was bending over the indifferent bandage, too concerned even to be aware of his indiscretion, which Lady Atterly noted with a swift glance at her husband.

"Ring the bell, please," Richard said. "We must get hot water and a proper bandage at once."

"I'll get it," Lady Atterly said good-naturedly. "I won't offer to do it, you know far more about wounds than I do, and besides I've just gone through a First Aid Class."

She went off and the two men were alone with Christina.

"I was only caught for a few minutes, and I could get loose; but, oh, Richard, isn't it dreadful to think of that poor little thing there for hours, perhaps?"

"It's dreadful to think of you being there one minute," he said between his teeth.

"But the man—the keeper—could not know I should go there, and he *must* have known that the hedge-hog would! What sort of man can he be?"

Richard was too occupied in bathing the hand in the water the maid had brought to consider what he said.

"Much like other men; indeed, if you were in the Lower Wood, it was Sharp, the man you were talking to yesterday."

Christina sat up with a gasp.

"Oh, it couldn't be! He was quite a nice man."

"He was only doing his duty, you see."

She drew a long breath of dismay.

"Doing his duty! But, Richard, I thought keepers were there to take care of the woods and things in them."

"Not hedge-hogs. They are mischievous little beasts. The keepers are there to protect the game, not to look after vermin."

Christina's white face called back some of its faint colour.

"That is worse than calling flowers weeds."

"But there are weeds, Christina. Hadn't you better go and lie down?"

He finished tying the bandage, in a highly professional manner.

"I have to understand this. I call flowers weeds when they come up in what is not their place; and I thought vermin were animals that were not in their place, rats and mice and things, when they got into houses and anywhere where they weren't wanted."

"It's the sweetest definition, and I daresay the trap wasn't meant for the hedge-hog. Do go and lie down."

"Richard!" she cried sharply. "Don't say you knew the men set traps — that you knew it before?"

Richard hardly knew what to say; she was not in a state to reason about things, and also he was so disturbed at her injured hand that traps, for the moment, did seem to him dangerous things.

"I don't tell them to set them," he replied weakly, "but it's part of their work, to keep — er — animals down, which destroy the game."

"You mean the pheasants you breed to shoot in the autumn?"

"Yes, haven't you really ever been amongst shooting people, Christina?"

But she was not to be diverted.

"Do hedge-hogs kill pheasants?"

"They destroy the eggs, I believe."

"There are no eggs now, you told me so. Do you mean that you let these keepers set traps that may catch little animals you only *think* may do harm, in order that you may have a few more pheasants to shoot in the autumn."

Her incredulous face was hard to meet. The wonder and perplexity on it took him aback. She had forgotten Lord Atterly's presence; indeed, he had moved a little farther off, but he was within hearing. The affair was entirely beyond him, so he basely left his host to fight it out unaided. Richard did turn to

him in mute appeal, but he only gave him a rather wicked grin and shook his head.

"I know you must feel horrid about it," said Richard soothingly. "Any one would after being caught. I know I should. We'll settle about it when your hand is better, and I'll have all the traps on the estate sprung." She leant forward eagerly.

"Will you really? I should never sleep if I thought that there might be some poor little thing caught — and not knowing how to get out," she shivered.

"Then sleep in peace."

"Thank you ever so much. I suppose you really had not thought about it. I am quite glad I was caught."

"But I am not." He touched the wounded finger gently. "I shall always feel it was my fault."

At this moment Lady Losford, who had been resting and had heard from her maid a confused account of what had occurred, came downstairs, and, to Richard's relief, insisted on Christina coming up to her room and lying down.

When she had gone, Richard turned ruefully to Lord Atterly.

"She doesn't understand a bit," he said.

"Not one bit," repeated his friend cheerfully. "And what's more, Sefton, you will never make her. She has a strain of right on her side after all. It's a nuisance one has to destroy the poor little beggars."

"Of course it is," complained the other. "But the keepers say they do a lot of mischief."

Meanwhile Lady Losford was doing her best to bring Christina to a better and more reasonable frame of mind. She herself had been brought up in a properly conducted household in the matter of sport, and was even more shocked than Richard at Christina's attitude. She explained to her with exemplary patience, however, that shooting was no mere matter of

pleasure, but a serious business involving time, skill, and money. Christina tried hard to take in this point of view without much success. She would have liked to forget the incident, but in this she failed also; it remained there at the back of her mind, complicating life for her in a surprising way.

Also, she became at last awake to Richard's wooing.

In her many intimate talks with her mother, Love had always been presented to her as the greatest experience in human life, and it filled her with wonder not unmixed with awe to find herself standing on the threshold of such an adventure. But she had not yet crossed that threshold, she was quite certain of that. The curious sense of expectant excitement the sight of Richard aroused in her was undeniably a new experience, but she could not bring herself to believe that it represented Love.

One day as she crossed the hall, she saw Richard kneeling on the floor beside his favourite spaniel, telling it what he thought of a clumsy passer-by who had trodden on its foot. The spaniel lay on its back and held up the damaged paw, and occasionally the undamaged one for more compassion, after the way of spaniels all the world over. Richard did not see Christina, who stood watching with a very appreciative look in her eyes.

"How like him!" she thought, and then remembering the hedge-hog, her face grew grave.

Still, after that the trap incident isolated itself in her mind as something apart from Richard. She ceased to try to understand him or to reconcile that occasional contradiction to her expectations, which had begun to trouble her. Without becoming self-conscious she became conscious of herself. It was so wonderful that Richard should care for her and want her company. It set a value upon her own Life

Standard, independent of her response to such care. She made no haste to determine her own mind, but waited with a grave interest to see what new revelation each dawning day should bring her.

No doubt the generally accepted thought of the whole household as to her ultimate mistress-ship of it was not without its power on her. There was every inducement for her to tread the path Lady Losford desired her to tread, which in the eyes of the little world around her was as entirely desirable a path as any young woman of the time might hope to tread.

And away on the other side of the world Rachel daily ventured to keep Providence in mind of the charge committed to its care.

CHAPTER VII

CHRISTINA awoke one morning to an urgent need to escape from her immediate surroundings, and come face to face with her own thoughts. Something in Richard's attitude the previous evening, when he had bade her good-night, had threatened to carry her with alarming impetus along that path she apparently was so pleasantly destined to tread. Her inability to face her own mind, however, in Richard's house, or amongst Richard's possessions, was proof of the reality of the attraction he had for her, and an equal proof of the need she had of an unbiassed friend—a need which under the present circumstances appeared quite unattainable.

Her inmost self must have been aware of this partial spirit round her, for it did not occur to her to seek counsel of Lady Losford, and on this particular morning her desire to stand sufficiently far from her surroundings to view them with unprejudiced eyes did not include any wish to share that examination with another.

She dressed quickly and slipped out of the park gates beyond Richard's domain, and went along the highroad in a direction she had not yet explored. Just along the boundary of the Bashford estate there was a strip of country belonging to no one in particular, according to local phrase, though in reality it did belong to a man who lived the other side of the world, and whose small possession was looked after by a bailiff, whose chief qualification for his post was his ability to refrain from troubling his master about anything.

Between this rather wasted and ill-cultivated ground and Bashford, there was a high hill rising straight out of the surrounding grass lands, covered with firs, and on the summit was a pile of stones, great slabs and boulders that stuck out of the earth like the bones of some giant, which Nature had clothed in moss to hide their nakedness. From this point one could discern — if one knew where to look — the distant sea, and overlook the reaches of downland, and across the great woods of Bashford. The dusty highroad ran round the foot of the hill through the pine trees themselves, and the intervening fence was a mere pretence at a barrier. Christina made no demur about crossing it and plunged up to her shoulders in the sea of bracken already turning brown under the late summer sun.

It was a steep climb, but half way up the bracken became less obtrusive, and Christina went steadily onwards till she stood on the summit.

She might have been in a vast forest for all she could see of any world but that of the straight firs and fading fern. The trees' reddish trunks caught the sun filtering through the intricate roof, and long shafts of light lay like heaven-poised ladders across the deep shadows. Christina clambered up on the stones and stood with clasped hands, looking round her, drawing deep breaths of ecstasy.

Those mysterious shadows and sounds which belong only to the pine lay all around her and were hers in all their beauty and perpetual mystery. For some golden moments she lost all sense of her identity other than her oneness with this quiet, solemn beauty. The place held an enchantment of its own and she fell as completely under its spell as if touched by the wand of some old magician. Shades of gracious ladies, of knights, of delicate forms that melted into nothing as she looked, peopled the place. Then such

impressions faded and she was alone again, face to face with the almost overpowering beauty of the spot, and its silence fed her heart, and its song expressed every desire, and its shade and sunbeams represented all she wanted in life.

So much mysterious shade, so few patches of sun which, in its radiance, dazzled the eye as it struck against the twisted branches, all this was as some vision of an existing Power without, and earnest of the widespread heaven above. Touches of blue showed through the green masses and always there was the pine trees' voice, low and insistent, full of longing and infinite desire, missing not the slightest breath of heaven, drawing to the heart the song of the sky half understood and wholly loved.

Once or twice she made a futile attempt to face the purpose of her excursion, but it was useless. The considerations, that had loomed so large on her horizon and offered such perplexing problems, became suddenly of little account and had no part in this perfect existence which wrapped her round and found expression in the song of the pine trees.

Presently she turned her head and saw a man standing looking at her. He, too — she knew instinctively — was listening to the same song she had heard, and she saw in his face a reflection of that mystical joy which she had felt.

She smiled at him and held up one finger.

"It is still singing," she said breathlessly.

"It is always singing," he answered, coming nearer, "even when one cannot hear it outside. That is what is so good to remember when one is away from it." She nodded. She had no curiosity about this man, as to how he had got there, or if his right was greater than her own. He was just part of the place — a shadow solidified for the moment. She made a movement to get off the big stone on which she stood, and

he put out his hand to help her down. When they were more on a level she looked at him. She could never describe his face, then or after, but the impression it made on her was one of quiet restrained strength.

"I wonder why I have never heard of this spot," she murmured half aloud.

"It is 'No man's land,'" he answered. "At least, so they call it about here. It's a sort of sanctuary for the life spirit of the woods. There are so few sanctuaries left."

"Sanctuary?" She looked round. "Yes, I like that. No one could set traps and cruel things here?" She glanced back at him with a pang of fear in her heart. It would be too terrible and tragic to learn that this spot also might be defiled by that spirit of cruelty that never recognised itself.

"No, no!" he reassured her, as if he read her thoughts. "There is nothing cruel here, it is all quite free."

Christina gave a little sigh of content. She accepted his assurance without reserve, and seated herself on the flat stones. The stranger still stood before her, looking at her with a gentle regard that was full of comprehension.

"It is a very good place to bring perplexities to be solved. Don't you find it so?"

She shook her head.

"I can't even see the perplexities before me."

"Then they have assumed their true proportion and are solved."

"They will come back when I go," she said a little wistfully.

"Yes, if you do not accept the answer you have found. Could I help you at all?"

The desire to speak to some comprehending fellow-being pressed very heavily on Christina's heart; yet

she held it back for a minute or two, wondering at the impulse. Then at last she found herself telling him of the trap incident, though she mentioned no names of either place or people.

"How difficult you will have made it for him."

Christina looked at him with astonishment.

"I? But I haven't done anything."

The stranger turned his eyes from her.

"This place is new to you, isn't it?" he asked.

She thought he wanted to leave the subject of traps, and was disappointed, for against all reason she found herself expecting help from this man whom she had never seen till three minutes ago.

"But all the same you are not, and can't be, the same as you were before you came into the wood, because I can see it has told you something. It has spoken in its wonderful voice and you have heard and understood; so you are richer in knowledge though you were not aware you lacked it before. That is also the way with human beings. Unconsciously we are always opening new doors of knowledge to others and they for us. It is the law of human intercourse. This young man, who is kind and loves animals and yet has them destroyed for his own pleasure, never knew before it was possible for a reasonable being to look on it as other than the natural course of things. Now, however, though he may try to tell himself that really you know nothing about it—and you don't, you know, from his standpoint—he must always know that to some people this thing is 'anathema,' accursed. It may be a truth that he cannot accept, but he can never *not* know it any more."

Christina drew a long breath.

"I see. But that is terrible. You mean it was not wrong for him before and now it will be?"

"Possibly. It depends on the man."

"But he will not believe I know anything."

The stranger caught the note of poignant distress in her voice and his eyes grew gentle. He sat down by her.

"Don't you wish him to feel the sacredness of life?"

Christina was silent. She felt herself convicted of an insincerity. She did not want Richard to be made to do wrong or to be altered by her medium, yet she was quite sincere in wanting him to stop killing little harmless beasts in the interest of his own sport. At last she turned to her companion.

"I don't know what I do want," she said frankly. "But I think you understand all the same."

He nodded, and they sat for a few minutes in silence, a silence that was momentous to the girl. It was as if in that short space of time she understood herself as she had never done before; as if some set purpose was born in her and with it the courage to carry out that purpose even to the end.

Into the very heart of her being a ray of love divine and pitiful had struck, so that in its illuminative light she saw at last the earth she had thought so beautiful is indeed full of dark places and great trouble, and those who know the eternal Law of Love will certainly be called to carry their knowledge into these shades; even she would not be exempt. For this very thing, indeed, she had been trained, and for this hour of self-revelation had she waited till now. All that was beautiful and full of joy in the world was hers and would be, but also it was hers to add to the total sum of it. That deep creative passion, which is at once the moving spirit of the Mother and of the greatest genius that has added to the earth's riches, stirred her soul and it was born in her of this strange meeting with this unknown man of the pine woods.

They both sat silent for some time, and then a cloud

seemed to drop across her knowledge and she was just Christina talking to the stranger again. He spoke of the wood and how it looked in winter and in spring, of the interesting life of a family of squirrels that he had watched grow up there; yet she felt he was no mere student of Nature. Presently she found herself speaking of Torrens and of her mother's absence, and owning — as she had owned to no one else — how much she missed her.

"Still you are learning to stand on your own feet," he told her reassuringly. "No doubt that is why she has gone."

"She has gone to be with my aunt," Christina said.

"I meant the back behind reason."

Christina felt silent again, and the man rested his chin on his hand and watched her.

"Am I a part of this?" she asked abruptly.

"The very incarnation of it, as if a bit of the sky had fallen through the trees."

He spoke so quietly and sincerely that no thought of insuitability crossed her mind, all petty possibilities were outside the boundary of this enchanted place where all things were real, sincere and sayable.

He rose.

"We must go."

"Oh, no," she cried, with vague misgiving, but he shook his head.

"We are both wanted somewhere, I expect," he said, "and that is always good; we should be like naughty children if we clamoured for more than our share of Paradise instead of giving thanks for what we've had."

His eyes were smiling down at her and she looked straight into them. As she looked she seemed to stand face to face with every noble thought, every worthy purpose, every impulse of love that was possible for her. She was aware of hopes and expecta-

tions, of possibilities in her life that had hitherto been hidden from her. Surely he had opened doors in her soul, and shown her in some silent, mysterious way, her own needs, and in the showing promised her fulfilment of the same.

As to the man himself, she could not have said if he were fair or dark, young or old, he was just a being who was part of the wood, part of life itself, the incarnation of the idea that had lain at the back of her mother's teaching.

"Thank you," she said simply, holding out her hands to him.

He took them, and though his eyes still smiled, they had grown a little wistful.

"Trust your own instincts," he told her. "That is your birthright."

He said no good-bye, but stood watching her go through the wood away from him, passing from sun to shade visible and alive through the ladders of filmy light which rendered her indistinct and dim. Once she looked back and waved her hand, and he waved too, and then turned and went away quickly; just an ordinary man clad in a rough Norfolk suit, with a tanned face, and eyes that held a challenge for the world's pain.

Christina said nothing at all about her morning's adventure at breakfast, but in some magical way things were not the same for her. She was conscious of a wider sense of good and at the same time of a deeper sense of evil, of sorrows she longed to help, of misapprehensions that were pitiful. It had never been her fault to judge harshly; indeed, she could not have been said even to discriminate very clearly between evil and good, but now, where she had wondered, she felt compassion, where she had felt a separation, she now felt a union. Her joy was not less, but it was the joy of one who is clear of the sheltered

valley and has climbed to the hilltop and found the world still beautiful. Rachel's confidence was not built on poor foundations.

Life went on its even, pleasant course for a few more days. She found she was still undecided as to her real sentiments to Richard. If anything she felt more tenderly towards him than before, and the life that had before pleased her senses appealed to her in a new way.

Richard gained confidence, and, one evening when the stars were shining in a clear sky, he took her out into the garden, and there, amid the sleeping flowers and in all that could make a beautiful setting to what was at least a beautiful thought, he asked her to marry him.

She stood still a long time without answering him, and he generously gave her time and kept silence.

Her hands were twisted together under her light wrap and her eyes were on the stars. She felt if she looked at him in that luminous light, she would say "yes." She wanted Richard badly that evening. He stood for all the serene beauty of the place, the terraced gardens, the smooth lake reflecting back the stars, and the grave solidity of the house behind her. She knew these things to be good just as she knew Richard to be good, and was confidently sure he could give her happiness of one kind. But what Richard did not stand for was the hill with the pine trees and the fading bracken beneath.

Just what did that short, strange experience mean to her?

"I love you so much, Christina."

Richard's voice nearly sent down the scale in his favour, but again he was silent, and in that silence the tumult of her heart stood still and left one voice only audible, and that voice told her she did not love Richard. It bewildered her, because she had really

thought otherwise, though she had not been sure — she might do so, and it abashed her because she knew he did most truly love her.

“No, Richard,” she said slowly. “I am really dreadfully sorry, because I do like you so much.”

“Give me time,” he urged hurriedly.

“It wouldn’t be fair now. I could not like you more than I do — it’s such a lot,” she added ruefully.

“I should be content. It would grow to more.”

“You would be content just to be *liked* by the person you married? I am sure you would not! Besides, can’t you understand?” She seated herself on the wall of the terrace, in no hurry to get away, but desirous of convincing him of the reasonableness of her refusal, and the best that can be said of this folly of hers is that she was quite inexperienced in such matters. “I like you heaps, I like looking at you, I like having you near me; it seems so safe, and I like you.”

“That’s more than enough, my dear,” he pleaded gently.

Again she shook her head.

“It’s all outside, you see. Right inside me I feel different. If I went away from you I should not leave part of myself with you. I should take it all and a big part of me would never be yours at all.”

“I wouldn’t ask for it.”

“But it is the best real part of me, you see — I couldn’t bear it if you didn’t want it.”

“Tell me, Christina,” he asked, his voice sounded a little thick and dull. “Has it anything at all to do with the beastly trap business?”

She was quiet again, considering this.

“I had not thought of it just now,” she owned frankly, “but I think it helped me to see.”

Indeed, she was amazed when she had spoken, so little had she fancied this.

He groaned.

"I feared so; oh, Christina, it's a bad business!"

"No, it's a beautiful one, that we have even wanted one another."

This admission made in all unconsciousness taxed Richard to the uttermost. He felt that if he could let himself go and take her by force, and keep this side of her that wanted him and liked him awake, then she was his. But he could not do it. Either he was afraid, or he was a shade too chivalrous; or deep back somewhere his subconscious self knew she was right.

Christina got off the wall.

"We had better go in," she said gravely, and he assented.

How different an entrance from what he had pictured almost unconsciously a few minutes before. Only now was he aware that he had so pictured it; the queer flatness of what was happening was as unlike anything that he had conceived as could be. He felt that the sort of men who wrote books about this kind of thing did not know the ABC of their business. He was neither in an extreme of misery nor inclined to drown himself, nor tragically conscious that life was at an end as far as his interest in it was concerned. He was only desperately dull and dispirited.

He told Lady Losford next day what had occurred, and she was almost incredulous with surprise, and of the opinion that Christina had behaved very badly, which Richard would naturally not allow.

Then she fell on him for choosing such an awkward time.

"You won't want the girl about all through September, and if you did, it wouldn't be proper," she snapped. She had to be snappy to hide her own deep disappointment. "And you must have someone to look after things."

Richard said ruefully he supposed he must, but did not see why Christina need go.

"Rubbish!" retorted the ruffled lady, "it will spoil your shooting."

She tried her utmost to be the same to Christina, but it was not very successful. Lady Losford was so convinced of the desirability of her own plans that those who opposed them were already self-convicted of stupidity. Yet she certainly tried her best to be nice to Christina, who was only too well aware of the fact, and who took the disconcerting course of directly facing the subject.

"I didn't say anything at first, because I was not sure if Richard would or not," Christina explained frankly, "but as he has, I think I ought to say how sorry I am I can't marry him."

"You can't marry him if you don't love him, of course, but I cannot imagine what you do want," sighed Lady Losford impatiently.

Christina rubbed her face against the lady's hands affectionately.

"Dear Mamsey, I don't want anything better, I expect it's too good for me! Anyhow I have written to Sir Vallory and asked him if I may come and stay with him a little while."

"Good gracious me!" exclaimed Lady Losford, startled out of all decorum by this amazing example of modern independence. "And, please, since when am I incompetent to manage affairs?"

Christina looked surprised.

"But dear Mamsey, it was so difficult for you. How could you leave Richard? Besides, he wants you, and you know it vexes you to have me about. Just for a little I mean — you won't feel like it long — and you are much too kind to say so. Mother said I could always ask Sir Vallory to take me if it were inconvenient for me to stay anywhere."

"Indeed! I did not understand all that," Lady Losford said, a little drily, but unable totally to resist Christina's pretty blandishments. "I am sorry I have made myself so objectionable, my dear."

"But you haven't, you have been a perfect dear," cried Christina. "Only things can't help being a little muddly, it's no use pretending they are not. Mrs. Chancely is not back, or I could go straight there."

But nothing would induce Lady Losford to concede to this proposition, though when Sir Vallory appeared next day she reluctantly agreed to his taking Christina back with him.

Sir Vallory was told the whole story, and hardly concealed his relief at the failure of the matrimonial project.

"It's hardly decent of you, Vallory," Lady Losford protested, "when I have just told you how disappointed I am. I believe it is all owing to this silly trap episode. Really I have no patience with Rachel."

"She will much rather you blamed her than Christina," he assured her. "In any case, I hope we will keep her free from any more love adventures till her mother returns."

Lady Losford smiled contemptuously.

"Is it likely? And you may mark my words, that young lady will marry whom she likes, and when she likes, with no regard whatever to any one else's ideas."

"I think that is what Rachel hopes. She will be glad to hear you think so," he murmured gently.

"Oh, I have no patience. Well, it's your lookout."

"You are quite as responsible as I am," he said hurriedly.

"How exactly like a man!"

"Yes, I suppose I am built like that," he owned, apologetically.

She ignored his flippancy.

"These Chancelys, I suppose she must go to them again?"

"I suppose so."

They both looked at one another and then he laughed softly.

"Dear Emily, don't you think we are troubling ourselves unnecessarily? So far as I see all we have to do is to let Christina do as she likes."

"It's deplorable."

"If it's any consolation to you, let me tell you that Rachel said that it was in order Christina should not think all people would be like those she met with you, that she chose something so different as the Chancelys."

"Is that a compliment?"

"What else could it be?" he returned gallantly.

She frowned.

"Vallery, I wish you wouldn't do that. You are just like Rudolph when you do."

His face and voice changed instantly.

"Heaven forbid!" he said harshly. "What business have you to mention him?"

Indeed, looking at the altered face, she repeated the query to herself, wondering at the mind that held secret and close such bitter animosity as she had read there.

"He'd get over it if he had Christina to live with him," she thought meditatively that night. "It is very strange, but it really is hard to dislike people when that child is about. When I am alone I shall indulge in a good bout of violent dislikes and forget people have two sides, and aren't flat like shadows!"

CHAPTER VIII

SIR VALLORY had never lived in the Massendon's old house at Charlmour since the bitter quarrel with Christina's father. He lived in a secluded house in Hampstead which had a fair observatory attached to it and was not without charms, though Christina told him the garden was shamefully neglected.

"Do anything you like with it, my dear," he said meekly, "there is a man who sends me in a bill for looking after it every year."

"Disgraceful!" Christina said, shaking her head.

"I pay it," Sir Vallory assured her.

She proceeded to take the garden in hand in spite of the unpropitious season, so that when Sir Vallory came out one evening — she had not seen him all day — he found the paths uncomfortably tidy and the lawns well shaved and Christina regarding it without complacency.

"I don't like London gardeners," she complained. "They have no ideas. This man, who cheats you, talks of bedding out with rows of lobelia and calceolarias and geranium next summer."

"I suppose it is cheerful," Sir Vallory replied mournfully.

Christina laughed and said what he wanted was something depressing enough to act as a tonic, and he ought to have a man up from Charlmour.

But Sir Vallory went indoors. He always went away if one mentioned Charlmour. No word had ever passed between the two indicative of their real relationship to each other, but Christina thought a

good deal about her father during her stay in Hampstead. She used to sit looking at Sir Vallory and wondering if her father were anything like him. She discovered a fleeting, illusive likeness in him to something familiar and she took it to be a likeness betrayed to her by her own mirror. He was amazingly absent-minded and capable of working for days and nights on end at his beloved calculations, without the slightest regard for any other engagements, even the ordinary ones of eating meals. While he was thus absorbed Christina took advantage of her freedom—not that it ever occurred to her that she was not free—to visit many quaint places, and spent hours wandering round St. Paul's and the British Museum, and such unfashionable haunts. One day, as she came out of the latter building, she nearly walked into Mr. Tennent, and had no diffidence about expressing her pleasure at the meeting.

"I thought you had returned to Paradise," he said, mechanically reascending the steps with her as she instinctively turned back.

"I'm in Paradise on Hampstead Heath," she told him laughing, "and a very nice place it is."

He made a little grimace of distaste, and asked her what she was doing there.

"I'm staying with Sir Vallory Massendon, my uncle," she explained with a little hesitation over the last words.

Mr. Tennent stooped down to look at the inscription on a remarkably ugly statue—they had wandered unthinkingly into the Gallery of Roman Architecture.

"And he lets you run about London by yourself?"

Christina was surprised at his tone. It was almost unfriendly.

"No, he doesn't 'let me,'" she said with dignity.

"He is discovering the whereabouts of a lost star and can't be expected to trouble all day as to the whereabouts of a 'just me.'"

"It will be a 'lost me,' then, one of these days," Mr. Tennent insisted drily. "Why aren't you with—" he paused a moment—"with Lady Losford, didn't you say?"

"You are very concerned," she told him half laughing, but conscious of a tiresome desire to tell him all about her time at Bashford.

Perhaps he recognised that he was tempting her to indiscretion, at all events he offered no more criticism on her movements, but suggested she should come and see the jewel room with him, and he would tell her stories about the gems.

He really seemed well informed on the subject, and Christina had never had so able or delightful a guide. She was amazed when she found the afternoon had run away and it was past five.

"They will be expecting you, I suppose?" Mr. Tennent asked.

Christina shook her head. There was not the slightest prospect of Sir Vallory expecting any one unless the lost star found itself.

"Then come and have tea," he said, cheerfully commanding.

Christina had not the slightest idea where he took her, but the tea was very good, and she enjoyed it and felt singularly pleased to be with him again.

"What are you doing in London?" she demanded in her turn. "You said you were going abroad."

"I've been abroad. It was so dull I came back."

"You were complaining London was so dull when we last met," Christina remarked severely.

"It seemed likely to be. When are you going back to Mrs. Chancel's?"

"I am afraid you cannot have enough to do," Chris-

tina said gravely, ignoring his last remark. "Only idle people are dull, you know."

"I haven't anything to do," he complained.

"Then you should have. You could give all your money away and then you would have to make some."

"I haven't any to give away," he assured her sorrowfully. "I make what I have in strenuous brain work."

His queer little smile ruffled her. She thought he was laughing at her, but he was merely playing with the idea of what she would say if she knew his chief means of livelihood consisted in his acute knowledge of how to play bridge and other games. He had no intention whatever of enlightening her, but it amused him to play with the thought.

He asked her if she had explored South Kensington's treasures, and, hearing they were unknown to her, offered to take her there the following day.

"I suppose you will have to ask Sir Vallory's permission?" he enquired in that slightly mocking tone that always disconcerted her.

"I shall tell him where I am going and that you have kindly offered to take me," she said, with her quaint air of dignity that he loved to provoke. "I can't make out how it is that people here seem to have to ask if they may do just ordinary, simple, nice things. Mother would be glad for me to be amused, but every one talks about 'permission,' as if one was tied up with rules."

"So one is in London," he told her a little curtly. "Still there is no rule against my taking you to South Kensington, if you like to go."

"Of course I should!"

He saw her off in the tube eventually and went back to his Club with a queerly bad-tempered mood on him, considering that he had done nothing but follow his own whim without opposition and was to do so again.

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Christina did not see Sir Vallory that night, but he turned up to breakfast next morning oblivious of two days' interval since their meeting.

Christina told him she was going to South Kensington with Mr. Tennent who was a friend of Mrs. Chancel's.

Sir Vallory looked unhappy. He was not at all sure it was correct behaviour, but he was at a loss what to do. It seemed so futile to say, "You mustn't go" to Christina, who clearly thought it a most delightful arrangement.

"I don't know him," said Sir Vallory feebly. "Perhaps I had better go with you."

Christina jumped up laughing, and took him another cup of tea.

"I should be arraigned before the Board of Royal Astronomers. Besides, what would you know about the museum? And it would bore you so."

"You don't want me?" Sir Vallory tried to feel that this was an adequate excuse for not going with her.

"I should hate you to be bored, and it does amuse Mr. Tennent."

The man fell back on the weak argument that he did not know Mr. Tennent.

"But I do." Christina assured him in all good faith that this was good and sufficient answer to his inexplicable difficulty.

Then a sudden enlightenment came to her.

"Oh, are you thinking about chaperones? Mabel says that no one wants chaperones now. I used to go for long walks with Richard and rides, and he is quite a young man. Mr. Tennent is —" She paused and looked round the room with a puzzled air.

"Isn't he young?" asked Sir Vallory, catching at the comfortable idea of an elderly, good-hearted man with a harmless weakness for taking young ladies about.

"No, not young. About your own age, I think."

"Perhaps he will come back with you to tea?"

Sir Vallory suggested as a final salve to his conscience.

Christina said she would ask him.

However, they remained so long in the museum that Mr. Tennent thought it better to have tea in town, and afterwards saw her into a taxi.

"Please thank Sir Vallory for his kind suggestion," he said very politely.

Christina could hardly have explained why she was sure that he did not feel at all thankful for the suggestion. He made no proposal to continue their explorations, as Christina hoped he would, and he asked again when she was coming back to the Chancelys'. She told him in the autumn.

"Then I shall see you in October," he murmured, still lingering and keeping the snorting taxi in a fume. "I shall be away till then," he added finally.

Again Mr. Tennent went back in a bad temper.

"Why shouldn't I get what amusement I can out of it?" he told himself savagely. "I shall be tired of it directly and meanwhile she is none the worse."

Sir Vallory was relieved to hear no more of the unknown Mr. Tennent. He allowed Christina to inveigle him down to Torrens for a week end and after that prepared himself philosophically for her departure to the Chancelys'.

"Come back, my dear, whenever you want to," he told her with an uneasy feeling there would be something missing in the house when she went.

"One would think from Emily's accounts that she was difficult to manage," he said to himself. "It is only a question of how to take her!"

He thought he had been rather clever on the whole, and never suspected his "how" had merely been to let her do exactly as she liked!

CHAPTER IX

“AND Mrs. Tymore’s two children are dead, and Joan Poynter, and old Micky, and there is not a house in the Apple Row that hasn’t someone ill — and I ought to go — I know mother would say so, and they won’t see it!”

Christina’s voice broke. Her eyes were heavy and spoke of sleeplessness and unhappiness — both experiences so unusual to her that the effect was quickly visible.

Mr. Tennent’s eyes took this all in, but his tone was levity itself.

“Won’t see you eating apples and getting ill, too? What’s the matter with the apples any way and with Joan Poynter?” He paused to light a cigarette. — “And old Micky and the rest of them?”

“Why, they are dead!” she cried, with a little despairing gesture of her hands. “Dead in three days — some fever, and they can’t find the cause.”

“Drains! Water! Dirt!”

She flushed indignantly.

“At Torrens? No! indeed it’s not! The water is the best, so are the drains and they are not dirty!”

“Yet the Devil has slipped into Paradise?”

But Christina had returned to her own grievance.

“There must be things I could do, and it’s our plaë. I ought to be there.”

“In Paradise with the present tenant? Or is he really only a lodger?”

“Mr. Tennent,” she protested indignantly. “It’s

no laughing matter to me. They are our own people and this outbreak is a terrible thing."

"What good can you do down there?" he returned more seriously.

"I've told you," she repeated with exasperation. "It's not just a question of use. The illness is a queer one and the doctors are trying to find out what it is; but meantime the people are dying, and there's no mother there to help them!"

"You can send them things."

"Oh, that's all done, of course — even Sir Vallory saw that. They have nurses, and lots of the worst cases are taken to the House. They have made a hospital of it. But it's not the same thing. It's the leaving one's friends to meet such trouble alone that's so impossible!"

"Some people prefer being alone, and your mother can hardly come back by aeroplane."

"No, she can't come back, of course. That's just what I'm trying to make you see. I couldn't take her place, but I could do something."

He picked up a book off the table and looked at it without seeing even its title.

"Amateur nurses are a mistake and a nuisance."

She ignored the indifference with which he sought to entrap her into by-paths.

"I don't want to nurse. There are enough professionals for that. I want to try and comfort them. I could at least be able to remind them of — of things my mother has taught them. It's what I ought to do, and no one ought to make it difficult for others to do their duty."

At that he did turn straight on her.

"You can't go."

"Even you!" she cried reproachfully. "I had hoped you would understand, and help me — and you said it just like Sir Vallory."

"I understand it's impossible for you to go to Torrens." He paused. "Val — Sir — Vallory — your uncle, isn't he? — well, who ever he is — is quite right."

She was silent, evidently disdaining further argument with him, but something in her silence made him uneasy, and he shot a keen sideway look at her. Her face was quiet and grave now, and he recognised with a sudden throb of anxiety that she had both will and purpose of her own. Supposing she really did exercise it and went to the fever-stricken place! He had read it all in the papers before he had called that afternoon. How even the new nurses were taken ill within a day or two, and how, so far, the mischief was still a mystery. He had not even asked for Mrs. Chancely, but for Miss Massendon, and had experienced a throb of unbelievable relief to find she was still in town, and alone.

"Your mother would say the same," he hazarded brusquely.

"You don't know my mother," she answered very naturally. "If you did, you would understand. It was foolish of me to mention the thing at all — but I had hoped you would see and help me."

"Help you in what?"

"I know you, and Sir Vallory, and Mrs. Chancely are all only thinking of me and saying what you think is right; but I feel much more strongly that it is right for me to go, so I must. Of course, if mother were to say she did not want me to do so, it would be different, because she is my mother, but no one else can have the right to stop me."

He walked over to the window frowning. She continued to speak in the same even tone, her tightly clasped hands alone showing her suppressed trouble.

"I wanted you to take me to the station now, before

Mrs. Chancely came home. I felt it was not fair to drag her into it any more, but since —”

“Wait, Christina!” The name slipped with amazing readiness off his tongue. “Say what you said just now again—if your mother were to say you mustn’t go —”

“Of course, I should do as she wished.”

“No one else has any right to—to command you?”

She considered this.

“I think no one —”

“Your father, for example? Would he have any right?”

He spoke harshly and with a certain sharpness.

“My father? How can that matter?” she said in a low voice. “Any way he would know my mother’s wishes.”

“Very well, then she wishes you not to go.”

Christina was silent a moment. She was regretting she had spoken to him about Torrens and conscious of a feeling of keen disappointment.

“I don’t know why you say things like that. It’s only your way of looking at it.”

He interposed in the same apparently unfeeling way, but without looking at her.

“You said I should know what she would wish.”

She put her hand to her head in a bewildered fashion. There must be some meaning in what he said, yet it was too incredible to take the first that occurred to her.

He offered no help, but strolled across the room, took up the book he had played with before and began to cut the leaves with a paper knife.

His face was set like a flint.

Christina mechanically repeated his last words in a vague endeavour to get at their real sense. He was constrained to assist her.

"I am Rudolph Massendon — your father."

His voice was as cold as if he had told her twice five made ten, but was as if he had held a lighted match to a candle. Her whole soul caught afire with the truth; knew it to be the truth, without further proof or explanation, and she sprang up with a quick cry.

"My father!"

Her eager arms caught at his, trying to turn him towards her. He did not repulse her, but he did not answer her appeal, and he fixed his eyes steadily on her hands and moved them gently enough from his arm.

"Oh, well, Christina," he said at length. "That's a word you had better leave out. It's not a matter of congratulation, you know — for you."

She shook her head.

"I think otherwise, I like you very much, you know. I've always felt as if you were someone to turn to — that's why I wanted you to-day."

She got no return to her advance. He had shut up his soul all these years from the snare of emotion, and he was not going to set it at liberty at this first flutter of the forbidden sensation.

"Don't you like me?" she demanded anxiously. "I thought we were friends?"

"Yes, I like you. I shall probably wish I didn't later on, and anyhow you are sure to wish you hadn't liked me."

"That's not true!" she cried with a catch in her breath.

"How much do you know?" he demanded quickly, as he flung himself into a big easy chair opposite to her.

"That you quarrelled — mother and you. It was her fault, she said, because she didn't understand."

Christina spoke dreamily, trying to fit in this strange

realisation of her father with her preconceived ideas of the whole story, or rather with the remarkable version she knew of it.

"Mother said she did not love you enough, *then.*"

Her gentle voice distilled such scalding pain that the atrophied soul of the man stirred under it, though not a muscle of his face betrayed him.

"She was always hoping that somehow we should meet and that you would like me and would — want me." She smiled a little half-shy smile.

"Well, I do want you, you see!" he said, with rather a dogged persistence. "I want you in London and not at Torrens."

"Ah, but still," she cried, bending forward and catching his hand; "still you must understand about it all, you know the place and the people!"

"The Tymores, Joan, and Micky, and all the rest of them," he broke in roughly. "And I want you more than they do. Look here, Christina, I'd sworn nothing should make me tell you this. It's against my wishes and my will — my *will*, do you hear that? If I could have seen any other way of stopping your folly I should have taken it — so you are not going!"

His jaws snapped together like a lock.

His hard voice, his determined stand against any emotion in this overthrow of his pitiless will for what he considered her well-being revealed the man to Christina as nothing else could have done, and doing so, called up in her wonder and pity as deep as his need of them.

She was thinking of him and not of her intentions which this finding had completely ousted from their first importance. Perhaps he misunderstood her silence, for with a sudden effort, he sheathed his imperiousness, and, rising, came and sat on the arm of her chair.

"It's your bounden duty to keep an eye on me now, you know," he remarked.

She slipped her hand over his and felt his tighten beneath it.

"Yes, I see that," she owned with a quaint naïveté. "I will do what you wish — Father."

Her hands were suddenly and swiftly caught in his. Never in her life had she felt helpless before or known the force of physical strength put out against her. But her eyes met his unflinchingly.

"You are not to say that. I forbid it. Neither are you to tell any one — *any one* — at all of this. It's true, mind, I can give you any proofs you want, but I won't be owned, you understand."

"My mother?"

"Least of all, your mother — till she returns, any way."

His grip hurt her hands cruelly, but she would not show it.

"Everything with regard to her remains where it is. It's her affair, mind, no one else's at all."

"I understand. Will you let go my hands, please?"

Instantly she was free, and he saw how he had hurt her.

"You see," he said, touching them gently; "you see how lucky your mother has been." Looking up, he saw her eyes on his, questioning, pitying, and perplexed; the softness vanished from his voice at once.

"Don't do that," he commanded sharply. "Don't try to understand things, don't think about me at all, don't be sorry and ridiculous, don't pull things out, I won't have it! Do you hear? Rudolph Massendon hasn't the slightest wish or intention of coming to life, he wouldn't find it comfortable at all — hardly more bearable than his present condition," he added ironically. "But for all that, Christina," he rose to his feet and spoke with a little affectation of boredom, "there's

no reason why we shouldn't be friends. I'm passably old and the Chancelys are good people."

"Of course, we shall be friends," she answered gravely; "but I would rather you did not say things like that. The Chancelys don't know you are—mine," she flung it out with a challenge. "What has it to do with them?"

He smiled.

"More than you think, you absurd child."

She felt she was as wax in his hands, and yet knew it was not only his will that bent her, still less was it the knowledge of their relationship, but he had left her to infer that in revealing the same, his will had paid so big a price, she could not in all honesty deny him his requital.

He was the first to break the silence which had fallen, and having obtained his point, his voice was neither harsh nor hard. He felt suddenly sure of her, sure, that is, that she would not resort to sentiment, or torture a scene out of the difficult situation at his expense. Therefore, he was prepared to discuss it at length with her and arrive at some definite arrangement.

"It's all very well, Christina, but if we are to see anything of each other, it will need some management. You won't be allowed to go running about London alone from here—and yet I do want to see you." He stopped and then added as if with an effort: "It will mean a great deal to me."

There was a very faint note of endearment in his voice, and it brought colour to her face in spite of her endeavour to give no sign, so well did she already read him.

"I'll arrange something and write and tell you. We can go on anyhow for a bit. You are not to scold me too much or regard me as incorrigible—or 'redeemable.' You must take me as I am. As for the

past," he assumed a nonchalant air and strolled over to the window again, "your mother does not seem to have been as accurate as usual over it, so you had better know that I behaved to her like a blackguard, and that the only decent thing to do was to take myself out of her sight — it was a success, too!" he added complacently.

Christina sprang up.

"It was not!" Her eyes were ablaze with anger. "You know nothing about it and you have no right to say so. I know now as I never did before what she must have suffered and just what her goodness means. She said she was in the wrong and I never believed it, but I see now what she meant."

Rudolph Massendon, who had never hung his head in all those wasted years, did so now, and there was a touch of humility in his voice.

"Very likely you are right, Christina. I can't judge and I don't understand. You told me once I did not know true from false."

"I told you you *pretended* you didn't," she interrupted.

"Probably it comes to the same thing!" He paused. An amazing desire to soften her hardening young judgment against him thrust itself persistently upon his senses, so persistently that half-bewildered he did at last yield to it.

"I will tell you this much," he said doggedly. "I have never feared man or woman or bogey of right and wrong in my life but once — and that was the day I feared your mother would make me lie. It would have been so simple if I had hated her — but I couldn't lie to any one I feared, you know."

Christina drew in her breath sharply. There was depth within depth here. She dared not draw on reason for assistance, but her subtle instincts stood sponsor for her understanding.

"Yet you always pretend you enjoy — deceiving people!"

"It's so easy! But then there was a difference. It's being *made* to do it."

His voice was low. He was debating wildly at the back of his mind if he could bear to see her again after this incredible folly. Still that unfaltering instinct kept her from approaching him, and saved the situation, but words she had to say — words born of the sudden comprehension of his difficult nature.

"Oh, I understand it quite well. *That* would be ignoble; you couldn't do it."

"Believe that, if you can, Christina. It's the only point you can pool in my favour."

He gave a short, careless little laugh.

"It's to the good," she persisted. "I daresay I shall find lots more. There's Mrs. Chancely coming in, and I meant to be gone when she came back."

"Good Heavens! I've been here an hour! Now, Christina, I don't ask you to talk fiction, but I do beg you won't give me away. I'm waiting to see Mrs. Chancely, you understand!"

Christina understood this less than anything in their amazing interview, but she held her tongue when she heard him telling Mrs. Chancely that Miss Massendon had assured him she would be home by four, and therefore he had ventured to wait to see her.

CHAPTER X

CHRISTINA awoke next morning to a sense of an expanded horizon. It seemed for the moment incredible that the day would go on like other days—the usual shopping expeditions with Mrs. Chancely, a walk with Mabel if the fog kept off, possibly a concert—probably an “At Home” or dinner, and by mere chance perhaps a meeting with Mr. Tennent. His identity sprang to her under that name. She jumped out of bed with the intention to shake off the obscurities of night.

“Mr. Tennent—my father—my father—Mr. Tennent,” she repeated it again and again seated on the edge of her bed, regarding her slippers thoughtfully. For the present, at any rate, the man who occupied her mind to the exclusion of all else, answered to the name of Tennent and to nothing else. Yet by the time she had done her hair she found it comparatively easy to think of him in conjunction with her mother, dissimilar as they were; it was only her own relationship with him that was so difficult to get into focus. She could have accepted Sir Vallory with ease. Richard would have been simple to recognise as “Brother.” But Mr. Tennent refused steadily to answer to the label she would attach to him.

The maid who brought up her letters was too used to her “queer ways” to be surprised to find her already dressed. The letters were few, but with them was a box of violets. There was no indication as to the sender; she smelt them thoughtfully as she looked at her correspondence. It was trivial for the most

part — a letter from a dressmaker — an invitation to tea — a note from Sir Vallory saying how greatly he was relieved by hers of the previous evening, and complimenting her on her good sense in listening to reason. Christina had written to say she had relinquished her idea of going to Torrens.

There was one other letter, in writing that was familiar to her on notes of formal courtesy, and she looked curiously at the strong slope of the letters before she opened it.

My Dear Christina,—

You will be used to the new idea of me by now, I suppose. I have the advantage of you in having had a longer time to acclimatise myself to our relationship. You will also by this time have recognised the necessity of keeping the little matter to ourselves — since it concerns no one else. But for the message from your mother as to her desire I should know you, I would even now put it out of our power to meet again, as I can see no possible advantage to you in so doing. But I am constitutionally selfish, and although I don't care about accepting favours, yet I have not the face to refuse what your mother offers, which is very characteristic of her. Therefore on any day you do not happen to receive a box of violets, you may consider that we are likely to meet. I advise you to go on considering me in the light of a friend — the other relationship implies responsibilities I am not anxious to undertake.

Believe me,

Yours sincerely,

R. TENNENT.

P. S. There is rather a good Organ Recital at the Queen's Hall on Wednesday, which is not much in Miss Chancely's line, still less in Mrs. C.'s. I enclose a ticket for you if you like to come.

There it was, the little green ticket — Seat 50. She was left to conjecture who might occupy Seat 49 or

51; left equally free to find her own way of dispensing with the escort of Mabel or Mrs. Chancely.

"Oh, how like him! How like him!" she cried, half laughing, but with a little catch in her throat.

It was certainly characteristic of Mr. Tennent and she was sure it was no less characteristic of Rudolph Massendon. Now she was fully face to face with the fact of the deception involved with regard to Mrs. Chancely, and she faced it quite frankly. A great many girls would have flinched at the thought of it. A few would have refused to practise it; some would have found a pleasure in it and some would not have considered it at all. Tennent had shown her quite frankly that he considered Mrs. Chancely a negligible quality, but he had not attempted to convince her of the fact or even sound her to see if she were of the same mind. The omission was deliberate on his part. He would not consciously bias her free mind still fresh from the imprint of her mother's spirit. He had not the least intention of ruling his life by her standard, but he had still less intention of seeing her adopt his.

His desire to meet her again was mitigated by very reason of the force of that desire. It annoyed him to find he really was anxious to hear what she would say in answer to his letter and casual invitation. He would not allow it could be of any serious importance to him whether she accepted or not. Yet when he entered his rooms and saw her letter lying on the table, he opened it with the nearest approach to eagerness he had experienced for years.

"I hardly know how to begin a letter to you," Christina commenced. "It sounds so absurd to say 'Dear Mr. Tennent,' as before. I love violets and it was clever of you to guess it. Thank you ever so much—and yet thank you much more for the days I shall not see them! If you want it in writing, I promise I will not tell any one of our story till mother comes home, but I *had* said

this to you before. I will be at the Queen's Hall. Really, you know, we have both been very foolish to feel surprised at the fact we have met, considering how much mother wished it. It would have been far more strange if we had not met.

"I am,

"Your affectionate

"CHRISTINA."

"P. S. Sir Vallory has sent another nurse to Torrens, and the Evens are better."

Tennent read this, laughed, tossed it down, picked it up and read it again, and then suddenly dropped his face on his hands and sat, elbows on knees, motionless. Minute after minute ticked its life away on the little French clock, and still he fought down and denied life to those ghosts of emotion, for which there was no room in his existence at all, and for which he could only make room by changing that existence to the root. He was not going to do this. He made this vow over and over again. He was going to see and meet Christina — his daughter — because it interested him for the moment, but he would tire of her soon and drop her, and the old life would go on just the same as ever. It was amazing what a lot of assurance Tennent required from Rudolph Massendon before he could be lulled to a sense of security.

In the end he apparently effected a compromise. Christina's little letter was dropped into the fire, but at the same time he looked round the room with marked dissatisfaction. He still had his quarters ostensibly next door to that Club that had aroused Mabel Chancely's curiosity and Walter's ambition; in reality they were part and parcel of the same.

"It's a confounded nuisance, but I suppose I shall have to move. One can never tell what may turn up now, and it's out of the question bringing her here."

Again a sense of irritation with Christina and the whole situation shook him gustily. His inclination and his will seemed momentarily to have changed sides. His will was to see her, and his inclination to avoid her and the necessary trouble of moving.

Move he must if there was the slightest chance of Christina ever coming to see him, and it was very much his will at present to see her for once on his own ground, as it were, free from social obligations.

But he wouldn't have Rachel's daughter *there*.

It was when he thought of her so, the incongruity of it was so impossible. When he merely thought of Christina, he was dimly aware, as Rachel was fully aware, that surroundings were powerless on her, powerless to injure her, or touch that primeval whiteness which was deeper than mere ignorance. Anyhow, these rooms were unsuitable and he must move, which was a beastly nuisance.

When Christina took her seat at the concert the places on either side of her remained vacant for some time, and it was long before she could give any attention to the music. She had, however, received no violets that morning and had no doubt that Mr. Tennent would turn up eventually. The third piece on the programme caught her in a spell and he slipped into seat 51, while she was too intent on an uplifting wave of sound to notice his entrance. She was soon aware of it though, and turned to him as the last majestic chords died away.

"Wasn't that lovely?"

He nodded and gave her no other greeting. Between the pieces they talked of the music, the audience, and general trivialities. She was not very satisfied, but he gave her no more. When she was absorbed in the music, his eyes were on her with furtive, hungry glances that seemed to find vast value in the folds of her dress and the little loose curls of hair, but once

her eager face turned to him, his eyes were all for his programme, or at most occupied with her clasped hands, and his look was expressive of nothing but a remoteness that was hardly human.

"Does Mrs. Chancely expect you back to tea?" he asked presently.

She shook her head.

"I said I should most likely not be back."

"That was thoughtful of you. But suppose I had not asked you?"

"Then I should have asked you to tea at an ABC shop."

He affected to shudder.

"I have lots of things to tell you," she said frankly. "Things that happened yesterday."

He silently congratulated himself on his previous hard day's work.

"I have just established myself in rooms rather nearer you, with some people who knew me as a boy. I thought we might have tea there unless you pined for a fashionable tea-shop."

Christina was frankly delighted. Neither an "ABC" nor a Bond Street shop struck her as a place for confidential talks, and she really had need of his advice, which a day or two before would have seemed such a preposterous thing to imagine. For once she submitted to be dragged away before the end of the concert without protest, though she assured him in the street it was only because she was so anxious to tell him things.

Tennent's new rooms were near by, in the vicinity of Bryanston Square, where an old couple, who had once been in the Massendon's service, let highly respectable apartments to single gentlemen. Tennent had learnt years ago of their being there, and it was with a half mock at circumstances, and half a sense of security to Christina in case of possible complications,

that he had sought them out, pretending at first not to recognise them, and then pledging them to secrecy by the honour of the house they still regarded as the epitome of all that was highest in the land, after Royalty.

His few possessions, for he never hampered himself with "impedimenta," were installed there that very morning, and Mrs. Swanmore was already in a quiver of excitement over the thought of receiving the young lady whom she was only to know as a possible caller, though she had bargained with her lodger that she might bring up tea instead of her husband.

Tennent had determined that for once and no more after, of his own will, he would take Christina to his own abode, and this, in spite of its being one of those indiscretions that he would condemn bitterly in another. It was not so much Christina's reputation that was at stakes as his own identification. To have been forced by circumstances to give that away would have been to pay a heavy price for his whim. His gambling instinct had its way with him as he took his daughter swiftly through streets where he was least likely to be seen by any one who knew her. Still, before the walk was over—and he had elected to walk just because he was a gambler bred and born—he recognised it was a reckless tempting of Providence, and must not be repeated. He breathed a sigh of half relief, half triumph, when he at last shut the door behind her, and led the way up to his still unfamiliar room. It was a painfully tidy and regular apartment, and he hated it at sight. It seemed to confer an obligation upon him that he neither sought nor desired, nor had intention of fulfilling.

Christina was responsible, however, and he determined she should do her part to make the place bearable. In all the months since he had known her, he had never permitted his thoughts to carry her con-

sciously into his every-day existence. Yet since the day that Mabel Chancely had asked him to come and dine with Miss Massendon from Wiltshire — his unseen daughter — he had known and fought against the knowledge that she was an element that was not to be dismissed so easily as he tried to believe.

He did not want to dismiss her at present; on the contrary he wanted to get as much amusement out of the situation as he could. That was how he put it to himself.

“Take off your hat, child,” he commanded. “And for heaven’s sake, do something to make the place look a little untidy and bearable. I’ve nothing to show you, and I have neither pictures nor curios nor books — here to-day and gone to-morrow, you see. We’ll make the most of to-day.”

“Which reminds me,” said Christina, arranging her hair before a glass, “that I shall be gone, if not to-morrow, soon after Christmas.”

“Where to?” he asked sharply.

She had not begun to bore him yet and he had no intention of letting her out of sight till she did, if he could help it.

She came and sat down at his feet on a little low chair by the fire.

“That’s what I want to tell you about,” she began. “You know that the idea was that I should stay three months with Lady Losford and three months with Mrs. Chancely in turn till my mother comes back.”

Tennent examined an exceedingly ugly ornament on the mantelpiece critically.

“Yesterday there was a letter from mother, saying —” there was just a suspicion of a break in her voice, Tennent looked at her sharply — “Aunt Esther is still dreadfully ill and even mother does not think she will live, but she may for some time and she is

quite alone unless mother stays; she says she has never known any one so alone."

Tennent gave a little restless movement. It was preposterous that every word she said about her mother should have power to hurt so sharply; — so preposterous that for nothing in the world would he have stopped her speaking of Rachel.

"So it will be longer than ever before she comes back. And things are rather muddled; Sir Vallory is going to Teneriffe to see an eclipse, I believe; Lady Losford is at San Remo, and I was to have joined her at the beginning of December, but Richard is with her, for she has not been well."

"Who is Richard?" demanded Tennent.

"Richard is her godson — Richard Sefton."

He nodded slightly. He recollected being dragged unwillingly to Richard's christening.

"What has Richard to do with it?"

Christina thought for a moment.

"I suppose it does not matter telling you," she said, "since I told mother. Richard wanted to marry me."

"And you refused him?"

She nodded.

"He is ever so nice," she said slowly.

"But you don't care to meet him?"

She looked up with wide-open eyes.

"Oh, I don't mind. I like him very much. But Lady Losford says there is someone else there, another girl — and perhaps —" She stopped again, knitting her brows in a puzzled manner.

Tennent suddenly put his finger under her chin and turned her face up to his.

"Have you altered your mind about him, Christina?" he asked abruptly.

She smiled, shaking her head again.

"No, of course not! I told you I just like him. One does not marry any one one just likes."

"You had better take out a patent for that idea," he said a little mockingly.

"Don't be silly. I haven't told you the rest of the trouble yet. Mrs. Chancely is ever so kind and pleased for me to stay over Christmas with her, but she is going up to Yorkshire directly after to her father's place, and she wants me to go with her."

Tennent reviewed the situation rapidly. There were more ways than one out of it, but with cynical selfishness he rejected any that would carry her out of the Chancelys' care and into circles that were perhaps, socially speaking, more her own, and had been his. Once under Lady Losford's charge and he would have to forego their meetings; for though he felt no compunction over deceiving Mrs. Chancely, and experienced a cynical pleasure in hoodwinking his brother, he was incapable of practising a deception on his cousin, Emily. It was an odd distinction, but there it was. Still he was prepared to fight for a better arrangement if it offered itself.

"I shan't see you in Yorkshire, you know," she said ruefully.

"More easily than in San Remo or Queensburn Square. I don't include Lady Losford on my visiting list at present," he drawled out casually; "but in Yorkshire one shoots grouse and hunts, and even motors. I assure you lots of people go to Yorkshire."

"But you wouldn't go all the way there just to see me?"

"I thought your mother's predictions always came true?"

Christina looked puzzled.

"She wished — she wanted — oh, is it really that? You really do want me? It's not only just being nice and kind to me?"

She sprang up and put her hands on his arm. For the first time she noticed that his hair was a little grey

on the temples, and that his face was lined. It was as if Tennent had suddenly grown older since the revelation.

He made her no reply, but his eyes held a smile which was new to her.

"And Richard has nothing to do with it?" he enquired irrelevantly.

"Nothing. Why do you think so?"

"Let me know when you contemplate matrimony again, and I'll advise you."

She laughed softly.

"You are nice! But one can't be advised over things that belong to one's soul, can one? We've got to manage that for ourselves. If other people could help us there, how wise we should all be, by now!"

The tea entered at that moment in front of Mrs. Swanmore's portly form, Mrs. Swanmore herself much out of breath by her ascent from the nether regions.

"If there is anything else the young lady would fancy, she has only to name it," she panted. "And I'm not knowing yet whether you drinks China or India, but China it is, as is better for the nerves. Shall I take your hat, my de—, Miss, seeing as you may like to put it on by a glass."

"Miss Massendon will put on her hat here," said Tennent sternly. "I am sure there is sufficient tea; we'll ring if we want more."

He kept a stern eye on her till preparations were completed, and Christina took him to task for harshness when the old lady had gone, at which he smiled.

"Mrs. Swanmore was prepared to weep over you and tell you reminiscences of my days of innocence," he explained.

"But I should have loved it above all things."

"I shouldn't. Reminiscences are mostly untrue

and generally damp and unpleasant. Come and pour out tea."

So Christina seated herself at the table and officiated gravely.

Tennent thought the tea atrocious, but he drank it, and suggested that Christina should make a parcel of various cakes and present them to the nearest crossing-sweeper on leaving, so that Mrs. Swanmore should think they were appreciated.

"How did you escape the chaperonage of Mrs. Chancely this afternoon?" he enquired curiously.

"I just said I was going to the concert at the Queen's Hall."

He raised his brows.

"And she made no enquiries, or offered to come?"

Christina considered a moment.

"She said, 'My dear, all by yourself?' but Mabel told her it was all right, and I told her I was going to see Sir Vallory afterwards."

"Supposing Mrs. Chancely had offered to come?"

He was curious to get at her real attitude in the matter.

"Why should she? I think people generally know if they are wanted or not."

He smiled.

"And you find them sufficiently obliging to act on that knowledge as a rule?"

Apparently she had. She confessed that people generally seemed to do what she expected of them; and further, that it had never occurred to her to prepare a more lucid or elaborate excuse for her afternoon's excursion. They spoke of Yorkshire again and he asked for more exact information as to her destination.

"It's a village called Chetley, about fifteen miles from the sea, on the east coast; Fremly is the name of the nearest town, and that's near Strancebury

Head. I looked it all out on the map."

Since he made no response she looked at him. He was buttering a piece of toast very deliberately.

"Do you know it?"

"I've never been there in my life."

He spoke as one who chose his words with care, and had she known him better, she would have been suspicious of the inner truth of this very simple statement. A good many people mistrusted Tennent when he spoke in that directly deliberate, truthful way.

"Mrs. Chancely's father has only lately built the house there. She has not seen it herself even."

"When does Lady Losford come home?"

He questioned merely to gain time, for his mind was rapidly reviewing any possible alternatives to that Yorkshire visit, which a few moments before had seemed not undesirable.

In the end he suggested nothing, except that it was time for her to go back. He was secretly amused when she insisted on returning via Hampstead to ensure her remark to Mrs. Chancely being true.

CHAPTER XI

FATE or that Providence to which Rachel had entrusted the management of Christina's affairs (with what Lady Losford called such culpable indifference, and Sir Vallory such mediæval saintliness) certainly carried out its part of the bargain in a manner not at all in accordance with the ideas of ordinary hum-drum maternity. Within the seven months that had elapsed since Rachel's departure, Christina had been through more surprising experiences than in seven years of life under her mother's gentle rule. Yet she was certainly not the loser by the change. The more life pressed its possibilities on her and hurried its pageant before her eyes, the more her inner self opened out and blossomed at the call of life. Instead of dissipating and wasting her mental energy Christina's migrations to continual new scenes and new places seemed to have the effect of consolidating and cementing that foundation of faith and steady belief in the things pertaining to the spiritual world which her mother had laid. The added windows of her soul made no difference to the spirit that looked out of them. Only the eyes were more farseeing, the look more gentle, seeing more and comprehending less, except the infinite variety of God's dealings with the race He has made.

Christmas was a strange time to Christina. As unlike the season at Torrens as could well be imagined. There, it was The Festival of Children and all that could be embraced under that name of promise. Certainly her mother and she had exchanged presents, but it was not on Christina that the gifts were poured

at that fruitful season. It was on those far and near, who lacked reminder of their kinship to the Hero of the day. Christina was amazed at the vast preparations for generosity and self-gratification, at the excitement and bustle, and the eager faces. It was beautiful to her at first to feel that every one loved the season, should rejoice so readily over the Great Event, until one day she heard a friend of Mrs. Chancely say how she hated the season and wished it was over.

"Why did she say that?" Christina asked Mrs. Chancely. "Is it a sad time for her? I mean connected with anything sad?"

"No, dear, she is a very happy woman, I think; but she has five children and I suppose it is rather a trouble, the holidays and buying presents, and all that."

"Did you find it a trouble when Mabel and Walter were little?"

"No, but then you see I am an old-fashioned person and we always used to make a great deal of Christmas, and I like keeping it up now. Mabel wants to dine at the Savoy or some hotel, but I can never bring myself to do that. I feel as if it wouldn't be Christmas at all."

Christina received a still greater enlightenment on the modern ideas of Christmas a day or two later, when Mrs. Talbot called and declared she was quite exhausted.

"I have just been round to the Stores to give in a fresh list of addresses for these stupid Christmas cards. I always make out the list myself, but they are so careless. I am sure last year they did not send out all I ordered. Over two hundred, I assure you! It's such a tax. But Willie will have it. He likes all these old-fashioned customs."

Mrs. Chancely agreed with Mr. Talbot.

"I always send my cards out myself, though," she admitted.

"Now how nice and energetic of you! How do you find time this busy season?"

"I think," Mrs. Chancely suggested mildly, "that it is just doing that and buying one's presents that makes it so busy."

"Really? I had not thought of that. But it is so difficult to get anything in shops. I always choose mine from a catalogue and have them sent direct. One would think the custom would die out," she added plaintively. "I am sure we all grumble enough. It's so absurd. And people aren't even sure it is the right date now. They say it was several years earlier or later, I forget which. That is so confusing. It makes the world sound so old. And perhaps it didn't happen at all, but I suppose I mustn't say that to you. You are quite orthodox, aren't you? That is so refreshing in these days."

She talked herself away at last and when she was gone, Mrs. Chancely looked at Christina a little doubtfully.

"I don't think she means all that, my dear," she said wistfully. "It's just a kind of fashion, I think. I am sure she is quite nice and good."

"It's not her fault, of course, if she doesn't know things," Christina agreed. "People who live in the middle of the Sahara can't be expected to know much about the sea, or even nice country lands, or downs, or things like that. But what I cannot understand is why, if they feel like that, they try to keep Christmas at all!"

"It's the only way lots of people get to know if their friends are alive or dead," put in Mabel. "If you are alive, you send a Christmas card. If you are dead, you don't, unless you are a member of the

Psychical Society. It's very convenient, after all."

"But apparently the Stores may kill you prematurely," Christina remarked gravely. "I shouldn't like that. I shall send my cards myself!"

She was much exercised in her mind as to what to give her father, and after a great deal of cogitation she had her photograph taken and sent him one. Mr. Tennent dined with them on Christmas Day and solemnly played Nap or Speculation with them after dinner. Mr. Chancely declared he had played Speculation for more Christmases than he could count, and hoped to do so for as many more. As an extra treat and because of the visitor, Mrs. Chancely allowed them to gamble. They bought counters at a penny a dozen from their hostess and sold their remaining stock back to her at the end of the evening. Christina had never played for "money" before and enjoyed it thoroughly. She was dreadfully rash, and spent quite eighteen pence on counters to Mrs. Chancely's great disapproval. Walter was in hilarious spirits and for some reason seemed to take great delight in instructing Tennent how to play and encouraging him to make high stakes.

"Ah, my dear!" Mrs. Chancely told him, shaking her head, "I suspect Mr. Tennent has played before."

Even Mr. Chancely joined in the laughter which seized the men, and Tennent gravely told Walter it was the playing for stakes that was new to him, not the cards. But he paid much more attention to Miss Massendon's play than to his own. Later on the family went to pay its customary visit to the servants' quarters who, on this occasion only, were allowed to invite a relation or even a young man, if properly engaged, and advanced beyond the walking-out stage, to spend the evening, and at this particular hour, Mrs. Chancely, Mr. Chancely, Miss Chancely, Mr. Walter Chancely, and Mrs. Lodon (a married daughter), and

Mr. Lodon, and the little Lodons, all visited the lower regions, and had their health drunk in Mr. Chancely's second-best champagne, and made venerable jokes and listened to respectful speeches, and felt they did their duty.

But Miss Massendon and Mr. Tennent were of course exempt from the obligation of accompanying them, and so for the first time that day found themselves alone together.

Tennent did not waste time. He went over to where Christina sat on the sofa and dropped a tiny parcel into her hands.

"That's my first present to you, but you are not to open it till you go to bed, Christina. I've written to thank you for yours, in case we did not meet, but —" He hesitated a moment and then kissed her. "Thank you for thinking of it, my dear."

Almost instantly he sprang upright again and stood facing her.

"Christina, do you ever play bridge, or any card games?"

"No," she cried, laughing. "Why do you ask? Did I play so badly?"

"Nor any games for money?" he insisted.

She shook her head, much puzzled.

"You have been told not to?"

"No, but why should I — or shouldn't I?"

"There are plenty of reasons why you shouldn't, and I want you to promise me you won't."

"You think it is wrong?"

He frowned.

"I won't have you play, Christina."

"But why not?" she cried half laughing. "What is the matter?"

"I watched you to-night — just children's counters! It won't do, Christina, promise me."

His voice was urgent and sharp.

"I will promise, then; but I would rather know why."

"You have unfortunately got this much of me in you that you are a born gambler, as I am. It doesn't matter in a man, but in a woman —!"

He stopped and looked at her swiftly, and then seemed to get himself in hand again.

"I make a point of objecting to the hereditary principle wherever it crops up. House of Lords or any other way. Responsibility is such a bore."

She got up and rubbed her cheek against his sleeve as she did to her mother, when she thought she was in need of consolation.

"I love it. Can't you hand your responsibilities over to me, dear?"

If the procession of the Chancelys had not been so audible, it is likely that Mr. Tennent would have had reason to sacrifice his cherished secret. As it was, when the family entered, Mr. Tennent was playing the piano — he played rather well — and Miss Masendon was gazing into the fire, evidently amused with her own thoughts, for she was smiling, and no one was attentive enough to see that her smile was not so very far from tears.

When she got to her room that night, she hurried through the usual hairbrushing drill with Mabel — she opened her little packet. It contained a pendant made of two rings of platinum and gold twisted together and within hung a single flawless pearl.

Christina slept with it round her neck.

After this Christina received her violets with disappointing regularity for some days, and was solemnly teased by Mr. Chancely about them each morning. She never pretended ignorance as to the sender, but she steadily refused to gratify even Mabel's curiosity on the subject, and Mrs. Chancely suspected some ad-

mirer from the other side. There was a certain Mr. Sefton of whom she had a disquieting remembrance. Since the autumn Mr. Tennent had used such discretion in his intercourse with Miss Massendon that all possible suspicion of his intentions had fallen to the ground.

The day for the departure northward drew near and Christina feared that she would have to go without seeing her father again. She already ceased to call it "seeing him" when they had no chance of being alone. But to her amazement, she found him at a dance they went to the night before they left town. He arrived immediately after them and came up to her at once.

"Do you know many here?" he asked abruptly, and looked relieved when she said "No."

He took at least half her dances and then did his duty to Mabel Chancely. Before Christina's first dance with him, she saw him dancing with a plain, nervous-looking girl with rather a scared expression. Tennent's face was so poignant with boredom that Christina nearly laughed at him when he passed her, and earned a dumb, protesting glance.

On the first note of the next valse he claimed her.

Christina had never met her father at a dance before. He said he was not a dancing man, but she soon discovered that that was not true from a point of proficiency. It was true that she had not a great experience of partners, but she readily endorsed Mabel's verdict when they got home, that Mr. Tennent ought to be compelled to go to dances five nights in the week in future to make up to them what they had missed. They danced through the first valse without stopping or exchanging a word. Once she looked up at him and smiled, and he gave her a little nod of approval. They ended just by the door ex-

actly in the right spot to secure a comfortable seat without an unseemly rush.

"You never let me know you were to be here, and the violets came."

"I see the violets came," he looked at the bunch she wore. "I did not know I should be here till this evening."

"And I didn't know you knew the Dermots?"

He looked round the hall.

"By the way, which is Mrs. Dermot? I wish you'd point her out to me."

"But don't you know her?"

A suspicion of a little ironical smile twitched his lips.

"I have not that pleasure. Still I mean to do my duty and help her guests enjoy themselves."

"But how did you come then?" asked Christina quite bewildered.

"There are more ways than one of getting to a dance, if one wants to go, Christina."

"You came with someone else?"

He shook his head teasingly.

"I came alone."

"Do explain," she urged.

Mr. Tennent laughed.

"I walked in, that is all."

Christina gasped.

"What! without an invitation?"

"It is quite easy," he assured her cheerfully. "It's done at the very best houses. I wanted to see you before you went North and I knew you were coming here; Walter told me, and so I dispensed with an invitation, though I am sure they would have been delighted to give it to me."

Christina was quite unconvinced as to the righteousness of the proceeding, but was too great a gainer

by his cool effrontery to offer any objection and it was really very funny, she thought.

"Still, you must know someone here because you were dancing with a girl just now."

"Was I—'dancing'?" he returned drily. "Oh, I secured her because I was sure she would not have the face to say she did not know me."

Christina's sense of the fit and right and wrong struggled with her sense of humour. She tried to be severe and then remembered it was done to secure a chance of seeing her.

Mr. Tennent was aware of her thoughts; he watched her face with a faint smile of interest.

"Am I forgiven, Christina?" he asked presently. "We have not much time to enjoy ourselves if we begin to quarrel, you know."

She turned to him with a little contented sigh.

"I think it is going to be the nicest dance I have ever been to."

"Poor Lady Losford!" he exclaimed laughing. "She did better for you than this, Christina."

"She didn't give me you," Christina protested.

Perhaps it had never fallen to the lot of a father to render a dance so pleasant to his daughter as Tennent rendered this to Christina. He seemed to lay himself out to amuse her and add that little spice of wit and comradeship which Mrs. Dermot's dances generally lacked. And on the occasions when he was not dancing with Christina or Mabel he did his duty and materially assisted her guests to enjoy themselves. Mrs. Dermot noted as much and asked her son who was that nice man dancing with Miss Platt.

"A friend of the Chancelys, I believe," he said carelessly, having quite forgotten what it was Miss Chancely had really said.

Mr. Tennent said nothing about coming North, but

during the last dance but one — he had taken that and the last with Christina — he told her casually she could write to him if she had anything to write about.

“And you will write to me?”

He was not sure. He would give no promises.

“How do I know you will not have vanished away before I come back?” she demanded, a little wistfully.

He promised he would not do that without warning.

“I would much rather be in Hampstead, you know.”

“I shouldn’t see you if you were there.”

“But why not? Why is it different?”

“I think,” said Rudolph Massendon thoughtfully; “mind, I am not sure, but I *think* it is because Val-lory is such a truthful man I should like to prove him a liar for once.”

PART II

THE LONELY MAN OF STRANCEBURY

CHAPTER XII

MY dear Father — oh there! I wrote that before I had thought! But what, after all, am I to call you? I never even think of you as Mr. Tennent now. Why do people come to Yorkshire? You assured me they did, but I think it is a dull country, at least just here. The Bentleys are very kind, just like Mrs. Chancely, and the four Miss Bentleys are splendid cooks, and have been teaching me to make cakes. The house is quite new, and I should think by its appearance that they are rich people. I am sure when the trees grow up it will not be ugly at all. We all drove to Fremly the other day. Fremly is quite a horrid little town, but perhaps the people are nice to make up. It has a kind of "make believe" promenade, with a bandstand in the middle and a place for ladies to bathe one end, and a place for men the other. The Bentleys have some great friends there, the Filsons, but they were out, so we did not see them. The only thing that is attractive about Fremly is the view looking towards Strancebury Head, which is at the end of a long neck of ground, flat and marshy with the sea on both sides. The Headland rises quite suddenly out of this — a great towering cliff with a castle on the top. I should like to have gone there, but they said that the man it belongs to does not like visitors even to the little villages on the two bays, one each side of the cliff.

— Since I wrote the above all the poor people in the house here are in great trouble. There is an outbreak of diphtheria in the village and they are all so terrified. It must be dreadful to fear illness like that! We should all go away at once, but unfortunately Mabel has developed a bad throat and they all are convinced that it will prove diphtheria, too. So I suppose it will. I am sorry for them all, and yet it is strange their being

so frightened, for they are such good people and go to church twice each Sunday, and have prayers every morning. We are all to be inoculated with some "serum," I think it is called, this evening. It seems very foolish to me, but it would upset them so if one refused, so it's not worth making a fuss. I suppose it is easier to believe in than just prayer. When it is done they want to send me into Fremly to the Filsons, who very kindly offer to have me or any one so soon as the doctor says it is quite safe. I don't want to go in the least, but poor Mrs. Chancely is so distracted that I don't like to worry her with a refusal, as it is a long way the easiest arrangement for her. You see, though this inoculating business is supposed to keep you quite safe, they still are so afraid I shall get it, that they want me sent away. It's no use telling them that I know I am safe and that mother knows, too. Mrs. Chancely keeps saying, "Your mother will *never* forgive me if you get ill!" Poor dear, it shows how put about she is to imagine such a foolish thing. . . . The doctor has just said that Mabel has diphtheria and one of the Miss Bentleys too, so I suppose when he says I am safe I shall have to go to Fremly. I think Sir Vallory is abroad or in the moon. I can't get a letter from him. Mother writes that she is well but much occupied, as they can get no proper nurse. I thank you every day for the violets. I believe the Chancelys think they are sent from Torrens, but really I never said so, nor anything like it. Do you think it matters?

Your affectionate

CHRISTINA.

Rudolph most thoroughly sympathised with Mrs. Chancely in her state of mind over Christina's welfare, but since it was not his custom to go to church even once on Sundays, and still less his custom to say his prayers, perhaps Christina would have found his anxiety less surprising had she known of it. Rudolph, indeed, was haunted for days with a dread that she

would be taken ill, and he would be unable to hear how she was, or to see her. He poured scorn on himself for these womanish fears, but they would master him from time to time. It was so long since he had had anything or any one of his own to be anxious over that he was worse than the proverbial hen with one chick. A few days later, however, he was reassured by another letter from Christina saying she was very well and quite safe, but that Mabel was now very bad indeed.

“They insist on my going to Fremly,” she wrote, “but I’d very much rather stay here and help nurse poor Mabel. I feel I might be some good because they are all so nervous, and that can’t be nice for her. Mrs. Chancely does not know the Filsons herself, but she tells me they are good people and there are two daughters, and as soon as possible they will send for me. I am determined while I am at Fremly to go to Strancebury Head. No one could mind one just walking there.”

Rudolph was thus satisfied that all was well with her, and dropped being anxious, but his old uneasiness or rather dissatisfaction (it hardly amounted to uneasiness) at her sojourn in that particular place again asserted itself and remained a vague irritation at the back of his mind.

He wrote her a short letter showing nothing of his fears for her beyond remarking that he thought Mrs. Chancely was a sensible woman and she was better off by the sea than in London, where they were having fogs and general discomfort. Christina tried to believe him right.

“You will be quite near, my dear, and some of us can see you often,” Mrs. Chancely told her wistfully.

Indeed, good Mrs. Chancely was playing a very self-sacrificing part in sending Christina away, for her

cheerful vitality and robust faith were comforting; but Mrs. Chancely did as she would be done by, and her charge's safety was the first thing to be considered.

And Mr. Chancely, when he said good-bye to her — he had to go to town despite his daughter's illness — added:

“I am glad you will be near, Miss Christina. The mother will like to see you now and again when the doctor will permit.”

So Christina submitted to her fate with a good grace. As a matter of fact, it was hard to think of anything else to do. For the same reason that had led her coming to Yorkshire in the first place was still potent and unaltered. Three days later, therefore, Christina drove into Fremly with Mr. Bentley, and was received by Mrs. Filson with a ceremony that rather took her breath away. She concluded it was kindly meant, however, and recognised that here was quite a new side of life for her to study, and fit into the general plan of things.

Mrs. Filson's opening speech had sounded reassuring:

“I have no fear whatever of infection, Miss Masendon. ‘The Lord careth for His own.’ We have never had an illness in this house, thank God. We use nothing but carbolic soap *everywhere* and under Providence *that* is a most wonderful germ destroyer. My girls all teach in the Sunday School, but I assure you, they have never caught anything.”

Christina was on the verge of asking what they might be expected to catch, but wisely refrained. She followed Mrs. Filson up the steep stairs wondering exactly how much credit might be given to Providence and how much to the carbolic soap, for the immunity the household enjoyed.

By the next morning she wondered no longer at that immunity. Any germ, however headstrong,

would have preferred open air to temporary lodging under Mrs. Filson's roof. Once established there, there is no doubt he might have learnt an entirely new method of conducting his existence, at least it would not have been Mrs. Filson's fault if he had not. Christina came to the conclusion that this lady should have been made Principal of a College for General Instruction, because it would have made her so happy, though those who remained outside would have been still happier. It was Mrs. Filson's method of imparting knowledge that Christina found so trying. She made emphatic statements which she never explained, but which you were expected to take on faith. Mrs. Filson, being the other side of fifty, considered herself "An Authority," and to ask explanations of "An Authority" appeared to her an improper — even an impious — proceeding.

Christina was so discontented with her own feeling of aversion to this good lady that she set herself the task of watching and lying in wait for those amiable qualities that she no doubt possessed.

"She is certainly kind to her maids," thought Christina, when Mrs. Filson would not allow Isabel, the elder girl, to ring for more coal "because it was after nine and the maids were tired." But the next day Christina heard her deliver a lecture to a little new maid on the iniquity of the sin of schism because the girl had asked if she might go to hear her brother preach his first sermon in a small meeting-house next Sunday.

"She works really hard for the poor," was Christina's next essay in this charitable intention of hers. Mrs. Filson certainly did. There were cupboards in the house stacked full of flannel petticoats and garments of a stout and ugly make that were doled out to the needy at stated times. But one day a thin, unhappy-looking woman came with a note from a lady

asking that she could be given some small dole from this store.

Mrs. Filson read the note, flung up her hands and exclaimed:

"What next, Isabel! I entreat you to listen. Here is Mrs. Lownes asking me to give the Daly woman some clothes! I knew no good would come of letting a stranger into the Guild."

"The woman looks very ill," Christina ventured to say. She was looking out of the window and could see her still standing on the step, her thin fingers playing nervously with the edge of her shawl.

"No doubt she is," Mrs. Filson said, in her lofty manner, and then actually volunteered an explanation to her visitor.

"The woman is a Romanist, my dear, a mere idolater."

Christina drew a long breath and sat up. But she could find nothing to say after all that seemed adequate, so she resumed her seat.

"Yes, you would hardly expect it, in a happy Christian place like this," sighed Mrs. Filson, taking Christina's agitation for very proper distress at the intelligence she had given. "But when one has a whole colony of these Romans over there at Strancebury Head, what can one expect?"

Silence still seemed the safest course, but when Christina went for a walk with Lily, the youngest girl, that afternoon, she was still thinking of Mrs. Daly.

"Do you know where that woman who came this morning lives?" she asked Lily when they had exhausted all the general topics of conversation.

Lily cast a sharp glance at her.

"Oh, yes, I know," she said confidentially. "Do you want to go there? Wasn't mother a beast about her this morning?"

Christina looked horrified for the moment.

"Perhaps she doesn't know what good Christian Catholics generally are," she suggested. "But I do and I should like to help the woman, but I won't take you in case your mother would not like it."

Lily giggled.

"We should have a dull time if we only did what she liked. Do you really know some Catholics? I do so want to. Mother is always so shocked over them!"

It required an almost superhuman amount of charity and faith on Christina's part to carry her through all this. The girls jarred on her quite as much or more than their mother, and the son, Edwin, made her positively sigh for the company of even Walter Chancelly. Yet the accounts of Mabel were still too bad for her to think of adding to poor Mrs. Chancelly's troubles by changing her quarters. She told herself it was a very little thing to do in return for all the Chancellys' kindness to her, to put up with these strange people for a week or two.

"Besides, I expect it is good for one to know that there are people like this," she thought ruefully. "There must be such to make all sorts, as Nursie used to say."

Meanwhile the days slipped by in a whirl of Mothers' Meetings, Protestant protesting Meetings, Poor Workers' Meetings (this was no misnomer, Christina thought privately), Friendly Guild Meetings, Tea Meetings for the Suppression of Alcohol, for the Providing of Musical Instruction to the Christians in East Africa, and numerous other Meetings, the aims and objects of which offered problems to Christina that were beyond her solving.

She was expected to take part in them all the same. Mrs. Filson did not like idle young people. She knew very well that Christina was a young woman

of wealth and considered her worldly, and conscientiously did her best to instruct her in a better way of life. She certainly gave her a vast deal of enlightenment on the possibilities of human nature.'

At length one day it came to Mrs. Filson's ears that Christina had paid a surreptitious (that was how she put it to herself) visit to that woman, Daly. Everything that was done in Fremly came to the good lady's ears sooner or later, and in doing so, too often assumed an added importance that did not by right belong to it. Christina's innocent little act of common kindness was almost more than an indiscretion, it was a pointed denial of the righteousness of Mrs. Filson's individual judgment. She considered for some time whether to remark upon it or pass it over, but a genuine concern for Christina's welfare and a secret dread of the effect of such deplorable independence of mind on her own daughters led her to face her duty manfully.

It was a dull, uninviting day, and the four of them were gathered at work in the room set apart for that purpose, which was in Christina's eyes quite the most uninviting room to work in she had ever encountered. The two girls were sewing laboriously at heavy calico garments, but Christina, who hated sewing, was uselessly embroidering a baby's dress, the extreme plainness of which hurt her mind. Mrs. Filson was cutting out. She did this in an extremely business-like way, cutting two or three garments together with a rapidity and determination that awoke a fearful admiration in Christina's breast; the scissors looked so formidable, the stuff so resisting, and Mrs. Filson so indomitable.

At length she paused to fold a new length of flannel, and, having brought her mind to the point of action, proceeded to give vent to her injured feelings.

"I have just heard, Miss Massendon, of your no

doubt well-intentioned — but, I must say, ill-timed.— attempt to help that woman, Daly, who called here a day or two ago.”

She paused to measure the flannel she intended to cut out into still more petticoats. Her able hand shook a little, it annoyed her that she should find any difficulty in performing so plain a duty.

Christina looked her surprise. She would not intentionally have hurt her hostess's feelings for the world, but she could not see by what right Mrs. Filson allowed them to be hurt by such a simple matter.

“I am sorry if it did not please you,” she said simply. “Perhaps I ought to have said I had seen her. You see you could not help her because you felt it would not be right. I quite understand that, but as I did not feel that, I thought I was free to do as I liked.”

“If you had even asked the misguided woman to come to church, or a Mothers' Meeting, or anything like that, I should have considered it just misplaced zeal,” Mrs. Filson went on, hardly heeding Christina's words.

“But she is a Catholic, she wouldn't want to come to your church.”

Mrs. Filson smiled with painful condescension.

“Exactly, it would have been useless. These people are so blind in their own conceit. Still it would have been an excuse.”

“I am sorry, but I really did not think one was needed,” Christina said quietly. “It was not meant to concern any one but the poor woman.”

Mrs. Filson continued to cut out and to make mistakes as she did so. She was entirely unused to have her remarks taken in this spirit and it upset her, even more than the original offence. Her two daughters bent over their work and did not venture to look up.

Christina considered the matter at an end and went

on working. Presently she held up the frock with innocent pride.

"Doesn't that bit of feather-stitching make it look prettier?"

Mrs. Filson looked, and looked away again. She could not honestly say the frock was not prettier.

"When you are as old as I am, my dear," she remarked in her most lofty tone, "you will know the Poor need no encouragement in seeking for prettiness. It is one of the most deplorable signs of the age, this continual caring for the vanities of this world."

Christina laughed spontaneously and gaily.

"Babies are bound to be a bit vain from all the admiration they get, but I'm afraid I should never be Stoic enough to put one of mine in an ugly frock to save its vanity."

Mrs. Filson fairly bristled with indignation and horror. The remark not only ran counter to her expressed opinion, but to her mind bordered on the indelicate. She regretted not for the first time her readiness to help the Bentleys in their predicament. She had an impression that there was a great many things she ought to say, but strangely enough the desire to say them had evaporated. It appeared so useless. It was no doubt Miss Massendon's misfortune rather than her fault that she had been brought up so badly and with such loose principles. Mrs. Filson hoped in her inmost heart that her visitor's example would not have a bad effect on her own girls!

"But I hope they are too well grounded for that," she thought thankfully.

Poor Christina was, however, destined to do or say the wrong thing (from Mrs. Filson's point of view) that day. Her next remark, made in all innocence, was productive of wider results than happily usually falls to the share of casual conversation, for if Christina had not said it, they would not have fallen to

discussing Strancebury Head at all, and Christina would not have lost her patience with Mrs. Filson, and gone for a walk on a day with a rising north wind and falling thermometer all by herself, to recover her temper, and then the rest of this story might have been "a different one."

The remark Christina did make, was this:

"Do you know anything about the man who lives at Strancebury Head, who will not let people go there?"

The two girls dropped their work for a second, and flashed glances at each other. Mrs. Filson dropped her scissors and stood upright, regarding Christina with grave concern.

"My dear!" she said in a horrified whisper. "Who could have spoken to you about that man?"

"It was Mrs. Bentley who said so. I wanted to drive out there one day. What is the matter with him?" was her not unreasonable question.

Mrs. Filson considered gravely. If it had been her own daughters she would have cut short further conversation in a summary manner, but Miss Massendon was a visitor, and moreover it was not easy to "cut her short."

"It is not a question of *his* not seeing people, but of self-respecting people not seeing him," she explained very seriously, with an eye on her own girls. "He is a very bad man, and his being there is a disgrace to the neighbourhood. It is not a subject to talk about." Then after a slight pause she added as she resumed her work, "He is a Romanist, too."

Now Mrs. Filson had not meant to convey that he was bad because of this particular persuasion, or that that was the beginning and ending of his misdoings, but she managed to convey to Christina that it was, at least, the crowning point of his iniquity, as indeed it may have been in her eyes. Christina had stood a

great deal, and endeavoured to keep her mother's teaching in mind, but this was too much for her.

"Mrs. Filson, being a Catholic doesn't make him a bad man," she began with a little blush on her face.

"It has not helped to make him a good one," snapped Mrs. Filson, scandalised that her words had not produced more effect.

"Do you know him so well?" Christina replied with a dangerous quietness.

"I?" The other trembled with indignation. "Did I not say no respectable people would have any acquaintance with him at all! He is quite unknowable, and let me tell you, Miss Massendon, it is not at all discreet or proper for a young girl to even ask such things about any one."

"You only said he was a Catholic, and it seems a little hard to take away a man's character for that."

Christina for once let her tongue run away with her sense of politeness and even justice, still she had been sorely tried.

"Well, I think that, too, and I should like to know what it is he has done, very much," put in Lily, fired to self-assertion by Christina's regrettable example.

Mrs. Filson dropped her scissors in horror.

"Never let me hear you express such a wish again, Lily; it is most improper. Let it be enough for you that your father and I consider this young man — unknowable — quite unknowable!"

"But he must have done something," muttered Lily crossly.

Her mother, after a withering glance at Christina, walked majestically out of the room just as her son, Edwin, entered it.

Edwin saw something was wrong, and proceeded to investigate by methods of his own.

"Miss Massendon and Lily wanted to know what was wrong with the man who lives at the Castle," ex-

plained Isabel, who was at least direct, "and I think it's not a subject —"

"Oh, shut up!" exclaimed Lily rudely. "Don't be such a prig; you want to know as much as we do. Tell us, Edwin."

Christina got up.

"I am going for a walk," she said quietly to Lily. "Don't come, please, I must walk my temper off, I feel so cross!"

The three watched her go with mixed feelings — Lily with vague envy; Isabel with open disapproval; Edwin with curious amusement.

"Do tell, Edwin," began Lily.

But Edwin either could not tell, or he had an attack of virtue, or he liked to tease his sister. He only shook his head and remarked Miss Massendon would find it pretty hard walking.

The coast line near Fremly was fairly low-lying for that part of the world. It stretched out northward, rising gradually till the cliffs were some two hundred feet high. But southward, it lay low for some two miles, when a projecting cliff called "The Mallets" stood out and caught the first force of the northeastern gales that swept this cold, bare coast with pitiless severity. Beyond The Mallets the coast curved in a wide sweep towards the great Headland of Strancebury, a ridge of fell-land running back from The Mallets, serving to cut off this track of country from the more inhabited neighbourhood of Fremly. Indeed, The Mallets might be almost said to be the boundary between Mrs. Filson's *bête noire* at the Castle and Herself. Certainly very few Fremly people troubled to go beyond the point.

To-day when Christina reached the sea front, she found that a strong wind from the northeast was blowing, and it was much colder than she had thought.

The dull little sea front was almost deserted save for some small boys playing round the empty bandstand, and an anxious-looking boatman who scanned the sky with strained eyes.

Christina looked each way and then turned in the direction of The Mallets and Strancebury Head. The tide was out and she could walk on the hard, wet sand most of the way. She walked rapidly but her thoughts even then outpaced her feet. She did not attempt to analyse them or reason about them. They were just angry, ruffled, uncomfortable thoughts that were not worth arranging or even fighting over. She would walk and walk, and get tired, and then they would go — so she hoped. But she had had too little experience of the power inharmonious society has to disturb the inner soul, to calculate exactly the time it would take her to regain her composure.

Meanwhile it was good to feel the wind pushing her, the salt air stinging her face, and to crunch the sand underfoot.

Little by little she became aware of the sea-gulls' swooping flight and the racing water so reluctant to recede, curbing the white horses for the returning onslaught, of the strange light that lay on the horizon like an advancing doom, and the lowering greyness of the sky. She reached The Mallets with its three outstanding buttresses and the ledge of broken teeth — like rocks that were passable at low water and in the neap tides only. High up on the face of the cliff there was a cave. Lily had brought Christina here one day and they had climbed up, to Lily's infinite delight. It was a charming little cave facing toward Strancebury. Christina had thought of it, as she came, almost with longing. By the time she reached it and had pulled herself up to its shelter her anger had nearly gone. Anger, petty anger against a fellow-being, seemed too small a thing to hold here in

the face of those great waters dancing in the distance, — grey, tumbled water that looked cold and pitiless. Christina shivered even in the shelter of the cave, but she had no intention of leaving it just yet. When she was sure of her own reasonableness she cautiously sent her thoughts over the regrettable day.

Who had been really to blame? Or was that of any importance at all?

She was aware that she had failed somehow in her own estimation and it troubled her for a bit. She wished most sincerely she had not to go back to the Filsons'. She thought of her father, and for one foolish moment fancied herself going to him. What a lovely time they might have together. Also how angry he would be! Christina thought he would not be at all a nice person to be with if he were angry. She thought of Torrens, but this was not a thought to be indulged, because it made her just a wee bit homesick, poor child. She put it away manfully. She thought of Bashford instead.

Bashford must be very comfortable now. There were big fireplaces that were meant for burning wood, she remembered, like they had at Torrens. What a pity it was she had not loved Richard; it would have been so nice and comfortable to be there with him now —

Then she thought of the pine wood and the Stranger.

There was no hour when she did not want to see her mother, and of late there had been very many when she wished quite distinctly for Mr. Tennent's presence, but at that moment she found with a stirring heart that she wanted to meet the Man of the Pine wood more than she even wanted her mother.

"I am sure he would laugh at me for minding Mrs. Filson," she thought, though what led her to do so was beyond explanation.

Only as she thought of him her eyes went out to the sea again and her soul seemed to follow, breathing the waters, tasting freedom in a baptism of vitality that would leave her as one new-born to clean, wide, and possible life efforts. She sat with her arms round her knees on the floor of the cave, and the wind, jealous of her temporary shelter, rushed round the corners and wrapped its rough arms about her, whipping her hair into her eyes, calling her to look and see what it was doing and would do.

"You are given to me, to me!" sang the wind, and shouted in gusty laughter.

But Christina sat still, breathing softly, fearful to break a dream that must pass too soon into waking.

That influx of infinite love that had been hers in the pine wood came back now, so that she knew her soul to be indeed washed clean in those deep waters whither it had gone. Some remote part of her that had become for the moment "Her" indeed and in truth, was full of pity for this soul of hers that was so easily stirred to anger and impatience by little human failings.

The dream passed imperceptibly, and the impression of it had to face the reality of things. She had been dull not to discern Mrs. Filson's real virtues. She was sincere. She did not juggle with her conscience at all. Things on the right hand were good and things on the left were evil, and never would she have purposely confused her hand, or put right for left and left for right. It was a virtue, Christina knew, and she was prepared to return and respect Mrs. Filson on the strength of it.

She rose at last regretfully to return, with not the slightest notion of how long she had been in the cave, which was perched too high for her to see the rocks immediately below.

When she stood at the entrance, however, she saw

that the great, impatient waste of water had let loose its white horses and was already storming the land. The waves had nearly reached the ledge by which she should return if she was to go back to Fremly as she came, and she was not certain if there were any other way back at all. It was only at the mouth of the cave she heard the real triumphant shout of the wind, the rush of its wings and the clamour of the sea in answer. She climbed hastily down and stood on the narrow ledge still facing Strancebury, and therefore still slightly sheltered from the full strength of the rising gale. She wasted no time wondering if it was a dangerous thing to attempt the path round The Mallets or not, she just went step by step along the narrow shelf of rock. As she turned the angle that would bring her face to Fremly, the wind gave a shriek of anger and a buffet that sent her back against the cliff, just as a wave that had sougled in one tremendous swell up to the very face of the rock, towered up, and crashed on the ledge itself.

It passed, sucked back with a protesting gulp, sobbing in and out of the rocks below. Christina, blinded, breathless, and nearly stunned, found herself still on the ledge holding on to the rough surface of the rock. There was no time to lose, she climbed back to the Strancebury side of The Mallets as fast as she could. Already the places she had trodden a minute or two before were running with water. Christina had had no experience of the strength and rapidity of a spring tide in a northeasterly gale, and it seemed to her like magic. She saw that there was no going back by the way she had come, and she continued slipping and sliding round the rocks till she could jump down on to sand below the little cave which had sheltered her too long. Here she looked along the bare three miles of flat sand and marshland that lay between her and Strancebury Head. It was not an inviting piece of

coast in this weather, and she looked back up the cliff to see if there was any way of returning "overland" to Fremly.

The steep cliffs prevented her seeing clearly what was above and she walked out of the comparative shelter of it, to get a better view.

At once she was shouted at by the wind, which drove her against a little sand hill. She could see, however, from here that the ground rose above The Mallets in steep, bare down, falling sheerly on this side, hard to climb in fair weather, but in the teeth of this gale impossible. The only thing to do was to walk to Strancebury, take a vehicle of some sort there, and drive back to Fremly as soon as she could.

So after one more look round, to be certain there was no nearer cottage or house in sight, she knotted her veil still more tightly round her cap and turned her face towards the frowning Headland, that seemed from here the very barrier of the world.

CHAPTER XIII

THE storm instead of abating continued to rise, and Christina realised that even if the tide had permitted she would never have been able to make her way back to Fremly in its teeth. As it was the force of the gale thrust her on with savage persistence towards Strancebury. The tide rushed on in a foaming, swirling torrent over the level sands on her left, and the rough path she tried to follow along the edge of the sand dunes became every moment more obliterated under the driving sand, which filled her shoes and her eyes, and drove over the waste land in eddying clouds. Halting for a breath in the lee of a large sand hill, which had cut off the view, she found herself close to the edge of a little mere whose fresh waters attempted a mimic rivalry of the vast mother deep outside the sandy barrier. Close at hand amongst the reeds she could see the roof of a hut, and decided to take shelter and rest there before struggling on further. Strancebury could not be more than a mile further now, but the very fact of pausing at all in her fight with the storm made her aware of her own exhaustion. She blundered across the twenty yards of rough heather, though the sideway beat of the wind was nearly too much for her strength, and a bigger gust than usual nearly flattened her against the log walls, before she discovered the opening was to leeward. As she stumbled she was conscious of a comforting smell of tobacco, and knew the hut was sheltering another wanderer. She was for the moment too blinded with sand and too ex-

hausted to speak or even to see. She was just conscious that a man helped her find a seat.

"If you are trying to get to Strancebury you are nearly there. But this is a handy shelter for a rest."

The voice was an educated one and courteous.

"I don't mind much where I get, so long as it is somewhere," she gasped, trying to wipe her face with an inadequate handkerchief. "I tried to go back by The Mallets, but the tide was up and I'm glad I didn't. I may get to Strancebury with this wind behind me, but Fremly — with the wind ahead . . .!"

"No, I don't think you could have done it," he said gravely. "How wet you are!" He touched her sleeve and then hastily drew back his hand.

"That was at The Mallets. I was up in the little cave watching the waves, and when I did try to go back round the point, they told me 'No!' very emphatically. I couldn't have climbed back and gone back over the cliff, could I?" she enquired anxiously.

"Quite impossible!"

She felt a little relieved. It had troubled her vaguely that perhaps she had overlooked a simple way out of her difficulties.

"Do you know any one in Strancebury?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I don't know anything about it at all, except it is a place and I must get somewhere."

It was getting very dark in the hut. A willow tree outside nearly blocked the entrance and the little strip of sky that was visible grew greyer and greyer. The wind raged and tore through the bending sedges and churned the waters of the little lake into white foam. It whistled in fierce, mocking notes through the rough walls; they had to speak loudly to hear each other at all. So far she was not sure whether her companion was young or old. His voice was pleasant and reassuring, and though she had not allowed herself to

get frightened, still she was conscious it was a relief to have a companion. He went to the door and looked out, and at that moment a heavier gust than any before caught hold of the thatch, as if with a giant hand, and tore it off. It scattered far and wide and the storm rushed into their temporary shelter with a shriek of savage joy.

The man was by her instantly.

"Come!" he said authoritatively. "That's a broad hint we are not wanted here. We must get on."

Directly they were outside and her tired body had to nerve itself to meet the old strain, an inconsequent thought flashed across her, that Richard Sefton's strong arm would be of use at this moment. This man by her side sheltered her as well as he could, held her firmly when she stumbled over the rough ground and made his way with a confidence that assured her it was familiar to him. Still she was dimly aware that he helped her at cost to himself, that it was mainly the strength of endurance that he lent her, so that when at last a buffet brought her to the ground she could still laugh gleefully and pant out little jokes between their struggles.

"We are nearly at the wood," he shouted presently. "It's no use trying to go to the village, there's the stream for one thing, and another is there's no place for you."

She had no objection at all to going where he might wish, and they struggled on towards the swaying pine woods.

The back of the headland was covered with pines which seemed to run up to the brow of the great upstanding cliff, where a building reared itself out of the very rock apparently. At the entrance to a little path that led up through the trees, she was allowed to wait and take breath again, and indeed, her companion

seemed to hesitate as to whether after all the village was not practicable.

"The only inn is on the other bay," he said slowly, "and it's so exposed it's hardly safe." He looked up at the cliff again and seemed to make up his mind.

She was too tired to speak now, and allowed him to help her along the path till they were on the narrow neck of land that connected Strancebury Head with the mainland. On the other side of the road she could see through the bending trees the rough pebble beach of the southern bay, and hear above the roar of the gale the shattering sound of the stones dragged to and fro by the terrific waves. They came out on a carriage road evidently little used, which wound up and up to the summit of the cliff. As they went upward, bent and pushed by the gale, there was a rending crack and a pine tree fell right across their path. The man caught at her arm and she felt him shiver. He looked at her with a dim apprehension in his face, but whatever his thoughts he kept them to himself.

"We must rush it," he cried to her, and seizing her firmly lent all his strength to the force behind them, and bore her up the hill at a pace she could never have managed alone.

Another tree crashed behind them, and at the same moment they came out of the wood on to a clear space of short, downlike turf, and by a few more steps into the shelter of an arched gateway.

"Were you frightened?" he asked breathlessly, looking at her with curiosity.

She shook her head.

"I don't think so, not for myself. If anything had been going to happen to me it would have happened at The Mallets. Are we there?"

"There" simply meant in shelter to her. She was not at all concerned to know where, so long as it *was* shelter.

"Nearly, we have only the court to cross."

But the courtyard, which might have been protected, one would think, from the wind, was turned into a very playground for the elements. Twice they essayed to start and twice were knocked backwards as by a mailed hand. Some mad witches' ball seemed to be in progress, and for one small moment Christina's courage gave way. Without warning her strength seemed to leave her and she was afraid of the wind.

The man knew, and, gathering her up in his arms, struggled with a strength that was hardly his own towards the great doors of entrance. Once his fingers were on the latch the wind played its part and burst them open. Christina found herself deposited on the floor in a heap and saw him fighting to close the entrance. There was a sudden silence as he strained to hold the doors to, and slipped bolt and lock as if against some tangible enemy, and then turning leant against them with shaking form and panting, laboured breath.

Christina recovered first. She saw they were in a vestibule with inner glass doors cutting off the rest of a long corridor or hall that ran at right angles to it. It was all very silent, there was no sign of any one watching or waiting for them.

At this juncture a proper heroine would, of course, have fainted, but Christina did nothing of the kind; she gathered herself up off the floor and looked at her rescuer with a smile.

"That was clever of you," she said, nodding at the doors; then she saw he was in worse case than herself. She looked round hastily for assistance and following the line of his glance, saw a bell handle, which she pulled vigorously, with the result that in a minute hurried footsteps came pattering along the passage. They were shuffling, feeble steps, so that she was not surprised when an old man and an old woman ap-

peared, and uttered cries of consternation at the sight that met them. Christina knew in a moment that their anxiety was all for the man leaning against the door, though their amazement at her presence was unmistakable.

"Oh, Master Desmond, Master Desmond! And we was that sure you would have stayed down at Garrett's!" cried the old woman wringing her hands.

Her master had recovered himself a little by now. He let the old man take off his waterproof, and he managed to gasp out:

"See to the lady, Hannah."

Hannah obeyed at once.

"Come you in, come you in, you poor young thing! Such a day as I never did see, no, not in sixty years, and you so young to face it!"

With such inconsequent phrases Christina was drawn into the inner hall and again — wet and dripping as she was — into what suddenly struck her as amazing warmth and quiet. She had not known she was cold before, and the suddenness of the change confused her mind. She was just aware of shaded lights, dim, rich colour, and a peace and quiet that could not yet conjure the stress and din out of her head. She just knew her friend of the storm followed them quickly, and that his arm was round her again and helped her to a wide couch that took up one side of the big hearth.

She protested feebly, that she was too wet and muddy, and her protests passed unheeded in the orders he was giving. His voice sounded remote and unreal like the rest of her surroundings. The room seemed vast and only the little oasis near the blazing fire was really lighted. A screen was put between her and the flames, and when her outward wet things were removed she was left in complete quiet.

She lay still with closed eyes and felt her strength

creep back with delicious certainty. Christina did not know that this rapid recovery was in itself almost a miracle. Any thought of weakness was so foreign to her mind that even her momentary lapse seemed a thing to be ashamed of, and far sooner than the patient watcher by her side expected, she sat up and said she was now "all right."

She saw she was alone in the room with the old woman, whose kindly face was full of concern.

"Lawks a' mercy, dear, and you can't sit up yet; why, you'll be fainting right away and then where will I be as have been told I'd no business to hurry you into the warmth as I did — meaning all for the best. But the Master was well nigh past speaking — and you lie still."

"But really I am quite well," persisted Christina. "I'm ever such a strong person and I am ashamed to have given so much trouble." Then she looked round. "Where is — he?" she asked, half laughing. It seemed so funny not to know the name of one who had helped her in such a pass.

"Where is my friend?" she demanded, and saw the old woman's face kindle strangely.

"Ay, that's the word to say, Miss, and I'm glad to hear it!" And then, with an abrupt change, she said, "When you're quite fit, Miss, I'll take you to my room and we'll find you some dry clothes."

It was an amazing surprise to Christina to find when she crossed the hall with the kind old woman that it was only five o'clock. It seemed to her as if a long night had intervened between the present and the dreadful moment when the wave had dashed her against the rocks by The Mallets. In spite of her boast, she found when she came to move, she was both stiff and sore, and submitted to be packed away again in blankets on a sofa in the little sitting-room to which she was conducted, with a good grace, and

here she fell asleep, undisturbed by the low murmur of voices in the adjoining room.

Loomis, the old man whose thin, bent form and cadaverous face was a striking contrast to Hannah's round, wrinkled countenance, was doubtfully considering Hannah's offered solution to the clothes difficulty, which did not entirely commend itself to him.

"The Master said, 'Find her some clothes!' and what's mine going to look like on a pretty young lady like that?" she demanded indignantly.

"Who's to see her?" he asked crossly.

"Who, but the Master? They're going to dine together to-night or my name's not Hannah Gubbins."

The old man smiled in a dry, withered fashion, as if his features were unaccustomed to the exercise.

"You'd better be quick and change it, then; the Master's just said he hopes you'll make her comfortable in here."

Hannah gave him one searching look, then turned and marched out of the room as majestically as her short allowance of inches would allow. Loomis looked after her, rubbing his thin chin in a doubtful manner.

"She'll do it if it is to be done," he muttered; "it's a woman's job after all. But them clothes — that's another matter!"

Hannah walked straight into the big library where her master was again in possession, lying back in a chair and looking far worse than the girl now asleep in Mrs. Gubbins's little room.

"And you'll forgive me troubling you, sir," she said in her kind, cracked little voice. "But Loomis was not liking to ask you. And what shall I do about the young lady's clothes. Hers won't be dry till to-morrow and there will be no keeping her in bed, I think, when she wakes up. She's dropped off to sleep again now like a baby, but she's none the worse that's

clear, and it would be cruel to make her stay in bed. Besides which the bed isn't made yet and I've got to get the fire lit. I'm putting her in the little room next to mine, what my niece had and hope that's what you approve, sir?"

She stopped, a little breathless, and her master, who had listened with a quiet patience that marked his intercourse with these two old retainers of his, answered her kindly.

"You do just what you think best, Hannah; make her comfortable, as I said."

"Then I'll just get some clothes out of the big wardrobe in Madam's room, sir." Her heart was in her mouth as she spoke, but she betrayed no sign of doubt.

He started perceptibly, and she discreetly eyed the ceiling.

"Haven't you anything else — they wouldn't be aired, you know," he added nervously.

"Not aired, and you said as how I was to take care of them? Well, sir, I didn't expect that of you! But men don't understand these things, asking your pardon all the same. You need not fear I'll put the young lady into damp things. But other than those there is none, seeing as she would hardly like to sit down to dinner with you in my dress which would be a fit that would make a cat laugh — and you nearly a stranger, too."

"But, Hannah!" put in the man sharply. "I told Loomis — the young lady won't come in here to dinner. You must make her as comfortable as you can."

Hannah still regarded the ceiling with displeasure.

"Then she isn't a lady, sir? I'm sure I'm sorry I troubled you, but a more ladylike young person I never did see, and it's small wonder I was mistook though —"

He interrupted her with patient anger.

"She is a lady, of course — that's it, don't you see?"

"No. No more will she, sending her to the servants' hall."

"Well, let her sit here and I'll go upstairs."

"And what's that room of yours like to-night, sir? And what will we say to the young lady when she asks after you?"

"I don't know, what you like!" He was evidently ill at ease, and Hannah pushed her point.

"And the chimney smokes something awful in this wind in my room, many's the time I've been going to see about it, and there's no other room that will get warm in this weather, fit for a Christian to sit in."

"Oh, have it your own way, Hannah," he acquiesced weakly. "I might have known it was no use to fight against you and Loomis!"

She beamed all over her old face.

"Me and Loomis, sir, wouldn't want ever to go against your real wishes, and you know it as well as we do."

He smiled rather mournfully, but there was a little tinge of recklessness in his voice.

"You know my mind better than I do, do you? Well, to-night have your way."

"And the clothes? Madam's?"

"If you must."

He was clearly less willing to give way on this point, but Hannah waited for no more. She dropped a queer, old-fashioned curtsey and slipped out of the room like a shadow.

"Is it my real mind, I wonder?" he said to himself. "It will be an interlude — let it pass at that. If she is a stranger here, as she must be, it will not hurt. She's a brave girl."

He tried to assure himself his mind was only occu-

pied with the question of the dinner, but at the back he knew he was in a strange turmoil as to what dress his guest would don. Which of the dimly remembered robes of Madam, his dead mother, would grace this vital, living girl. He thought of Christina as small and his mother as tall, but in reality they would have been much the same height; and the recollection of the cold austerity that even now checked the warm course of his blood, and that to his morbid imagination still clung to anything and everything that had been hers—the thought of this, in contact with the fresh, glowing life of the girl, was almost a horror to him. He had given in to his old servants against his own judgment, but for the moment he had not been sure his wishes were not on their side. Now he almost feared to hear the rustle of her dress across the floor, and stood with his back to the door, alternately scoffing at himself and listening to dead, unwelcome voices speaking out of the shadows.

Christina slept for nearly two hours and then woke with all feeling of lassitude gone, and only conscious of joy in the pleasant warmth and comfort round her. There was all she could want in the way of clothes spread out before the fire, including a double choice of dresses. Mrs. Gubbins stood holding a dress over each arm and regarding both with anxiety.

“They’re well aired, my dear,” she said; “but which is the best for you is more than I can say?”

What she wanted to say was, which would be most acceptable to the master, but since she could not determine that herself, it was no use mentioning it to the stranger.

Christina examined them with interest and excitement. One was a heavy grey velvet dress with wonderful adornments of old lace that already showed yellow from want of air. The other was a sumptu-

ous robe of red-brown velvet bordered with fur embroidered in flame and gold. It appeared nearly new and almost mediæval in make.

"This?" questioned Christina. "What is it? A fancy dress?"

"Yes. It were made for that — some great fête that Madam was to attend."

She sighed.

"Didn't she wear it?"

"No. It was just before — the trouble; after, she had it altered and wore it once, but he, Master Desmond, — the Master, I should say — he never saw it."

"It was his mother's?" She laid the beautiful gown down with a certain tenderness and stroked its soft folds.

"It was Madam's — yes." The old woman's voice was dry and short. "It's warm," she went on after a pause, "that's why I brought it down."

"Does Mr. ——" And then she stopped. "It is too absurd," she cried. "I do not even know his name."

"Mr. Stressborn."

"Did he wish me to have these things to wear?"

"Yes!" lied the brave Mrs. Gubbins stoutly. "Look at your own clothes steaming wet, and could you get into mine?"

Christina nodded comprehendingly. After all it was very simple. She could not have explained her momentary hesitation. She looked at the dresses again. For some reason the grey dress repelled her and the rich, warm brown was attractive.

"I'll wear this, then, if you please," she said.

CHAPTER XIV

THE very small glass in Mrs. Gubbins's room was insufficient for Christina to see the full effect of the brown velvet dress, but she got the impression that it was not unbecoming, and sailed down the corridor to the library in Mrs. Gubbins's wake with all the dignity the wonderful garment appeared to demand. The dignity was not perhaps enhanced by the little dimpling smile her quaint appearance drew from her, as she caught sight of herself in a big dim mirror near the library door. Mrs. Gubbins here somewhat basely deserted her and so, as her knock was unheeded, she opened the door and walked in.

Stressborn, still standing by the fire, turned almost with an effort and saw her, as an amazing vision in gold and brown, which served as a mere background to a charming face alive with health and vital strength, demanding admiration for the background, of which alone it was conscious.

He took a step forward and stopped with an effort of will.

"Is it all right really? — my wearing this, I mean. It looked so warm and cosey, and Mrs. Gubbins said I was to wear which I liked?"

"It is more right than anything else in the world," he answered blindly. Then recovering his staggered self-possession, he brought her to the fire and indicated a deep chair with a great bearskin thrown over it. His desire to take her hand and lead her to it as to a throne, was almost too much for him. It would be so simple, a mere pretty playing for which

her unconscious joy in her own charming appearance called.

He seated himself with his back to the shaded lamps, so that he could watch her with the firelight threading red-gold strands into her hair and bringing out marvellous shades of colour from the velvet gown and emphasising the strange embroideries. She was still a little pale, though the fire was doing its best to remedy that; but from the sweep of her soft hair off her level brows and the delicately defined angle of her face to the slim foot with its springing step, there was no line of weakness or lassitude in her. Youth, that immortal desire of mortals, health, courage, confidence of love, all were there to be read by the discerning eye. Stressborn read, and by reason of that confident kindliness of hers, and the courage which took the unusual present as a mere simple movement of the clock of time, there dawned in him a new-born, spiritual humility that set aside any consideration of his own worth or unworth as itself unworthy consideration so long as he might serve her.

She talked away to him with a simple frankness, accepted his interest as a matter of course, and told him of the circumstances that had landed her a visitor in Fremly, and a guest of Mrs. Filson. Finally she told him of her walk, the rest in the cave and her foiled attempt to return by The Mallets.

While she talked Loomis entered with the dinner, and proceeded to arrange a small table near the fire, his silent, deferential manner giving no sign of his real excitement.

When he announced all was ready, Stressborn rose and looked at the table laid for two with such scrupulous care.

"I apologise for asking you to dine here with me," he said a little stiffly, "but there is no other room ready—I only use this, you see," he almost stam-

mered; "if you will let me—" His voice trailed off inaudibly.

"I certainly don't want to dine alone," she protested laughing. "After such kindness that would be a dismal thing to do—as for the room—" Her eyes wandered from the circle of flame round them into the dim shadows beyond. "It's quite beautiful, why should you use any other?"

She took her place at the table as she spoke.

"It has the beauty of shadows," she went on dreamily. "I want to see it in daylight, though."

She was still standing, but, seeing he was waiting for her, took her place with a blush.

"I thought perhaps you'd say grace," she explained hastily. "I got into dreadful disgrace with Mrs. Filson the first evening because I sat down before grace was said. So I determined I would always wait and see in future. I don't like to hurt people's feelings."

"I don't in the least mind your saying grace," he answered with almost wistful gravity.

"I'm afraid I don't, for food—yes, I did, for Mrs. Gubbins's tea! How lovely it was. But food generally is not so very interesting, I'd heaps rather say grace for a beautiful sunset, or a picture, or things like that, wouldn't you?"

"For shelter in the storm?"

"Oh, I said that?" she replied frankly. "How thick the walls and windows must be here, one can't hear the storm at all in this room."

"Mightn't it have gone down?" he asked a little curiously.

She shook her head.

"No, I feel it still."

"The windows are all double, and the walls at least four foot thick, otherwise in this wind it would be a poor port."

He waited on her as they talked, for Loomis had

withdrawn. The strange intimacy of the meal, the glowing, leaping firelight, the soft radiance of the lamps, and above all the sound of her voice so untouched with trouble or shyness, all this troubled his soul in a dim way. It struck some unknown note from which he shrank as one afraid, yet feared to avoid. A mist settled over his mind. He—Desmond Stressborn—was not really there. He saw himself, as it were, down a vista of long corridors, not him but rather one in his likeness permitted to perform some gracious service in heaven itself.

In such a mood he took up the small chased flagon that Loomis had set by his side and rose to fill her glass. From his far-off habitation he felt this "Desmond Stressborn" touched on some wonderful mystery here.

He left his own glass unfilled, and forebore to look as her lips touched the melted ruby harvest of long forgotten summers.

"This, too," she said, looking at him, "is one of the beautiful things for which one may say grace. Sunshine stored up. We only have it on festivals at home, and it always seems to me a kind of service, homage to the earth. Aren't you going to have some, too?"

He shook his head.

"Don't you like it? Or do you think it wrong? Lots of people do. But I can never understand why. I wish you would tell me."

"It's not that with me."

There was a little silence, and then he repeated these words quietly, looking at her the while:

"If Time should lend to you the Cup of Joy
Drain not the last sweet drop but something spare:
So when the Cup's withdrawn Time shall be
Your debtor—and remit some penalty."

A flame of protest rose to her eyes.

"Oh, no, no. I don't like that at all," she cried. "I don't know who wrote it, but it seems to me cowardly. There is no trust in it. If I have joy given me, I take every tiny bit of it and hold out my cup for more."

"Spendthrift!"

"No! God doesn't give us joy and happiness in that niggardly sort of way. He wants us to be happy."

"Are you so sure of that?"

"Of course."

He was silent and she went on meditatively.

"I know lots of people don't think so. They seem to think He gives them all the dreadful things — illnesses and unhappiness and evil generally, and that all the good, beautiful things are either natural or else just belong to the senses. It seems terrible that they can believe it, but they do."

Her eyes were full of questioning interest, he could not but answer.

"I am sure of this," he said slowly. "We are responsible for our own evil and have no business to put that on the shoulders of Providence."

She was clearly relieved.

"I am glad. I was almost afraid for the moment you belonged to the other kind of people, and —"

She stopped, not with embarrassment, but from sudden attention to a new thought.

"And?" he questioned.

"Oh, and I didn't want you to be. It didn't fit. Do you live here alone?" It was the first personal question that she had asked, and he knew it was interest and not curiosity that had prompted it. Yet he hated answering.

"There are Mrs. Gubbins and Loomis."

"She is a dear. It's so beautiful to grow old and still be interested in things."

He moved his chair back. Did she know anything, or did she not? His better self needed no assurance, but he pandered to the paltry suspicion.

"How long have you been in Fremly?"

"Not ten days — the longest ten days I have ever spent in all my life; and all because Mabel Chancely has diphtheria, which she wouldn't have if they hadn't been so frightened about it at first."

"Is that your theory?"

"It's true, isn't it? But one couldn't make Mrs. Chancely see it, so the poor dear took endless trouble to send me out of the way to these friends of theirs. Of course, it was very kind of them to have me, but I really begin to wish my mother would come back," she sighed faintly.

"She is abroad?"

"In Tierra del Fuego."

"It is certainly — far off," he commented gravely.

"She is nursing her sister, who is very ill and has no one with her, so it is abominably selfish of me to want her back, when I have heaps of friends."

"I can imagine that."

He rose as he spoke. The simple meal was over. He had hardly eaten anything, yet down the misty vista through which he still saw himself, his physical well-being was beyond dispute. It had been in his mind before the meal to leave her after, and to face the solitude of some other distant corner of that shadow-haunted house, but now he remembered nothing of that intention. This evening he was lifted from purgatory to Paradise.

They sat there talking in the same restful, unimportant way and presently she spoke again of the silence of the storm.

He went to a window and flung back a curtain and a shutter. Christina went near and pressed her face to

the cold glass while he held the curtains together behind her.

Blackness upon blackness was without. No shape or outline broke the utter void, only against the window ledges, and where a stream of light filtered out and cut the blackness like a knife, there was white — the whiteness of snow. And the sound like the voice of a vast city — like the roar of many waters, thundered out of the darkness, and now and again a shattering, rending sound gave a note of fury to the thunder.

She stepped quickly back through the curtains into the warmth and light of the room.

"God help men at sea to-night!" she murmured half under her breath.

"Amen!"

He crossed himself instinctively as he spoke.

Then he shut to the heavy shutters, and the terrific voice was deadened.

"There should be music even in the storm sound," she said a little tremulously. "I have never felt afraid of it before, but it is too dreadful!"

"Would music change it for you?" he asked.

"It is the only thing that can make it bearable, or help one to know the purpose of it."

He hesitated a moment. He could give her what she wanted, but to him it was like giving part of his very soul — the one beautiful thing that was left him for his own. Moreover, he was not sure of his mood.

"If you will stay here by the fire, I will play to you."

She curled herself up against the big bearskin and, though she heard him moving about in the far, remote end of the shadowy room, she made no attempt to see what he was doing. The fire crackled and the soft ashes dropped noiselessly on the hearth. She thought

how still it must be there quite alone, then through the stillness there came the deep, low notes of an organ, chords that seemed part of the air she breathed, pregnant with rich harmonies that rose and fell and quivered with meanings too complex for words. Presently it swelled into vast sounds suggestive of illimitable Powers dimly understood, but still ordered by a Law that had never been fathomed. She knew nothing of what he played, or what a master touch was on the keys, but she did know she wished him to go on — on — on.

Some old Italian church music followed, that brought tears of pure thankfulness to her eyes, and then again there came a tender, gentle theme full of healing. How tired she was! — but it did not trouble her, it was so blissful to let herself be tired, and just to rest on that ocean of sound, the sense world satisfied, the soul unfettered.

The fire continued to crackle and sparkle, the grey ashes still fell. Outside the blizzard still tore and screamed across the earth, wrath with the very shadows of the snow still falling — falling — piling itself up, obliterating roads and every landmark.

Stressborn left his instrument at last and came out of the shadow to the fire. He stood looking down at the sleeping girl as she lay back against the fur. The untroubled repose of her face so troubled him that he turned his glance away quickly, and stood gazing at the fire instead.

Considering the joy she had brought to him, the thought in his heart, which almost amounted to an unspoken prayer, was a strange one.

“If only she might go to-morrow and never see nor hear of me again!”

That was his thought, and if it were not a very brave one it was natural to one on whom the hand of Fate had lain heavy for long years. He allowed

himself to look at her once again, spread another rug across her feet and went out.

When Christina awoke, not far from midnight, cramped with her strange position, the fire was still burning brightly, and opposite her on the sofa Mrs. Gubbins sat nodding over some long-abandoned knitting.

CHAPTER XV

DESMOND'S prayer was not destined to be answered. The next morning the gale had certainly abated, but the snow was falling steadily. Deep drifts lay across the land even in the comparative shelter of the pine woods, and out on the open moor the road was impassable.

Mrs. Gubbins brought Christina her breakfast in bed, and also her clothes dry and clean, and it must be recorded that Christina looked regretfully at the beautiful gown she had worn the night before.

She gazed out of the window a little doubtfully.

"How far is it to Fremly?" she asked.

"Eight miles, but there'll be no Fremly for you to-day, Miss; not as much as a message, though I'm thinking the Master has sent out to see."

"It's much nicer here than in Fremly, any way," Christina replied gaily; "I shall not cry if I can't go."

Mrs. Gubbins opened her mouth as if to say something and shut it without accomplishing her purpose. This attitude of indecision remained with her all the time she assisted the visitor to dress, but either discretion or fear won the day and presently she went away and sought comfort of Loomis.

"She's just a child, nothing more than that," she remarked sitting down heavily in a chair, and lifting her hands with a helpless gesture.

"Who does she know in Fremly?" Loomis asked indifferently.

"Them Filsons; but she's none of that lot any one can see! How is he?"

"Restless! terrible restless, but no sign as how he's the worse otherwise. When he heard the drifts were deep in the wood, he was for going out himself to see."

"Lord save us! What did you do?"

"Told him as how it was tempting Providence, which had been mortal kind to him last night, and said it would be terrible bad for the young lady if he were took ill."

"What did he say to that?"

Loomis began rubbing up some glass, and his grim face looked a little grimmer.

"Said it would be all the better for her most likely. That's what he said!" He snorted in indignation.

"Sakes alive!" murmured the old woman.

"Not but what, mind you," went on the man, waving a glass dispassionately; "not but what she has done him a power of good already. It's broken the order of things—that's what I say—broken the order of things," he repeated this to himself once or twice, as if he found some comfort in the phrase.

The queer couple remained silent, brooding over the same thoughts. The dull monotony of their existence contained no other interest than the well-being or ill-being of the man they had known from infancy. All things that came into their ken were measured by the effect on him, even this guest that chance had brought to their door was of importance merely by measure of her influence on "The Master."

Meanwhile he—oblivious of this absorbing interest—stood in the deep embrasure of a window, with irresolution swaying his mind this way and that. The glamour of last night was gone. He had no longer to deal with a second self in a position sanctioned by angels, it was a question of Desmond Stressborn himself, outcast from society, outlawed by himself, isolated by circumstances, and host by his own rash ac-

host of an extraordinarily unsophisticated girl — that was how he put it to himself — who was now the involuntary captive of the weather in a house where, he knew, with bitter knowledge, not a really respectable person in all Fremly would visit under any circumstances, and which was peculiarly “anathema” to Mrs. Filson. He knew that much of his neighbourhood, at least. Only the previous summer the truth of it had been brought home to him very emphatically through the instrumentality of Mrs. Filson herself. It had been proposed to hold a school treat at Strancebury Bay, a proposal emanating from a new Vicar unaware of the shoals and quicksands about him. As the place was more or less private property, the Vicar had applied to Stressborn for permission, which had been readily granted, offering the children the run of the grounds and tea at the Castle. After some delay, he was told that owing to the wishes of one lady who was concerned in the “treat,” the plan was altered and the pic-nic would take place elsewhere. That lady was Mrs. Filson, and her objection to the locality and the Vicar’s action were based on the grounds that Strancebury Castle under the circumstances was a most undesirable place for children. Gossip seldom came to Stressborn’s ear, but the fishermen who had been interested in the idea as a possible source of small profit, found out the truth of it, and, with rare indiscretion, told “The Master.” He smiled a little grimly now, remembering this, and the fact that Mrs. Filson’s own guest had become and was likely to remain his guest. Yet, putting Mrs. Filson aside, he still felt at fault. He ought not to have brought the girl there with such weather at his elbow, so to speak. He should have taken her to the beach and let Mrs. Saunderson or the Portons take charge of her; or faced the storm himself and the hospitality of his dear fisherfolk. There must have been twenty ways out of the

difficulty, had he but taken the trouble to find them!

It all spoke of a supersensitiveness, a certain weakness, that Christina would have dissipated at once. But a morbid habit of thought that has been indulged in for years cannot be cast off at once. It required the actual healthy presence of Christina herself to fling it even into the background. She came in to him at the moment, so confident of welcome, so radiant and serenely unconscious of any difficulties at all, that for the moment he, too, doubted their existence.

She looked round with interest. The shrouded mystery of the big room was gone under the hard betraying glare of the snow without. It was just a very big room that had once been something more, rather shabby, surrounded with bookcases that covered the walls for about nine feet up, above which, against green tapestry, dull heavy portraits frowned. Above these again, an arched ceiling with heavy beams rose, giving a curious remoteness to the room. The organ was built into a deep recess at one end, and on the east side of the room there were three windows sunk into the thick walls. The first fact that struck her, however, was that as she faced these windows she could see nothing but the sky; and stepping nearer she saw, with almost a shock, the unbroken greyness of empty space. For the windows looked out over sea and sky only; the cliff fell sheer away below the main wall of the house, which indeed might almost be said to be part of it. There, far below them, the sea boomed and thundered, and flung itself against the rocks, and the grey sky bent to meet the horizon. The formation of the cliff allowed for no view to right or left other than open sea. It was infinitely and fearfully desolate. She understood now the sense of blackness on blackness she had felt on the previous night when she had stood in the curtained recess beside him. Now, through all that wide space, snow

fell, melting out of the grey above into the grey of the sea below — falling, falling, falling with a slant from the north, not gustily, but with mechanical evenness, like the great outpouring from some vast reservoir.

Christina's eyes grew dizzy with looking. She turned with relief to look at the room again.

Near the wide hearth where she had sat the night before was a big writing-table, that looked as if it were rarely used, a pile of books, one of which lay open, stood on an oak stool; by the organ was another table covered with music. Everything looked faded and worn, and old; the room took its colour from the books, whose mellow bindings and beautiful tooling were both old and new. These were cherished, costly things, Christina thought, and they imparted an air of comfort which otherwise would have been entirely lacking.

Stressborn watched her as she looked round, with her interested air of survey, and then back at him with a smile.

"It's a very good room to live in," she said, with a desire that he should assent. He did not, however. He was very slow of speech — this man who had passed so many long days alone here on the verge of nothing.

"If you care about books, there are some here worth seeing," he said, hesitatingly. Since she signified assent, he took down certain volumes for her, at first with reluctance and a certain shyness; but she was eager, really interested, and she discerned that these books were more to him than the mere echo of other men's thoughts. Many were copies that had brought solace and joy to greater men than the writers, books with histories, bound with love and gathered together by one who understood them. He forgot his shyness

and doubts, and showed them with self-forgetful pleasure.

"I have not had much time yet," he said, putting back with care an artistically bound Plato, "and it is difficult to secure real treasures unless one goes about one's self, which, of course, I don't do."

Then and then only it came to Christina with a shock, that this was the same man whose character she had been daring enough to defend in face of Mrs. Filson's disapproval, in whose cause, moreover, her own temper had been so ruffled that she had started on that very walk that had brought her here, here to the place which her innocent desire to view had occasioned such an unexpected denunciation of its occupier. How absurd and ridiculous it all seemed, and under what a ludicrous mistake Mrs. Filson lived with respect to her ideas of Mr. Stressborn. They were such silly ideas that Christina, looking at her host as he stood replacing the books they had taken down, smiled to remember them. "A young man your father and I consider quite unknowable!" Christina thought this was very likely more true than appeared at first sight. Neither Mrs. Filson nor her husband would be likely to "know" anything whatever of this quiet, shut-in, lonely man, who lived, so to speak, at their very gates. She sat on a window-seat and watched him with much interest. He had none of Richard Sefton's strength and vitality; after twenty-four hours' acquaintanceship she found he was more a stranger to her than the man in the pine woods had been after twenty-four seconds. His thin figure was well shaped and he had neither the movements nor the walk of a mere bookworm or recluse. His deliberation in movement indeed seemed rather of intention than of nature. His long face, with its clean-cut angles, was tanned and coloured by sun, wind, and

sea, and his eyes had the steady, far-off look of the watcher. His mouth was the worst feature. It was too closely shut, and indicated a suppressed sense of irritation that might be under control, but which certainly needed a great deal of that valuable asset. Christina could not even hazard a guess at his age. There were queer little lines on his forehead that contradicted a vague impression of youth, as did also his unresponsive manner and the fettered sense of movement that so troubled her. She was sorry for him, though she could not possibly have said why. She was just conscious that his quiet dignity was a mask to something that was not well to see, still less well to hug in silence.

Christina had as little idea of class distinction as any girl could have, and it was quite involuntarily that he fell at once into place in her mind with Richard Sefton and Mr. Tennent, and claimed no kinship with the Chancelys' menfolk, still less with the Filsons. The most reassuring thing about him was that it was quite easy to be silent with him. Indeed, he had a trick of dropping into silence that he never sought to break himself, and Christina wondered with a funny little sense of amusement how long he would keep this remoteness up if undisturbed.

At this moment Loomis entered with the luncheon, and proceeded to arrange the table as he had done the night before.

It was only then that Stressborn remembered with a start that he had intended presenting his visitor with the freedom of the room, and leaving her to her own resources while he went out to investigate the state of the road that the fishermen declared was impassable. Here was the morning gone already!

Loomis announced that a man had come in to say the road through the wood was completely blocked,

and till the snow stopped it was impossible to see what the moor way was like.

Stressborn looked so disconsolate at this news that Christina felt a little embarrassed.

"The weather never studies any one's convenience but its own," she said apologetically. "It's taken a most unfair advantage of your kindheartedness."

He was covered with confusion.

"No, no! it's not that! Why, your coming is the biggest event that has happened for years — but your friends — I was thinking of you —" He broke off in embarrassment.

A momentary boyishness had leapt out and amazed her, and then vanished as swiftly as it came.

"Yes, I suppose they will be anxious," she said thoughtfully. "Telegraph wires are all down! I only hope they will not send and worry Mrs. Chancely. If it were mother now!"

"Yes, that would be much worse," he agreed.

He dismissed Loomis and served her as he had done last night, only with an increased gravity of demeanour. He had no illusion about the situation at all in the cold light of day, and it occupied his mind so greatly that he became a little absent-minded.

"My mother would not have been frightened as Mrs. Chancely would be," Christina explained. "You see, she is one of the people, who know when you pray about anything it will be all right. And that is very comforting when things are worrying."

"Does experience justify her faith?" he asked a little curiously.

"Of course. It really is hardly faith, I suppose," she added, raising her candid eyes to his, "when one is so sure of a thing. What do you think?"

"I fear I am not in a position to give any opinion," he replied.

Christina was on the track of a thought and did not heed him.

"I know," she cried, "what it is I was trying to remember. It's in the 'Peter Pan Book': 'Perhaps we could all fly if we were as dead confident sure of our capacity to do it as was bold Peter Pan.' And then 'for to have faith is to have wings.' That's what I meant. If one isn't dead confident sure one's prayer will be answered, then it's only just a kind of comforting thing to do that isn't much use."

He leant his chin on his hand and looked at her. She spoke of these matters as another might speak of the latest book or gossip. He had known very few girls when he had been part of the world, but he did not fancy that they were like Miss Massendon.

"You care a great deal for these things," he said slowly.

She became suddenly grave and a shade of distress crossed her face.

"You mean because I talk of them? I suppose I ought not to, but you see my mother and I always spoke of them and of what interested us; just what came into our heads. Then when she went away and I went to London, just at first I did the same, till I noticed people seemed to think it strange, and I learnt not to do it. But here it seemed different again."

His hand shook and he set down the glass he held.

"I am glad you feel so. Your mother must be unlike most mothers, I think, Miss Massendon."

"Yes," said Christina calmly. "She is. Will you play to me after lunch?"

"I wondered if you would care to see the Castle — what there is to see, anyhow?"

She gave unqualified assent, and he rang for Loomis and gave him certain orders. Presently the old man reappeared with a fur coat and cap.

"Are we going out?"

Stressborn explained to her that the rest of the house, being unused, was likely to be more chill than was pleasant. She submitted therefore to be muffled up, though she laughed at his excessive care of her.

The house was built round a centre, square courtyard with an arched entrance on the western side. The eastern and oldest part jutted right out on to the cliff edge, as has been seen. On the south side a long, narrow strip of garden ran between the cliff and the building. It was in this wing and in the old eastern part facing the sea, that the only rooms now used were situated. On the cliff front of the house a little to the right of the long library (which was the original "Hall") a small terrace had been quarried out of the very rock itself, and here in summer, rock and sun-loving plants thrived and blossomed in profusion, and made the only spot of colour in all the stern, grey sadness of the neglected place. The western wing, through which was the approach, was in ruins; they viewed it across the courtyard from the windows of the corridor, which ran the whole length of the eastern portion. The north side was used for store places and for stables for the one ancient horse, who did the little work required of him in a manner befitting his age and dignity. But on the first floor above this was a long range of rooms in better repair. Here were a collection of armour, cabinets of treasures, and stacks of furniture shrouded with holland. In such a room the ashes in the open grate showed they had been a fire recently, and on a table near by lay a partly written catalogue.

"I am cataloguing the armour," said Stressborn. "It does not seem to me it ought to be done; some of it is very fine."

Christina would have liked to say that it was not interesting, but by this time she had a certain reluctance to speak of himself.

It was the building itself he was at most pains to show her — carved doorways, decorated arches, and in the remoter places traces of a far older building.

“There has always been a castle here of some kind or other since there were people in the land and an enemy to come over the sea, but little by little it has been pulled to bits, and moderns have played with it till it’s like this.”

“I feel as if the spirit of the place remained,” she said slowly, for indeed a sense of stress, of resistance to life, a fatal holding on to something shadowy and remote, clung to the walls and touched her responsive spirit strangely.

“If only that could be pulled down, one would not complain,” he broke in bitterly, his curious, dignified reserve dropping its guard for a second.

Christina noted it, but she was too generous to hold it in memory.

They had reached the angle between the eastern and southern wing, and had halted by some steps leading down to an arched door.

“That,” he said half hesitatingly, “is the chapel. The people here are mostly Catholics, you know.”

Christina nodded. “Yes, so Mrs. Filson told me,” she admitted. Stressborn longed to gather what else Mrs. Filson had told her, but he would not for worlds have questioned her.

He opened the door of the chapel and stood aside.

“A great deal of it is Fourteenth Century work will pay you to look at it.”

She went down the steps and then saw he was following.

“Aren’t you coming to show me?” she asked in surprise.

He shook his head.

“You can look at anything you like.”

Christina still paused; she was very puzzled,

her instinct to leave him unquestioned struggled with a very natural curiosity, and something else more vague — a desire to understand the curious sense of oppression the place was making on her.

"Aren't you a Catholic?" she asked gently.

Stressborn pushed back the curtain that hung over the door a little further.

"I am out of it," he said shortly, "and I never go in there. But there is no reason why you shouldn't, if it interests you. You can tell me if it is in good order," he added a little grimly. "At least, I'm responsible for that."

She went slowly down the steps into the little chapel. It was a beautiful building. She knew nothing of its real architectural value, but the fretted roof seemed to her a fantastic dream, and the painted windows to be dipped in fire. It was evidently used daily, there was a faint odour of incense, and a dim lamp burnt just above the altar, which was of plain stone, headed over it a shrine of alabaster and gold that even her unaccustomed eyes recognised as amazingly beautiful work, and over all again a picture of the Divine Mother and Child. This was the first glimpse of the interior of the chapel. The rest was a mass of stone, with seats and a wooden table.

one
above
Piers
nine years

"I suppose that was a brother," she thought. "How curious to call them both by the same name! I wonder what my Desmond's other name is."

Christina would have been at a loss to explain why these mementos of later days caught and held her attention to the exclusion of the older associations of the building, but she could not at once leave them. They were dumb memorials of people, some of whom had lived in the compass of her own short life. People who had lived in this lonely, sad house — she could only recognise it as that — and left behind them none of the shadow of it lightened or any sense of happiness enjoyed.

She looked round once more and wished Mr. Stressborn was with her, that he might explain the wherefore of a great fishing net on the wall, and the little model of a ship standing before the figure of St. Nicholas.

These things were in her mind far more than the chapel itself when she rejoined her host outside. He was sitting on a stone window-seat, his elbows on his knees, and his eyes on the flag-stones at his feet. The cold of the corridor struck Christina as intense, and she was suddenly angry with him for waiting there. Why had he not walked about, at least. He got up as if the cold had indeed numbed him. He asked her nothing about her impressions of the chapel. It was the last thing he had to show her, and as they went back to the library Loomis met them, saying a fisherman had reported it might just be possible to get to Fremly the next morning, as the snow had ceased.

Stressborn departed with Loomis, and Christina went into the library, and for a while stood looking out of the window at the crawling sea below, fancying what life would be like, here, faced every day with that outlook and the silent, empty house behind it.

CHAPTER XVI

STRESSBORN did not appear next day till about ten o'clock. He had evidently been out, for his coat was powdered with snow and possibly the cold outside had brought into prominence the set lines of his face.

"It's still quite impossible for you to get through, Miss Massendon," he said. "So you will have to put up with us a little longer, but Purton thinks that he can manage to get into Fremly with another man, and they will take a letter for you to your friends."

He showed her where to write, and left her again abruptly.

Christina wrote a full and particular account of her adventure. She dwelt largely on her good fortune to have got to Fremly safe, and to be found so kind a host, and she said at all times of her unconventionality of thought, and how it had occurred to her there was no other way of getting out, and how she still held out, and how she was glad to see the roads are openable, I said, and how she was glad to see you and not be able to get out of the country.

...the ... and ...

"I beg your pardon, Miss, I was just ..."

...the ... and ...

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

"I think it ..."

He told her he wanted to go down to the South Bay, if she could find her way back from the North Gate alone.

As they went down the long corridor, she saw from the windows the snow was still falling gustily again, and on the far side of the courtyard it was piled five feet high.

"It's hardly weather to play on the beach," she suggested doubtfully, with a glance at his high boots.

Stressborn laughed. She remembered she had not heard his laugh before, and it pleased her. It was a nice, boyish sort of laugh.

"It's not much weather for the fisherman's boats, either, Miss Massendon. I just like to see all's right."

It seemed preposterous that a mere matter of dress could make a difference in a man, but it did seem to Christina that Mr. Stressborn looked younger and more vital in this rough garb than she had hitherto seen him. She thought, too, it suited him well.

As they passed the chapel door, a short, stout little priest came out and, seeing them, would have slipped back again; but Stressborn stopped him.

"I was wanting to see you, Father Mathews," he said. "Porton tells me he is quite ready to take Mrs. Daly in when she can get away from Fremly. You had better see to it."

There was a certain curtness in his tone, and an air of discomfort on the little priest's face that puzzled Christina. She was too interested in hearing Mrs. Daly's name again, however, to give it much attention.

"How will Mrs. Daly get work here?" she asked. "I should not think the fishermen's wives would have much plain sewing to put out."

"How do you know Mrs. Daly does sewing?"

Christina felt she had been indiscreet.

"She came to Mrs. Filson's a few days ago. I thought she looked ill. Does she belong here?"

"Yes. They mostly come back. Father Mathews should have had her back before. Did Mrs. Filson help her?"

"Well, no, I think not," Christina admitted. "You see, she did not like her being a Catholic."

Stressborn felt that this did not cover the ground, but he questioned her no further.

They reached the little tower at the north angle of the Castle which looked right down into the Bay, with its dozen or so of cottages huddled together above the beach, and its tiny harbour, where the fishing boats swung and tossed and strained at their moorings. The great waves surged round the little breakwater and rushed up the steep, pebbly shore, receding and dragging back with them the tugging boats, swinging them this way and that in wild confusion. Even to Christina's unaccustomed eyes that confusion looked dangerous. The windows of the tower jutted out and gave a good view on the shore below. On a table behind them stood a large telescope and sea-glasses and several charts were spread out. Stressborn took up the glasses and looked attentively at the boats.

"Porton's boat is loose," he said quietly. "I must go and tell them. Can you find your way back alone, Miss Massendon?"

"Surely you are not going down to the Bay now?"

"A boat's a boat. They can't live without them, and in all probability they are sitting mending nets in the sheds, and have forgotten to keep a lookout. Porton generally does that."

"Isn't there any other way of sending word?"

He gave a slightly petulant movement.

"No, there is no one else; besides, I meant to go out. I never stay in doors all day."

"Let me come, too."

"This weather?" He smiled at her and quoted

her own remark. "It's hardly weather to play on the beach."

She shook her head reproachfully, and again gazed out of the window. When she looked back, he was gone.

Christina had no intention of going back. She remained watching and wondering how long it took to get down to the beach. She pressed her head close to the glass to see further. The loose boat had got clear away from the others and was slowly drifting out towards the entrance of the harbour. Before she could bring herself to believe that Mr. Stressborn was half way down to the Bay, she saw that one of the small boats, that were pulled high up on the beach, was being dragged down to the water's edge. Two men jumped in, then for awhile it was out of her sight.

"I hope they will be in time," she thought. "Porton's boat looks as if it were going out to sea 'on its own.'"

The loose boat had indeed drifted against the tiny breakwater and was being surely sucked out by the retreating tide. Presently the little rowing boat came in sight again, dodging in and out amongst its bigger brethren. It plunged up and down, now caught on the crest of a sullen breaking wave and now swallowed up in deep troughs of smooth sliding water. One man only was rowing, the other stood upright in the bows with what Christina guessed to be a boat-hook in his hand. Christina caught sight of him clearly just as they approached the loose boat, and she snatched the glasses from the table, with a gasp.

There was no doubt about it. The man in the blue jersey and big boots was undoubtedly Mr. Stressborn, and for the first time it struck Christina that it was very dangerous work these men were doing. The small boat plunged and rolled in the heavy seas as they

swept in at the narrow entrance, but always it crept nearer the free vessel, which was alternately carried back by the in-coming waves and then sucked out from its poor shelter by the outgoing tide. At the end of the jetty, Christina could see a little group of men and women watching.

"How could they let him go?" she cried indignantly, and then quieted herself to watch again. Time after time the standing figure in the little boat struck out at the trailing, broken rope of the loose ship. Once he got it, but it was torn from his grasp, and once she saw a big sea "rush" the small opening just as he leant forward for his prize, and then boat and men and all were swallowed up in a swirling, foaming pile of grey water. An inarticulate prayer sprang to her lips as the wave passed on and for a minutē she could only see one figure in the boat. But Stressborn had apparently been knocked backwards and he seemed to have as many lives as a cat, for he scrambled up again, and in the momentary quiet that followed he caught up the rope and drew it on board. Christina could see the two men leaning over it, and then they both began to row, and to row furiously, while the rope now attached to another coil in their boat rushed out over the thwarts. Once within touch of the jetty, there were hands enough to help them and to haul on the rope till the loose boat was dragged to safer ground.

Stressborn did not wait for this. He considered them quite capable of seeing to it, and shaking off Mrs. Porton, who sobbingly protested she had promised her husband to watch the boats in his absence, he clambered up the steep path that led directly to the north tower.

He was wet to the skin, for he had not waited to put on his oilskins, and even his hardened hands were cut and bruised by the slipping, icy rope. He had not

done this thing to shame these simple fisherfolk, he had gone merely because he was the nearest man to jump in when old Mesler pushed out. There might have been a momentary hesitation among the men, for it was another man's affair, and they had all wives and children of their own. The hesitation would only have been momentary, but it might have cost Porton his boat.

Stressborn had no thought of finding Christina in the Tower room when he entered, and she sprang to meet him with shining eyes.

"That was rather too exciting a game to watch," she cried, with an odd little laugh. "But I'm glad you won."

He was greatly taken aback and his first thought was to thrust his injured hands into his pocket.

"They hadn't taken it in," he said indifferently. "I did not know you were watching. Shall we go back?"

"I think so," she answered, touching his sleeve. "Whatever will Mrs. Gubbins and Loomis say?"

She kept an anxious eye on him as they went, but he walked freely, less deliberately than usual, and he held his head just a trifle higher than she had seen him do. The excitement of the hour had rekindled in him, as it ever did, a something of the boyish spirit that had never had time to burn itself out. The weariness and physical collapse would come after; that, too, was inevitable.

"Look here, Miss Massendon," he said, half way down the passage, stopping her with a half deprecating, half apologetic smile, "there isn't any need for Loomis or Hannah to know anything about it. They'll only worry themselves. I'll just run up and change."

"I don't wonder you're ashamed, and anyhow you are not to wait here," she said severely.

He half laughed, half frowned, but he followed her obediently.

At the foot of the stairs he stopped again.

"You mustn't think, Miss Massendon, that they can't look after themselves down there. I only happened to be nearest, you see — and I have very good eyes."

"Ah, do go and change," she told him with a little catch in her voice. "I don't care about your fisherfolk — just look at the carpet!"

He looked down guiltily at his feet. The big boots had left wet prints all along the corridor. He turned and fled upstairs.

Christina had tears in her eyes, though no doubt it was very foolish of her. "Why, he is just a big boy," she thought. "How he wants looking after! But how splendid it was!"

When he came down again, about an hour later, "the boy" had been put off with the wet clothes. He was his old, collected self. They sat over the fire and she could see he was chilled to the bone, and his face was white and strained. He spoke querulously to Loomis when he came in, and Christina caught the old man giving his master a suspicious glance.

Stressborn, however, continued to talk to her and to tell her stories of the fisherfolk, of their bravery, their endurance, and their hard lives. Christina tried to assure herself that the expression of expectant fear in his eyes was only the effect of the firelight.

He did not appear again after lunch, and Christina was once more left to her own resources. The afternoon wore away, and about four o'clock Mrs. Gubbins brought in tea for one, and laid the little table by the fire silently.

"Isn't Mr. Stressborn coming to tea?" she asked, rather forlornly.

"No, my dear, he says —" she hesitated, and then repeated herself; "he says will you excuse him."

Christina wondered, and ate her tea in solitude; afterwards she read again, and when the shadows shut down, sat in the gathering dusk and wondered what had happened. No one came to light the lamps and the house seemed strangely still. The distant corners of the great room seemed peopled with shadows, the portraits on the wall were but white-faced ghosts staring out of a gloom that weighed on her.

She went out into the hall and down the corridor in search of Mrs. Gubbins or Loomis. Their rooms were deserted and the fire in the little sitting-room, where they were mostly to be found, had gone out. With a vague sense of discomfort and loneliness, Christina groped her way upstairs and along the upper corridor. Here the lights were lit and here she tumbled against Mrs. Gubbins coming out of a curtained doorway with a tray in one hand and wiping her eyes with the other. Christina heard Loomis speak behind her.

"Go and see after the young lady, and get some more hot water — boiling, mind!"

At sight of her, Mrs. Gubbins hastily set down the tray, and turned to shut the door behind the curtain.

"Oh, Miss," she cried. "You must think I have forgotten you and so I had, but I'll come and light up now. Loomis has a cold and I've just taken him something hot."

Christina looked at her curiously. It was the first time in her life she had been told a lie that was so palpably a lie, even she was not deceived by it.

"What is the matter, Mrs. Gubbins?" she asked.

The old woman cast a furtive look towards the closed door and shook her head.

"What should be wrong, Miss? It's —"

The door opened and Loomis appeared.

"That hot water, quick!" he said curtly; "then light up."

He disappeared again, and Mrs. Gubbins went mechanically towards the stairs.

"He does not appear to be very ill," remarked Christina, groping her way after her.

Mrs. Gubbins made no reply. She stopped and lit a lamp in the corridor, and Christina took the tray from her almost without her knowing it.

"It was wrong of me to forget you," Mrs. Gubbins said humbly, as she hurried about the small room they used for kitchen, and pushed the kettle into the heart of the fire. "Was you frightened, my dear, in that big room all alone?"

"No, not frightened. What is the matter with Mr. Stressborn?"

She spoke so quietly that the old woman did not realise that her poor little secret was guessed.

She wiped her eyes with her apron.

"I've seen him worse, but for all that I pray Porton may get back to-night."

"Is he ill?"

She found it hard to control her impatience to get at the truth of things.

"Do you mind staying here while I takes this water up to Loomis, he's rare impatient, and then I'll come and put things right for you in the library."

So Christina was again left to her own surmises, and even in that little cosey room, with its firelight and cheerful lamp, its red cushioned chairs, and a contented cat curled up on the rug, she was still aware of the vague shadows of the house. They roused a feeling of opposition in her, a desire to open the windows even to the cold air without, and to break down some unnatural barrier, and to breathe freely.

When Mrs. Gubbins returned, she found that her

guest, instead of sitting quietly by the fire waiting for her administration, had set a cloth on the table and laid out plates and glasses from off the dresser which stood at one end of the room.

"Lor me, Miss, what are you at now?"

"Getting supper ready," Christina replied gaily. "Perhaps you don't know it's nearly half past seven, and I am hungry?"

"Oh, deary me, to think I forgot. But this trouble always makes a ninny of me. What would the Master say? But, surely, my dear, I'll have it ready for you in the library in a jiffy."

"No, you won't," persisted Christina firmly; "I am not going to have a meal alone in there, I am going to have it here with you, and you are going to tell me what is the matter with Mr. Stressborn — and Loomis," she added, after a pause.

She had her way. Ten minutes later the two were seated at the table duly taking high tea, in spite of many demurs on the part of Mrs. Gubbins.

She learnt the little there was to learn. Mr. Stressborn was occasionally subject to bad heart attacks, complicated with attacks of terrible pain. "Sort of neuralgia," Mrs. Gubbins explained. Whatever it was, it was bad, and Loomis had to keep at hand a certain medicine and administer it at stated times till the attack was over.

"And he broke the bottle yesterday, and there's only half a dose left, and Porton mayn't get back with it to-night," she moaned distressfully.

"I see," said Christina.

"He wants it now and Loomis daren't give in case it do get worse later on."

"What brings on the attack?"

"One can't say. Loomis think gettin' tired, but sometimes one can't feel

doing anything he wants to, for all that. Out all weathers, on the sea and in it; like as if he were seeking his death, I often thinks."

Christina's appetite had vanished without being appeased. Pity so poignant as to border on tears sunk into her soul and with it infinite longing to help.

She asked if he had always been subject to the "trouble" and Mrs. Gubbins shook her head indignantly.

"Never! as fine a boy as you could see for all he had to bear. No, it's that wicked pr—" She stopped sharply and altered her speech. "It's only lately," she said confusedly.

Christina refrained from further question: clearly there was some trouble that was not to be spoken of, and it would be unseemly to catechise Mrs. Gubbins, who, however, volunteered the almost unnecessary remark that Mr. Desmond couldn't bear that any one should know or mention his "being bad."

"Loomis was vexed you should know about it," she added. "But I told him as I was sure that you was not a young lady that would be wanting to hurt any one's feelings, and that if you knew how Mr. Desmond felt, you would say naught at all to him, and he'd never know as you found out."

"He shall not know," said Christina soberly.

CHAPTER XVII

“**D**EAR Miss Massendon,—
“This is a terrible misfortune! Of course, I was greatly relieved to hear that you were safe.” (This was underlined.) “I assure you what with the wind and wondering where you were, I have hardly slept the last two nights, though Alfred insisted you would have got into shelter somewhere.” (Christina could hear ‘Alfred’ saying it.) “But I cannot help remarking that since The Mallets is quite a mile nearer Fremly than Strancebury Head, it is a great pity that you should have continued your walk in such weather instead of coming straight back here.”

Christina read this twice in bewilderment. She was certain she had explained to Mrs. Filson just what had occurred. That refinement of stupidity, that digests of plain fact only so much as suits its own lethargic theories, was new to her, and so inexplicable, she was readier to believe that Mrs. Filson had missed a page of her letter in some amazing way, than that she could have so misread it.

“—Or that having got to Strancebury, you did not rather take shelter with some respectable fisherwoman rather than at the Castle, though it may have entailed a few hardships, which I must say were not entirely undeserved. This would have been far safer for you than the luxury and comfort you appear to have found at the Castle —”

Christina’s bewilderment increased by bounds. It took only one more sentence to bring her to the summit of indignation.

"That you should have been taken to the Castle at all is only what one might expect under the circumstances, and I can only offer as your excuse that you forgot our conversation on the subject a few hours previously (underlined) which I need not comment on now, only it has an unfortunate appearance."

Christina remembered well that conversation, and her face flushed scarlet. She flung up her head with a little gesture of disdain, and saw Mr. Stressborn watching her with an intent look in his eyes.

A sense of shame that should surely have been Mrs. Filson's made her drop her eyes, and look at the offending letter again.

"Alfred has had to go to York, so I am in despair as to the best course to pursue, as I still — perhaps unnecessarily — feel responsible for you. Since you have not come back but merely sent this message, I would, if it were possible, send someone to you to save appearances. Alfred, of course, would not let me enter the Castle, and there are the girls to consider, but my cook is a trustworthy woman and well known in Fremly, though it will be impossible, I fear, to conceal from people what has happened, and I have not yet thought of any possible explanation to offer to our friends.

"It would, of course, simplify matters for you if you could join Lady Losford abroad at once. I am sure I could explain things better in your absence, and I shall suggest this to Mrs. Chancely, to whom I shall write tonight, sorry as I am to convey such distressing tidings. If she wishes you to *join* her, I believe there is no real danger now you are inoculated. I would meet you at the station with your luggage, but, of course, can promise nothing definitely until Alfred comes back. Above all things I wish to avoid contact with this Mr. Stressborn."

"Oh, how can she?" cried Christina, burning tears rising to her eyes, tears of wrath and shame for an-

other's dull, narrow mind and bitter unkindness. She crumpled the letter up in her hand and stood facing her host, shaking all over. In all her sheltered life nothing had ever hurt as this did. No weapon had before pierced the armour of her confident love of mankind. Anger left her bare and defenceless, with all familiar supports wrested from her. Instinct and intuition were alike useless to her for the moment, the only possible support and the cause of it all stood facing her, and watching with self-reproach written in every line of his white face.

"You don't like your letter," said Stressborn gently. "I was afraid of this, Miss Massendon. You will have to forgive me, if you can. I ought to have thought, but I did not, till too late." He stopped, looked down and then at her again pleadingly: "The storm beat everything but the idea of shelter out of my head."

It was more than she could bear that he who had helped her at need, had treated her with a courtesy and kindness that had never failed, had spoken to her soul as no member of the Filson family could ever do, or hope to do; — that he should think it necessary to apologise to her was too much! Also, she saw with dismay that she had betrayed herself, or rather Mrs. Filson.

"Don't say anything like that," she cried sharply. "As if there were a shade of excuse for this!" She glanced at the letter. "It is that that needs apologies, only what use are they? It is all wicked — stupid!"

It was an anti-climax, but she did not see it; her anger had deprived her for the moment even of her sense of humour.

"Will you let me see Mrs. Filson's letter?" he asked quietly. "Then I shall know better where we are."

But she gripped the paper tightly. Show it to him! That was quite impossible!

He smiled at her.

"It would be best really," he insisted. "You see, I know Mrs. Filson — by report. I can quite well guess the sort of thing she would say, and it will be easier to decide what to do if I know just where we stand."

But Christina only shook her head with evident horror at the very idea.

He thought rapidly. It was really essential for him to see what had actually been said, and he took the only possible way to make her yield.

"Do you think I was asking for curiosity? I assure you it will not hurt me. I know just what — just how I am regarded at Fremly."

She wavered a little.

"I shall think you attached too much importance to it, and won't give me a chance."

At that she handed it to him without a word, but with an upward tilt of her head.

He read it without any sign, even of anger, and then pointed out to her that she had not seen the last page.

Christina would not look.

"I do not want you to think I am unkind, my dear, but it is all so upsetting. I was so pleased to do anything for Mary Chancelly, and now what will she say to me! It's that that worries me so.' You see, she wrote in a fluster," he urged. "She really is thinking of you and from her point of view it is disastrous. You know I am not — visited —" He said it a little whimsically, as if for the moment it rather amused him.

"As if that counted," she flashed back hotly. "When kindness, goodness, help, everything, was against the balance!"

"Thank you," he said; "I can't even now really

regret that I brought you here, though I ought to." He walked away to the window and looked out. The sun, which had broken through that morning for a short space, had disappeared again, and the clouds, grey and ominous, were gathering together on the horizon.

"Porton got back at two o'clock this morning," he remarked. "I think from his account, Mrs. Filson will have plenty of time to concoct a passable story and arrange things for you."

"She will have nothing to arrange for me at all!"

Christina's voice was quite calm now, also no one could mistake the fact she meant what she said.

"I do not want any one to run any more risks for me, but when there is a chance of sending a letter or wire I will send to Sir Vallory."

"The men will always go when it's humanly possible."

Christina suddenly remembered that the letter was not the only commission Porton had had the previous night, and she gave Stressborn a swift look. Had the medicine been badly wanted before that late or early return?

He looked much as usual, except for lines she had not noticed before round his eyes, and also he was slower in movement. It struck her she was keeping him standing, and she went to the fire and sat down on the big sofa. He seated himself, too, and she felt reproachfully that he seemed relieved.

"Can you keep me till I hear from Sir Vallory?"

"Who is Sir Vallory?" he asked to gain time. He must at all costs keep his mind clear, but this morning it would not work well. He must pledge nothing rashly, too much depended on it.

He was still absently turning over the letter which he had kept in his hand.

"If you would rather I did not stay?"

He spoke hurriedly then.

"It's not that; but your friends the Chancelys wouldn't even let you stay in a house with illness in it."

"That's not the case here."

"It is much the same to some people."

She stamped her foot.

"Some people are — stupid. I am not going back to Mrs. Filson, anyhow." Then, after a pause, she added: "Sir Vallory is my uncle. He lives in London."

She sat considering this admission, since he made no comment. Was it allowable under her compact with her father? Just for the moment her ideas were strangely confused. The thought of her father became dominant and a need of sending to him more imperative than her need of Sir Vallory's advice.

Stressborn arrived at last at an answer to his perplexity. This was no ordinary girl, to be measured by the standard of a Mrs. Filson. She was neither made for nor by the laws of convention, and he would keep her so long as she wished; if her friends did not know her to be immaculate from any surrounding circumstances, the fault was theirs. She would be and must ever remain untouched by considerations that weighed with the Mrs. Filsons of the world. He got up and, without reference to her, dropped the offending letter into the fire.

"Thank you," she said. "How did you know I was longing to see you do that?"

"I had no right, I just took it," he answered grimly. "It was not good for you to have it near you."

So he gave the lie to his own conviction, and knew in his heart it was not she but himself that could not endure that letter in the room, from which he had so carefully excluded all thought of the world that was not his, and never could be his again.

"You will stay here just as long as you wish. You

will do just what you like with everything," he spoke slowly and deliberately. "Your wire shall go to-night, if you want that."

"I don't. I want no man to run risks for me."

She knew with a certainty that whatever he thought, last night's struggle had not been undertaken for *her* service.

"Is it dangerous?"

He looked towards the distant windows and the gathering greyness without, and it gave him a subtle pleasure to be able truthfully to say "Yes."

The letter was despatched the following day, and there was nothing for Christina to do but await events. She did so very contentedly. The days were full of quite definite happiness to her and of wonderful revelations and moral enlightenment to Stressborn. Time after time Christina's persistent good fellowship and gaiety conjured back the "boy" in him, and time after time he would lapse back into his old depths of reserve and aloofness. She did it knowingly, of set purpose, for Christina was well aware by now that it was no fanciful shadow that lay over Strancebury Castle. Mr. Stressborn evidently had a history that accounted for, though it could not justify, Mrs. Filson's extraordinary attitude towards him. She would have liked to know just what it was, but she was more concerned for the moment in defeating the shadow of this vague unhappiness, than in finding its origin. It was a real pleasure to her to wake up this "boy," even though he so soon slipped away.

She taught Stressborn a "baby" game one day — a game of drawing an apparently aimless line on a piece of paper and giving it to someone to make into a picture. Stressborn proved rather good at it and more inventive than Christina, who made desperate efforts to convert a series of weird angles into a boat.

Stressborn looked over her shoulder.

"If you mean that for a boat, it isn't the least like it," he said frankly. "Good heavens, look at the bows!"

"But I don't even know which are the bows," she protested meekly.

He took her pencil away.

"This is how it goes. I meant it for a boat right enough."

He drew rapidly and she watched, not his pencil, but the thin, nervous hand, at once so hard and so expressive. There was a newly healed cut on one side.

"How did you do that?" she asked, touching it gently.

"It's only the mark of the rope. This is how it goes — that's the stern."

"Oh, you had better give me a lesson," she cried, laughing.

"I want to — now listen!"

He explained it all very clearly and well, but presently spoke more of the purpose of it all than of the bare meaning.

"You are a born sailor," she remarked. "You seem as if the sea were part of your life. What would you do if you couldn't have it?"

He had been half sitting, half leaning on the table in a careless attitude, but he sprang upright with an indrawn breath, and everything he had been for the moment vanished as if by magic. He just stood looking down at her with such dumb reproach in his eyes that she put out her hands and touched him.

"I am so sorry. What have I said?" she asked. "Please, I didn't mean to hurt you."

He evidently struggled with himself and answered her quietly.

"You see, I have had to do without it — that is all — I am sure you did not know."

He wandered irresolutely away to the window and remarked on the improving weather; then he went out.

Christina sat with her elbows on the table thinking. It was by no means the first time she had seen this rapid transition. She knew he would come back presently his old polite self, very anxious to please her as a good host, and with the patient, wistful look in his eyes a little more visible, and she would begin all over again to coax him back to confidence and friendship.

How sorry she was for him, almost as sorry as she was for her father!

She could not help contrasting the two men in her own mind, Mr. Tennent with his almost supernatural inability to show his own mind, and this undoubtedly weaker man showing involuntarily and unconsciously every secret of his soul that his lips would not utter. Life did not seem to have been very kind to either of them.

Out in the little servants' hall, meanwhile, where Loomis and Mrs. Gubbins sat together, the situation was talked over exhaustively, and not one item of its development was missed by this attentive old pair.

It was a great hour when Loomis came out, and, setting down the dish he carried, stood looking at Hannah and rubbing his chin with satisfaction.

"What do you say to this?" he said. "She's made him laugh, I heard him."

Hannah would barely credit it, but she heard for herself next day.

Christina still pined for exercise, which was denied her by the weather, and she made Stressborn rig up a rope across the hall to serve as a Badminton net, and they both tired themselves out playing a game at which neither was proficient. They had both laughed then and Hannah had heard them.

"You said you never got tired," he remarked as

they returned to the library, and Christina flung herself back in her favourite chair.

"I don't call it tiredness. It's just enough of a good thing; besides, it's getting dark. You are much more tired than I am."

"I have had no practice. Even I would not be so unfeeling as to ask old Loomis to play Badminton with me."

This was in reference to a late reproach she had made over some service he had taken from the old man, that Christina thought he ought to have done for himself.

She watched him contentedly as he repaired one of the old racquets Mrs. Gubbins had unearthed in some attic.

"No, I don't think Loomis would play well," she allowed. "But what can you do?"

"I spend a lot of time on the sea and in the summer in it."

"And you collect books and play the organ divinely." She nodded to him, across the space that divided them, confidentially.

"I am making a catalogue," he reminded her.

"But you are not really interested in it."

A day or two ago he would have disliked any reference to his own way of life, but now he had begun to look on it with new eyes and to feel some anxiety to know how she did regard it. In some subtle way, he was himself concerned about the life he had made for himself and taken so for granted.

"It fills up time," he offered as his excuse for the catalogue, of which she clearly did not approve.

"That's what I complain about," exclaimed Christina, sitting upright and speaking very earnestly. "It fills up time. It all fills up time! But one does not do things for that."

"I do," he answered quietly.

"Yes, that is what I complain about." She said it again emphatically.

"There is a great deal of time, you know." He offered the excuse whimsically.

"Just as much as any one else has."

"Only mine is of no consequence, you see."

She turned to him, her eyes suddenly misty.

"I can't bear to hear you say that."

"Then I won't. It is of consequence to Loomis and Mrs. Gubbins and a score of fishermen down on the Bay."

She nodded again.

"That's better, but it is not enough."

"No?" He got up, his old nervousness and dread of the topic overcoming his new-born interest in her interest.

"It's not enough, Miss Massendon, but it's all I am allowed, and I have to make the best of it. Shall I play to you?"

She went on looking at him with her gentle, scrutinising glance that never hurt, though it rendered him a trifle uneasy to-day.

"It's so bad for you to be shut up here and never see people."

"Would you suggest I ask Mrs. Filson to lunch with me?" His tone was light and she recognised with a start that he would not have spoken so three days before.

Then he suddenly changed again.

"Miss Massendon, you are something that has been chipped off the sun, and wandered here by mistake. It's very good to entertain the sun, but please don't look into the corners; there is too much dust there."

"And when I have gone, you will let it go on accumulating."

When she had gone! The words brought him face to face with what he had tried to keep from him with

growing difficulty. Soon, very soon, she would go, must go, and the old life commence again. It was unbearable, that old life — now — it would never be bearable again. She had pushed back the shadows in which he lived, and he had looked at them with her eyes, and how could he bear them to close in again? He was not yet thirty, this man with the grave, dreamy eyes and lined face. His unspent youth called out to her to keep it free, to give it back to the life that had slipped from it untasted.

She stood to him as the embodiment of some possible existence that was his by right. Revolt, hot passionate revolt, against all that had brought him to what he was and all the morbid thought that had kept him there, rose in him.

So he stood opposite her and looked at her as if she were not a real tangible being but some incarnate idea, that had set him in flames.

At length he turned aside and went silently across the room to the organ and began to play.

The music quivered and shook through the quiet room. Storm-tossed, passionate music ever on the brink of some glorious harmony and ever escaping it. It ended with quivering chords vibrating with longings for some impossible resolution and then ceased unresolved.

The silence that followed was so prolonged that Christina rose and went over to him. He sat with his hands lying idly at his side and bent head. He was not even conscious of her approach.

“That is not the end,” she said gently. “It is only a little bit. Why don’t you finish it?”

He looked up.

“I don’t know how,” he muttered hoarsely, “there is no other end.”

The aching anguish in his eyes and voice raised her instantly into that region of healing that was her own

"land," had she known it. She had no fear of the trouble that faced her, no nervous dread of intruding. To her it was only that here was a fellow-being in pain and it was her task to heal him. More than her healthy girlhood, more than the deep maternal instinct that lies in all women's hearts was there. For just as there are those whose hands will soothe away physical pain, in whose touch is true healing, even without their knowledge, so with some few the gift of soul-healing is found, an instinct that can sweep down barriers of convention and lay its healing balm on wounds none have dared to touch for very pity.

"Are you quite sure you have tried to find one, or have you let that particular theme get the upper hand? It's all very well in its way but there is too much of it, you know."

"Oh, I know, I know," he interposed hastily. "It has got the upper hand. It's bad and morbid and all the rest, though I never saw that till you showed me, but I don't know how to end it." He hesitated over the last words, and put his fingers nervously on the keys again, making a pathetic attempt to keep to the figurative sense of things.

But Christina had no finesse in her. She had not spoken of premeditation or chosen a simile to point a moral; she only knew he wanted help and she must give it.

"Mr. Stressborn, we didn't pretend about the storm the other day and you helped me, and you didn't pretend about the fishing-boats and you helped them; well, I should like to help you now, if I could — I don't know what is wrong, but I do know that you seem to let whatever it is, have its own way with you, as if evil things were a real power. Anything that makes you unhappy and — and like that music you played, *can't* be right. You oughtn't to let it get to such a pass. It's like pulling the blinds down on a sunny

day. There is sun outside and you won't look at it!"

"People in prison don't see the sun," he said significantly.

"It does not follow that it's right or wise, or that they are any better for it, or even that any one has a right to shut them out of the sun."

"There's no question of right or wrong, it is Law. I've been in prison, you see, five years."

Her hand gently stroked his coat sleeve.

"Poor, poor you, who need such a lot of sunshine!" Her hand still rested on his arm, she was unconscious of everything but her longing to comfort him and he was still dumb with his misery, which her very kindness seemed to accentuate, though in reality this was the only way healing could reach him. He had to be aroused to resentment of the fate he had hugged to his own undoing.

"I don't see how a question of prison can effect your whole life," she went on courageously, not even shunning the ugly word. "After all such a lot of people must have been there. Heaps and heaps, if you come to think of it. Whatever they did ought to be wiped out and forgotten when that's over. Anyhow they have no right to think it absolves them from further work in the world. I should think they owed their fellows rather more than most people."

"The world repudiates such debts."

"Nonsense. It hasn't the right! Why should you accept favours from the world?"

"Favours?" he looked up, bewildered at her amazing way of regarding things.

"Isn't it considered a favour to be let off paying one's debts? But I am one of the world and I don't let you off. I insist that you do your own job whatever it is."

She smiled at him so tenderly, so confidently, that he bent down and kissed her hand.

"How good you are. How good!"

"Let in the sun!" she cried, with a little impatient shake of her shoulders. "I believe you are living with ghosts!"

He shivered and his hand gripped the edge of the organ.

"You must get away from them. Promise me you will, Mr. Stressborn. I shall not be able to go till you do promise."

"That is a very bad argument to use," he returned unsteadily. "You have nearly driven them away, but when you have gone they will come back."

"Not unless you let them. Oh, do try and believe it!" She saw then what it was that had troubled her in his habitual look. It was that patient acceptance of ill that meant paralysis of will in the end. It appalled her. It was something that she was still too young to reckon with. Ill, evil, unhappiness, were things for her youth to fight against, to overcome, never to make terms with, never, never to accept as part and parcel of life itself!

"Mr. Stressborn," she cried in quick pain. "You are not to do that. You are not to think that these things are part of your life. I know they are not."

He dusted the organ keys slowly with his handkerchief. He would have to tell her the whole story in the end. He knew it. She was no longer to him the mere embodiment of sane happy life, but a girl, a woman, whose very presence had stirred his sleeping blood, roused a passionate resentment that shook him in spasms from time to time. He would have to tell her — but not now.

He got off his seat and closed the organ.

"I will think of what you say," he said, in a voice he tried hard to keep cool and steady.

CHAPTER XVIII

CHRISTINA did not see Stressborn again till the next morning was some hours old. He had seen her. He watched her crossing the court to feed the birds with crumbs, which she spread in a sheltered corner of the arched entrance. He had heard her talking to Mrs. Gubbins in the long corridor, whose wide fireplaces had been filled since her advent, and put to use. He had been conscious of her presence every minute of time, conscious also that it was going from him. That morning had brought a telegram from Sir Vallory at last, saying he was coming to fetch her.

Christina had sent the wire to him to read.

“Glad you are safe shall be with you as soon as possible.”

So the message ran, and it should have reached her the previous day.

Stressborn stood in the comfortless room he called his bedroom and thought aimlessly of many things and purposely of a few. The hours were dwindling down to thin measure now, and this would soon be for him only something that had passed — a maddening excursion into freedom that would render ten times worse the narrow limits of his existence. For the passion for freedom, the desire to get out of the tangle would not outlast her presence, he knew. It was not born of his own soul but of her clear vision, her passion for joy and all things beautiful and healthy and sane.

But before Sir Vallory Massendon took her away from him he meant to tell her the miserable business.

It was inevitable that she should know. So many people would be able to tell her if she asked. Sir Vallory himself could do so. But she should not hear it from any one but himself. It was not that he thought for a moment of dealing more gently with it than another, but the idea of her discussing it — just the outside part of it, that was common property, was intolerable. Even if it turned her friendship to dislike and her pity to contempt, it would not make a shadow of difference — he would continue to love her just the same and as he had a right to do. It is to his credit that he recognised it was a right, and never pandered for an instant to the morbid fancy he should put such ideas from him. He did love her and had done so from their first hour of meeting, and would go on doing so when they would not meet, even when the shadows had it their own way and the whole wretched affair was played out.

It was not merely that she had come into his life with gracious confidence, or that her happiness and her sympathy had erected a momentary barrier between the shadows and him. The matter of his love went deeper than that. He had wanted her all his life. How he had wanted her! She was the very incarnation of his boyish fancies in the far-off days of his adolescence when he had sailed across dancing waters and left trouble on the shore, or when he lay prone in his boat under the burning sun rocking in the long, slow swell of the summer sea. It was of her he had dreamed — her sweet, sane strength, her instinct for joy, her tenderness, her dear companionship, that understood without words all that was worth understanding.

Never in all the twenty-eight years of his life had even the reflection of such a vision trodden the steps of his life; she was built up out of his own mind of fancies, hopes, vague desires, perhaps dim remem-

branches of "the Back Behind Land," but experience had yielded nothing! For such a fulfilment, his life had been empty of all love and the homage he brought her was fresh, pure, virgin in quality, the very soul of the boy who sailed the summer seas—and she had come too late!

Well, at least he recognised her when she came.

The thought crossed his mind as he at last went downstairs that to-morrow he would have the courtyard swept and she should walk there if so it pleased her. To-morrow!

To-morrow she might not be there! He had known that much of course every day, yet it had not before occurred to him just what was meant. It had been like saying, "It will rain soon," or "There will be no fishing," or any other of the small, trivial things that happened and were to be counted as the disagreeables of life. But this was not trivial, it was not disagreeable; it was tragic. She would go away entirely out of his life, he would not see her any more, it would be to him as if she were dead.

It was incredible! Of all the horrible things that had occurred in the past ten years this was the worst. But he had accepted the rest; this he would not accept, at least, not in its entirety.

He went on more swiftly, conscious of a curious excitement, a rapid decision to have something his own way. He would tell her not only his story, but his love. He would not, of course, ask anything in return (he was so far sane), except her friendship, but for that he was prepared to beg as a starving man for alms. Neither pride nor shame should have anything to say in the matter. Pride in him was rank folly, shame had no place, because it was a thing to rejoice in that he loved her; the very act lifted himself above the place Fate and his own sins had found for him.

He went quickly downstairs and into the library where she had gone a moment before.

She was in her usual chair by the fire and had taken a book which she had not begun reading, and she looked up with a little smile of greeting and some relief. She had been afraid she might have said too much on the previous evening.

He closed the door and came straight to the hearth, and stood looking down at her and then away out of the window. The sun had come out and the glare from the sea and snow outside showed up rather pitilessly the shabbiness of the big room. It accentuated also the sharp angles of his face and the very unusual resolution in his eyes. He began to speak steadily and quietly without any preamble whatever.

“Once upon a time, Miss Massendon, there was a boy living in rather a remote part of the country, who inherited so few tastes in common with his parents that at times his father was given to remarking that he might be a — a changeling.”

Christina drew a long breath and settled herself to listen.

“No doubt this accounted for the fact that he did not get on very well with either of his parents. I have often thought it must be very exasperating to have someone about, who really, without meaning to do so, is a living protest against every pet theory and belief one entertains. Oh, they did their level best to mould him into the desired shape, but he was not very mouldable perhaps, or they were not skilful over it. So as soon as he was moulded in one direction he ran out of shape in another. At last he was sent to coach for the Civil Service with one of the men near London, and so into the hands of different modellers. No one seemed to know even then what was the best shape for him, not even he himself, but he had not greatly enjoyed life so far and when he at

last fancied himself free, he did his best to remove the dulness of those former years. The only thing he did inherit from his parents — one of them — was a passion for gambling. I don't suppose you can understand what that is."

Christina made no answer. She refrained from looking at him, but sat with her elbows on her knees, listening and giving no sign even when he appeared to wait for it.

"Well, he had this passion and had it badly; also he did not spend so much time with his coach as perhaps his people thought. He had an allowance, but even if he had been a careful boy, it would hardly have been enough for his needs, and he was not careful, not in the least — think of him as a boy if you can," Stressborn put in hurriedly, "he really wasn't anything else — There were debts and rows, you can guess that much."

Christina's knowledge of such things was completely drawn from books, but she thought she could imagine it.

"This boy got to know one man who attracted him greatly and who taught him a great deal; he never troubled to consider if it were worth learning or not. It was the first time a man of his own class had taken the trouble to be friends with him, perhaps he was flattered, perhaps the man was really attractive, anyhow the boy pretty nearly worshipped him at a respectful distance. This man taught him to play and to play high. He took him to places where one can do that sort of thing, oh, it was on the square as far as such things are square. At first the boy had luck and he thought it would last — did I tell you he was a fool? Then he began to lose, and lose, and lose."

Stressborn's voice dropped. Christina felt there was something dreadful in the repetition of those little

words — some recollection of an agonising experience that had never lost its force.

“He borrowed money of his friend and went on playing, for, of course, the luck would change, that is part of the creed! But it didn't, and a settling day came. The man happened to want his money, what he had won as well as what he had lent. He lived on what he won like this — by chance —”

Stressborn stopped and walked to the window and back. It was the first time he had moved and Christina did not turn her head. Presently he came back and resumed his story and his attitude of attention again.

“When he came to put it all down he owed three hundred pounds or thereabout, and he had five pounds in the world and another twenty to come next quarter. I suppose it does not seem possible to you, but you see he had borrowed quite a large sum. It had been so easy to borrow. He told the man who had been his friend what a hole he was in, and he had laughed and reminded him that as he had had his fling he must be prepared to face the music.”

Stressborn paused again.

There was something in his voice from which Christina momentarily shrunk, something so hard and harsh that beside what she had seen of him it appeared unnatural. He stood still evidently struggling to get mastery over some feeling that had nearly conquered him, and then went on.

“He didn't tell his father they were gambling debts because he had been forbidden to play, and I expect you can guess by now that he was a bit of a coward as well as a fool. All the same he didn't get his money, and the man had to be paid — and others, too — it was a question of — his honour, you see.”

Stressborn's eyes were not good to look at for a

minute, and Christina, who had glanced up with a look of reproach, looked down again.

“The days went on and he was no nearer a solution. He had no friends but these who wanted to be paid and only knew him as the son of a man who might very well be rich, and, in any case, should be able to pay his son’s debts like a gentleman. At last, fate, or the devil, or what you will, left the boy in a room with an open cheque book and the sure knowledge of a careless owner to the same and a large banking account — he took a blank cheque; he was told after he ought to have taken one from near the end, but he hadn’t even the sense for that. He just took the first one and left the blank foil, and so by the evening he had forged the man’s name, not badly, on the whole. It passed muster the more readily that the man was known to be generous to his friends, if needy, though the boy could hardly account himself a friend. You see I still call him a boy.”

Stressborn still spoke very quietly and restrainedly, and Christina clasped her hands nervously. There was more coming; she knew this was not the climax that had turned the boy into a man.

He seemed to pull himself together with an effort. For all he had said, it would seem he could offer if no excuse at least pity and regret, but that was done with now, the boy existed no longer, and he dropped the impersonal form and spoke more hurriedly, with a little catch in his voice now and again.

“I went abroad — I had secured enough money for that — and loitered about a little French place for two days, I think, never daring to see a paper, never daring to plan anything, always waiting. Then I heard two Englishmen talking at a café where I was sitting, and I knew something had happened, and got a paper. There was an account of the forgery, comments on it, details, the whole complete, except that the wrong

man had been that day arrested. I knew him slightly and I had passed him coming up to Trenchard's rooms as I went out, though I knew he had not seen me. I was sure of that. There was only one thing to do, of course, to go back and give myself up. It was the only possible thing — and I didn't do it."

He looked steadily into the fire and pushed a burning log back with his foot.

"It's not worth telling you how I reasoned it out that he wasn't convicted and might get off, that it might be all a mistake — I waited two days before I came to my senses, and then I started for London. I think it was at Dover I bought another paper."

He waited so long after this that Christina made a restless movement.

"He — the boy who was arrested — couldn't see any way out, the facts were all against him, he couldn't face it — he wasn't that sort, so he had killed himself! I had come to my senses too late."

His voice was by no means steady now. He spoke spasmodically and his face had got whiter and whiter. For over seven years he had never spoken of these things to a living soul; those around him, who had known, had kept silence and the ghosts had it their own way. He had not anticipated that the telling would be so unbearable, or that the thing that was so seldom out of his thoughts should prove so unthinkable in words.

He finished hastily.

"He — the boy who died — was a Catholic as I was. He left a mother, the only person belonging to him. I saw her. They had told her as they told me that they could not offer prayers for him. I hope they told her less crudely than the prison chaplain told me — he considered it a case of a lost soul — but he offered me forgiveness! I don't remember word for word what it was I told them, but I know I have

never taken it back. How can I, unless they, too, take back what they said? For the rest, I gave myself up, and I had five years. You will remember you said I should not like to be out of reach of the sea."

He gave a little dreary laugh and dragged up a chair.

"My — my people were both dead when I came out. They had never spoken of me, I believe. They had counted me as dead even before I was sentenced."

This, then, accounted for the little medal in the chapel.

The whole horrible, ugly tragedy of it seemed to rise up and drag from remote corners of that terrible house shadows that might lie in wait for a man's soul that were warders and gaolers more sure than any in His Majesty's prisons. Something of all this Christina guessed. She dared not look at him, but the slow tears gathered in her eyes and dropped one by one on her dress. And he did not look at her. He sat with his arms on his knees looking at the carpet at his feet.

He sat so still that she could bear it no longer, but sprang up and went over to him, and put her hands on his shoulders.

"Oh, if caring could help, how much I could do!" she cried in a shaking voice.

His hands stole up and were clasped over hers. She felt them shaking.

"I ought not to have told you," he said quietly, and very gently moved her hands from his shoulders, but still held them a moment. "I told you myself," he said slowly, "because I love you and I could not bear that any one else should do it."

This was his inadequate declaration. All these years he had dreamt of her, known he would love her when she came, and now all he had to offer was his spoilt life, and all she could give, her transcendent woman's pity.

He looked up at her directly at last and saw the

tears in her eyes and the shadow of trouble on her dear face.

He got to his feet.

"I had no right to tell you," he said hurriedly. "I don't mean no right to love you — but to tell you so — or the rest of it, only you would have been bound to hear it from someone."

She was standing very still gazing out at the wide sky.

"That is all," he said rather shakily. "There isn't a thing else to say, except you mustn't worry over it, please. After all, I have met you."

"Don't!" she interposed sharply. "That is what I cannot bear — your accepting it all as finished, done with, inevitable! There *must* be a way out. It can't be meant to spoil all your life; we must find it — the way out."

"We!" He drew a little breath of wonder. It was so like her and so impossible.

"My dear," Stressborn said gently. "We can't do anything — but I shall remember you said that."

She stood gazing out at the empty sky, her thoughts on his story and not on themselves.

"That man — who was your friend?" she said in a low voice. "What did he do for you?"

His face got greyer, and he moved away from her.

"I never saw him again — That's half the trouble! It's the thing I can't do — forgive him. It's unreasonable, no doubt, and it's a sin." He was silent and then his voice came low and hard:

"I hate him!"

This seemed to Christina the last dreadful touch of all. His helpless misery, his unfruitful repentance, and behind all, this load of hate more vivid to him than all else.

"Have you tried?"

He shook his head.

Christina nodded.

"I can understand," she whispered. "I could feel exactly like that myself."

"It's because I will not even try and because I will not accept pardon that doesn't include the other man that I am outside of things from the Church's point of view, you see."

"And that matters to you?"

"Yes."

It was brief, but it explained many things in a lucid manner. It emphasised also more clearly the unlikelihood of his "getting out" unassisted.

"Listen," Christina said. "I want you to promise me to go on being friends after I go."

"I told you I loved you," he answered in a broken voice.

"Yes, that is because you know how dreadfully sorry I am for you."

"No, no, it is not!" he cried, flashing up in defence of this one sure, safe spot in his universe. "If you hadn't been sorry at all I should love you just the same, and I want you to believe this, that it is not me — not the man who has made such a mess of things that loves you, but the boy that was and the man that ought to have been. If it were otherwise I shouldn't dare to have told you, please believe it."

Yes, it was true, she felt it all through her. Richard had loved her, but he had not made her feel it like this. Because Stressborn asked her for nothing, she longed ardently to give him something, but what she could give, or what she might give, she did not know. She held back the impulse to give all, she feared to give less. Pity had become inadequate, they had got beyond that.

"I do believe that," she said at last. "I believe you love me and I think I love you — no, don't say anything yet. This isn't the end of it, you know."

"Yes, yes, it has to be," he insisted hurriedly.

She put her hand on his again.

"Wait. Don't you see, Desmond, that if God means us to belong to each other, it is no use to stand in His way and resist. It only takes longer to get things done, and if it is so, then it does not matter what you have done, or I have done — all that is over. But we have to be sure. I do not know anything yet. Perhaps it is only that you have to care for me."

"Yes, that is all," he said doggedly and without looking at her.

"I care so much I can't trust myself yet," she replied.

Then they were both silent.

The patch of sunlight in the room had broadened and spread till it nearly lightened the darker end by the organ. It had crept from window to window and laid distorted silhouettes of them across the floor. It showed the dust on the many ledges, the faded carpet, and if it still left the grim old portraits unlightened, yet it continued to creep slowly up the floor to the very edge of the big rug before the fire. And they both sat watching it.

CHAPTER XIX

WORD had been brought to the Castle that the expected carriage was approaching, but Stressborn did not send to tell Christina this. He wanted, if possible, to get his meeting with the stranger over before she came. It was so long since he had met a man in his own rank of life, except Father Mathews, whom he occasionally encountered in the passages, or coming and going among the people in the Bay, and Dr. Consett of Wardly. He knew him professionally, but he could have known him as a friend if he would only have believed it.

As it was, Stressborn felt nervous and ill-at-ease, and could not bring his general passive endurance to bear on the case.

At last a carriage drawn by three horses dragged itself wearily into the courtyard and a tall man muffled in coats and wraps got out. Stressborn, who had thought he would meet him in the hall, went back to the library as he took off his wraps,—which offered hardly the respite of a minute before Loomis announced the visitor.

Sir Vallory's apparently unseeing eyes took in the room and its occupant far quicker than Christina had done. He advanced quickly with outstretched hand.

Stressborn bowed, he did not seem to see the hand, and the two men went up to the fire together.

Something was said of the journey, the cold, the difficulties.

"I consider we are deeply in your debt," Sir Vallory remarked, in his gentle, courteous way. "Christina is very lucky to have found such a refuge."

"I wished to speak about that to you," put in Stressborn hastily. "I want you to understand it was because I knew what the accommodation in the fishermen's cottages would be like, that I brought her here first of all. I did not foresee —"

"It was most kind of you, I can only hope it has not put you to great inconvenience."

His entirely courteous tone and something in his quiet, absent manner told Stressborn that this was the attitude he meant to take and maintain. It was proof of the damage the years had done that poor Stressborn would have understood any attitude better than this of taking him as an equal, and treating him merely as a rescuer of an adventurous young lady.

The adventurous young lady at this moment ran in, and gave Sir Vallory a warm welcome.

"How nice of you to come yourself, Sir Vallory — though I should have been hurt if you had not — you see I am quite safe and well."

Stressborn noted he was Sir Vallory to her and also that their obvious good friendship did not run to an embrace, despite their relationship.

"I really could not go back to Mrs. Filson, she did so annoy me. Please say you want me very much."

"Whether it's true or not?" demanded Sir Vallory sternly, with a twinkle in his eye.

"It is true."

He laughed and turned to Stressborn.

"You see she does just what she likes with us, and I was particularly told she would be no trouble at all."

"That was quite correct."

"It's a question of definition. I can manage to put up with you if you want to come to London. My impression of your mother's instructions is that you were to do just what you liked."

Christina nodded.

"Yes, exactly. You understand simple things quite well, considering how learned you are."

This nonsense had given Stressborn time to pull himself together and accept Sir Vallory on his own grounds.

"I shall have to ask still more of your hospitality," Sir Vallory said suddenly, turning to his host. "I am told the horses can't possibly do the return journey to-night, and I am not sure I want to, if you can put up with us till to-morrow."

Stressborn assured him that it would cause no inconvenience and tried not to look at Christina.

With Christina's help the conversation drifted round to books, and Sir Vallory was soon exploring the shelves and proving a more discriminating excursionist there than she had done.

Neither of the two men was thoroughly at his ease, however. For though Sir Vallory would not have been capable of slighting, or even thinking ill of the man whose guest he was and to whom he stood indebted, still it was impossible to forget entirely in the face of Stressborn's grave aloofness that there was a barrier, which they ignored chiefly on account of the Cause of their meeting.

On the whole, however, Stressborn's manner as a host left nothing to be desired, and Christina felt a little thrill of proprietary pride in noting how finely he differentiated the Master of Strancebury Castle and Desmond Piers Stressborn. She went to bed wondering if by any chance she would see the latter again before she left.

She recognised quite clearly that she must go away in order to learn more certainly just what it was that this strange episode meant for her and for him. Never for a moment did she think it was going to end there with her departure. To those whose lives have been given into the direct keeping of God things do

not happen haphazard and without meaning. Such had been Rachel's teaching and to Christina it was a self-evident truth.

But the next morning came, and the hours of her sojourn were running down and Christina felt restless. She wanted to see Desmond so much and not a glimpse of him had she had. The Master of Strancebury had it all his own way. Now he had taken Sir Vallory to see an old chart of the heavens that they had discovered the previous evening in the south wing.

Christina sat alone in the big library and already felt homesick for the *miss* of it which was coming.

She had been there just five days — days that had held more than any other five years of her life. Ah, if only her mother were waiting for her in London, to whom she could tell all there was to tell!

Of course, there was her father. Christina fell to wondering how much she might tell him and how soon she would see him.

Then the door opened, and Stressborn came in, closing it behind him. It was not the Master of Strancebury now, but Desmond himself, and his face was white and strained, and his voice unsteady.

"There are about ten minutes more," he said. "May I spend them with you?"

"I was wanting you." She held out her hands to him.

"Christina!"

He was not going to play any part now, he was just going to be true. The only compensation for the agony of parting with her was that he need not lie or pretend by word or voice or look.

He took her hands and held them.

"I may call you so once, mayn't I?" he said half under his breath. "It can't hurt you, nothing I can do would hurt you, and when you are gone I shall remember and see you standing there like that."

"No, no! You are not to do that! You are not to see — ghosts — it's so bad for you!"

"Nothing will be good or bad for me when I've lost you."

"You are not going to lose me; oh, my dear, can't you believe it?" she cried. "I am only going away to find out — I shall write and I shall see you again."

But he only smiled back at her. This Sir Vallory who was so kind and courteous would see to that.

"Remember, Christina, that if I could pray, I should thank God every day for letting us meet."

A clock struck the hour somewhere and he started, and drew her a little nearer.

"Christina — for one single moment of all time, let me pretend that there's nothing — that I have the right — My dear! my love!"

She let him put his arms round her; she turned her face up to him, and she let him kiss her.

"I shall come to you, dear, I don't know how — but I shall come."

"Yes, I know, why not?"

She touched his hair tenderly.

"If you would only say that as if you believed it."

"At this moment I believe all."

But he was speaking of the moment of time he had begged from the Powers that be, to isolate from the Past and the Future.

"You will need me."

"Yes, I shall need you."

He smiled down at her, a quiet patient smile, and set her free.

Loomis announcing the carriage, a searching for Sir Vallory, and a finding of wraps and extra coats for Christina, farewells to a weeping Mrs. Gubbins, farewells and pretty thanks to a most commendable host, the sound of wheels growing fainter and fainter in the distance — these things undoubtedly happened.

There was a silence in the house that was new because it was the silence of something missing, and not merely the silence of something that was not there. Stressborn sat in the library from which Christina had chased the shadows, but he found them all back in their old accustomed places, when the evening drew its curtains across the empty sky.

CHAPTER XX

IT was May, and London was once more in full swing of the momentous business of amusing itself. Lady Losford's little circle were interested to find, when that good lady entertained "en grand dame" or was to be found at Hurlingham, Ranelagh, or Lords, or Henley, or any of the hundred and one pretty functions of the day, that Miss Massendon was to be found with her, but that when they called on Lady Losford quietly, or met her at small gatherings, or at little family dinners with Richard Sefton, then Miss Massendon was absent.

This was precisely because Miss Massendon was "not there"! That is to say, she abode in the wilds of Hampstead, and emerged from there into the flowing tide of social life under Lady Losford's wings on suitable occasions.

It was an arrangement so entirely to every one's satisfaction that it is difficult to say to whom it was due.

Sir Vallory had told his cousin, Emily — as in duty bound — of Christina's Yorkshire episode, and added that she did not seem very anxious to go out this year.

Lady Losford was horrified. Not altogether at the episode — that, she considered, though unfortunate, could be put down to Rachel's account, and her unwisdom in entrusting the girl to those Chancely people! What horrified her was the idea of Christina failing to be visible on the social horizon.

"My dear Vallory, she must appear *everywhere*; it is most important, and I shall make it my business to see that she does. You have no idea how little

things like that travel, we must not have a whisper of it get about if it can be helped. People never take the trouble to find out the facts of a case, you know. They haven't time — and all the miserable Stressborn story will be raked up. Let me see, his mother — Mrs. Stressborn — was a Caberly, one of the Irish Caberlys. I never knew them intimately. They were a queer set — good family, but born gamblers, every man, woman, and child, and poor as mice. Every one was amazed at her marrying Stressborn, an odd, silent man who always made me shiver. They *said*, of course, that her cousin — Oh, good gracious, I am getting indiscreet in my old age! Why didn't you stop me before, Vallory? It's all your fault. Well, keep the child with you if you want to, and I'll see she goes about."

Lady Losford was as good as her word. But she had not quite forgiven Christina for her blindness to Richard's merits and thought it more comfortable all round for her to remain at Hampstead. There is no doubt her kindness to Christina was quite as much due to a memory of a certain charming young man, who, about twenty years ago, was a great favourite with Cousin Emily, as it was to her desire to oblige Rachel, or even Sir Vallory, or even her real liking for the disappointing young lady. Neither to Lady Losford nor to Sir Vallory had Christina said much as to her experiences with the Filsons, nor did she even speak again of her time at Strancebury Castle, when once she had answered Lady Losford's pertinent enquiries thereof. It was not that Christina had the slightest idea of deceiving either Sir Vallory or his cousin, but she felt that they would be so out of sympathy with her in the matter that it was worse than useless to provoke discussion. She had written to her mother a very full and detailed account of the whole affair, but letters took a long time to go to that distant

corner of the world, and it would be still longer before one could come back; meantime, Christina longed ardently to talk to someone who would help her to a decision about it all.

She had written twice to Stressborn and heard from him once — a quiet, restrained letter, telling her of the various outside affairs that she might be expected to remember, and that was all. She could not know how many answers to her letters had fed the flames in the big fireplace by which she had sat. She had thought it would be easier to learn just what it all stood for in his and her life, away from him and his deep need, yet her mind only became more confused. There was the apparent impossibility of doing anything, the persistent doubt as to whether it was “her job” or not, and the doubt of her right to bend occasions to a purpose that was too vague for definition. Turn which way she would she could see no gate open for her, it was a case of waiting. Once, however, she felt assured that her mother had received her letter, she was less troubled and the waiting became only part of what had to be done.

Apart from Stressborn, her great desire was to see her father. She had written to him twice, once from Strancebury Castle and once since her return, and had no answer. She would have thought he had lost himself again, except that she had gone to tea with Mrs. Chancely one day, and heard that Mr. Tennent was still in town and had been there on the previous day.

She was rather indignant with him and would not write again, but she took to watching the faces of the passers-by as she had when she first came to London, only now she knew for what she was looking, and gathered a little quiet amusement from the recollection of the type and face she had once sought for as of possible kinship to herself; also now, she knew better than to look for him in the Park or at fashionable

gatherings. But one day, as she waited outside of Robinson and Cleaver's for Lady Losford, Mr. Tennent did pass her and bowed. She leant forward and hoped to stop him, but he went on swiftly, just as Lady Losford came out.

"Who was that, my dear?" she asked, as she got into the carriage.

"It was a man I met at the Chancelys'," Christina told her quietly, and the rest of the drive she was wondering what would have happened if Mr. Tennent had paused, or if Lady Losford had come out a shade more quickly. She realised that her father must run such risks every day, and that either he was immune to them or he was so altered that no one recognised him or — but Christina did not care to follow up the third possibility that presented itself to her. She made up her mind, however, that she would see him.

A few days later Mr. Tennent, letting himself into the front door of No. 5 Montly Street, nearly fell against Mrs. Swanmore, who had hurried up from the basement out of breath and much agitated.

"I saw you from the airy window, sir, and thought I must tell you straight that the young lady's come."

"What young lady?" demanded Mr. Tennent, frowning, with his foot on the stairs.

"Miss Massendon, to be sure. You see the new young man let her in — and I hopes he is satisfactory, sir, while I have the chance —"

"You had better get some tea instead of advertising my callers to all the house," he told her, and went on, two steps at the time, with rather an angry light in his eyes.

Christina's hat lay on the table beside her, and she was reading the only book she had been able to find.

"Well, Miss Massendon, and to what do I owe your honour?" he remarked drily.

Christina sprang up and held out her hands.

"I had nearly made up my mind to go — and the honour is due to a desire to see you, unaccountable as that may seem."

She was half laughing, but there was the faintest shadow of alarm in her mind. She looked straight into his face to learn if the alarm was justified.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" she demanded.

He was quite convinced he was not glad, that she had upset his plans in turning up in this way, and that he'd take good care it didn't happen again.

"As a rule I prefer to issue my own invitations."

The colour came to her face and then died away. She took up her hat mechanically with shaking hands. Rudolph knew she was frightened and was trying to hide it, and an uncomfortable sense of remorse seized him. He took her hat away from her.

"Oh, well — since you're here."

Her eyes were still lowered. He could swear they were misty and yet wanted to be sure they were not.

Quite as much to his own surprise as to hers he bent and gave her a curt little kiss.

"You have improved, Christina. Is it Yorkshire?"

Would she have the sense to help him obliterate that ungracious welcome? Apparently yes, for she met his eyes with a brave smile.

"Do you know," she told him with gentle reproach, "you've not written to me since I was at Strancebury Castle?"

"I didn't like the address. It was too long for ordinary envelopes. Anyhow what do you want, now you're here?"

"I want you," Christina said frankly. "I want someone to talk to."

"Vallory?" he suggested, with a shade of mockery in his eyes.

"I am very fond of Sir Vallory," was the sedate answer.

Rudolph laughed.

"Then why do you want to talk to me?"

Christina leant her head on her hand.

"I wonder if it could possibly be because you are — my father?" she suggested doubtfully.

"Certainly not, that is no reason at all. Quite a big proportion of people haven't the least desire to speak to their fathers, I can assure you."

"Ah, that was before my day," she retorted promptly.

"I repudiate your abominable suggestion," Rudolph declared indignantly. "I am not half so old as you think."

"That still makes you a little older than I am, you know. You have not noticed the decorations."

She had filled the vases on the mantelpiece with pink roses; — he had noticed them as soon as his foot was across the threshold.

"Yes, I have. I suspect you are like the princess who only takes gold dust in her tea. You have to take your own if you indulge in such whims."

"Meaning I cannot take tea without flowers? I did not know I was going to take tea — and I will remove all the gold dust I don't eat."

"Oh, no, that's the perquisite of the unhappy host."

She put her hand on his.

"Let's stop talking nonsense, there is such a lot I want to say."

There was one thing that Rudolph was waiting to hear with a nervous dread that was totally out of keeping with its importance, so he told himself. Still he fenced off the moment of direct certainty.

"You told me pretty nearly everything in your ters," he said, lighting a cigarette. "You seen have made the most of your time at Strancel

Castle, and now you are staying with Vallory, and going about with Emily. It's all plain sailing, isn't it?"

"It's about Strancebury," she said slowly and paused.

He was afire with impatience to know just how much she did know, but for nothing on earth would he have hastened her.

Christina came and sat on the arm of his chair. The last remnant of her new fear of him had died out.

"Do you know, as every one else seems to know, about Mr. Stressborn?"

Rudolph attentively examined his cigarette.

"Stressborn? The Strancebury Castle man? He got into trouble. Forgery, wasn't it? I've wondered what happens to fellows who come a cropper of that sort!"

He spoke meditatively. He would get at what he wanted to know in a minute.

"I want you to tell me if he — Mr. Stressborn — is right in thinking that no one would know him if he tried to live more in the world. Surely people couldn't be so cruel?"

Rudolph was silent. She went on:

"He was such a boy, and he's not much more now. It's so dreadful his living there and feeling life is all over for him." She broke off. The thought of it always gave her a little choking feeling in the throat.

"When one's slipped out of one's place, it's not very easy to get back," Rudolph told her rather harshly.

She was instantly aware of the danger of the ground here, but she kept to her subject as the safest method of gliding over it.

"People would not know him, you think?"

"I should not advise him to try, unless he's a great

deal thicker skinned than he — than most people. Who told you about it?"

"He told me himself. Father, I wish I knew what I ought to do. I made it better for him the few days I was there, I know I did, and I think I could do more, and the thing is, isn't that what is meant, why I got there at all. What ought I to do?"

The irony of her appealing to him on the point was so pronounced that Rudolph gave a little sharp laugh at the thought of it. Also he felt more kindly towards Stressborn than he had done since he heard of Christina's meeting with him.

"You? It's not your affair, Christina, it's nothing to do with you at all. He isn't the only man, as I told you before, who's got in a mess."

"That doesn't make it better, it makes it worse," she said mournfully. "I did want you to understand."

"You can't fly about the world helping every poor devil who's having a bad time. Stressborn's nothing to do with you — you'd better forget him."

He spoke with sharp decision that would admit of no argument. Christina sighed. She was to get no help here either, apparently.

"Do you remember telling me I was not to play cards for money?" she asked. "Isn't it dreadful to think there was no one to tell that poor boy that?"

"I expect plenty of people told him it," Rudolph returned drily.

"But the man he liked, to whom he would have listened, just encouraged him. Sometimes I wonder what he felt like afterwards."

"That's not worth your wasting time or thought over. I don't suppose he worried much if he got his money."

"Father! He can't have been so bad as that!"

"He sounds fairly 'poor stuff.' Isn't that your private opinion?"

"I should not like to know him." Rudolph got up and went over to the sideboard to fill his cigar case.

"None of them sound people you ought to be mixed up with — are you going to have tea here or not?"

"You invited me just now."

"I thought you might have changed your mind, finding me so unsympathetic."

So they had tea, and Rudolph was rather more flip-pant and amusing than she had ever found him, and made her laugh as she had not done since she came back from Yorkshire.

"Did you tell Vallory you were coming to call on me?" he asked presently.

Christina blushed.

"No. I did not see him after lunch," she paused, then confessed, "I did not try very hard to meet him."

"If he asks you?"

"He never does."

"You go to see the Chancelys, don't you?"

Christina said "yes," and explained that at the end of June she would perhaps go to them again, unless he preferred her going sooner.

He would not say one way or another, but said instead he would take her to Kew next Sunday, if she liked.

"It's Ascot Sunday, so we shall not meet any one worth attention there," he explained.

"But how could I do it?" she asked.

Rudolph shrugged his shoulders. That was her concern. He had no intention of instructing her how to act, but if she chose to find the way herself, he was ready to take advantage of it.

"You have immense capabilities for getting your own way," he told her, "you want no assistance from me."

Christina knitted her brows; there was something she did not like in his voice.

"I can't plan beforehand," she objected frankly. "It does not seem fair on Sir Vallory."

She looked rather coaxingly at her father, wanting him to agree.

But Rudolph would have none of the responsibility for or against.

"Do just what you like," he insisted.

"Will you write to me?"

"Is that 'fair on Vallory'?" he asked mockingly.

There was a glint in his eyes of something she had not seen there before. The preposterous idea entered her head that if she showed too great a consideration for Sir Vallory, "Mr. Tennent" would fade away from her horizon.

"I won't come to Kew because it is all so uncertain," she said at last, "but I will call at the Chancery on Sunday, and if you are there, you can walk back with me."

"And come in to supper?" he scoffed. "What odd lines you draw, but I will come, Christina."

Still he was not satisfied. He wanted more certainty. During her absence he had made himself believe he was tired of the thing, and wanted to escape it, and all it involved. He would not allow even to himself that he had feared what she might learn from Stressborn, and, that fear being once removed and Christina a substantial fact in the universe once more, that he was so far from being weary of her, or of the experiments he played on himself. Now he was even more anxious than she to secure a greater certainty of intercourse.

He told himself that it was largely because it was such a score off his brother to meet his own daughter, while she was under Vallory's roof, and that the satisfaction to be derived from this more than counterbalanced the bother of having to 'play up' to Christina's need of him—a thing, by the way, that he

never did. So far his personal intercourse with his daughter had been marked with a sincerity that was sadly lacking in his intercourse with the world in general. It was so easy to bring her to terms by the slightest appeal to her affections or pity, that he took studious care to exact nothing from her he could not get by dint of jest. The only mistake he made was in thinking Christina did not see this. Christina was so aware of it that she answered jest with jest, and never failed to respond to his mood.

It was very clear to her that, whether or no she was in time bound to do something for Desmond Stressborn, at present she was far more bound to keep in touch with her father. She was fairly sure he would keep his word not to disappear without warning her, but she knew quite well that if he intended to slip out of sight, he would do it — and warn her after — so to speak. By some means or other she contrived to see him every week, generally at his own rooms. Once or twice they met on the far side of The Heath, and went for long walks right into the country. Singular good fortune attended them, for never in these excursions did they meet any one to whom their existence was a matter of the slightest interest, and never did Sir Vallory question Christina as to her movements. Now and again she caught him looking at her with speculative gravity, but he never asked if she wanted companionship on her walk, or if she were content; perhaps he thought she would not fail either to ask or to get whatever was her particular will.

The hours Christina spent with her father were fruitful in many ways. Rudolph had never been deficient in brains, and he was now not only a man of wide experience, but he had a facile comprehension of what was best in modern art and literature that was a revelation to Christina, whose knowledge of such things was rather chaotic. He lent her books to

read, books that had never come within her ken before, and opened her horizon in this way, as Rachel was not capable of doing. He did not do it of intention. It amused him to talk, and it gave him an odd pleasure to see her ready absorption of new ideas. She showed a rare discrimination in what she actually took and wove into her own mind, and in what she "Left outside," as it were, as of doubtful truth for her at least. Occasionally he tried experiments on her, giving her a book or dictum that offered more than a superficial opinion on strange matters, and always he was left with an odd sense of discomfiture almost amounting to shame, by her quite serious, unembarrassed digestion of the same. The broad foundation of faith and tolerance that Rachel had strived to lay seemed as if it were of sufficient strength to bear any superstructure that future revelation might lay upon it.

But it was Rachel's mind and not Christina's that Rudolph really studied as he talked and experimented and listened. It was Rachel who spoke to him when Christina gently rejected this and substituted terms more gracious and kindly to the harsh maxim of the world.

Rudolph introduced her to Meredith and Hardy and the modern giants and felt secretly gratified at her appreciation. He found fault with her French and made her read to him for a few minutes at a time, then he would take the book from her impatiently and read to her himself. Other days they would talk. These were stirring times in the country, and Rudolph would walk to and fro, flinging out quips and epigrams, and summing up complicated situations with that dangerous faculty of piercing irony that has brought many politicians to grief.

"You pour scorn on them all," said Christina one day; "but what would you do yourself?"

"Something just as foolish, I have no doubt, that is why I stay outside." He flashed a glance at her. He was rather apt to try her steady, persistent disregard of his social standing in this way.

She was as unmoved as usual.

"Happily for the poor country," she said, "there are plenty of people still who don't mind being fools. Somebody's got to take a step in the dark, you know."

"So long as it is not me," he began, and then suddenly indulged in an attack of sincerity. "Oh, hang it all; Christina, I always meant to go for Parliament instead of — That's why I hate them all."

"You have never told me what you actually do," she reminded him thoughtfully.

"I am qualifying for a Government appointment in a Board School," he returned gravely.

"Are you quite certain your methods are sufficiently up to date?" she asked anxiously. "It's a great strain learning new regulations every six months."

Rudolph was at the window and his attention seemed to have drifted outside.

Christina made another remark to no purpose.

"Did you say, Christina," he remarked in an oddly dry voice, "that Sir Vallory never asked you where you went or what you did?"

"Hardly ever. But he always seems pleased to listen if I am telling him anything," added Christina severely.

Rudolph laughed.

"And probably a great deal more pleased that you do not tell him too much."

He was looking so intently out of the window that Christina got up and looked out, too. One could just see the opposite pavement from under the projecting green blinds. A tall, thin form was walking slowly

along, the only wayfarer in sight. Christina gave a little gasp.

"Why, there's Sir Vallory! Whatever can he be doing in Manny Street?"

Again Rudolph gave a strange little laugh.

"Wait a moment!" he said, and stood with his hand on her shoulder.

Sir Vallory walked straight along without pausing, but just when he was level with No. 5, he looked across the way, a slow, casual sort of glance; there was no hurry or even any interest in it, but he had looked.

Christina looked up at her father with rather a puzzled expression.

"What an odd chance for him—" Then she stopped; Rudolph's eyes were following his brother's figure with a singular expression.

"Did I tell you I was thinking of going to the Andes?" he remarked presently.

"Whatever for?" she demanded, rather out of breath, trying to keep pace with his surprising variations to-day.

"To shoot polar bears, penguins—or whatever grows there."

"Probably you mean the South Pole," she allowed indulgently; "in which case, I had better begin knitting you some thick socks. I don't knit very fast, though."

He looked at the very superlatively fine silk socks he was wearing.

"Thick socks? Then I should want new boots and that's sheer extravagance, Christina."

"What, even for a Government Schoolmaster?" she retorted, leaning her head against his. He made no objection at certain times to her showing a little demonstrative affection to him, and she was singularly

quick to choose her minute; but he never by any chance responded to it.

“Vallory will discover a planet that never existed some day, he is so clever,” was his next sudden and entirely irrelevant remark.

CHAPTER XXI

“MY dear child, the thing is impossible,” repeated Sir Vallory wearily. “You could not propose anything more utterly preposterous.”

“I might propose to go to the South Pole,” said Christina plaintively, with a faint reminiscence of her father’s late nonsense.

“The two things are on a par — preposterous.”

“Oh, do listen,” she cried, spreading out her hands across the table, and speaking with a concentrated earnestness that at least demanded his attention. “All this last week I have been certain this was going to happen — that I should hear of him — this morning before the letter came, I was sure. I woke knowing he wanted me and that’s one of the surest things of all — one’s waking thoughts.”

Sir Vallory gave a little despairing gesture of dissent. For the first time he began to entertain grave doubts of his sister-in-law’s wisdom in her dealing with this unmanageable child of hers.

“Of course, it’s very distressing that Mr. Stressborn should be so ill. I am sure I hope he’ll get better —”

Christina interposed quickly.

“How can I believe that when you won’t hear of helping him?”

The poor man’s patience was wearing thin.

“Good heavens, Christina!” he said testily. “You must see it’s impossible!”

Which brought them back to the starting point.

“Your going there at all was a very unfortunate occurrence,” Sir Vallory resumed, with really exem-

plary effort to retain his patience. "But you had the worst blizzard in memory to back you up; there is no blizzard now, and it's out of the question that you should go and nurse a sick man who is not in the remotest way related to you, because an old woman fancies he wants you, and you might do him good."

Christina sighed. They did not seem a bit nearer an understanding than fifteen minutes ago.

"You see, Sir Vallory," she explained with equal patience, "it's not what Mrs. Gubbins thinks — it's what I know myself inside — I know I can help him and that if I don't go, he will die."

"Oh, nonsense!"

Sir Vallory moved uneasily in his chair. He preferred his own statement of facts. It was a better standpoint from which to argue, and after all argument was absurd in such a case.

"If you do not like my going alone, why do you not come, too?" was her next suggestion.

"I would not countenance such a thing for the world! What should I say to your mother?"

Christina looked past him out of the window.

"That is just what I am thinking," she said in a low voice. "What will you say to her when you have to tell her you refused to let me save a man's life?"

"It's so ridiculous to say that," murmured the unhappy Sir Vallory.

"Read the letter again," she pleaded, pushing it once more across the table.

More to gain time than for any other reason, he complied.

Dear Miss (the poorly written letter ran): It is a great liberty I am taking but I am an old woman and there is nothing matters to me in this world but Mr. Desmond and I writes to say that he is very ill. You will recollect as how I told when you was here that he got often ill like he did one night after he brought you

back. After you went away, he was bad again and then better and then he got restless like, naught would keep him indoors, wet or fine he was out on the sea or in it, 'Tempting Providence,' as we told him, me and Loomis, but never would he listen. He was out in a boat all one night in soaking rain and since then he has been ill. It's two weeks now and the last few days he has never spoken a word good or bad, to know it himself and the work it is to get the food into him! And oh miss, the pain be that bad though he never complains, but times and again when he does not know what he's at, it's your name he says over and over again. And me and Loomis that have known him so long, is sure that it's you could do him good if any one could. The doctor says as how unless he can be roused, he's bound to die and he can't find anything that stops the pain now. So that's why I venture, dear Miss, to write knowing as you are friends to him, though may be, over young to see such sorrow. But ask you I must, even if it's no good, for I should not die easy when my time comes, if I had not done all I could for Mr. Desmond that I've always loved and pretty nearly the only one who has loved him from a baby. And Miss he will see no priest and what Loomis and I will do is more than I can tell, so excuse the liberty I'm taking for his sake, Hannah Gubbins.

It was a maddening epistle from Sir Vallory's point of view and he flung it down again impatiently.

"I'm sorry enough for Stressborn, Christina, but really it's no matter of yours. He behaved very well to you, but he'd be the last to wish you to attend to this rigmarole."

"Yes, that is quite likely — at least he'd say that," she acknowledged.

She made a tremendous effort to see things from Sir Vallory's point of view, but it was not much of a success. The thing that was quite clear to her was the fact of a man lying near death and needing her

help, soul and body, and another man — presumably a Christian — refusing her the right to give that help, because it was “not what people did.” The position seemed quite as unarguable to her as to him.

She took up the letter again, sighing.

Sir Vallory accepted it as a sign she was becoming reasonable, at any rate for the moment, but his wishes rather than his reason lent the interpretation.

Christina went out of the room and into the garden irresolutely. She felt she must be alone to think out things, and she went down to the garden gate with lagging steps. She was deeply troubled. Never in her life had the call to action been so clear, and never had the force of circumstances seemed so insurmountable. If only her mother were here — or the Stranger in the pine wood, he could help. It was odd she should think of him, though, and as she stood there by the gate doing so, he passed along the road and, looking up, saw her, stopped, and smiled.

“Oh, that it should be you of all people!” she exclaimed, holding out her hand; she was conscious at once of the desire for this meeting which she had just formulated.

“Well, why not?” he said quietly.

“But you were at Bashford?”

“So were you nine months ago.”

“I was only staying there.”

“Do you want me?”

The colour came to her face and she gave a little sigh of content.

“Indeed, yes!” and was straightway seized with embarrassment.

“Let us go up on The Heath,” he said, as if it were the most matter-of-fact thing in the world, not only that she should want him, but that he should be there.

So they went up by a narrow road that was little used, and came out at an unfrequented corner, where

was a seat under a flowering hawthorn tree and they sat down.

It was a perfect summer's afternoon. The pulses of the day seemed to have sunk to stillness. The trees stretched out green fingers with longings and the whole earth seemed waiting for the delicious coolness that would come later. Overhead a bird sang to itself, not with full voice, but quietly, as if it needed assurance its sweet power was still there.

Once more a sense of perfect safety and confidence came to Christina, a certainty of help, a surety of being understood, and a faculty of which she was as a rule hardly aware, seemed to stand dominant in her soul, a faculty of distinguishing the reality from the shadow.

"Will you tell me what troubles you?" he said. "Perhaps I can help."

Just so had he spoken before, as if it were his sole mission in life to recognise trouble or help to heal. She told him the whole story and Desmond Stressborn's story with it, and felt no more compunction over it than in thinking it over to herself.

When she had finished, they sat quietly and for some time he said no word at all, yet she seemed aware that he was thinking.

"Youth is very strong, youth like yours. Can you bear it?"

His voice was wistful and a little sad.

"I suppose so, if it's mine," Christina told him.

"No one will approve. There is no common sense in doing it."

"No, but what matters is, can I help him?"

"What does your own heart tell you?"

"That I can save him. *I feel it!*" And then half fearful at the sound of so momentous a statement, she added with sudden humility, "It seems a terribly big thing to say with such confidence, but what else can I say?"

"Nothing else, if it's so with you."

Again it struck her his voice was sad and she looked at him anxiously.

"I thought you would be glad."

Her companion looked away towards the sunset. Undoubtedly his eyes were sad.

"It is all very good for him," he said slowly, "but I was thinking of you."

"Isn't it good for me?"

"In the end, yes, because you have enough faith."

She sat still, marvelling how he answered her unspoken thoughts rather than her direct questions.

"How much are you prepared to renounce?" he asked her abruptly.

She considered doubtfully his meaning.

"What is there to renounce? The renunciation would be in staying."

There was nothing sad in his eyes as he met her glance now, nothing but a comforting reassurance that filled her with content.

"How glad I am I met you. Everything seemed so confused before. I wish you were always get-at-able."

"I think if you ever really need me, I shall be at hand. It looks like it, anyhow."

"It is very strange," she confessed with a puzzled look.

"Wouldn't it be more strange if you needed someone and there was no one there?"

"You mean — considering mother?"

"I mean considering yourself. You told me you wished to do whatever the Power you believe in wanted you to do?"

"You believe in It, too?" she asked breathlessly. The thing seemed so essential.

He did not answer at once, and there was a reserve in his voice when he did.

"Yes, I know about it. There is a great deal to know."

Presently she reminded him that she did not know his name.

He told her it was David.

"David what?" she questioned.

He smiled at her.

"Does it matter? Why should you risk knowing? It might be Jones or Tubbs or anything else you would think ugly and unseemly."

"I am sure it is not. But I do not mind if you don't want to tell me. Only I should like to know where I could find you if I wanted you."

He shook his head.

"Then you would never grow up. You cannot tell yourself what are the really difficult places when you must have help."

"I think you are a sort of magician."

"I am a doctor," he told her. "And I live not far from here. I often go to Bashford, because the man in the White Farm there is my father."

There did not seem to be any particular sense in this, she utterly failed to connect him with any one but herself.

"If you are a doctor, do you think my idea that I can help Mr. Stressborn is silly, I mean to help him when he is in pain?"

She held out her hands suggestively and looked at them.

"I feel it, you know, there — at the tips of my fingers."

"Do you always feel it?"

"No, only when I think of him."

He put his hand on hers. It had never occurred to her before there could be anything so beautiful in mere touch; such comfort, such strength.

"You have the healer's hand," he said quietly.

"Sometimes it is a good thing to have, sometimes not. You can heal him if you choose to do so."

"I have no choice now you've told me."

"It's no use doing things by halves. Mere life of the body is not always worth having. You will have to finish what you begin and to go on being sure, as you are now."

"Yes, as I am now."

"Hold fast to the surety, for it is true that you have this thing to do and that you can do it, though apparently you needed outside assurance about it. Very soon you will learn to trust yourself and then you will be grown up." He rose and stood bareheaded before her. She was conscious of a sense of homage in his regard, despite the fact he appeared to her so far removed from ordinary men.

A momentary rebellion against parting rushed over her.

"Don't go!" She held out her hands.

He smiled.

"How will you do all you have to do, if we stay here?"

"How shall I set about it?" she asked, with sudden helplessness.

"You will know. Do the things that must be done, one at a time. It will all be clear then, and don't be afraid."

"No, I shall not fear."

Her eyes were far away in the blue distance, and she did not see him go, only presently she felt she was alone, and rising, went back by the deserted road to the house.

She went at once to Sir Vallory's room and found it empty.

"A telegram came for Sir Vallory just after you went out, Miss," explained his manservant, with rather an injured air. "It was from Sir Archibald Page at

the Royal Observatory, I believe, and Sir Vallory told me that I should not be wanted, and that he would be away one night, perhaps more, and he would write."

Christina thought a little and then turned her attention to a *Bradshaw*. She found if she caught the evening train from King's Cross, she could reach Knapworth by eleven, but could not make out further connection with Fremly. It meant an uncomfortable time to arrive, but she would not wait till morning. She packed what she wanted quickly and with surprising certainty of her needs, and then told the servants to get her a cab. This order apparently gave the household some surprise, for Mrs. Loader, the housekeeper, came up to see if there was any mistake.

"Sir Vallory not having said that you were leaving, Miss, and I hope that it's not you don't think we will do our best to make you comfortable while he is not here."

Christina assured her it was nothing of the kind and she left a note for Sir Vallory. She added she had spoken of the matter to him before he left. She laid her note on his table, then wrote her address to which letters were to be forwarded.

Perhaps it was as well for her that Mrs. Loader did not see this address before Christina started, or she might have had some trouble in convincing the good woman it was a destination that would meet with Sir Vallory's approval. For the matter of her storm-bound visit there was not quite such private property as Sir Vallory imagined and Mrs. Chancelly hoped.

Christina did not look forward to the journey. She was so little used to travelling alone that all the time she was packing, she meditated borrowing a maid to support her, but in the end rejected it as not practicable, and perhaps not fair to Mr. Stressborn. The desirability of so doing from any point of view except that of her own comfort never as much as entered her head.

The other point that was still undecided when she got into the cab was the advisability of stopping to tell her father of her intention. There was just time to call at his rooms, if she wished to do so. He was likely to be in at that hour, but there was no doubt as to what his point of view would be, and remembering how he had interposed to keep her from going to Torrens in the autumn, she felt that it would only be opening the way to more fruitless argument, and she might lose her train.

The one thing that did not occur to her was to reconsider her decision, or even admit that there was any choice of action left for her.

The Creed of love and pity for every suffering, unhappy, erring thing in all God's world was so deeply engrafted in her, that she was quite unable to see that those amusing little social laws of convention which were framed to suit certain social conditions, could have any part in deciding one's action when the first law of human fellowship was at stake, and it is only fair to Christina to state that had Desmond been a crabbed old man, her action — supposing it to have been called forth at all — would have been precisely the same. But Desmond Stressborn's need of her, coupled with his love for her, was a summons so imperious that to disregard it would have been an almost unpardonable sin against the Law of Love.

Rachel's remarkable teaching was showing remarkable fruits. It could perhaps hardly be expected, that after eighteen years' close companionship with her mother, she should in one year so assimilate the prevailing ideas of the world with regard to correct and incorrect conduct to the overthrowing of her early teaching. It was an unusual thing that she could even frankly recognise there might be another standpoint than her mother's, better suited to life in general, a standpoint it was only reasonable and right to follow

so long as it did not clash with fundamental principles, but these principles were so wide apart from it that when the point of divergence came, the line of action shot off, so to speak, at right angles from this lesser law of conduct. It was unavoidable, but she had not the faintest misgivings as to what she was doing. Her mother would have told her to go, and had not "David" also sanctioned it?

As the train sped northward her thoughts lingered round this man "David" with dim wonder. If she considered the strangeness of their acquaintanceship, she felt confused. To seek for reasons was to rob those encounters of half their purpose and help. How little had really been said on either occasion, and yet how full had been the help she had gathered. She knew she had been strengthened and helped just by the being with this man of whom she knew nothing at all, except that he had twice crossed her path when she needed him.

Considering that she was so great a novice in traveling, she arranged matters very well. She remembered that one could dine on the train, and before leaving town she had wired to Mrs. Gubbins that she was starting. She had also discovered she could not possibly get to Fremly that night, but must drive a tedious ten miles from Knapworth to Strancebury direct. The thing that had not occurred to her was that there might not be a vehicle available at Knapworth when she arrived there.

The thought of this omission came into her mind with startling vividness about ten o'clock and she sat upright with a sense of dismay unusual for her. Her recollections of Knapworth were of the vaguest. She thought that she remembered seeing an hotel from the little station, but she felt nothing would induce her to stay in it. Then slowly her momentary panic calmed down. If it were intended that she should get to

Strancebury Head that night, the difficulty would be overcome, and if it were not so intended, why then it did not much matter where she stayed.

This philosophical reflection settled the matter, she determined to think no more about it till she reached Knapworth.

The train was a slow one after York, and it seemed to her to creep from station to station with reluctance. She imagined it to dislike this part of its work and to wish to leave out some of the dull little places. Then a new alarm smote her. She had said nothing to the guard about stopping at Knapworth, and she knew some trains only stopped when passengers requested. As a matter of fact, this was one of those trains, but by good luck, or the careful arrangement of the Providence that had her in charge, there was another passenger for Knapworth in the same train. It was unfortunate, perhaps, that Providence had not selected a different passenger to play its part, but since Christina did not even see him it remained rather a mystery to her for some time how it was she was not carried northward. As she descended from the train, a weary station-master hurried towards her.

"Are you the lady who wants to go to Strancebury Head to-night?" he enquired, rather as if she were doing him a personal wrong in the intention.

Poor, bewildered Christina owned that such was her wish.

The passenger, who had first alighted, heard her voice, and hung for a moment on his steps.

"By Jove!" he muttered below his breath.

"I don't know if it can be managed at all. Can the man and horses be put up there, do you think?"

One or two porters had gathered round and none looked too friendly.

"I suppose so. It's only ten miles, is it?" Christina was telling herself that this was only the hour

when one is in the thick of going about in London, when dances are barely in full swing, and the streets ablaze with light and thronged with people. They went in a little group to the gate leading out of the station. The yard was deserted except for a waiting dog-cart. A distant lamp twinkled before a dim building.

The station-master was puzzled. He was a married man with daughters of his own, and the thing did not agree with his notions of propriety. He had expected some elderly person, possibly a nurse, for the illness of the Master of Strancebury Castle was known in the neighbourhood, which vague term embraced even this little town ten miles off.

"I am quite alone," said Christina wearily. "And I want to go as soon as I can. Where is the carriage?"

"Well, Miss, I sent to the 'Dragon' when the wire came and told them to be ready, but it only said the carriage might be wanted, so you see," he broke off, "— I'm not sure they'll let a carriage out so late."

"Why not? I shall pay them. Please send for it."

The whole thing was getting too much for the girl; this deserted station, the half hostile men round her, her own perplexity. Then she remembered she had said she would not be afraid. A porter was putting out the lamps along the platform, for this was the last train that night; the sky above was dark and cloud-covered, though here and there a star showed through a rent in the racing clouds. It was a mild summer night, mild even here on this high land where winter lingered long after he was driven from more sheltered spots, and summer trod hard on the heels of spring.

The high dog-cart, that had been waiting, at this moment pulled up a little further into the shadow. The passenger seemed to be an unconscionable time settling his luggage at the back of the cart. Before

it was done a shut carriage lumbered down from the yard of the "Dragon" opposite, with a shrieking brake, the old man on the box looking surly enough.

The station-master accosted him as he drew up.

"Can you do it, George?"

Before he could answer a young porter had hoisted Christina's luggage up on the box.

"What's up, Ted?" asked the old driver hoarsely.

"This young lady's wanting to get to Strancebury Castle to-night, and you make haste and take her safe, see, Dad. You stay with Portons th' night. I'll tell the mother."

"Don't know what business 'tis of yours," put in the station-master huffily.

"No, nor tain't anybody else's that I sees," retorted the young man shortly, and he came round to the window.

"Don't you feel afraid, Miss," he said with rough respect. "Father'll take you there all right. He's the carefulest driver these fifty miles round, and he knows every inch of the way."

Christina held out her hand.

"I thank you very much," she said gravely. "I shall feel quite safe. I am only sorry to have to take him so far."

The young porter hesitated a moment and then took the hand she held out, blushing scarlet, if there had been light to see it.

"One moment," she called as the horse began to move. "That wire? Was it signed?"

The porter looked round.

"There was no name, only 'A lady passenger by last train may require carriage to-night for Strancebury, if not already ordered!'"

Christina thanked him, smiled good-night to the man whose hand she had taken, and the cab moved off.

The young porter looked after it.

"What did you make out of that, Ted?" enquired a fellow-worker, with a sniggle.

The station-master had already gone.

"More than you'd have done," retorted Ted, who was rubbing one hand furtively. "Is that young Filson gone yet? What does he want coming back at this hour?"

"Come to that," returned the other slowly, "what does a young lady like that want travelling alone at this time o' night, and going to the Castle."

Ted interrupted him angrily.

"You let the doings of your betters alone, and don't pry into what's not your business."

The man grinned.

"Who was saying the same of young Filson but now?"

"I said 'your betters,'" growled Ted and walked off.

Meanwhile in the darkness the cab lumbered on up hill and down with a monotonous lurching, the two eyes of light made the night itself invisible, and it was only when Christina leant forward that she could see the clouds were passing and more stars appearing, as the night drew to its full age.

They passed through one or two ghostly villages. In one a dog barked after them savagely. Beyond that there was no sign of life, all was silent darkness.

Christina was surprised to find that she was no longer sleepy, but wakeful. She went through some bad minutes when the thought occurred to her that Desmond might be sufficiently well to be angry at her coming. This quite useless idea was crushed by thinking of the kindly young porter.

"How nice people are," she thought gratefully, entirely forgetting that his niceness was by contrast to the un-niceness of the others, which was very characteristic of her.

As to what would happen when she got to the Castle, or what would be her welcome, she resolutely refused to consider it at all. The sweet, fresh air of the night seemed pregnant with life. She took off her gloves and held her hands out of the window.

These hands of hers seemed wonderful possessions since David had told her they were "Healer's Hands." She could see them white and dim before her against the blackness of the surrounding gloom.

They came to a long hill and the horse halted. The driver got down.

"Is it steep?" she asked out of the open window, and was told "yes." She begged him to wait and let her walk beside him, and, after hesitating a while, he consented, and they trudged up the long ascent together.

"It's a main way up just to go down agen t'other side," volunteered the driver.

She agreed absently.

Through the thin air the sound of a clock striking twelve came with startling precision. In the day such a sound is blurred and unimportant, but at night in that bare land, it seemed full of meaning. Christina realised that Time is different in different places. It was striking twelve in London, too, and people she knew were dancing, going on to parties, telling each other the night was yet young. The night which is never young because of its vast secrets!

The walk brought on a little natural tiredness and she dozed during the last two miles of the way, waking with a start at the change of sound as the carriage rolled under the arched entrance to the Castle.

There was a light at the door and a figure standing there.

Christina got out feeling cramped and dazed.

"I knew you'd come! I know'd it! For all Loomis said you wouldn't," sobbed Mrs. Gubbins.

CHAPTER XXII

A TEA table had been set ready for her in the familiar library, where a fire was burning brightly. The night was not cool, but it seemed natural to go up to the flames and hold out her hands to the friendly welcome. She felt as if she had "come home." The familiarity of it all could hardly be accounted for by a six days' visit four months ago.

"How is he?" she asked, as Mrs. Gubbins helped her take off her hat, and ministered to her comfort generally.

"It's been the worse day yet. 'Tis cruel, passing cruel to see him suffer so." It had left its marks, this same cruelty, on the loving old soul whose grief and joy was only for others.

"The doctor was here till six, and will be back early in the morning."

"There is a nurse, I suppose?"

Mrs. Gubbins shook her head.

"We tried one, leastways the doctor did. But it just fretted him worse nor nothing. Loomis, he is better than any nurse, Doctor knows it, only he thought we was getting too wore out. Loomis can do pretty near all one of them trained women can, and a sight more."

"Does the doctor know you've sent for me?"

"I said naught to nobody. 'Tweren't anybody's business that I could see but your own, Miss; and Loomis wasn't sure as how you would come."

"When may I see him?"

The old woman studied her face anxiously.

"Maybe you're tired?"

Christina put her own interpretation on this.

"You mean you want me to see him at once? Mrs. Gubbins, will you remember that it's never a question of my being tired since I am here — it's what we can do for him."

She followed Mrs. Gubbins down the dim corridor and up the shallow stairs. Just by the curtained door that led to the only part of the house that Christina had not seen, Mrs. Gubbins stopped.

"My dear," she said in a tremulous whisper, "I see now you've come as how it's a dreadful thing I've done, fetching you. Maybe your mother will be angered."

Christina smiled reassuringly.

"My mother would have come, too, if she had been there."

Still the old woman hesitated.

"Does he know I am coming?"

This was the question that was wanted.

"No — and, Miss, if he don't remember after, that you came up, you won't tell him?"

"Tell him what?"

"That I brought you up here." In her anxiety the poor old thing put her hand on Christina's arm appealingly.

"Let us go in," said Christina gently.

They passed into another long, bare passage, where a small hanging lamp cast swaying shadows on the whitewashed walls. Mrs. Gubbins knocked on a door on the right softly.

Loomis opened it and his face softened perceptibly. He stood aside without a word and let her enter.

The room struck her as austere and comfortless, and even cold, though there was a fire burning on the hearth. The bare floor, the absence of all but the strictest necessities, the complete lack of anything per-

sonal, oppressed her even as she crossed the room to the narrow little bed where Stressborn lay.

It needed all the strength she had gained in her interview with David that day to hold her pity and fear in safe check, as she looked down at Stressborn's pain-racked face. The stillness that was imposed by the agony of movement and was in its turn a cruel endurance, seemed to her the most terrible thing she had seen. Pain, which had been but a name to her, became a reality, clamouring from every corner of earth for remedy, calling on God for cure as something too foreign to His gracious law to endure even for the night.

His eyes were open and fixed on something behind her, and he was not conscious even of her presence; that was another thing unbearable and subtly cruel. Then, as she looked, there sprang up in her a consciousness of Force, and an assurance of that well-being we call health, too great for her own needs. The very tips of her fingers seemed charged with pulsing life.

She leant over him and laid her cool, trembling hands on his.

"Desmond," she whispered, "I am going to help you. The pain shall go."

She knelt down by him, keeping her hands on his. She did nothing of premeditation, she did not even understand what would happen. She only knew she was being used as an agent of relief by the Giver of Life. There was nothing for her to do but to acquiesce in complete willingness to be so used, to surrender herself unconditionally to this Power of healing. In time she knew those fixed lines of pain would fade; she could only wait.

Presently she wondered at what he looked so intently. It was evidently something behind her, and she turned her head to see what it could be.

It hung on the wall opposite his bed — a marvellous

mediæval Crucifix, ivory on black; a work of fervoured devotion and of morbid appreciation. Such a perpetual memorial of an agony, not triumphant, was inadmissible to Christina's creed. Her impulse was to cover it up, to remove it, to cry to him that it was not the Truth — that Life, and not Death and Suffering, was Christ's message to men. But even as she thought it, Stressborn looked at her and she recognised from whence his eyes gathered that expression of patient endurance that had so troubled her.

He showed no surprise at seeing her, but she felt his hands quiver under hers.

"So you, too, are a ghost at last," said Desmond. "But if you will only go on holding me, I think the pain will stop presently."

After that he looked at her with the same intentness with which he had previously looked at the crucifix.

CHAPTER XXIII

DR. CONSETT slept very badly that night, also he awoke early while the sun was still climbing the azure steeps of heaven and trailing the rosy glories of his ascent behind him.

The doctor's alert mind, that found such ill expression in his somewhat clumsy, heavy person, wasted no time wondering what had occasioned his unusual restlessness: he was aware of every particular factor that had gone to its making, and was equally aware that the best means of recovering his equanimity was to rise and carry his anxiety to the seat of it. Therefore, he dressed and, boots in hand, stole softly past Miss Arethusa's door, downstairs and so out to the stable, where his stolid and solid cob greeted him with fretful whinny. Dr. Consett, having saddled the cob and fetched sundry needs from the surgery, proceeded to ride up the steep, rough road that led from Blandchetts to the moorland that lay between it and Strancebury Head some five miles away. The summer morning was good for soul and body, and the doctor regarded this early excursion more in the light of an indulgence than as part of the daily round of tedious toil that would be his before the sun climbed down the steep ascent of heaven once more. The rough track he followed ran along the crest of the bare moor, that stretched away behind him like a petrified sea, away and away to far Druner Beacon. On the right the ground sloped gradually down to Fremly, which looked almost beautiful in the clear, pure light of the morning. On either hand the sea lay like a gleaming silver sickle, essaying to cut short the twisted wreath-

ing mists, that sped phantom-wise, out to the dim horizon: mists that seemed born of the low-lying marshlands that lay between the high ridge and Strancebury, that circled and dispersed and gathered themselves together again, drifting against the high, up-staining headland, and falling back to be sucked out to the vast unknown. The Headland stood above them and floated, as it were, on the intangible moving sea of them, like some fairy building; the irregular roof painted silver and gold with fire of sunrise.

Dr. Consett saw nothing of poetry or beauty in the place — perhaps he knew it too well, perhaps he bore it a grudge for a bad night; at all events he frowned, and that alert mind took up again the burden of its waking thoughts.

Had he done right or not in giving in over this vexed question of a nurse? It was true that the highly gifted woman he had imported with so great care had not been a success, and that "poor Stressborn" (so he always thought of him) had entreated him in a lucid interval to leave him to Loomis; also it was true that Loomis was one in a thousand, a man with a born aptitude for nursing, dependable, faithful, and untiring, and better able to manage his master than any stranger was likely to be. Still, if anything happened, and Dr. Consett could not disguise from himself that *anything* might happen — it would look better if there was a regular nurse in the house.

But Stressborn had been urgent about it, and it was little enough that could be done for him, poor fellow!

He felt mechanically in his pocket to make sure the last resort of science and his little hypodermic syringe were safe. He only used it with reluctance and at extreme need; it seemed to set free possible lurking dangers and responsibilities that he was unwilling to face.

Rheumatic fever taken "in that damned prison," as

Doctor Consett put it to himself, had left Stressborn with a heart sufficiently disarranged to have been the end of nine men out of ten who put such undue strain on it as he did. Time and again he had weathered attacks and thanked Dr. Consett with formal gratitude for the victory. But the heart had been getting stronger of late and it was the acute rheumatism itself to which the fever had left him a prey, that had been slowly breaking down Stressborn's strength and endurance. This second bout of the fever seemed likely to close the account, and as Dr. Consett rode across the mist-clad moor to Strancebury, he was not sure, even on this glorious morning, that his errand was altogether an errand of mercy in that it ministered to the prolonging of a spoilt life. Only superficially, of course; he had not the slightest intention of letting Stressborn slip through his fingers, if care, trouble, early rides, and late visits could compass his recovery.

As he hitched his horse's reins to the post by the entrance doors that had served generations for the same purpose, he noticed that there were wheel marks on the gravel, and stood flicking at them with his whip, wondering.

Mrs. Gubbins made some attempt to explain them when he entered, but her story sounded so improbable and fantastic that he went on upstairs with it trailing out its length behind him, half impatient, half angry, but far more anxious to see his patient than to distinguish between fact and fancy. He judged Mrs. Gubbins to be halting between the two.

The windows in Stressborn's room were open behind the blinds and the light filtered in, and filled the room with an opaque silveriness that was full of deception. Loomis was making up the fire in a silent way that would commend itself to the best trained of nurses; he just nodded when the doctor entered.

The latter, with a step amazingly soft for so bulky

a man, went swiftly to the bed. The deceptive light had filled him with alarm as he entered, Stressborn lay so still and with eyes shut, instead of open, as too often he found them. He was asleep and his hands lay outside on the bed. By his side there was a handkerchief of a size and material not affected by him, still less by Loomis or even Mrs. Gubbins.

Dr. Consett sat down in a chair and looked at his patient curiously.

Presently Stressborn woke. On his worst days he generally accorded the doctor a little smile of welcome, but to-day he regarded him with vague disappointment. Dr. Consett, as he bent over him unobtrusively, took up the little handkerchief and thrust it into his pocket.

About an hour later he found his way slowly downstairs towards the library, where he knew from experience breakfast would be found. As he crossed the threshold he was dimly aware of some difference in the room. The table at which he generally sat was set nearer the window, and all the windows were wide open and the room swimming in the wonderful light. It may have been that, or it might be due to the fact there were flowers on the table, an entirely new departure. As he stood a moment looking round with a vague feeling of discomfiture, through the door that opened on to the little terrace, there came a girl with a great bunch of "seven sister" roses in her hand. He was getting close to the facts of Mrs. Gubbins's extraordinary story now.

Christina put down the roses and came forward, holding out her hand.

"I expect you are Dr. Consett," she said. "Mrs. Gubbins told me that you would come early. Is he better?"

Her eyes questioned his on a dozen points besides

the one indicated, but his were equally speculative and a great deal less candid.

"You are Miss Massendon, I suppose," he ventured a little gruffly, since introductions were of the informal order.

She nodded and moved towards the breakfast table.

"Mr. Stressborn is a little better," he allowed, wondering why she had not pressed her enquiry.

"Yes — he seemed very ill last night. I did not get here till past twelve, though, and that is always a bad time, isn't it?"

They were both standing by the table, each too conscious of non-fitness to act as host, to sit down first. Christina solved the question and flung the burden of responsibility on the housekeeper.

"Mrs. Gubbins said would we ring when we wanted breakfast. I don't know if you do, but I do know about myself."

He went over to the bell and rang, and he had time to look at her as he came back. She stood, silhouetted against the light — a graceful outline, with firm, sweeping lines and a certain pose in the carriage of her head, that made him frown. What Mrs. Gubbins said as to her sitting up half the night was fancy, of course. Not so long ago it had been the personality of the girl herself that he had set down to fancy.

"You saw Mr. Stressborn then last night?" he asked cautiously.

"Yes." Her eyes clouded and she looked out towards the sea. "I stayed with him till he went to sleep, that was at daybreak," she remarked simply, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world.

"And then what did you do, may I ask?" demanded the doctor brusquely.

"Then I went to bed and to sleep," she smiled back at him. "I have never slept like it in all my life."

Three hours of it seemed to mean more than ten of the ordinary kind of thing."

Here Mrs. Gubbins intervened with the rest of the meal, casting anxious, pleading glances at the omnipotent doctor, who grimly refused to see or understand her agitation.

"Poor Mrs. Gubbins!" said Christina, when she had gone. "Aren't you going to ease her mind, Dr. Consett?"

"I didn't know she had any. I presume you mean her conscience." Then he said suddenly, "I hope you understand she didn't consult me as to asking you here. It's entirely her doing."

"Yes, she made that quite clear. Two lumps or one, Doctor?"

Christina held the sugar tongs suspended and looked anxiously at him.

"Two, please."

"I am glad. I was afraid you would say you didn't take any."

"What difference —" began the doctor indignantly.

"I am always a bit afraid of people who don't take sugar," she told him gravely; "they sound so capable and unbending."

"I hope you won't infer I am incapable."

Christina blushed.

"I didn't mean it that way. Please eat some more of the scones, if you can, or Mrs. Gubbins will think you are mortally offended with her."

He suggested she should do her share.

Miss Arethusa herself could not have administered better to her brother's material comfort than did Christina at that amazing breakfast party. Dr. Consett made and unmade his mind on the subject of Miss Massendon some six times during the course of it. When, however, he would be ministered to no more, she pushed back her chair and sat for a moment in

silence, looking at her hands that lay folded on her lap.

Dr. Consett involuntarily followed the downward sweep of her eyes. He was aware her hands were different from those of most ladies of his acquaintance, though he could not have said in what their peculiarity lay.

"I daresay," said Christina, rather wistfully — she would so much rather be understood without explanation — "that you are wondering why I am here?"

Dr. Consett gave a dry little cough. He was wondering very considerably, the only adequate solution being that in some impossible way Miss Massendon was engaged to Desmond Stressborn, preposterous as it seemed, knowing Stressborn as well as he did.

Yet it was startling to hear her echo the thoughts of his mind.

"I had thought of saying I was engaged to Mr. Stressborn," Christina went on simply, "but it would not be quite true, and when one wants to help a person, one has to be very careful about truth, don't you think?"

Dr. Consett, who was an habitually truthful man, felt more and more embarrassed.

"I felt I could help him if I were here and near him, and you would let me."

She spoke with the guile of the serpent and the gentleness of the proverbial dove, and he grew restless, knowing full well she was beguiling him, and not quite seeing the manner of it.

"Perhaps you know, being a doctor, how it helps a patient to have some kinds of people near, and makes him worse to have other kinds." She became confused and inarticulate in her desire to enlist him on her side. She remembered many things she had heard and read of the aversion of the professional world to anything that savoured of the mystic in connexion with their

own province. Her mother's struggles with the medical world of Torrens were over before she was of an age to enter into them; but she was quite aware that her help would probably meet with little encouragement from the ordinary medical man.

Dr. Consett coughed again uneasily.

"I suppose," he said doubtfully, "that you are what is called a Christian Scientist, or 'faith healer,' or something like that."

Christina shook her head.

"No, I don't think so. But I don't know much about them—I just feel I am very strong and have lots of life in me and that I can help Mr. Stressborn. That is all."

She looked down again at her hands and again his eyes followed hers.

"Don't you think," said Christina meditatively, "that God may perhaps sometimes be able to help more quickly and better that way—through another human being—than by the usual way or means?"

No. doubt what he ought to have said was: "Madam, I do not presume to know how God works, but the method you indicate is not in the pharmacopœia and I must decline to have anything to do with it."

What he actually did say was:

"Will you come up and see Mr. Stressborn with me?"

He told himself as they went upstairs that he could come to no decision till he saw what effect she had on Stressborn. If, as he assured himself he expected, she disturbed the patient and agitated him, he would have none of her, though he did not take into account how he would get rid of her; but if by any chance her presence had a good effect on Stressborn, then etiquette might go hang. He would use her as he would use any other thing, drug, or method. One heard of odd things now, quite authentic, strange proofs of the im-

portant part mind played in some matters. And then, incontinently, he decided it was no concern of his if Miss Massendon chose to brave public opinion, in being there at all. Nothing at all. Yet he could not wholly shake off a vague uneasiness. She appeared so young and so little concerned with herself that he was prepared to believe she had not considered this aspect of affairs. Still the first thing to do was to ascertain her effect on Stressborn, who undoubtedly was better that morning than he had expected to find him, whatever might be the cause.

The mathematical neatness of the room allayed Dr. Consett's misgivings as to the question of a nurse. This happened regularly, just as regularly as that in the morning Stressborn was undoubtedly at his best. It was the evening visits that left Dr. Consett torn by conflicting doubts.

He told Christina shortly to go to the far side of the room and not even to look at Stressborn till he called her, and she obeyed him exactly, scoring a point in her own favour that was not meditated. Dr. Consett sat down by Stressborn's bed and watched him.

He was quite conscious this morning, and there was certainly less fever, but there were signs that the pain was returning. He moved restlessly now and again.

"You had a new nurse last night, I hear, Mr. Stressborn?"

Dr. Consett spoke quietly and clearly, but it was not easy to tell if Stressborn really heard or not.

"Will you bring me that glass from the mantelpiece, Miss Massendon?"

He spoke in precisely the same tone with his hand on his patient's wrist.

The restless movement ceased entirely.

"You told me you did not want a nurse, you know, but Miss Massendon thinks she knows better."

Christina came quietly towards them.

"Christina!" He spoke with a little gasp, and his arms, that were so painful to move, tried to reach out to her.

If Dr. Consett's wish was to rouse him, he succeeded. She laid one hand over his, and very gently put his arm straight again.

"I said I should come when you wanted me, Desmond, and you know from experience that it's easier to get me than to get rid of me."

No sentiment! no fuss! Dr. Consett grunted an approval. This was a young woman of discretion, she would do no harm, possibly good, who should say?

"Arethusa," said Dr. Consett that night, as he helped himself to the last morsel of his sister's very excellent salad, "I think you need a little change. Be ready to drive to Strancebury Castle with me to-morrow. You will go to call, but as you will probably prolong your call into a visit, you had better take some things."

It was fortunate that little Miss Consett had finished her supper long ago, or her appetite would have been sadly impaired; as it was, only her digestion suffered from the shock of the unexpected announcement.

"Certainly, my dear Herbert," she stammered rather plaintively. "But, really, are you sure that —" She stopped and gave a little nervous, embarrassed cough.

"Sure that it's quite right and proper for you to stay in Mr. Stressborn's house? Well, you will have a young lady of possibly twenty summers to chaperone you," he retorted grimly. "If that isn't enough —"

"Indeed, Herbert, I am sure you would not ask me to do anything that was not quite proper. All I meant to convey was the question of use."

"The use lies in keeping a new nurse we've got hold of in countenance, and keeping other people at a distance. I'll put up with Miss Massendon, but I'll be

hanged if I'll put up with the cousins and aunts and busybodies that are sure to track her down, whatever she says. I won't have it!"

He scowled as fiercely at poor little Miss Arethusa as if she had suggested wiring then and there for the before-mentioned relatives.

Long experience had taught Miss Conssett that Herbert's odd ways generally explained themselves if given time, better than he did himself. So all she said was:

"No doubt you know best, Herbert. It would be awkward for Mrs. Gubbins, and if I can be of use I shall be happy to go."

She was so quiet and apparently undisturbed that even Herbert did not notice the little spot of pink colour on her cheeks when he said good-night, and certainly never guessed at the tremulous excitement that agitated her breast and gave her at least as bad a night as her brother had had on the previous evening.

Whoever the young lady at Strancebury Castle might be, she was *certain* she was not a nurse; besides, Miss Massendon was the name of the young lady who had been kept there by the blizzard that spring.

Miss Arethusa's timid mind tasted romance in the air, and Miss Arethusa adored romance. Is there any wonder she was agitated?

CHAPTER XXIV

SIR VALLORY was waiting in the library until such time as Christina should be pleased to descend and see him.

His face was rather stern and set, and betrayed a likeness to Rudolph that would have annoyed him greatly had he known it. The silence and the apparent emptiness of the house struck him disagreeably, and had an uncomfortable effect on his jangled nerves. The impatient anger with which Emily had enveloped him as with a cloak still clung to him and fitted him very ill. Her frantic, urgent telegram had broken in upon a serious morning's work with Sir Archibald Page, who had been by no means ashamed to send for him in a difficulty that his cool, clear, calculating brain could serve to elucidate. And he had had to throw over this interest and honour — it amounted to that — and take the first train north in pursuit of this headstrong girl! Lady Losford had called her so, but in his secret heart Sir Vallory had not thought it exactly appropriate. It was only with difficulty he had avoided Lady Losford's company on his journey. Now he was actually here and ready to meet Christina, in a manner befitting her misdeed, she left him waiting in this forlorn room with its uncomfortable associations!

Small wonder that Sir Vallory was annoyed and prepared to be very short with the culprit when she should appear.

While he fretted impatiently and wandered round trying to take an interest in the books, the door opened and a little lady in a greeny-grey dress came in. She

was so small and fair and unobtrusive that in a dim light she might readily pass to the casual observer as anything between twenty and forty, whereas she was on the other side of fifty. Sir Vallory would not have known of her entrance if his eyes had not happened to be turned in that direction.

She came forward rather timidly.

"Miss Massendon hopes you will excuse her. She will be down as soon as possible," she said, in a timid, gentle little voice that matched herself with almost annoying exactitude.

Sir Vallory bowed. He was at a loss to account for this lady's presence at all.

"I should introduce myself," she went on with a faint quiver. "I am Miss Consett—Dr. Consett's sister, and I came here because my brother thought it would be more pleasant for Miss Massendon to have someone with her."

"I am sure it was very kind of you," gasped Sir Vallory, trying hard to readjust his ideas.

"May I ask if Miss Massendon will be long?"

Miss Arethusa sighed.

"I hope not. It means he is better when she does leave."

There was a little silence. Miss Arethusa's presence and her few words were making dreadful havoc of all those hastily formulated theories, on the wings of which he had been torn from his real interests on this wild chase. Presently he asked her if Dr. Consett was in the house. It was a relief to hear that he was, and that therefore eventually he would have a man to deal with instead of these fragile women that one could not knock out of one's way for fear of breakage. A little later again, when he had got a better perspective of things, it occurred to him that he could not with justice call Christina fragile or breakable.

Miss Consett offered him tea, and when he refused, asked him with even more embarrassment if he would take anything else, but seemed relieved at his repeated but polite refusal. She wanted badly to speak to him of the invalid upstairs, of Miss Massendon's goodness, and her brother's skill, but shyness held her back. Sir Vallory asked her polite questions and learnt that she and her brother lived at Datchet, some five miles distant, and that he had a widespreading practice, and that his father had had it before him. Also he learnt that she was interested in poultry and reared innumerable chicken.

At last the door opened again, and Christina came in. Miss Consett rose, and made Sir Vallory a curious little acknowledgment that was neither a curtsey nor a bow, but partook of the nature of both, and that said quite plainly, "I have done my best to entertain you, now please may I go?"

She slipped away as unobtrusively as she had come, and Christina came forward slowly.

She was wearing a pale blue linen dress, her hair was rather tumbled, and her face looked grave and wistful. She held out her hand to Sir Vallory without saying anything, and seated herself at once in the big chair with the bearskin rug on it.

"It was kind of you to trouble to come," she said quietly; "but I don't think you need have done so. I wrote last night to tell you everything."

"Lady Losford thought differently," he snapped. "And so did I. Someone has to save you from this absurd situation."

Her lips trembled very slightly.

"I don't think if you saw him you would see anything absurd in it."

He turned away, frowning uneasily. The things that had seemed so obvious and easy to say in company with Emily seemed to desert him at his need.

He made two attempts and then succeeded in saying:

"It's out of the question your staying here, you know."

Christina sighed. She had the air of one listening for an expected call, and paying only perfunctory attention to her visitor. This annoyed Sir Vallory a good deal.

"Look here," he began, and was interrupted by the door opening for the third time.

This time it was a man-servant who appeared — an old, cadaverous-looking man who regarded him with a hostile eye and spoke to Christina.

"Excuse me, Miss, but Dr. Consett sent word that he would be glad if you could come back for a few minutes. The Master wasn't asleep after all."

Christina rose instantly.

"I'll come back," she said, and then paused a moment and turned to Sir Vallory. "Have you had anything? I'm sure Mr. Stressborn would wish you to ask for anything you wanted."

"But I am not staying here, nor are you!" he tried to say, but she had gone before he had finished his sentence.

He strode across the room to the window and swore with a fervour that would have done credit to Rudolph himself.

Another interminable wait. He recapitulated the arguments which were unanswerable in the same small limits of London, and knew in his heart he would never have courage to utter them aloud here. Yet, of course, Christina must return with him. It was not to Emily he was answerable, but to Rachel.

It was a great deal more soothing to think of Rachel than to think of Emily.

Eventually, Dr. Consett appeared. Sir Vallory, thirsting to fall on him tooth and nail, constrained himself to polite patience.

The doctor looked worried and tired, and his manner lacked the politeness of the visitor's.

"You've arrived on a bad day!" the doctor said awkwardly, and with a certain curtness. "Mr. Stressborn has had no rest at all except when Miss Massendon was with him."

"Is that wise?"

"Wise? How can I tell? He's got to sleep if it's humanly possible. She does it — somehow."

"It can't be very good for her!"

Dr. Consett turned on him sharply.

"Perhaps it's not, but when one is struggling to save a life, one doesn't care about little things like that."

"Little things like that!" Sir Vallory viewed him with curiosity. The health of Rachel's daughter was called a little thing! The reputation of Rachel's daughter would possibly be called a little thing, too, by this fierce champion of life. It was greatly to Sir Vallory's credit that he was able to tell himself that the man was overstrained and unnerved by his conflict, and must be taken with patience.

"You must see," he began gently, "that — sorry as I am for Mr. Stressborn's illness — it is impossible for me to leave my niece here in such a position."

The doctor's eyes blinked quickly.

"That's what I feared," he muttered. "No peace! Drat 'um!" Then he sat looking hard at Sir Vallory till that gentleman felt singularly uneasy.

"You can't expect me to see it's impossible," snapped the doctor at last.

"My dear sir," began Sir Vallory, waving his hand deprecatingly.

"Have you ever seen any one ill with rheumatic fever? No? I thought not! This unhappy man has it about as badly from the point of pain as a man can have it. I was furious when I came and

found her here, but I was mistaken. I don't understand what it means and I don't much care, but she can do more for him than all the drugs in the pharmacopœia."

Sir Vallory hardened his heart to tell himself he must think of Rachel, but he could not tell his companion as much.

Dr. Consett suddenly got up.

"Come with me," he said, in his short, abrupt way. "I've begun being unprofessional, so I may as well go on with it."

Sir Vallory, to his own wonder, found himself following his guide through the long passages to the stairs. It seemed to him his last visit had been a very recent thing, and he was curiously aware of Stressborn's presence. The dulness and silence, the lack of servants, the unused look of everything, of every piece of furniture, every curtain, every chair, all seemed to speak to him in dumb reproach and to open his understanding. It was on the stairs that he finally lost sight for good and all of the petty arguments that had held sway over him in their own atmosphere, and which faded to nothing here. All that concerned him now was that Rachel's daughter should not be injured at any man's expense; he must find better arguments than those he had relied on to support him.

The doctor stopped outside a door and told him to wait, and then disappeared. Poor, courteous Sir Vallory had never been treated with such scant deference in all his life. As he waited he felt rather than knew who and what it was that was Master here, levelling all distinctions more surely than Death itself. It was pain. In the shadow of it outside that closed door Sir Vallory bowed his head, and wondered at the pettiness of men.

Dr. Consett came out, looked up and down the passage, hesitated, and then said:

"Come in here a moment!" Sir Vallory demurred for one second and then went in.

Ten minutes later they were both standing in the library again, and neither of them had spoken. The doctor cast swift, sideways, blinking glances at his companion, but he refrained from speech.

"Had you sent her away on purpose?" Sir Vallory's voice was hard and dry.

The other flushed red and there was an angry light in his eyes for a moment.

"It was the shortest way," the doctor told him, "and it saved time in the end." He glanced at him questioningly, as if to assure himself this was not a false prophecy.

"Does she always quiet him like that?"

"So far. Oh, I don't understand it, but there it is. Shall I tell her to pack?"

He shot out the query with ruthless bluntness.

Sir Vallory gazed out of the window and appeared not to hear.

"I should like to see her here before I go."

The doctor grunted and turned away.

"One moment," said Sir Vallory. "You seemed to think I was rather a brute; we are quits there, I thought so of you two minutes ago. I shall have to leave Miss Massendon, I see—but your sister? Is it possible for her to stay here?"

"She'll stay," said the doctor gruffly.

"Mrs. Gubbins is getting a room ready for you," said Christina gently when she came in to him again. "You can't possibly go back to London to-night. It is such a long journey."

"Yes," Sir Vallory agreed absently. "It is a long way off."

CHAPTER XXV

MY Dear Father,—

I wonder if you have heard of the dreadful thing I have done? It must be dreadful, or every one would not be so angry with me, I suppose, though it's only that they do not understand. But if you are cross, too, it will be the last straw, and I shall tell Mr. Stressborn he will have to keep me here as a permanency—that is, when he is well enough to be told anything, for he is very, very ill. You will probably be less surprised than the others at my being here, as I told you I felt I had to do something for him, though I did not know how or what. So when Mrs. Gubbins's letter came saying he was ill, and that she and Loomis thought I could do him good, I knew I must come. Sir Vallory did not understand it then at all, and tried to make me see what he called common sense, still I had to come and he was away when I started. I dare say it is difficult to make allowances for people who act in a different way from what one thinks is proper and right, and when Lady Losford called for me two days later, and the maids gave her my address which I had left, she telegraphed off to Sir Vallory in rather a fright. He was at Greenwich, doing some very, very important work with Sir Archibald Page, and I expect he did not like being disturbed. I had written to him, but he had been too busy even to open letters. He came straight up here to fetch me back, and it shows what an understanding person he really is—when once he was here he did understand, and stopped worrying about the silly little social things that only matter when there is nothing real beside one. Mr. Stressborn has a nice kind doctor who has brought his sister over here to stay, in case I should be too lonely; for you see there is only Mrs. Gubbins and Loomis and a little maid in the place, and Dr. Consett

does not let me see Mr. Stressborn except when he is at his worst. I think he regards me as a sort of last resource, and uses me accordingly! He is very careful of me and sends me out for walks, and makes me eat far too much! He seems to think I am using up my own strength, which of course is not the fact at all. I do not know myself just what it is that I do for Mr. Stressborn, but I feel as if there was a great stream of life running through my fingers and that when I touch him, it helps him to stand against the pain. It is rheumatic fever he has, and he had it before in prison. Oh, dear, when will there be enough people in the world who understand, to keep these terrible things out? I shall never forget those first days. I could only keep the worst pain at bay when I was with him, and when I went it all came back again. One dreadful night I thought it was all a mistake — my being here — and that I was only doing more harm than good. I lost hold of everything. It was unspeakable. I think that is what Hell must be like, not feeling sure of things, not sure that God is able to manage for one, and that He could not deceive one. Can you understand? I almost hope you can't, for it is so horrible. Everything went at once — my belief in myself, in God, in my being there — and I saw the ghosts that poor Mr. Stressborn sees all the time, though I am not going to let him see them any more. Then at the very worst moment Dr. Consett sent for me. He had been trying his remedies all the evening and given them up as useless at last. So I just told the ghosts they had to go, and myself that I was only pretending not to believe, but that I knew better and when I came to stand by him and felt God was still using me to help, in spite of my being so weak and wicked as to doubt, I felt things getting light again and so all came right. Do you mind my telling you all this? I did not write it to mother because I felt it had passed and would only make her sorry for what was over, but it is good to tell someone and "own up." Mr. Stressborn is really better these last few days. When he is well Mrs. Gubbins and I are going to make a little room next to the library into a bedroom for him, as he will

not be able to go up and down stairs for some time because of his heart, and that room of his would attract the most reluctant ghost. I never believed in them before, but here each room seems to have its own particular shadow, and when one has sat there a little time, sad, bitter, wretched thoughts come creeping up one's mind; one has to be very firm with them to shut them out. I feel certain that if you were here and saw Mr. Stressborn now you would not say that it was no business of mine. I like to think that you would be even a little proud that I was allowed to be of use. It is all very wonderful. I suppose God can cure him more quickly this way than any other. Perhaps Mr. Stressborn has lost faith in medicines that don't help him now. Dr. Consett said to me the other day, "It's paying pretty heavily for one indiscretion, isn't it?" It would be too dreadful if one thought that he was still paying. He has paid times over, but it's every one else's sins mixed up in it. His father's and the poor boy who killed himself, and the man who helped him go wrong in the first place — it's harder to forgive him than any one, I think — and heaps of other things; it's the things that are wrong everywhere, not just one man's doing. Mother has often told me, but I never quite understood till now, how we are all tied together and no one can stand or fall alone. It is the whole perverted idea of life and what it means, and every one's thoughts, that brought about Christ's tragedy, only He was strong enough to get through it. There are so many things I have learnt to see clearly while I'm trying to help my patient. Dr. Consett calls him that. He did not like my coming at first, I know, but now he owns that it all means something, though he can't just see how it works. Write and tell me you feel I have acted rightly. It will be so monotonous if you say anything else. Good-night, mon père. There — that is such a beautifully appropriate title that it must stick!

YOUR AFFECTIONATE DAUGHTER.

Rudolph read this letter through twice, and decided the whole thing was too exasperating for words or

answer, that the letter merited destruction, and finally consigned it to oblivion — in his pocket.

He went about for two days with a mood on him that broke off the slender ties of three acquaintanceships and brought about a quarrel with Walter Chancely, nearly as final in results as Rudolph had told himself he desired.

At the end of that time he took the letter out again and read it anew.

He thought of their interview when Christina had paid him that first visit after her return from Strancebury, remembered with ironic self-contempt how he had felt himself safe and thought it a "score off" Christina's Providence that it should be so. He remembered also her account of Stressborn — how she had speculated on the thoughts of the man who had led him into such deep waters of trouble, and how he had told her it was no business of hers, and that they were none of them people for her to be mixed up with.

It was true! Of course, it was true! But at the same time Rudolph could not, with the best intention in the world, have repeated that remark of his now. Save on the score of Rachel, his conscience was — or he told himself it was — an easy one. He gave no credence to Christina's uncomfortable belief in mutual responsibility. He had regretted the Stressborn affair; it was bad luck the boy should have come against him at that time. He was a young fool, no doubt, but he had been a very attractive one, and undoubtedly he had had to pay too hardly for his folly. He had told himself that at the time and kept as clear as possible of the ugly business. It had not been his cue to court publicity at that particular moment and would have done no good at all. But he did not want — no, indubitably he did not want — Christina to know his connexion with the miserable case. He would have told Rachel, but Christina was another

matter. Of course, it was really Stressborn's own affair. Rudolph was not to blame by his own comfortable, practical creed; but then the trouble was Christina would never be brought to see either the soundness or the utility of that creed. Rudolph hoped with a fierce intensity that she would never meet the man who had helped Stressborn to ruin.

Apart from that, Rudolph as a man of the world appreciated to the full what such a flying in the face of social laws would mean to her. He experienced almost a glimmer of sympathy with his unfortunate brother. It really was delicious, when one came to think of it, that Sir Vallory should be saddled with this independent, headstrong daughter of his, with her unusual views on life and her uncanny capacity for carrying them out.

There are few things more disconcerting in the world than a person determined to do the thing that appears right regardless of general rules. Just because it was Vallory who was so troubled and the fact awoke Rudolph's sense of humour, the affair took a lighter tone for him. He was almost ready to approve Christina's action. The whole situation was a gamble for him anyhow, and he had just sufficient stake in it to be quite genuinely interested. A stake, but not too high a one, he told himself, for what could the opinion of a mere girl matter to him, especially as she was bound to be cut out of his life within a few months at most by an impassable barrier.

"It's such a picturesque adjustment of Providence," he told himself. "I ruin the boy and she puts him right with the world, or rather — with heaven. I wonder if he's lost all his old attractiveness."

This attitude was far more pleasing than his first black annoyance over it all, of which he felt suddenly ashamed, so he sat down then and there, and wrote to Christina.

My Dear Christina,—

I consider the inappropriateness of “*Mon Père*” a stroke of genius that must not be lost. In the event of my sudden demise and the discovery of sundry unburnt letters, who would connect a series, so commencing, with either of us? By the way, have you been properly brought up to recognise the sin of keeping any letter, however trivial? Especially, let me impress on you, those written in that delirious state known as being in love. I seldom trouble you with paternal advice, but I here perform my bounden duty in warning you that no one who values his or her reputation for sanity would be guilty of such a crime in the face of reason, as keeping letters. Now, never say that I did not give you good counsel. Little have I imagined in past years how thankful I should be for Vallory's existence. I seem to see the finger of Providence arranging all this, and giving me the inestimable pleasure of being your father, and him the appalling responsibility thus incurred. It is such a fine adjustment of past troubles that I can afford to feel quite sorry for your friends. It must be disconcerting to feel that one day not so far off they will be called to account over you and your scandalous behaviour.

Do I think you have acted rightly or wrongly? Why don't you ask me whether I approve of the laws of Confucius or a simple little problem like that. Am I going to be shocked like the others? Heaven forbid I should be monotonous. It's one of the deadly sins I've struggled against heroically. If you want to know whether I *like* your being at Strancebury Castle, then I don't. It's too far from London in the first place, and you will get old-fashioned, and I shall be afraid to walk on Hampstead Heath with you in consequence. At my time of life one does not begin to practise the virtues of self-immolation for another's benefit. I'm seriously thinking of changing my name. It is one of the unfair advantages that women have over men that you can with such ease escape the dull monotony of being called Fitts or Rupleswith or “such like,” while poor mankind has to put up with it for the whole of his life, unless he is as clever

as I am. Tennent is beginning to bore me, so you might practise forgetting it, except in the case of addressing envelopes for the immediate present. Eventually I will appear before you in the white robe of an unsullied name, and restore this to whomever it belongs to. Do you think Mrs. Chancely would be inconsolable? You would have the enormous pleasure of meeting me again for the first time.

Don't you think you ought to renounce your dislike for poor Stressborn's soi-disant friend, blackguard though he might be? The feeling may interfere with the nervous electric current, or whatever it is. It gives me cold shivers to think of the state of any one you could be reduced to disliking. Leave that side of things to me.'

Yours, still unchristened, R. M.

P. S. Shall it begin with a *T* or an *M*? *T* would save a lot of re-marking, wouldn't it?

This letter did Christina a world of good, which was more than its deserts. It was so like him. Whoever — except her mother and herself — would think he had a heart like other men. It was comforting, too, after the reproachful and wrathful letters she had had to wade through of late.

Lady Losford had nearly broken with Vallory for good and all on his return from Yorkshire without Christina, with the meagre excuse that one simply couldn't take her away!

He was quite unable to give her any idea as to the reason of this change of front, but he persisted that Rachel would not mind, and with that she had to be satisfied. She lectured with energy, she washed her hands of the whole affair, and then sat down and wrote to Rachel and Christina. Mrs. Chancely did the same.

The situation, however, was undoubtedly saved by Miss Consett's presence, and happily Christina had taken to the little lady on first sight, discerning under her somewhat quaint exterior the kindest of hearts

that had ever beat time to the little faded measure of some forgotten romance.

When Christina had asked her anxiously if it was really possible for her to stay she had assured her it would be a pleasant change. Apart from all question of convention it was most fortunate for Christina that she was not left to face the dreariness of the Castle alone in the lonely hours when she was not with Desmond. For the doctor, as she had told her father, having discovered the value of her presence there, insisted on treating her as a prescription only "to be taken on order." This saved her from too great a strain on her faculties and no doubt increased the value of her soothing presence when she was with the sick man. But it also meant that she only saw Stressborn at his worst hours and could not judge fairly of the improvement in between.

She complained of this one day to Miss Consett.

"Your brother is a dreadful tyrant, Miss Consett. You must lead a sad life. If I dared I should go and sit with Mr. Stressborn now; Loomis says this is the best day he has had."

"I think Herbert must know best, my dear; and indeed you are mistaken, he is the kindest of men. I am extremely happy."

"That is because you always do think he knows best," returned Christina, shaking her head.

"He is a doctor," said Miss Consett mildly, but with a quaint little air of dignity.

"Even doctors are not infallible! After all he did not believe me at first."

"It was outside the run of his usual experience," quoted the sister, without being in the least aware that she was quoting. "Although I am sure that Herbert has had many wonderful cases. He has told me about them sometimes — in confidence of course — the wife or sister of a doctor has to be very circumspect, Miss

Massendon." She sighed as if it were a heavy burden, this being circumspect!

"My dear," cried Christina, "it is quite cruel to ask you to be anything so horrid. As if your kind, pretty, little interest could hurt any one, and you would love to talk of it so much!"

By this time Christina had discovered that the little lady's natural propensity for gossip was well controlled by her kind heart and her awe of Herbert. Also Christina had begun to "mother" her as Miss Consett had never been "mothered" in the fifty years of her placid, lonely life. Miss Consett was perplexed by Christina, but she was never angry; she could not have been angry with any one, much less one on whom Herbert had set his seal of authority in saying "she was worth her weight in gold." Still Christina was a continual surprise to her; she was so entirely out of the range of her limited experience.

"I have seen very little of the world," Miss Consett admitted with rare modesty, "and no doubt there are many people in it that I could not understand."

So, as it was not possible to understand her, Miss Consett just accepted Christina, and that answered very well.

Once she had asked Herbert rather timidly what he thought Miss Massendon was, with reference to her religious persuasion, which certainly troubled her. Herbert had given an answer that nearly took away her breath, it had so closely bordered, in her estimation, on impropriety.

"She's a Christian."

Miss Consett often thought over this speech of her taciturn brother, and tried to fit it in with her conception of Christina, but she could not reconcile the two. Christina said very little that, in her gentle judgment, could be construed into religious speech; sometimes, it was true, her conversation took a turn

that Miss Consett would have considered profane, if Herbert had not held different ideas; but as a rule Christina seemed inclined to find something amusing in all around her, even to go out of her way to discover it; she took a particular pleasure in making the grim Loomis smile, and altogether was as full of spirits and as little depressed by the sad state of things at the Castle, as it was possible to be. It was charming and pleasant, but Miss Consett could not reconcile it with her ideas of Christianity. Loomis was wonderfully careful of Miss Massendon. He saw that nothing was wanting for her daily comfort, and seldom failed to put Mrs. Gubbins through a catechism of her preparations for the day's provisioning, Mrs. Gubbins being capable of forgetting little matters, like puddings and clean table-cloths, and cream and honey, when the Master of Strancebury was lying under the hands of the angel of pain.

Christina certainly required all the simple pleasures and joys she could gather in, for those were terrible hours she spent by Desmond's side. Her presence would not have immediate effect. It took time to get him to "let go" the rigid control of his muscles, and the bracing himself against the recurring attacks, but little by little he began to see what was wanted of him, and would keep his eyes on hers. Then the result would show slowly and clearly. First, the sharp line of pain round his lips would give way and the lips unclose a little, and his hands would relax and no longer quiver under hers, but lie still and quiet so long as hers were over them. He seldom spoke to her and never had he asked for her even at his worst hour.

She would sit by him till he fell asleep and then slip away into the open air if possible, with a great gravity on her, and a feeling of love for the whole world. At first she could not do with more companionship at such times than earth and sea, but presently she would go

down to the pebbly shore and talk to the fishermen and their wives, and hear tales of Desmond when he was a boy, that made her transfer her quiet, steady anger from the man who had done so much to ruin Desmond, to the father that had made that ruin such an easy matter.

They were silent folk, these fishermen of the Bay, as a rule, concerned for the most part in their catch, and in their own perilous lives: any interest beyond this was centred in the affairs of the Castle which had frowned over them and their forebears for generations. The last Stressborn had not been in the direct line of descent, and they had attributed his many failings to this. He had not been a man to command affection, and certainly had none from the cold, hard woman who was Desmond's mother, so Christina gathered. The two had got on badly together. It was whispered that in moments of passion Stressborn used to fling bitter sayings at his wife, things that were stinging insults, but which she took as she took everything that came from him, with cold disregard. It must have been clear to the most unobservant that Stressborn had no love for his son, yet he had kept the boy there under his eye, with a series of tutors who came and went with persistent regularity, through the early years of Desmond's life. Christina could not gather that there had been anything in the nature of affection shown the boy except in the love that these simple people gave him in abundance. The women in the wretched little huts by the shore had always a corner for "the young master," and it was in the fishermen's boats that Desmond had spent his happiest hours, often facing dire punishment rather than lose the taste of joy and freedom that was his on the open sea. To go out in the boats for the night was the crowning joy and the worst crime, but he would only laugh when the men counselled his staying ashore.

Those nights on the open sea, scudding before the wind, working at the nets, lying prone in the trailing boat with the stars above, and the voice of the sea in his ears, were worth heavy payment, he felt.

He passed out of their ken when he went to London to a famous coach — as unfit a candidate for the sudden freedom and revelation of life as could well be found. Of his fall, his miserable trial, and all that pertained to it she gathered nothing from the friends of his boyhood.

“He was took with trouble awāay in Lunnon,” was their way of expressing it, and neither then nor in after years, did Christina ever hear these loyal friends of his youth speak otherwise of that event. They just ignored it, or at all events refused to pass judgment on it. But those of his own blood had counted him as dead, refused to hear or see anything of him. They paid a lawyer to attend his trial, and when that was over, entered him as dead, and hung up the medal that had been put round his neck at baptism, in the case where such things were placed. He had sent it on order and had written them a letter which was not answered. The two shut themselves up in the Castle, saw no one, and lived in ghastly silence that death sealed with his unbreakable seal within three years of the catastrophe.

Such was the terrible story Christina pieced together bit by bit. She felt a necessity of understanding once for all just what she had to fight against, or she could hardly have borne to hear it again.

“Was he delicate as a boy?” she asked Mrs. Porton, as she sat at the door of her cottage, watching the Saturday toilet of one of the Portons’ many offsprings.

“What! t’ young measter? Nea, nivver. He’s onmost as strang as my measter. It were ’at tahn

they hed him awäay down theer, 'at he was takken badly wiv rheumatik fever, Ah've heerd tell."

"That's what it is now," sighed Christina.

"Is that it noo? Will 't ther stan' still, Dan, while Ah've brushed thi haar, if thoo disn't Ah'll githa a skelp, an' Ah'll thank ther nut to ruffle it agean. Here's fave o'clock an' Ah hevn't gettin te t' preest yet."

"You are all Catholics here, aren't you?"

"They Wears an' Pickles, them Methodies, they bide down on t'other baay, an' all them Hadley lot."

"What's Father Mathews like?" asked Christina, with a sudden purpose. It mattered nothing to her what brought Desmond peace so long as he found it, but she could not feel very hopeful about Father Mathews, since he had, so far as she could see, done nothing in all these years to help Desmond to a more sane way of life.

Mrs. Porton dismissed her offspring with:

"Git along an' keep tidy till Ah's ready."

When he had disappeared round the corner of the house she turned to her visitor.

"Ah ax pardin, Miss, but it disn't do to let t' bairns heer what we think about 'em 'at's in authority. Faither Mathew's a good man in his waay, he's fain to do his duty."

It was implied he did no more. Christina wondered what that duty was if not to "bind up the broken-hearted." She went thoughtfully back to the house by the steep path that led to the north tower, and down the corridor leading past the chapel. She had not entered there since her arrival. Some instinct of loyalty to her host had kept her back. Now she opened the door and went in. The chapel was not empty; here and there a kneeling form waited its turn at the little confessional, where Father Mathews

listened to the sins of his flock and administered penance and pardon with such sagacity as heaven had endowed him with. Christina turned her back resolutely on the case of medals by the door. Some day, she told herself, that and the lying record it held, should go. It grew dark early in the chapel; the evening light shot through the painted glass and made spots of glory on the worn floor; but up in the arched roof the dusk spread its wings and stole silently down, wrapping the figure of Mother and Child in obscurity, shadowing the shrine with its golden gates, and re-illuminating the little twinkling candles that burned before the Altar of St. Nicholas. Only the foot of a great crucifix held the last warm glow of the sun. Outside the light would be still clear and full of beauty. Christina felt glad to know this.

As she sat there, there filtered into her heart a better understanding of Desmond's needs. Indubitably there was something here which would get grip of a soul. The Divinity of God stooped down so low as to touch the Humanity of Man.

Desmond had been brought up not only in the faith, but in this particular place. It was here had been born every spiritual thought that had kept the boy's soul swept and garnished. The "Other Side of Things," the After Life, Reward and Punishment, were clear and definite matters to him as real as the Present life, as Honour and Disgrace, and just as he could not have accepted honours at another man's expense, so he could not accept the reward of eternal life at another's cost. Christina saw quite clearly how he would look at it. How plain a problem it would seem to him. Sorrow he had, and repentance he had, yet because across his sin another had leapt — so he had been told — to perdition, he saw no way compatible with honour in saving himself from like disaster. There was another element still in Desmond's attitude which she

understood less well. The unconquered weed of hate grew strong in silence and isolation, and spread choking roots about the best qualities of his simple, direct nature.

It was typical both of Desmond and the Faith, as he understood it, that he accepted the dictum of the only two men, who had met his soul over the affair, and it never entered his head to weigh the personality of either man against the stubborn facts they had driven into his mind. A priest was a priest to him just as he would be to the fishing folk; a specialist on the matter of spiritual things with whom one did not dispute. He would have said frankly that it was not they who put him outside the privileges he would value. It was as if a starving man would not cross a road to take the bread held out to him because another had fallen unfed beside him.

But Christina, sitting there in the dim light, saw more than this. She saw that immeasurable factor in human life, the factor of personality! She was more ready to believe the individual might be wrong than that the Faith which was founded on the very rock stone of Mercy, could fail to recognise requirements of so simple a nature as Desmond's.

The Prison Chaplain, or Father Mathews, or Desmond himself had blundered somewhere.

Had Father Mathews really never attempted to help this man? It seemed too incredible.

One by one the quiet figures stole away with odd, reverent little bows.

Father Mathews came out of the curtained recess with a stifled sigh, or perhaps it was a yawn; he was rather stiff and very tired. At the best it was monotonous work, and his sagacity was not greatly tried.

The sight of the unfamiliar figure that stepped out of its place to meet him filled him with vague alarm, and then when he saw it was Miss Massendon, this

much-talked-of visitor to the Castle, a little flutter of excitement passed through him. She wanted to speak to him, she said, so he led the way to his adjourning room and begged her to be seated. Could it be possible that she came to him as a possible convert desiring instruction? A hazy idea of the greatness of such an adventure danced before his eyes, which blinked and watered in the light from the uncurtained window, after the darkness where he had sat so long. A convert? That meant many things. Firstly, a gain for heaven, of course, but more — there were earthly gains that even a poor priest need not despise. But the dream faded in a flash; he saw its absurdity as he looked at Christina even before she spoke.

They talked perhaps for an hour. When he at last escorted her to the chapel door his face was troubled and his manner anxious. Christina was thoughtful, but not distressed. She looked, and was disappointed, but her idea had been of too deep a foundation for her to feel seriously concerned over its first failure; moreover, she had received more instruction than Father Mathews imagined.

“You will not mind if I come to service to-morrow, then?” she asked, pausing at the door. The little chancel affected her strangely; she desired to understand more intimately its spirit, but still feared to intrude.

“The church is always glad to welcome worshippers,” he replied, a trifle pompously.

Christina shook her head.

“Not always, Father Mathews.”

“I have tried to explain,” he said rather wearily. “The children of the House are in a different position from guests; it is all a question of accepting the authority we must acknowledge.”

Christina turned and held out her hand.

"I am sure you are doing just what you feel is your duty, and that it is not a bit what you would like to do," she said frankly. "I do understand much better." With that she left him and went back to the library and Miss Consett, who was beginning to get anxious at her absence.

"I feared you had gone for too long a walk, my dear. I hope nothing happened."

Christina shook her head.

"I have been thinking," she said slowly, as if thoughts were adequate explanation of her doings, "that it is much lighter outside the chapel than in."

"There is a great deal of coloured glass, I believe," Miss Consett ventured, without pretending to understand the drift of this.

"Yes," Christina agreed vaguely. "I expect that is it. There is a lot of coloured glass."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE days slipped into weeks and weeks slid into months, and the hot summer sun made its presence felt on the bare rock of the Headland, flickering back into the quivering air as if heated in a furnace. The sky hung like a pale burnished dome over the sea whose oily waters heaved languidly. At Strancebury Castle there was coolness to be found only in such apartments as looked into the courtyard. Desmond by this time was moved down to the room that Christina and Mrs. Gubbins had prepared for him on the ground floor and furnished with care with such things as Mrs. Gubbins could assure Christina would hold no recollections for their owner, good or bad. It presented a marked contrast to the bare, comfortless room upstairs, and Desmond, so far, had raised no objection to the change.

He was also promoted to the library sofa on suitable days, but the heat there and the glare from the high, unsheltered windows was not found very beneficial, and it was only in the late afternoon or evening that he could stand it. Dr. Consett came in one day and found Christina standing on the top of some high steps, fastening up long green "tatties" in a secure, if amateurish, way.

"I got them made in town to measure," she told him. "It seemed such a pity Mr. Stressborn should not be able to be here all day. I think he feels more like being well when he is."

It was certainly an improvement. The glare had given an air of discomfort to the room and put a cruel emphasis on the shabby details, which now were

clothed with a decent, homely vagueness at once pleasant and tranquillising.

The doctor approved, and told Christina he would help Loomis bring Desmond in, directly he had seen him.

In the hall he met his sister, as composed and gentle as ever, but with the faintest little shade of anxiety on her brow.

"There are two ducks dead, Arethusa," he told her abruptly.

She was distressed.

"Herbert, are you sure that Jane feeds them properly? They were all right when I was over on Thursday."

Then she added nervously:

"Jane is a good girl, but it's a long time to leave her; I suppose there is not any one else who could—"

"Any one else to come in your place?" he tapped his boot impatiently. "I don't think so. How should I know what they mean to do?"

He spoke with such irritation that she drew back a little frightened, and brought him to repentance.

"He is better, they will have to settle something soon," he told her reassuringly.

Miss Arethusa still lingered.

"I suppose, Herbert," she said rather confusedly, "that Mr. Stressborn will marry her when he is well?"

"If he waits till then, he won't!" he returned drily. "The only chance is to make him marry her while he's too weak to fight against his own luck."

Miss Arethusa's confusion deepened.

"I quite thought they were engaged," she murmured reproachfully, as if it were the fault of her brother that they were not.

"You have a tendency to travel too fast, Arethusa," said Dr. Consett, eyeing his sister severely. "Still I don't mind telling you that if any prescription of mine

could bring about their marriage, I should prescribe it."

With that he turned on his heel and went in to his patient.

When he left the Castle that afternoon he should have done so with a bad conscience, for he — being, as before stated, an habitually truthful man — had told his patient a lie. Perhaps it was more of the implied kind than the direct, but he would have been the last man to take shelter behind that excuse. However, he did not want to shelter behind anything; on the contrary, he was rather proud of his questionable achievement. Retribution from an accusing conscience might await him in the future, but at present he only wondered whether he had sufficiently instilled his meaning into Desmond Stressborn's mind.

At the gate he met Christina again. The "tatties" were up, and she had come out to waylay the baker, who occasionally brought the letters over from Datchet in the afternoon.

He dismounted and walked by her side for a little way.

"Mr. Stressborn's made an amazingly quick recovery," he remarked in his usual jerky manner.

"Ten weeks," she reminded him.

"It's short for rheumatic fever. Of course, he will have to be careful and to keep quiet. The heart trouble looks as if it would pass away if he'll be sensible, and lies up long enough. I consider it amazing. You should be proud."

She shook her head.

"It's neither of us. He was meant to get well."

"For what?" demanded the doctor, facing her suddenly. "That's got to be solved, you know. What are you going to do, Miss Massendon?"

He questioned with brutal frankness, jerking his

horse to a standstill and fronting her with a "stand and deliver" air that sat oddly on him.

Christina was grave, but not apparently alarmed.

"About staying on?" she asked slowly. "Do you think him well enough to be left yet?"

"No, nor never will be," was the blunt response.

"That's what I meant — What are you going to do?"

"Whatever he wishes," she told him quietly.

The doctor swung himself into the saddle again.

"I daresay you think it's none of my business, Miss Massendon. But Desmond Stressborn would have made a fine man. I knew him as a boy."

She nodded. He still lingered, awkwardly switching his whip at imaginary flies.

"About my sister — I suppose, Miss Massendon, there is no one else —" He stopped hesitatingly.

Christina looked up with real contrition in her face.

"I had forgotten," she said in a low voice. "I *am* sorry! She told me just now two of the ducks were dead. I ought to have thought."

She made no promise of readjusting affairs, but Dr. Consett nodded in a satisfied way. He rode off a few paces, turned back and rejoined her.

"Couldn't you persuade him to go abroad for a time?"

"I have often wondered why he didn't go," she said thoughtfully.

"He's not well off. What there is, is for the upkeep of the place; he can't even let it, I believe. But for a time — later on —"

"I will try," Christina assured him sedately.

This time he really went off.

The baker's cart brought Christina two letters and she returned to the Castle with them, going out by the north tower on to the rough path that led down to the Bay. Here she seated herself on a jutting-out

rock that was in the shadow of the cliff. Just below her a big bush of gorse incensed the air and showed like a golden fire against the sea behind. She took off her hat and leant against the rock, too content for the moment even to trouble about her letters.

Down below her was the little harbour with the boats rolling lazily on the heaving sea. The shadow of the great cliff lay over the water. Things were strangely distinct and clear within its bounds. Outside that, sky and sea were mingled in a melting haze.

Christina thought of the scene she had watched from the windows of the room in the north tower above, when so different a face had been on sea and sky. . . . It was Desmond who had gone out in the boat . . . because he was the nearest at hand. . . . Desmond, who had just now been carried to the big sofa in the library on condition he would lie still and not sit up, nor lift books, nor commit any foolishness of that kind. A longing that amounted to an ache came over her to see him again coming up the steep path in his rough fisherman's clothes, brown-faced, reliant, splashed with spray, and the boy-spirit shining for the moment in his sad eyes.

Once in these latter days of convalescence she had succeeded in awaking that spirit again, by the medium of Miss Arethusa, but only once. For the most part he was content to lie still and listen, if she chose to talk or read, equally content if she sat silent so long as she sat within his sight. She desired intensely to rouse him into such impatience with the tedium of his slow convalescence as other men would feel — and show. She did not know that in his former attack he had passed three months on end in the bare prison hospital, months of monotony and pain beside which this interlude had been like heaven itself.

Christina opened her letters and read them. One was from her father, the first for weeks. It appeared

he was abroad again. He gave her an amusing and witty account of Trouville, remarked she was a long time curing her patient, and it was a warning to him not to engage her as a nurse, and incidentally expressed a hope that all was well in Yorkshire, and also on the other side of the hemisphere! The other letter was from Sir Vallory, returning a letter from her mother she had sent him. Rachel knew the whole situation by this time, and if she were dismayed by the dealings of Providence with the charge committed to it, she did not betray as much.

"If you cannot reconcile your actions with other people's consciences," she wrote, "at least meet them on such points as are possible. The poor man sounds as if he needed help, and it is difficult to see what else you could have done. God send him healing to soul and body. I have never desired to be in two places at once before. In case I have not time to write to Vallory by this mail, you had better send him this letter to read. I thank him greatly for his care and concern for you. I fear he will have to exercise great Christian charity towards me, seeing that I promised him you would give him no trouble. Tell your patient I look to hear of his complete recovery, and how glad I am that you were able to be of use. God bless you, my dearest. . . ."

Sir Vallory returned this with the remark that he was practising the Christian virtues to the best of his endeavour. He asked after Stressborn and when Christina proposed returning. Would she like to go to Torrens for the autumn? Perhaps the Chancelys would go with her, etc., etc.

At any other time this proposal would have been full of interest to her, but this evening her thoughts would not settle either on Sir Vallory or even Mr. Tennent, not even on her mother. They all seemed far away and out of focus.

It was of Desmond she thought. Her mind was set on reconciling the idea of the man within, tended so carefully by old Loomis, and her vision of "Desmond of the fishing boats."

Again she seemed to see him coming up the path to her, straight from the sea, with the strength of it in his figure, the joy of it in his heart, and the spirit of it in his eyes—Desmond, who could not move without help now!

Yet it was all there, lying latent—a remote possibility, not as a momentary rekindling of extinguished hopes, but as a permanent fact. Something deeper than mere physical recovery, a possibility, if she could find a way to realise her thought and translate into the world of actualities the vision her mind had conceived. Moment by moment the desire to do this became a pressing need that clamoured for recognition. Deep down in her heart something that had slept till now stirred fitfully.

As an artist images a picture that his greatest skill will hardly compass, as a writer feels the inrush of the idea his pen will barely materialise, as the musician catches vibrations too pure and faint to be trammelled by law, so Christina caught in that hour a shadow cast from some Master Mind of the man who had been planned—nothing heroic, just a man ready to do the thing that had to be done, to meet the need of the hour without complaint, or barely comment, fearing nothing, but weaving into life some of the freshness and joy of the sea he loved. This was the thing she had to do, the possibility that must take tangible form through her. She recognised it for the moment, drew back from it and then was shamed at her own cowardice. No one else had been able to help—unless, indeed, Father Mathew's prayers had had their part in this vision of hers.

Nothing so far in her life had roused quite this

desire for another presence, quite such oblivion of outside affairs, or quite such fear, sudden and sharp, hardly to be borne, of separation. . . . As a mother stands between her child and the harsh days of disillusionment, so she would have stood between Desmond and the world, which would have none of him, and as a mother would she have shielded him from harm, fought for his good, his right to live, his right to his own fulfilment; but as a woman would she have surrendered herself to her vision made real, the man she loved, the Desmond that would come to her out of the sea — that deep, deep sea of the universal life where all potentiality is born and has its origin.

Meanwhile Desmond in the library was wondering at her unusually long absence. The "tatties" were still down, and the light filtering through them filled the room with a golden, misty haze. The mist seemed to spread itself over his thoughts also, for his mind had not yet recovered its balance after Dr. Consett's amazing and unexpected statement. He continued to go over the matter of it, trying to put new interpretations on it in vain.

Just before he left Dr. Consett had spoken of Miss Massendon.

"It is unfortunate for her that her mother is not at home," he had said. "She will be rather alone when she leaves here."

It was then Desmond had been first clearly conscious of the mist. Christina's going was of course an evil which must come, but he had tried very hard to put it from him.

"There is Sir Vallory," he said wearily; "he seems a good sort."

"Yes, there is Sir Vallory, but no woman apparently — now —" He stooped to pick up something from the floor. The monosyllable might have be-

longed to either sentence for he went straight on — “why don’t you marry her, Mr. Stressborn, and it would be a way out of both your difficulties?”

Desmond struggled hard against the instability of his mental outlook, and succeeded so well that the doctor did not even know how damaging his statement had been.

“If I were sure I should die in a week, I would,” he said bitterly; “but you say I’m getting better.”

“You are decidedly better, but you will have to be careful, you know.”

Desmond groaned.

“Careful! For how much longer?”

“For your life,” the doctor said quietly. “Two bouts of rheumatic fever such as you have had don’t leave a man where he was, as a rule.”

The gravity in the doctor’s voice irritated Desmond. He turned to him with an impatience that would have satisfied even Christina.

“I wish you would tell me just what you mean! I am not so keen on my life that I am easily upset.”

Then Dr. Consett began his lie, with keen eyes twinkling behind his glasses.

“If you are careful you may live several years.”

“Really!” Desmond returned drily. “How many, exactly, would you be inclined to give me?”

Dr. Consett hesitated still.

“I am not afraid of definite numbers,” insisted the other.

“Then — three years!” said the doctor, and added under his breath, “and as many more as heaven wills!”

“It was hardly worth all the trouble of getting well.”

After this, Dr. Consett had gone, and Desmond fell to thinking it over.

He had told the doctor, and believed it when he said

it, that he did not care about his life, yet now he was resenting in an entirely sane manner the limit given. He did not wish to be a semi-invalid, but he did want to live. He wanted to taste the sea again, to smell the hot, oozing tar and the tanned fishing nets, feel the joy of fighting wind and tide; he wanted these things as he had wanted them in prison with every fibre of his being, but he wanted still more desperately, all those things he had told himself so continually he must not have, and now added, he could not have.

He thought of all this till he grew tired of thinking, and could not distinguish in his mind whether it were the doctor's prohibition or his own, that stood between him and his many wants.

It was at this point he began to wonder rather fretfully why Christina did not come.

And then she entered, moving across the cool, dark spaces as if formed from the mist itself.

"Have you been wanting me?" she asked, seating herself by his side.

He smiled, and straightway forgot he had been worried and sick with wants.

"One gets used to wanting things," he told her, "and I knew you would come."

"You had much better get used to getting things," she insisted, putting her slim brown hand on his white one. "Don't you want to get decently brown again?"

"You have been on the sea?" he said, with a quick little sigh.

"Yes, this morning. I know quite a lot about boats now, and if you are not impatient to see, I am impatient to show off my knowledge."

"I shall be all right soon."

He made the remark without enthusiasm, however.

"Wouldn't you like to go abroad — for a voyage?"

"No. Don't ask me, Christina. I should hate it."

She sat silent awhile, and presently remarked med-

CHAPTER XXVII

THAT "they" would assuredly wish to refuse their consent to Christina's marriage with Desmond Stressborn was evident; yet after the first outbreak of indignation neither Sir Vallory, nor Lady Losford, nor Mrs. Chancely could find any plan of action effectually to stop it, except the unthinkable one of kidnapping Christina and shutting her up in durance vile.

They all three received the news simultaneously, and a hurried consultation on the telephone resulted in a meeting at Sir Vallory's house. That again-distracted man received his visitors in the formal drawing-room that Christina had tried so hard to make livable, and, having effected an introduction, found himself seated before the gorgeous banner screen that dominated the hearth, with a lady on each side of him. Each of the three clutched a letter in his or her hands. Sir Vallory indeed clutched more than one, and each of the ladies proceeded to give voluble expression and explanations to their sentiments on receiving the news. Sir Vallory, on his part, explained nothing, and his sentiments were sufficiently visible in the resigned desperation depicted on his face. He appeared to listen politely to the ladies, but he was really re-reading Christina's letter. He had intended showing it, but changed his mind and put it behind another that was written in pencil, in a clear, rather sprawling hand. He meant to pass that on, but he waited to see what would be said, first.

Lady Losford had plenty to say.

"I don't know what else you could have expected,"

she declared with biting scorn. "You chose to leave her there and nobody has any control over her but her mother. You can telegraph to her to forbid it, but for my part I don't see what else the girl can do. After all, he's a Stressborn — I know he's been in prison and all that; one couldn't receive him, but he is a gentleman, I suppose, and she has put herself into an impossible position. Who knows anything about this Miss Consett, for example, but ourselves, or rather yourself?" she added unkindly. Sir Vallory gave a little penitential sigh.

"The girl has made a fiasco of her affairs and Rachel has only herself to thank for it," concluded Lady Losford, whose apparently hard judgment hid a very real concern.

Sir Vallory, without replying, turned to Mrs. Chancely, whose kindly face showed unmistakable traces of tears, and whose hand clutched her letter, as if its agitated movement was due to itself rather than to her.

"I feel it terribly," she faltered, "being, in a way, my fault. I am sure if my father had known, he would have lived somewhere else, and I can't forgive Jennie for making me send Christina to the Filsons'; but, really, I was so agitated and Mabel was so ill, and I was so afraid of the infection —" She stopped for breath.

"I am quite sure, Mrs. Chancely," said Sir Vallory, "that no one would think of blaming you in the matter. I alone am the guilty one, because I yielded to — to circumstances and left her there."

"I am glad to hear you own it," put in Lady Losford, whose own conscience was by no means clear that she had done what she could.

"I will own anything," Sir Vallory told her hastily, "but the question is not who is to blame, but what is to be done."

There was a little silence, each desiring the other to speak first. Mrs. Chancely achieved the feat.

"I'm sure I shall be only too happy to have the dear child back and keep her till her mother returns," she said, adding plaintively, "if you will trust her with me."

"If she could be persuaded to come," amended Sir Vallory courteously, "nothing could be better. It would be a very wise course."

"Unfortunately no Massendon is given to taking a wise course," snapped Lady Losford a little angrily. She was annoyed that Mrs. Chancely had made this offer, which would have come better from a relation, however remote. She had intended to make it, she assured herself; but the intention was quite recent.

"My dear Emily," returned her cousin meekly, "surely it is the essence of wisdom to seek your assistance in this case."

"You are only half a Massendon; you belong to our side. I was thinking of Rudolph — yes, I will say so, if I like — don't frown like that! Christina is just like her father. 'Do what I like and damn the world!' It was always his method and it's hers!"

Poor Mrs. Chancely looked so shocked that Sir Vallory had to forego his own wrath to ease her embarrassment, but even as he did so, a second thought ironed the faint smile from his lips, and straightened them into a thin line.

"You have not suggested any solution yet, Emily," he said coldly.

Lady Losford, who had offended knowingly and in a fit of temper, was still unrepentant.

"I have told you — telegraph to Rachel, if you want to stop it. There is no other way, unless you find her father."

There was a curious pause. Sir Vallory's languid eyes rose slowly to his cousin's face, and she could

feel their scrutiny searching into her very soul. She was glad at that moment that she had no knowledge of that other Massendon to confess, and remembered a little late that it was never wise to press a Massendon too far.

Mrs. Chancelly wondered vaguely why it was she had not recollected that Christina's father was still alive. Was it really twenty years ago she had sat by Rachel's bed and listened through long, sad hours to her monotonous whisper of "Rudolph, Rudolph, Rudolph!"

"Unfortunately," said Sir Vallory, in a voice even more suave and gentle than before, "with regard to wiring to Mrs. Massendon, Christina has forestalled us. She wired when she sent these letters — she kindly sent me a copy."

"Was it explicit?"

"Quite. It cost fifteen pounds."

Mrs. Chancelly gasped.

There was another pause. No one seemed to have any further suggestions to make.

"The Stressborns had money," Lady Losford remarked at last inconsequently.

"Not this one; when I was there, Dr. Consett told me the father had got rid of every penny he could and left what remained away. There's just enough for the upkeep of the place and a bare living, that's all."

"I suppose the Caberlys are no use? His mother's people?"

"I know nothing about them. Consett said Stressborn saw no one."

Mrs. Chancelly felt out of it; she could not follow them, for the name of Stressborn conveyed nothing to her but the idea of someone that people did not visit. It was rather amazing to find he had relations, and that they seemed familiar to even such a distinguished person as Lady Losford.

"Perhaps you had both better see this," Sir Vallory said at last with a weary sigh; "Stressborn's own letter."

"Goodness gracious, do you mean he wrote to you himself?"

"The man isn't a savage, my dear Emily," was the mild response.

He handed her the letter and wandered away to the window, while the two women read it. The situation did not seem to him to have received much assistance so far. Through the well-seasoned veneer of his traditions and education, there had filtered into Sir Vallory's mind extraneous ideas that played havoc with his common sense, that put him oddly in sympathy with Christina, even with poor Stressborn, and very certainly in sympathy with Rachel.

He could not have assimilated, but he could appreciate her outlook on life, and the thoroughness of her creed; and he was, or this extraneous part of him was, ready to accept what after all was the logical outcome of it. He was aware of this, and yet here he was, acting — and he would continue to act — as if the affair was deplorable and a calamity from which Christina must, if possible, be saved.

Still they were no nearer a solution than in those tempestuous conversations over the telephone, and he had had such pathetic faith that the women would find a way out of the hole!

He was angry with Emily, too, not only for the introduction of his unforgivable brother's name, but for her tacit assumption that Rudolph would have had greater authority over Christina than he had — or even Rachel. He never regarded Christina as a family possession, but he did regard her as something so closely belonging to his sister-in-law that on her behalf he resented the mere idea that any one else could have a claim on the girl's obedience or loyalty. Mean-

while this was the letter the two ladies, who were so inefficient for the situation, read.

The writing was irregular and the lines broken off in places; sometimes, too, they went up and sometimes down, and it began without any preamble.

I apologise for writing in pencil but I am not allowed ink; and I ought to apologise for writing at all, only you will probably think that what I am going to say is so unpardonable you will not want to hear apologies. I have asked Miss Massendon to marry me, and she has consented. I can't offer any decent excuse for myself — unless you can take into consideration the fact I have not much time allowed me to live (though Miss Massendon does not know this) and that she says she loves me.

I think she will have told you we think it best to marry as soon as we can. It's not very likely that time would bring any one to think I was justified, and so Miss Massendon has wired to her mother who, she is sure, will not object. I cannot share her belief but I trust her. Anyhow Mrs. Massendon is not likely to say the things to me I deserve and you can. I find it's two years before Miss Massendon will be of age and I know I ought to ask your formal consent, but what is the use, when you could only refuse and I could only hold on to the great thing I have found? To wait two years is far too big a slice out of the time I'm told to expect, indeed it's all of it on the top of all else. I am a poor man, that is, I have enough to live here in the meagre way you have seen, enough for myself. I know nothing of Miss Massendon's affairs, but I suppose, unless you have the will and power to prevent it, she has enough to keep her in the comforts to which she is used. The very most I can ask of you is that if you can manage to think of the thing as inevitable, you will do what you can to make it plain sailing for her. It's no doubt another disability that I have been brought up a Catholic, though I think circumstances will have to make us content with a civil marriage only. I should add

that Parsons & Fretters of 96, Lincoln's Inn Fields, have been lawyers for this estate for the last three generations, and would, I know, meet you if you should wish it.

The letter was signed "Desmond Piers Stressborn" and the writing at the end was very indistinct.

There was a little addition to Christina's letter bearing on this one that Vallory did not show them.

"Desmond will write," wrote Christina. "It is months since he has used his right arm and it's much too much for him. He has had to do this in three tries, and he won't show it me. If it's to say he'll give me up if you wish, you are to take no notice because I have given him my word. N. B. He was so cross because I would not let him write with pen and ink, lying down!"

"I suppose," remarked Lady Losford, when they had both finished the letter, "that there is no doubt as to what Rachel will answer?"

"I have never known Rachel anything but consistent," Sir Vallory replied quietly.

"Then," returned his cousin, rising, "it appears to me that we are wasting our time, and the only thing that remains is to make up our minds whether we give her a wedding present or not."

"I certainly shall," cried Mrs. Chancely, taking it literally. "The poor, dear child may not have a proper wedding, but she shan't go without presents. Still I do wish she would wait and get married properly by banns and have her bridesmaids and a reception."

"Then she would have to marry someone else," Lady Losford retorted rather harshly. "Vallory, it was sheer waste of time asking us here."

Sir Vallory knew it would have been a far worse offence not to have asked them, besides he did not see that Stressborn's letter was more conclusive than Christina's, if anything could be done.

"I thought we might do something before Rachel's wire came."

Mrs. Chancely jumped at the suggestion.

"Should I go to her? Perhaps she would wait if it were pointed out to her!"

Lady Losford looked a little contemptuous.

"I am fond of Christina," she said judicially, "but I do not think any 'pointing out' is likely to induce her to take any road but the one she means to take."

"No bridesmaids, no wedding reception, no cards," murmured Mrs. Chancely plaintively.

"Not even a wedding dress," the other lady assured her, "for it would be superfluous."

Sir Vallory was considering something all this time.

"Will you leave your offer to go, open for a day or so, Mrs. Chancely?" he said. "Christina, in my letter, remarked she might come to town, but it might be well if you could go. We should be very grateful to you."

He spoke with some emphasis. He was not pleased with his cousin's attitude, though it fitted with his own general policy of inaction.

He saw her off before Emily made any attempt to go, and came back thinking that, after all, Rachel, as usual, showed more discretion than she got credit for with respect to her friends.

"You never meant to do anything," was Lady Losford's remark as he re-entered.

"There is nothing to do, but if I had not let you find it out for yourselves, I should have been in trouble all my life. Emily, you are not a shining light as a good Christian!"

"After I have backed up your masterly inactivity so thoroughly!" exclaimed the indignant lady.

"You backed me because you did not want to have the thing talked about as it would be if Christina were seen in London," he told her coolly, "not because you think it is really a good thing for the girl."

"No one in their senses could think that," snapped Emily crossly. "It's the best of a bad business. Why couldn't she have married Richard and been properly happy?"

Sir Vallory, who privately thought Richard rather a fool, agreed it was a deplorable mistake.

"That means you are tired of me. You are always too polite to contradict when you are bored. Let me know when the wedding takes place. I confess I do not quite know what it will feel like to have Desmond Stressborn for a relation. I hope he is good-looking, at least."

With this last shot she took herself off and Sir Vallory was left in peace.

Christina did not write to her father till after she had received the telegram from her mother. It was by far the most difficult of the many letters she had had to write, for she felt there would be opposition here more deep-reaching and less easy to override than in the other cases.

She wrote with more marked affection than usual, begging him to stand by her, and urging that her mother's message was so far the only support she had.

"I had wondered if we could find any way of waiting, but even these few days of uncertainty have put Desmond back. I knew all yesterday he was getting worse and at night, in spite of himself, he had to give in. Moreover, a stranger here instead of Miss Arethusa would be trying for us both. I want him well—I want to be on the sea with him. It is not easy to arrange about the marriage on account of the religious question. I wish it were possible for you to come, as it is I must not even mention 'Mr. Tennent,' lest I should betray myself. He has never asked me about my father, so I have not had any trouble to keep my promise so far. I think sometimes if you knew him you would see as I do what a fine man he was meant to be. Quite simple,

direct, and straight, full of the courage that doesn't know of its own existence. It is almost too wonderful to believe that a girl like me should be allowed to help a man back to that. But you mustn't think it's because I feel I can help him I'm marrying him. It's hard to explain. I think it is that if I went away from him I should leave so much of myself behind that life would be cut in half. Some day I shall make him travel — no, some day he will *want* to travel, when he has got over that strange fear he has of meeting the man who hurt his life so. He has only spoken of him twice. It is odd to me that he fears meeting him, it should be the other way round. . . .”

The evening after Rudolph got this letter he played roulette solemnly for three hours and lost a sufficient sum to make his neighbour gasp at the “Englishman's sang-froid.” Just at the end his fickle goddess repented and requited his careless faith with a lavish generosity.

He went out with a faint little smile of contempt for the excited chorus which greeted his victory. The lights of the Casino twinkled like jewels against the velvet night, and the *plage* was still full of the throng who were tired of the long day's round of play and chatter, of excitement and plans, of wonderful gowns, and more wonderful faces, some so fresh from the hand of God, some so far from it. Rudolph liked it well enough; it amused him, and the little Casino, if it did not afford such excitement as the Peregrination Club in London, served its purpose to pass the hours. That he was bored to-night was Christina's fault and he resented it. He wished she had not told him. Why should he be forced again to come to a decision. Left to himself he could do that easily, but that other people's actions should drag him to the point was more than annoying.

He walked along with the Tourmols, friends of some

two weeks' standing, and Madame Tourmol was witty and charming. He arraigned Christina at the judgment bar of his pleasure-loving soul while he parried his companion's gay jests on his fidelity to the goddess of Chance. But he was not as adroit as usual and that scored another mark against Christina.

They planned an expedition for the morrow.

Madame Tourmol told him as they parted he was as solemn as if he were going to be married.

Rudolph turned to M. Tourmol.

"Is it so solemn a function?"

"Do you not see me sink under its cares?" laughed the Frenchman, with an adoring glance at his pretty wife.

Rudolph bade them good-night rather abruptly and went to his hotel.

The night was young for him, but there was this confounded decision to be made, and he could not settle it in the street. Apparently he was not to enjoy even the friendship of his own daughter without some foolish complication like this creeping up. Then he remembered he was angry with Christina for disturbing his content.

If he were really angry he could easily end it by merely not writing to her. He always told himself how simple it would be — yet it was pleasant to score off Vallory. The old arguments came round in turn. It was a long time before he arrived at the real point at issue.

Should Christina marry Stressborn or not? He could prevent it. Nothing easier. It was his duty, moreover, for it was a suicidal marriage for her from the social point of view, and Rachel was not there and she could not understand if she were. Plainly he ought to prevent it. To separate Christina from Stressborn and add another item to the account that lay between them — He had been well within his

rights in getting his money from Stressborn, of course. He smiled grimly, remembering his own predicament at the time; still undoubtedly Stressborn had had infernally bad luck. But it was no bad luck to marry Christina. He wondered impatiently what had come to him that he could even contemplate a man with Stressborn's record as Christina's husband, and little guessed that same thought and wonder was at the precise moment occupying the mind of his brother with equal uselessness.

It was, of course, unbelievable that Rachel's outlook — she being the other side of the world — and Christina's personality could affect a man, or men, of his or their experience, yet it remained a fact that Vallory, who could do nothing in the matter, and Rudolph, who could have stopped the affair at once, did not do so. Certainly they both "wobbled" over it, argued this way and that, while neither Christina nor her mother either argued or "wobbled" at all.

Rudolph returned to the decision he had arrived at in London when he heard of her being at Strancebury Castle the second time.

"Poetic justice shall have a chance," he said with a little contempt for his few hours of disturbance. "After all, we can't choose our father-in-law — and hang it all, it's no business of mine."

Considering what power of devastating a man and a girl's happiness had lain in his hands, it might be argued that he had made it his business quite as much by refraining from interfering as by interposing.

Lest it be thought that Rachel acquiesced only too easily to the perplexing situation, it should be known that since these dark years of Christina's early life Rachel had never realised the height of the rock she had climbed with such slow anguish herself. For some terrible hours she had overhung those precipices

by which she might still fall to the hidden depths below. This supreme call on her faith was the touchstone of her life. Either that God to Whom she had confided her darling was worthy the trust or He was not. If He were, then this strange thing that had happened was by His will, was the path, easy or difficult, He meant Christina to climb. Rachel never doubted the work she was doing was the work she was meant to do, and in that surety lay her strength. If she had been necessary for Christina at this crisis, she would have been there. Since her intervention could bring about nothing but confusion and trouble, and add to the passing sorrows of those who had had more than their share, then such intervention was not for her to give. The wide wings of her faith lifted her beyond reach of human unrest and that human wisdom, so sufficient for the daily need, so finite and weak in the face of God's need. Not casually, not helplessly, not indifferently, Rachel sent her message to Christina, and Christina never knew it was blotted with tears.

"You must not wait for me if it would be injurious to him. I trust your heart. God be with you both."

"I never believed I could be so happy again," Esther said to her sister that evening.

How could Rachel doubt she was in her right place, and how fail to trust the Hidden Wisdom that had sent her there?

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE matter of getting married is almost as complicated as that of getting buried, and Dr. Consett, who was more familiar with the latter form than the former, sighed heavily.

Christina and he were pouring over "Whitaker" one afternoon in the hope of extracting information, but the results hardly repaid their trouble. The chief thing they gathered was that there were more ways of getting married than one.

"Apparently, if we are to be content with a civil marriage," Christina said at last, "we shall have to wait till Desmond is well enough to walk into a town, and leave a door open. And if we get the Archbishop of Canterbury's license to hold a wedding here at once, we have to find someone to perform it, and Desmond isn't Church of England. It's all very confusing. I think it looks as if we should have to apply to Rome."

Dr. Consett coughed.

"You are Church of England, aren't you?"

"Not if it doesn't see fit to marry us without fuss. I don't really care a bit so long as Desmond is satisfied."

"Father Mathews ought to be able to explain matters."

"I talked to him last night. It's no use. He says, practically, if Desmond wants to be married in the Church, he must submit to the Church's ordinances. He can't even see Desmond's doing that now."

"Scandalous in a Protestant country!" muttered the doctor, who was an Evangelical, and hated Father

Mathews with a cordiality that was not diminished by the fact it was entirely unnoticed.

"He offered to make enquiries at headquarters," Christina added thoughtfully. The "Whitaker" slipped from her lap and the doctor picked it up and resumed its study.

They were seated in the little sitting-room that looked into the narrow garden on the north side of the Castle. It had been prepared for Miss Consett and Christina, when Desmond was well enough to take possession of the library, so that he might be alone, or have company, as the mood and need moved him. It was a quaint little room with uneven, white-painted panelling and faded chintz on the sofa and chairs. There was a high-backed piano with pleated silk front that had once been rose-colour, faded blue curtains, a pathetic little shelf of books with faded covers. The only things that retained their pristine brightness were the pierced brass fender, and a gorgeous wool-work parrot that occupied the banner screen.

Christina loved the room. Mrs. Gubbins told her it had belonged to an aunt of Mr. Desmond's who had lived at the Castle till her brother Piers had married, and that Mrs. Stressborn for some reason had disliked the room and never used it.

"So I put all poor Miss Eleanor's things in here together," Mrs. Gubbins said. "For Miss Eleanor died abroad soon after the Master was married."

Instead of sternly trying to master "Whitaker," Christina let her thoughts slip back to this dead and gone lady as they often did.

"Did you know Miss Eleanor?" she asked rather suddenly.

Miss Arethusa, whom she addressed, looked to her brother to see if he would answer for her, as in fact he did.

"I remember her quite well; she used to drive into

Datchet two or three times a week in a pony phaeton. Sometimes she called to see my father. She was rather worried over her brother's marriage, I believe. Isn't that so, Arethusa?"

Miss Arethusa assented. She was crocheting and the pattern was intricate, so she stopped.

"Miss Eleanor was a very good woman and very fond of her brother."

Christina looked incredulous.

"Yes, it's hard to find anything good to say of Piers Stressborn," the doctor remarked drily; "but the fact is true he was fond of his sister and she of him."

"Yet she was turned out when he married?"

"It was her own choice," put in Miss Arethusa. "I sometimes think she knew she would not like Mrs. Stressborn. She had friends who lived near her in Ireland."

Christina sighed and, rising, went to the window and flung it wider open. There were not many flowers in the garden; such as there were grew in rank confusion. The air was full of the scent from a great tangled mass of white jasmine that should have climbed up the house, but had fallen away from the wall and swept the grass with its long, straggling sprays. A startling change came over Christina's face as she leant out. She had been restless and vaguely perplexed all day, and now all sign of this perplexity vanished. She turned back from the window and faced the doctor, who was rising to take his departure.

"Dr. Consett, I want to go away to London for a day or two. Will you keep Desmond well while I'm gone?" There was the faintest trace of raillery in her smile, and very certain excitement in her eyes.

"I make no rash promises."

She looked back out of the window.

"I must go," she said in a low voice.

"Have you told him?"

She shook her head.

"You could go and look after Jane a whole week sooner, if I go," said Christina, sitting on the arm of Miss Arethusa's chair and winding up her ball of crochet cotton.

"My dear, there's not the least need to consider that."

Dr. Consett grunted an assent. He was standing by the table, fingering a bowl of *Gloire de Dijon* roses. Christina got up and pulled the roses toward her. She selected a bud with care and placed it solemnly in his coat. The two were very good friends by now and formed a mutual admiration society of two, who so far had not quarrelled.

The creamy yellow tint of the rose did not set off the doctor's complexion to advantage, but he viewed it down his nose complacently. Dr. Consett dearly loved a button-hole.

"That's your consultation fee," said Christina gravely. "I apologise for keeping you waiting, and I am not sure, you know, I have got my rose worth."

"That's the fault of 'Whitaker,'" protested the doctor; "when do you propose going?"

"Probably to-morrow. I am sorry if you don't approve, but I must go."

When he had gone, she came back to Miss Arethusa's side and took her work gently away.

"Miss Arethusa, do you think it horrid of me?" she asked. "I feel I must go. I can't tell either of them, but I think you will understand, I must see Torrens — first."

"Yes, my dear, it's very natural."

"I want it so badly," went on Christina, "that even if Desmond does not like me to go, I feel I must. Is it horrid of me? I don't understand why I am like this. I felt something wrong all day and then at the

window just now I knew. We have jasmine at home, the smell of it reminded me."

Miss Arethusa nodded. She stroked the girl's hand gently, but she did not speak.

"Is it very selfish?" she persisted.

Miss Arethusa thought quite otherwise. She was well aware that Christina needed some more experienced aid than she could give her across the perilous passage from girlhood into womanhood. She was acutely aware of her own inefficiency, but surely at Torrens, if anywhere, Christina would find what she needed. In a way Miss Arethusa was relieved.

Christina, being assured of her approval, went to break the news to Desmond. No one could accuse Christina of not being prompt!

When she had gone, Miss Arethusa tried to return to her work, but it slipped from her hand again. She leant back in her chair and looked into the garden, where the evening light had already withdrawn from the shadows. Certainly the jasmine smelt very sweet. Miss Arethusa recollected she had once intended to wear jasmine and myrtle on a certain day that had never dawned to completion. . . .

Christina told Desmond with some misgiving that she wanted to go to London. To her surprise, he raised no great objection, except such as she might plainly read on his face, but which she refused to see.

"It will be much easier to tell Sir Vallory what we want, than to write about it; that is, when we know ourselves what we do want."

Sir Vallory had offered to help them in the formalities that seemed so appalling.

"We do—at least I do," he said positively. "I want to marry you as quickly as I can."

"Dr. Consett and 'Whitaker' declare the quickest way is by special license, and here."

"Then we know what we want. I've forgotten

the name of the vicar at Datchet. I suppose he would do it?"

She was silent for a moment.

"Your people and Father Mathews would not recognise it as the right sort of thing, Desmond."

He gave a faint sigh.

"It's legal, dear. You are a Protestant, aren't you?"

"Desmond, I talked to Father Mathews last night."

He put his hand on hers.

"We didn't get very much further, but I understand he is willing to refer the matter to another authority." She was not speaking of the marriage matter, however. "You see," she went on undaunted by his silence, "the mere legality doesn't cover the ground for you. In your heart you want to be married by your own Church — properly."

"It's not your church."

She leant her head against him.

"My church is the one which gives you happiness. You know, Desmond, you have only seen Father Mathews and one other."

"The Prison Chaplain," he said between his teeth.

"Christina, I can't — it's no use, but you are right enough about what I want. It's absurdly illogical — I can't help that."

"If Father Mathews and the Chaplain were wrong in the matter — or if someone could put the thing differently to you?"

"One can't expect the Church to alter her teaching to suit individuals," he returned steadily. "It would be more to the point if I could bring myself to feel it all does not matter a bit."

She could not have that, she told him with such earnestness that he wondered.

"I am sure it will come right for you. You are born in it; it's part of you in a way I don't understand.

It's not that you are tired of it or indifferent, or feel that you are grown out of it—I can't help feeling you have seen the wrong man."

"How do you know these things?" he asked her. "I never thought of them so, but you are right, I think; yet, after all, Christina, I have done without any faith for all these bad years; now I have you, I can get on for the rest."

There floated before Christina's mind a memory of the ivory crucifix that had helped him when all else had failed.

"You have never done without faith," she said quietly. "Some people can, but you were not built that way."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE great Cardinal leant back in his chair regarding his visitor with interest. He was accustomed to interviewing every description of men and women, and had hardly imagined there was any type left for him to explore. Yet now he found himself regretting the limited time at his disposal. He had already overstepped the few minutes he had rather reluctantly wedged in on the receipt of the urgent letter Miss Massendon had sent up, with such refreshing faith in his accessibility to the needs of the unhappy.

He could not, however, keep "Her Grace" waiting in the ante-room much longer, but he stood up and walked across the big empty room with his visitor himself, instead of summoning his secretary.

"You will send quite soon?" she asked him earnestly.

"At once. Are you returning to Yorkshire yourself?"

Christina shook her head.

"I am going down to my own home first. I really want to see my mother, but as I can't, the next best thing is to see my home."

"Your mother is away?"

Christina explained it in a few words. It seemed quite natural to tell him things. He stopped to listen, moreover, again oblivious of the duchess.

"Does she approve of your marriage?" He questioned her with his eyes bent on the shining floor.

Christina considered for the fraction of a second,

then opened her bag and handed him a telegram. She could not have explained her impulse or a certain shy desire to gain this celebrated man's approval, but it is likely the secret of his success lay just in that particular power of his, to inspire others with the desire for that approval.

She watched him read the telegram anxiously, and when he had done with it, he gave it back with the remark: "Your mother must be a good woman, Miss Massendon. I hope you will be happy for her sake as well as your own."

"And you don't mind my marrying Mr. Stressborn, though I am not a Catholic?"

He gave her a curious little quizzical look and a very kind smile.

"I am not sure you are not the better Catholic of the two, Miss Massendon. You both have my sincerest good wishes."

He held out his hand and she put hers into it with confidence.

"You think you can make it all right for him?"

"I have not much doubt about it."

Even when she had gone the duchess had still to wait a minute or two.

Christina left the Cardinal's with a light heart and drove straight to Mrs. Chancely's, where she was to spend the night. She felt ashamed of the depression that had crept over her on the long journey, when the various difficulties and complications of affairs seemed unreasonably to mount themselves up to outrageous proportions.

"I will never be so silly again," she told herself. "I suppose that is what is meant by crossing a bridge before one comes to it."

She was just a little bit shy about meeting Mrs. Chancely, whose distracted letters had worried Christina more than all Lady Losford's sarcastic epistles,

but her reception was as warm as she could desire, and unmistakably genuine.

"It is nice of you to be so good to me when I've given you such a lot of worry," Christina told her, as they took up their places amongst the cane lounges and chairs that were scattered under a brilliant awning in the equally brilliant garden. "You must think me such a perverse person," she added; "and really I am not, you know, it just happened."

"I believe," said Mabel seriously, "that when mother went to see Sir Vallory Massendon, it was decided that it was he who was to blame."

"What a shame!" cried Christina indignantly. "And, anyhow, why should any one be to blame when mother and Desmond and I are satisfied? Would you have all felt 'to praise' if we were all made unhappy about it?"

Mrs. Chancely looked troubled. She thought Christina was perfectly serious.

"We should feel responsible, if you were not happy," she began, but Mabel interposed.

"Christina knows all that, Mother — suppose you let her tell us about her engagement." She turned her dark eyes on the other girl questioningly. Ever since her illness Mabel had developed an "intense habit of thought" that puzzled her mother and revolutionised her circle of friends.

"And it's a bit hard at my time of life," poor Mrs. Chancely complained to her married daughter, "to have to get used to such very different kinds of people. Mabel says she is afraid of getting to know people like the Filsons, but I am sure, at least, that they were respectable."

At the present moment Mabel's desire to have a long, "intimate" talk with one in such a romantic situation as Christina, blotted out her recollection of

many failures in past time to arrive at just the condition of intimacy which was essential. It was not that Christina did not talk and talk willingly on any subject Mabel chose to bring up, but she never arrived at that point when the appearance of a third party put an end to the subject. There was not the faintest chance of a tête-à-tête to-day, however, so Mabel made the best of the matter and urged Christina to relate her story.

"But there isn't any story to relate," laughed Christina. "I told Mrs. Chancely in my letter all there was to know."

Mabel was lying in a gorgeously coloured hammock with a pile of cushions under her head. She turned a little on her side and regarded the "engaged one" with solemn interest.

"What is he like? Is he tall or fair or dark? What sort of eyes has he?"

Christina gazed across the garden. How could she tell them what Desmond was like? It was a futile process, describing people to others, she thought; yet even Mrs. Chancely was waiting quite eagerly. She feared it would seem rude to refuse.

"He is not so tall as Sir Vallory," she said, beginning with judicial thoughtfulness. "He is very thin and straight—the sort of thinness that belongs to doing things. He's dark—and sunburnt—I don't know what colour his eyes are. I think they must change like the sea. He looks as if he belonged to the sea—and boats—and open air."

Anything further from an accurate description of Desmond Stressborn of that moment could hardly be conceived, but she was not in the least wilfully deceiving them; that was Desmond as she thought of him, as she saw him always in her mind's eye.

Mrs. Chancely conjured up a picture of a certain

brisk, clean-shaven lieutenant of the Royal Navy, whom someone had told her looked "every inch a sailor."

Mabel made no picture. She was waiting, with her eyes still fixed on Christina.

"Go on!" she said, half under her breath.

"There isn't any more, and it's no good, you couldn't see him a bit more clearly." Which was a great deal more true than she knew.

"Well, some day I hope you will bring him to see us," Mrs. Chancely remarked kindly. The vision of the naval lieutenant had ousted for the moment her preconceived ideas of this Mr. Stressborn, whom no one knew.

Mabel saw the colour mount to Christina's face. She had by no means forgotten the point that lent such additional interest to the engagement. She wondered with languid amusement whom her dear mother would ask to meet "Mr. and Mrs. Stressborn." It was not that she was indifferent to the tragedy that was involved, but, as with many people, what was so entirely out of her range of experience, was also out of the range of her imagination. It was the first time Christina had been brought face to face with the difficulties that would be hers; she met the occasion with commendable calmness, and said she should love to bring Desmond to see them, which was strictly true.

She told them more easily of the Castle and the fishing folk, of Mrs. Gubbins and Loomis. This led them again into what Mabel thought should have been an absorbing theme, and to which even Mrs. Chancely thought Christina did scant justice.

"Loomis nursed him day and night, and only rested when he could be safely left with Mrs. Gubbins, or Dr. Consett could stay."

"But it was you who cured him?" insisted Mabel.

"It was bad for him to move about and he seemed

to find it easier to lie still when I was there," Christina said simply.

"He was very ill, wasn't he? Isn't rheumatic fever very painful?"

"Yes," Christina asserted. "It's not an amusing illness. Where are you going to this summer, Mrs. Chancely?"

"We go to Switzerland next week."

She did not add that but for this visit of Christina's they would be already gone.

Mabel gave a sigh.

"I have always longed to go to Switzerland," she said. "But Mr. Tennent said it was horrible in August."

"We miss him very much," Mrs. Chancely put in sadly.

"But he is only gone to Trouville," Christina assured her, and was aware instantly of Mabel's eyes.

It was the first time she had so blundered. She almost wished Mabel would call attention to it and give her a chance of retrieving it; but Mabel had no such intention and Mrs. Chancely apparently had not noticed.

"We shall hope to see him in the autumn, of course," was all she remarked. "And now, my dear, I want to talk of a very important matter. What are we to send you for a wedding present?"

Christina sat upright, with sparkling eyes.

"A wedding present! Do you know no one has ever mentioned such a thing? It's such a funny wedding, I never thought I should have any."

"But you can't possibly have a wedding without presents," Mrs. Chancely said mildly, "even if you have it without bridesmaids. Presents and a cake you *must* have."

"I really don't think," Christina answered seriously, "that I can see Desmond and myself cutting up a

wedding cake, and I am sure Dr. Consett wouldn't let him eat any of it."

"But, my dear child, what about your friends and the people—your tenants at Torrens? They will never think you are married if they don't have some cake!"

Christina was aglow with excitement.

"Mrs. Chancely, you are a treasure! If it had not been for you, I should have forgotten all about them at Torrens. Of course they shall have a cake and a party and all sorts of things. Will you help me settle it?"

They spent the next hour in planning out a sufficiently imposing festival, and at last Christina suggested Mrs. Chancely should come down to Torrens with her and help to arrange it.

"Not on Thursday, when I go," she said frankly. "I must have a day or two all by myself there, but if you and Mabel could come down on Saturday for the week end, it would be nice. Mother would love it."

Mrs. Chancely, at any rate, was pleased and Mabel had no objection to offer. The conversation returned to wedding presents.

Christina's wants were absurdly and provokingly limited both by reason of possessions and future needs. She could not honestly say she coveted a Dresden dessert service, or an old silver coffee set, or even a bracelet; at last it was decided that they should drive to Liberty's after tea and she should select what she chose in the way of oriental hangings and embroideries.

Mabel went away after a while, and when she was safely out of sight Mrs. Chancely remarked quietly:

"Does Mr. Tennent write to you, my dear?"

Now Christina had quite forgotten her blunder, and at the time had been sure it had only been noticed by

Mabel. She was troubled for the moment, for she could not tell Mrs. Chancely a direct lie, and yet any answer that conformed with her promise to her father must deceive her.

"I have written to him," she said at last frankly. "I wrote to him when I went to Strancebury this time."

"I am sure he is a very interesting man to correspond with. I had thought at one time — but there — he is nearly old enough to be your father!"

"I suppose he is," said Christina, bending to pick up a shining pebble. "You never saw my father, did you, Mrs. Chancely?"

"No, dear; when your mother married we were away, and after, though we wrote I never saw her till — till just before you were born."

"I know," Christina said softly. "She was very ill and very unhappy and you came and nursed her, and you were so good you never asked questions."

She stroked the kind, motherly hand affectionately.

"Well, my dear, I was there to help, not to gratify curiosity. It was a sad time."

"The sadness is all gone now, though, and only the nice, kind things remain to remember. I am so glad you will come to Torrens, Mrs. Chancely."

The next day Christina went to Hampstead, and Sir Vallory was at once pleased to see her, and at a loss how to best define his position towards her future.

There was a good deal of business to go over with her, and he remarked that he should have had to come to her in Yorkshire if she had not come South when she did. There were papers for her to sign, and she thought with a sigh it was more than ever difficult to get married quietly than in the ordinary way.

She saw a letter from Desmond concerning settlements that she did not even know he had written.

"You had better see what he says," Sir Vallory

told her. "He sent a copy of his will with it. The lawyers are trying to get into communication with the heir-at-law to cut off the entail, if possible, in case — but that will not matter to you. However, you must understand your own position. Subject to your mother's correction on her return, we are settling five hundred pounds a year on you, that is, of course, from the Torrens estate. There was other money settled on your mother at her marriage, but she has never touched it, I believe. We are adding three hundred pounds a year on that account."

"That would be my father's money?" Christina asked with a rising colour.

Sir Vallory hesitated.

"You are entitled to that," he said.

"But is it from him?"

"No!" he replied rather curtly.

"Then it's a gift from you?"

"It's a question of what's due to you from the family."

"Then it must be subject to correction, like my mother's allowance."

"It is not likely your father will be in a position to make you any allowance," he said drily.

"Surely he has means?" she cried, in sudden trepidation.

Sir Vallory frowned.

"Really, Christina, I am not in a position to say. He *had* means. Why should it concern you?"

The slow, scrutinising look that had so upset Lady Losford left Christina unmoved. She was thinking of the expression on Mr. Tennent's face the day Sir Vallory had passed down the quiet street.

After a rather long pause, she said:

"Sir Vallory, will you come to my wedding?"

"I was wondering if you intended asking me,

though I should have come in any case. I was asked long ago."

"Desmond is a fraud," she declared laughing. "I was under the impression I knew all he did and thought, and here I find he has even issued invitations behind my back."

She was clearly pleased all the same.

"Still it does not mean that I approve, Christina," he said, flinging himself back in his chair and speaking with a new moodiness. "I think it's a preposterous thing — this marriage; but I can't prevent it, short of shutting you up."

"All because Desmond has been in prison," she said steadily, with disconcerting frankness; it was the man who was most embarrassed.

"I am not defending what he did," she went on, "but sometimes it seems to me that we take more trouble to protect those things which are temporal than the things that really last. Perhaps it is that Law cannot protect the things most worth having. Desmond did break this law of property and he paid for it. I am not quarrelling with that," her voice shook a little, "but if it is a just law, the sentence covered it, no one ought to add to it; but when one thinks there are heaps of people about who have done much worse than poor Desmond, who have stolen other people's happiness, cheated joy out of lives, yes, and men who have watched others drown, worse, have helped them drown, pushed them under — and still they are received and known and respected — somewhere or other the man who led my Desmond on to play, who pushed him to extremities, who deserted him when he had got his money, somewhere that man is going about the world received and probably respected, and Desmond — my poor Desmond —"

She broke off, and sat with her hands over her eyes,

and Sir Vallory, looking at her askance, saw the tears falling on the table.

He was horribly confused; he had never seen Christina cry even as a child, and it caused him the acutest discomfort.

"I wouldn't mind so much," Christina went on unsteadily, "if he wouldn't take it as if it were only to be expected. Perhaps it ought to be so sometimes, but, oh! Sir Vallory, he'd have been such a dear if other people had let him — he *is*, if they'll give him a chance."

She was crying quite frankly now and dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. He wanted to comfort her dreadfully, but all he could do was to pat her on the shoulder.

"I daresay you are right," he said soothingly, "and at least you are giving him a chance and we'll back you — I quite agree about the scoundrels who do worse — and get off scot free —"

His face grew rather hard and he walked up and down again. It was an unpleasant reflection that such a man as she had described, with the right to call himself his brother, was walking about the world as she said — scot free.

"No, the Massendons can't afford to be particular, even if one chooses to take up Rachel's point of view," he told himself bitterly not for the first time.

"I think I had better go to bed if I am to make such a baby of myself," said Christina, getting up with a feeble little laugh. "I am so sorry, Sir Vallory." She was desperately ashamed of herself, her weakness implied a recognition of a point that she was determined not to recognise, so far as was possible with Desmond's comfort. She felt as if she had betrayed him.

Sir Vallory sat musing for long hours after she had gone. He had seldom liked her so well, seldom won-

dered for so long what it would be like to have her for a daughter. As a rule, his genuine affection for her was held at bay by her extraordinary resemblance to Rudolph. There were little turns of speech, little movements, certain pretty mannerisms, that were so closely related to her father as to raise a barrier between them.

But her breakdown, her tears, and, even more, her frank avowal of them, were as unlike Rudolph as could possibly be. Apparently, at any crisis of her life this resemblance was swept away, and her own personality — that was neither of Rudolph nor Rachel, but was herself — had sway.

The next day Christina went down to Torrens, and if she had thought it was to be a time in which she could think in solitude, she was rapidly undeceived. She had hitherto accepted the affection of these kindly friends of her childhood very much as a matter of course. Not that she did not value them, but the woods, the river, Torrens itself, were all a matter of course. It had not occurred to her that when she was away their interest would still be centred on her and her doings would still be the marked spots in their lives. She visited every one she could on the estate and consulted old Howard, the steward, as to the best way of celebrating her wedding day. She learnt in confidence that she was to receive a tribute as worthy the occasion as they could compass before she left.

Then there was Mrs. Chancely's visit to be arranged. There were linen presses to go through with Mrs. Winch, and on Friday evening the latter came to her as she returned from an inspection of the gardens, with a mysterious air and a request she would come upstairs a moment.

They went up to Rachel's own room; Christina's opened out of it.

Mrs. Winch had dragged into the middle of the room a big ottoman which Christina could never remember seeing opened before. It was open now. A faint perfume of lavender and roses came to her as she looked in. There on its white wrappers lay Rachel's wedding dress. It was made of some fine silky fabric faintly creased by the passing years and covered with a mantle of lace which would have excited a collector to envious rapture. Shoes, gloves, and faded heather blossoms, lay beside it. Mrs. Winch smoothed the folds of the intricate lace and said:

"I thought you would like to see it, Miss Christina, dear. I suppose we shan't be seeing yours. You will have ordered that in London," she spoke a little wistfully.

"I haven't ordered a dress at all, I never thought of it," confessed Christina, blushing at her own obliviousness to the occasion. "Oh, Mrs. Winch—do you think—" Her voice grew tremulous with excitement—"do you think mother would mind—would let me wear this?"

"Sakes alive, my dear! It's asking for bad luck!" cried the horrified Mrs. Winch.

Christina stooped and touched the dress gently.

"How could anything of my mother's bring bad luck to me?" she questioned indignantly.

"And fancy you waiting till now to think of your wedding dress," moaned Mrs. Winch, "and most young ladies so anxious about it!"

"But I'm glad. I want to wear this, it will be almost as if my mother were there."

It took some time to reconcile Mrs. Winch to the idea, but Christina prevailed in the end. Rachel's servants could not but have been imbued with some of Rachel's beliefs, and these surmounted mere superstition.

Christina took out the dress with hands that shook

a little. It gave her exquisite pleasure to touch it, to fancy her mother arrayed in it; she wondered what "Mr. Tennent" had thought of it. It was hard neither of them would see her in it.

The Quaker-like plainness of the gown, the straight line of the stole-like mantle of lace that covered it from head to foot, suited Christina admirably. The alterations required were not beyond Mrs. Winch's skill, and she was unwilling any hands but hers should touch it.

Christina had a pencil note from Desmond each day, but it was not till Sunday morning that she heard of the arrival of a certain Father Maitland, who seemed to have made good use of the twenty-four hours of his stay that had already elapsed, and to be at least helping Desmond towards a reconciliation with the faith of his fathers.

"I am still in the dark as to how he happens to be here," wrote Desmond, "but certainly your dear hand is in it, as it is in all that's good in my life." He added he was well looked after, but, in spite of Father Maitland, the days were long. In a postscript he added that the visitor had offered to stay and marry them. He hoped she would be pleased with this.

Certainly neither Mrs. Chancely nor the congregation could find fault with the bearing of the "bride elect" on that Sunday. She was glad enough of Mrs. Chancely's support in the churchyard after service, when all the neighbourhood seemed to gather together for the ostensible purpose of offering their felicitations and the secret one of gratifying their curiosity; for even if Christina had taken thought as to the advisability of keeping the matter to herself it would have proved impossible, once the coming festivities had been announced; and Christina, far from thinking any such thing, was anxious that no one should imagine her marriage was anything but a source of congratulation,

though the question of it taking place so far away had to be explained on the score of Mr. Stressborn's illness.

On Sunday afternoon Christina showed the Chancelys her wedding dress and listened silently to their rapturous admiration.

Mabel was deeply pleased with Torrens. It gave her a melancholy pleasure to wander about while her mother and Christina were otherwise engaged, and imagine herself owner of this quiet, dignified home, with its atmosphere of restraint and decorous comfort, so unlike those palatial residences she had visited in the north, which formed her only idea of country life and country homes. She was profoundly unwilling to depart on Monday, but there was no avoiding it. Christina had a telegram from Sir Vallory that morning, saying it would suit him better if she could return with him on Tuesday to Yorkshire instead of Wednesday as formerly arranged. He undertook to let them know at Strancebury — the wedding was to be on their arrival.

There was nothing whatever in the telegram to arouse Christina's suspicions. Desmond's note came as usual. It contained no news but that there was now no difficulty as to the ceremony being performed, from his side of things.

Dr. Consett's letters to Sir Vallory, however, had been less assuring. He spoke of Desmond as not improving, and at last had argued a speedier return, if compatible with arrangements! Stressborn never mentioned Miss Massendon, which he thought a bad sign, and the heart trouble, instead of clearing up as it had been doing, made no forward progress. The uncertainty and waiting was bad for him, in short.

Sir Vallory had thought it out and decided to hasten matters if only by one day; hence the telegram.

It made little difference to Christina. It was only when the Chancelys had gone on Monday, that she

realised the time at Torrens was nearly up, and that the rest and quiet she had looked for there had not so far been part of the programme.

She wandered out after tea with a vague desire to arrest the flying hours and to still the annoying confusion of mind that would not let her rest. But whatever it was she needed, it still eluded her, and she returned to watch Mrs. Winch pack the few treasures she had decided to take with her.

The unreality of the situation forced itself on her more and more. Strancebury seemed very far away, and the idea that she was leaving her home for good and all so preposterous that it held no sorrow. Even the last sight of the wedding dress folded into the box just ready to don directly she arrived, lent no substantiality to affairs.

When she could find no excuse to remain up any longer, she sought her own room, half regretfully conscious of her failure to make the most — to make anything — of these last few days. She had still no wish to go to bed, so she drew a chair to the window and put out the light.

The garden was distinct in the moonlight, with great black shadows lying across the lawns. The distant outline of the bare downs stood clear against the purple sky. Soft voices called through the night and the sound of water falling, falling over a tiny weir, was like the accompaniment to the psalm of the resting earth.

To-morrow she was going to marry Desmond!

She was glad of it; her heart turned to him with a longing to begin this new life, with desire to see his eyes brighten at sight of her, and deepen into the passionate love she had never been quite able to meet. She would have to be strong, it was no play-work that lay before her. She looked at her hands in the shadow; she had a childish fancy to wish them

A shadow of fear crept into the room — into her heart. She had not thought to feel like this to-night. She stood up and leant out of the window. The moonlight bathed her hands now and showed even the outline of Desmond's ring. It was the only one he had given her so far — his own on the day she had left.

"A Healer's hands." So the stranger of the pine woods — David — had called them. She had not thought of him lately. Now it was a good thing to remember that he had sent her North on this errand, which was ending so strangely. She felt sure he would not fear for her.

Thinking of him she came face to face with that thing which had cast its shadow of fear over her — the fear of her own pity.

It was not the Desmond she would meet to-morrow, that she must not fail in the new life opening for her; it was the Desmond of her vision; not the weak man, but the strong man who called to her for help. For the Desmond of the morrow she had love — and pity; for the Desmond to be, Love — and no pity, lest it should be self-pity. With this end in view she could face the present life of endeavour, a daily task nearer and dearer than life itself, but still a struggle. She knew nothing of what it would actually mean, and she had nothing but the presence of her vision and her unbounded faith to guide her, but that was enough.

To imagine herself parted from the Desmond who waited for her was grief unbearable, but by no means could her imagination picture herself as separated from the Desmond who would be. This pity she had feared was but a passing need, the steps by which she entered the Court of Love. It carried her present love from earth to heaven, but the other margin of it lay within heaven itself. She looked out at the beautiful night and there was no confusion or perplexity any more. Deep thankfulness was in her heart that it had been

given her to see just what was hers, and something of what was to be hers, so that no false illusions or fictitious values should spoil for her the immediate happiness or cancel the future joy.

This was Rachel's reward for her faith, that in the hour of need her child should recognise and meet without fear the knowledge of things eternally true from age to age.

CHAPTER XXX

ONE pale star hung over the sea — a solitary jewel set in the soft monotony of deepening grey. The restless breeze, which for the last few days had cooled the heat, had died out, leaving the night to approach with cold and silent footsteps.

Desmond, who despite orders, had left the sofa and reached the window, shivered a little in the thin, fresh air. The silence of the house, the silence of the room, the stillness without, laid a kind of paralysis on his brain, and lent a lack of substantiality to his surroundings, that troubled him vaguely.

He had not felt this overpowering sense of dreaming so long as Dr. Consett's cheery presence had been by him, but the Doctor had gone off grumbling and laughing to a distant case, and Father Maitland with the gentle, spiritual face was gone as well, though he was coming back, so he said — Desmond wondered why? — for of course the idea that Christina was really going to return and break the silence forever, was not a thing that would happen in real life.

The first few days of her departure had been terrible. Dr. Consett had spared him every hour he could, but there were still lapses, waste time, when there was no one. Then Father Maitland had come.

For the next few days after that Desmond, so far as he thought of his health at all, believed himself much better. There had been mental agitation and effort, but in the end — peace. They had spoken of the wedding; Desmond said he would be well enough to walk to the chapel by then. Father Maitland had

looked at the doctor, who shook his head though Desmond did not see him; he shook it still more the following day. He told Desmond he had a "case" down in the Bay and it would be a great convenience if he might stay at the Castle, so as to be within call. He *had* a case, and a serious one, but that was not his reason for staying at the Castle. He told himself it was sheer bad luck he should be so busy just now with innumerable babies to usher into the world, and no less than three bad cases wanting close attention. Desmond, however, did not complain of loneliness. He did not even complain of Christina's absence. This evening, Dr. Consett had been called to the other side of Datchet, and Desmond had promised to be sensible and to refrain from the follies of the previous day, when Loomis had entered and found him staggering under the weight of a big quarto volume which he had reached from a high shelf. He said in excuse he had forgotten it was so heavy.

"Forgotten you haven't the strength of a baby yet," grumbled the doctor, dissatisfied with the result of the forgetfulness.

"Rot!" Desmond retorted, with rather a gasping laugh. "It's nothing but want of exercise."

He said nothing whatever to the doctor of the ghosts which still crept out of the shadows and smiled sardonically at the thought that there was going to be any radical change in the manner of existence. The book had been fetched as a weapon of defence against these intruders.

This afternoon, however, a new line of thought had filled his mind. Supposing this return of Christina was an assured thing, as they all seemed to think, it was from her side of the question a lamentable matter—it was inconceivable that he could allow it. There was another aspect of the question, he knew, but just now he could not get this clear; all he could

see was that it would be much better for her if she did not come back. Suppose this silence got hold of her as it had of him? Most certainly she must not come back! He would write and tell her so. For the moment he entirely forgot he had written her that morning a letter — a few bald lines — saying he was looking forward to the coming Wednesday. He would write at once. The writing-table was a preposterously long way from the window, however. . . .

He found paper and ink and wrote what appeared to him to be a very lucid and sensible letter, stating that the silence and shadows in the Castle had grown so bad he really could not ask her to risk them. "It is not as if one could get out of here when one is once in," he wrote. "I am used to them, but one must consider your happiness first of all, and I should dislike your facing the risk; indeed I feel I cannot meet the possible consequence!"

It was a curious, foolish letter. Dr. Consett gave it to Christina later on, but he did not hear what she thought of it.

Even Desmond had an idea it was not so forcible or conclusive as he could wish, but it was all he could do. He addressed it, left it on the table, and returned to the window. He was oddly uneasy at the silence now, and wanted to break it. The solitary star had deepened in glory. There came into his mind some Prelude of Bach's that was at harmony with the soft greyness and that glittering point of light, and without thinking even of the distance he rose and went over to the organ. Equally without thinking, he started the little electric engine that did the work of a man, and opened the keyboard. . . .

The notes were dusty, he remedied that carefully with his handkerchief. The first low opening chords stole like some golden measure through the room, and mingled with the coming night with a dignity and

peace that was satisfying. It rose, and fell, rose faintly again, and stopped.

The doctor and Loomis in the corridor had heard the music, had hastened in, incredulous and found him sitting there — in a silence that had very nearly shut him in forever.

Desmond heard the doctor muttering angrily. He was on the sofa again and would have liked to apologise for giving so much trouble, but it did not appear possible. It was a dim, dumb world around him — it remained like that for some time; very quiet and dim, but the quietness was not akin to that silence which had reduced him to the odd fear of some treacherous memory.

He was never alone now, and every one was cheerful and kind and they spoke to him of Christina, not knowing that he had written to tell her not to return. He wanted to tell them this, but it seemed involved and after all they would find it out. Dr. Consett brought a friend in one day, Desmond knew quite well he was a specialist. He hoped he was polite to him, but there was a queer little hazy fog that hung about his brain, which prevented him from explaining that he really did not want to talk or answer questions. . . . It was convenient that Christina answered for him — he could hear her quite plainly — in precisely his own voice, too. . . . Father Maitland came back and that pleased Desmond greatly; he liked looking at the calm, austere face and the eyes that could be stern enough as Desmond knew — but they were not so now.

Then one morning Loomis and the doctor dressed him with especial care. He felt much stronger and told them so. Certainly there was that little haze, but beyond that he felt every hour he was gathering strength. He walked quite well into the library, though he was not sorry to lie down again.

Father Maitland sat by him and talked about music. "Do you mind any one else playing your organ?" he asked. "I have a friend who would like to try it."

Desmond said he would be charmed. He could hardly say otherwise, but he was anxious; no hands but his own had ever touched the instrument.

The Bach's Prelude came floating in to them — Desmond had no more anxiety, Father Maitland's friend was a musician. When he had finished, Father Maitland had things to say to Desmond and he to him.

Later on the room seemed to fill with people, he heard himself talking to strangers collectedly and with ease. . . . They knew nothing about the haze, it must be remembered. No one mentioned Christina, but he knew they expected her, and wondered how he should tell them; then there was music again, and he forgot what he had to tell them. It was so long since he had heard any one else play — not since the services in the prison chapel. . . .

Dr. Csett brought him some stuff to drink, to which he had an aversion — but it cleared the haze for the time.

Sir Vallory came to the door and stood there a moment, looked at Desmond and went out again. Father Maitland had put on his vestments and one of Porton's boys was there with an incense burner in his hands, and they had arranged a table with flowers and a golden crucifix from the chapel. He remembered it as a boy.

Sir Vallory had come back and someone with him. Someone in white — She came to him, knelt by him, took his hands, and smiled at him — then she stood up, but she still held his hand, and Father Maitland stood before them. . . .

Presently Desmond looked at the doctor.

• "Help me up," he said quietly. "I can stand for this."

He stood opposite her and his eyes never left her face.

They wanted a ring — no one had remembered it!

Christina, blushing, drew off the signet ring he had given her when she left — he gave it her again —

He felt rather than saw the little haze ascending with the incense, leaving his brain clear and ready for the new life.

They made him lie down again, however, and there were papers to sign — another short form of words. People came and went, and he spoke to them, thanking them gravely for their kindness. At last they all went out, into the garden, he heard them say. The improvised altar was taken away, nothing was left but the little faint blue cloud, curling up to the high roof. . . . And Christina was by him, and he was glad of time to look at the intricate pattern on her lace veil.

Christina went out to the others in the garden later on. Father Maitland had already left with his friend. The Rector of Datchet, who had attended as registrar, was going back with Dr. Consett and Miss Arethusa. Sir Vallory had still an hour to wait before starting to catch his train for York.

Dr. Consett came to her.

“He stood it far better than I had expected,” he told her gruffly. “Keep him quiet. Loomis knows just what to do for him, but always send at once if you are nervous; and I’ll look in to-morrow.”

Miss Arethusa kissed her and whispered.

“I’ve left a little parcel for you in your room, dear, with our love.”

The Rector was introduced and expressed a wish for her happiness. His wife should call, he assured her kindly. Christina thought it very nice of him.

When they had gone, Sir Vallory went back with her to Desmond.

Desmond asked him to get a proper ring for them in London, and they measured the size carefully. Just before he left Sir Vallory called Christina to the window, and put a case into her hands.

"They were my mother's," he said. "I should like you to have them. No one will have a better right."

"They" consisted of three ropes of pearls, flawless, beautiful things, and he fastened them round her neck. He noticed she wore only one little pearl ornament hanging from a slender chain.

"Pearls don't suit every one, but they do you," he told her, and then drew her near and kissed her.

"Christina, if you are not happy," he said rather huskily, "I shall renounce Rachel's faith forever. Go and show yourself to Desmond."

He had never called him so before, and she thanked him for that with her eyes as she thanked him for the pearls with her lips.

"Don't come away, child," he said, as he was going. "Loomis will see me off. Good-bye, Desmond, make haste and take her out on the sea yourself."

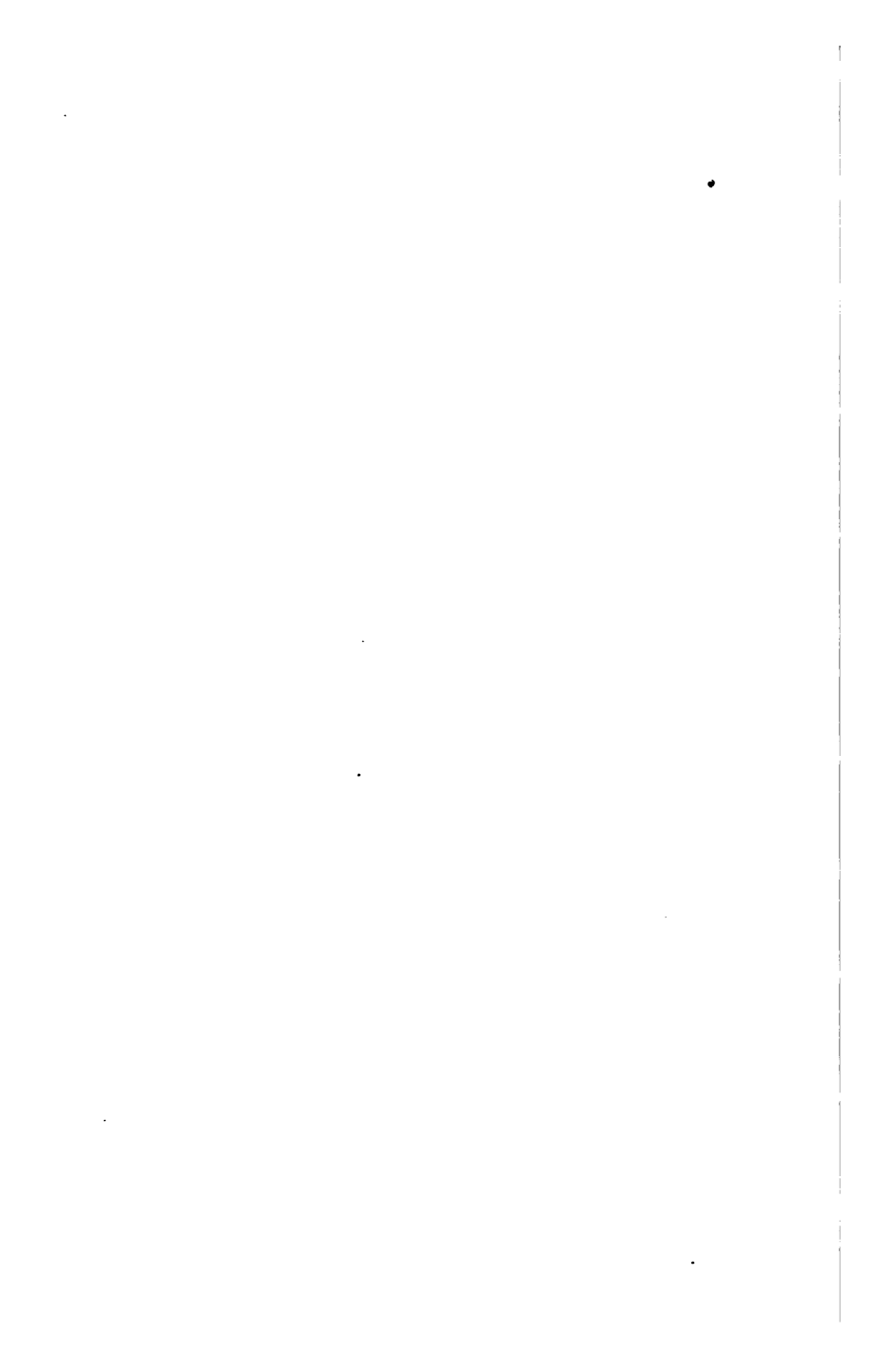
Desmond promised to do his best. Christina went as far as the door with him and returned.

Silence settled down on Strancebury Castle again, but it was a silence filled with music, joy and hope.

Once more the pale star hung out its beacon in the darkening sky and the hushed whispers of the sea came in through the open windows. The faint breath of incense still tinged the air, and floated in little drifting clouds amongst the high rafters.

They sat there hand in hand as the dusk closed down.

PART III
THE ACHIEVEMENT



CHAPTER XXXI

“**D**ESMOND, Desmond!” cried Christina, and her clear voice rang with little laughing echoes down the long corridors. “Desmond, where are you? I want you.”

She flung open the library door and called again. It was a pretty call, low on the first note and rising softly. Desmond, who had heard it all the time, had not answered just because he liked to hear it.

The room was full of sunshine and the wind sweeping in at the open windows, blew the soft green curtains out like sails, and wafted in the scent of honeysuckle and gorse from the little sunny terrace dug out of the rock below the end windows. The wide space before the hearth was no longer the only inhabited portion of the room. Every corner and every table seemed to have its own occupation and to be used in turn. Desmond was sitting in the window by the door leading to the terrace, and the floor before him was covered with intricate plans of a boat and sheets of figures. He did not in the least mind that Christina had broken in on an abstruse calculation, he was quite content to be interrupted so that it meant she was here in the same room with him and not away talking to Mrs. Gubbins, or playing with her new motor, or making love to old Fenton, the gardener, in order to get her way over those much disputed flower borders in the north garden.

He told her so as she remonstrated with him over his silence when he had heard her call.

“I believe you just wanted a game of hide and seek,” she declared; “only you shouldn’t hide in such

easy places — and your tie is all crooked. What an untidy creature you are!”

She pushed his chin up and readjusted the tie which really was the least bit in the world crooked. Christina could not endure to see anything the smallest degree out of place on Desmond; she held very strong views on the subject, and her secret criterion of masculine dress was “Mr. Tennent.”

“You will do now, so come along and be introduced.”

Desmond caught her hand.

“Who to?”

“To your latest tenant. Porton has brought up the baby himself to show us.” For the fraction of a second it seemed as if Desmond was going to refuse, then he got up with a sigh.

She took his hand as if he were a reluctant child and led him down the passage. It gave her a subtle pleasure to feel his thin, strong hand yield to her pressure, as she crushed it up in her own. Desmond laughed and called her cruel.

In Mrs. Gubbins’s little room they found Porton, junior, in his sea boots and blue jersey, for the boats were starting out that afternoon. Porton was made on a lavish scale, and the white bundle in a shawl, that he carried gingerly, was of mean proportion beside him. He was greatly abashed because he had not a hand free to salute the “Master and his Lady.” His cap he had shaken off, but it required all his vast strength and both arms to hold the precious bundle safely, as instructed by his wife.

“Begging yer pardin, sor, but t’ wife were that set ov ma shewin’ yo t’ bairn afoor wa went oot. It dean’t do te cross ’em — so Aw mak bould;” he stammered his apology with a shame-faced blush, and Desmond nodded, but stood still with his hands in his pockets.

“Now, Porton!” remonstrated Christina, laughing. “You know that’s all nonsense. It’s not the wife at all, but you are going out with the fleet and you didn’t want any one else to show off your son to us—and quite right, too! Come and look, Desmond.” She pulled the shawl gently back from the little dark head that was cuddled so securely against the man’s arm. Porton’s broad face contracted in his efforts to look down at it.

“It is a darling,” Christina cried. “I never saw so pretty a baby. Look at its long hair, Desmond.”

Desmond looked, but still found nothing to say. Porton on his side made some attempt to push back the obstructing shawl.

“T’ waay them wimmen foalk muffles ’em up!” he muttered. “Can’t see noa dayleet.”

“Please give it me,” Christina entreated, holding out her arms.

The big fisherman hesitated just a moment, not from fear of entrusting his treasure to her waiting arms, but he gave a sidelong look at Mr. Stressborn as if he sought permission. Desmond was looking out of the window, however.

Christina took the baby and sat down in a chair with it. She had been accustomed to handling small babies from her earliest days. Torrens had produced sufficient to make her proficient in the art.

Desmond looked round at her sharply, and his face changed. He nodded again to Porton and went out.

Christina turned with some surprise and saw he had gone, and that Mrs. Gubbins and Porton were both regarding her with a curiously furtive air.

“Has he gone? I wanted to make him nurse the baby. I thought he liked them.”

“Ay, ’ee likes ’em an ’hey nossed mony on ’em, Missis, when ’ee were a little chap,” said Porton in hi-

gruff voice. "Aw've heerd ma mother saay 'ee were just crazy on baabies."

Christina gave it back reluctantly.

"I will go and see your wife to-morrow, Porton — and if Father Mathews will allow, I should like to be godmother; you see it's the first baby since I came here for good."

"Ay, for good it were, Missis; there's none dean't saay as much," Porton remarked bluntly, as he gathered his son into his arms.

Christina asked him a few more questions and then went off to refind her capricious charge.

Desmond had returned to the boat-building plans, though they had ceased to interest him. Yet when Christina came in he was bending over them with apparent attention, and did not see the look in her eyes so full of comprehending pity — certainly it would not have been there if he had looked up.

She sat down by his side, with her elbows on her knees, and asked about the boat. He explained he could not get in all he wanted without "outbuilding" the average fishing boat in matters of speed and draught.

"She must run with the fleet and not before it," he said. "She's to fish with them, and to have all the newest improvements and her catch will be divided amongst the rest. Perhaps in time they will all get boats like her, if she proves good."

He began folding up the plans.

"Did Porton say when they started?" he asked abruptly.

"Before the ebb," she told him.

"Then they are going for the long run."

He looked at the sea dancing and glittering in the sun.

"I think I will go, too." His tone was a little irresolute.

The fresh breeze whipped a strand of hair across Christina's eyes, and she went over to a distant glass to tidy it.

"Have you written to Henry Stressborn yet?"

She knew he answered "No," though his voice hardly reached her; also she knew it was a shade cross.

"Why not ask him here and settle it personally?"

Again he answered "No," far more emphatically.

Christina came back and slipped her hand through his arm.

"Very well, then come and write; then you can go out with the fleet with a good conscience."

But he was still irresolute and there was a frown on his face.

The matter of cutting off the entail and leaving Desmond free to deal as he would with Strancebury was still unsettled. Henry Stressborn, the heir-at-law and Desmond's second cousin, still demurred. He knew nothing of Strancebury, but for the last eight years he had mentally apportioned it to his own eldest son, and Desmond's amazing and unexpected marriage had angered him, and in no way led him to fall in with Desmond's equally amazing desire to cut off the entail. In spite of the lawyer's complete assurance that his reversionary interest was not worth "the snap of a finger, now," Henry Stressborn — partly because he was a Stressborn and Desmond was also, and partly from sheer desire to be disagreeable — still held to his legitimate claim if Desmond should die without issue.

Matters were, therefore, at a deadlock, and the lawyers were for letting them remain so and allowing time to solve the problem in its own way. They knew nothing of that hazy sentence of Dr. Consett's that still held a place in Desmond's uneasy mind, nor did they reckon that one Stressborn's determination

might be quite as strong as another's. The cousins had never met, though both the lawyers and Christina had of late tried to bring about such a meeting — the former from the belief that Henry Stressborn might in this way be brought to see the real hopelessness of his expectations, and the latter from mere desire to seize any opportunity of bringing Desmond in touch with mankind. Christina took no side in the dispute as to the entail, only listened with a quiet, little, wistful smile, and maintained a very tender patience with Desmond as usual; but in her own courageous, unabashed mind she had already selected the rooms that should be the nurseries for the children of that Desmond that was still in the making.

That irresolution of his, when confronted with any outside matter, troubled her a great deal. In his own daily affairs, his comings and goings, his amusements and routine, he was decided enough, following the wish of the moment without second thought, regardless of anything — and it must be confessed, of any one — except his own convenience. But in any dealing with the outside world there crept up in him this indecision and a certain weakness of will from which Christina could easily help him by exerting her own will, though generally she would not do so.

To-day, however, her sympathy with him ran deep. She was dimly conscious of certain ideas and delusions which he still nursed, that had yet to be expelled, and not merely alleviated by her presence. She could have bent his will to her own ends and guided him nearly blindfold to any point for wisdom, but what she wanted was that he should walk alone, that his own will and his own reason should lead him into desirable paths. She would take no short cuts to the realisation of that new Desmond whose presence was with her day and night, crying for life and fulfilment.

The matter of the letter, however, was but a small

thing. She made him write it, and then sent him off for the long night with the fleet, and the heavy work which he never shunned and which seemed the surest road to his own freedom. It was only on the sea that he could bear to be long out of her sight; she might have been jealous of that second mother of his whose voice could still even the desire for her own, had she been made after the fashion of some weaker sisters; but Christina rejoiced at it, and even this evening, though in truth, the big house was silent and dull enough, she neither grudged him his sea-love, nor repined at her own loneliness. She went down to the shore and walked along the sands towards Fremly, which she had never visited since that day of the storm fifteen months ago, when she had so unthinkingly turned her back on it for good and all. The tide was at its highest and the wind was behind her; she saw the fishing boats come out from behind Strancebury Head and could distinguish Desmond standing at the helm of the Portons' boat. He waved to her and she waved back. She sat on the low sand banks and watched them grow smaller and smaller. She felt aware of a certain tiredness and weariness. It seemed suddenly a luxury to let herself relax, and to allow life to slip by her. She had not been aware of strain or effort, yet undoubtedly her life was not altogether easy. It was made up of daily little efforts, of daily small disappointments and occasional victories, of the exercise of continual and indomitable faith, and in the continuous attempt to maintain an atmosphere of happy commonplace in the still hostile atmosphere of Strancebury Castle. She was winning, she never allowed herself to think differently or, indeed, to think consciously about it at all, but this evening she clung to the thought of winning with a tenacity that was not without significance. This momentary realisation of her passing fatigue was a dis-

agreeable surprise to her. She decided that the low, long shore with the shadow of the great headland lying over it was not a propitious spot for her, and turned homeward; and then was seized with a desire to visit the little hut again where she had first met Desmond, and which she had hardly visited since. It had been re-roofed and was in excellent repair; without knowing why she was certain that Desmond came there not infrequently, and she was curiously aware of a quality in his love for her that had troubled her a little, some vague suggestion of homage and remoteness that had yet to be bridged over.

The evening was falling now, and the oak woods over towards Datchet glowed with almost autumnal tints in the light of the low sun, which already was balanced, as it were, on the tip-top of Drunes Beacon. The blue was dying out of the sea and the waves were crisper. Christina was already weather-wise for that coast, and she foresaw a gusty night, but she allowed no room for fear or no more time than it took for a prayer to cover it.

But the evening in the empty library was long. She wished Desmond was there to play to her. She decided with a little effort she would finish turning out the old writing cabinet, which she and Desmond had begun some time ago. It had not been finished then because it had seemed to hold so much that caused him unhappy memories. She had protested she was tired, and shut it up, having surreptitiously collected in one drawer a little pile of things she meant to burn on the first opportunity; there would hardly be a better than to-night.

She opened the drawer, took the things out, and carried them to the fire. For the most part they seemed harmless trifles, but with each one she had seen Desmond's face stiffen, and his explanation had been short and sometimes too vague for her to follow.

There was a fan—"his Mother's," he had said curtly. Christina could not see the cold, frozen woman waving it slowly through a current of furious abuse to which a small boy listened with white face and beating heart. There was a book with a torn, spoiled picture in it; a box of birds' eggs— forfeited for some boyish misdemeanour—and a riding whip which Desmond had taken from her, looked at curiously and flung on the sofa with an unmistakable shiver. And there was a letter—an unopened letter. It was the result of the sight of this that had made her grow weary of "turning out" and she shut up the cabinet. She looked at the letter now and saw it was in Desmond's own writing, but it had never been opened; it was addressed to his father. Christina thought for a moment and then opened it. It had been written by Desmond the night before his trial, and no eyes less kindly than hers had read the broken sentences and half illegible words. Some angry hand had thrust it into the drawer full of letters where she had found it. When Christina had read, she gathered up the rest of the things and knelt by the fire. Into the very heart of the flames she thrust the letter now wet with her tears; into the same red heart, too, she thrust the fan, the book, the riding whip which refused to burn for long, and smelt evilly. Its twisted, distorted fragments were there among the ashes in the morning. She piled logs above the holocaust and fed them with other remains—newspapers eight years old, and other letters that Desmond had asked her to burn; with each she felt she was ridding the house of some evil presence. One thing she kept. She found it in a small drawer in the little central cupboard of the cabinet. It was a dainty blue ribbon folded round a small envelope in which was a baby's curl—a little chestnut-coloured curl labelled Desmond. This Christina kept. There had been a time,

then, when this strange woman that Desmond called "Mother" was like other women, had loved and been proud of this baby of hers, to whom later on she was apparently so indifferent.

The next morning Christina received a wire from her mother saying she was starting for England.

Desmond's night was less reposeful than Christina's. He soon grew tired of steering, and going forward, lay full length on the little forward deck and looked out through the cordage and net tackle to the dim horizon, as it shut in round them with the approaching night.

So had he lain many and many a night as a boy, full of idle dreams of the coming years. . . . They were running before the wind and the voices of the men behind him and the creaking of the ropes and sails, and now and again a hail from some comrade boat, came clearly to his ears. Occasionally, Porton, senior, came forward ostensibly to see to some gear, but as Desmond knew full well, chiefly to see if "the Master needed aught."

They were running northeast now into the night; back behind them against the dim ridge of the high fell-land, a band of orange colour still marked the day that had been. Desmond glanced round it at once and then looked ahead again. He did not want to be driven to think of what he had come out purposely to avoid, preferring, or hoping rather, to fall into that half lethargic, half pure physical content that makes a dream of the passing minutes, and knows no dimension of time but the present. But the desired state would not come. Instead he felt anew conscious of that unforgotten saying of Dr. Consett's. Those three years of life which had grudgingly, as he thought, been allowed him. . . . Well, the Doctor was wrong, Desmond knew it. He was alive,

more alive than he had been for eight long years. He stretched out his arm and felt the pleasure of the strength that was his again, in greater measure than he had dared to hope. He was well. He could feel the old restless life, the energy and vigour that was his as a boy, coursing through him, and he hid his face on his arms and told himself it was all a mistake and that he had married Christina under false pretences, with false reckoning, with a false intention that was not holdable. It had seemed so easy and simple when that cursed fever had brought him low and the tide of life was running out; but the tide had turned. . . . Putting weightier questions aside and supposing they continued to lead the life they led now, how could he expect or ask her to remain forever, shut in the boundary of this maimed life of his? He had never thought of her as tied for a long life to a man possessed of health and strength, and all necessary for ordinary human intercourse, except the right to enter other men's society as their equal. That was an idea that it would take longer than the seven months of their marriage to eradicate.

There was little profit in the thoughts that swarmed to him through the gathering darkness, and they were broken happily by the sounds of men getting ready their fishing tackle, and the flopping of the nets on deck.

He sprang up and took his place with the men, working as they worked, sharing their anxiety and labour as keenly as if his own livelihood depended on the catch and, as ever, found salvation for himself in action.

CHAPTER XXXII

RACHEL stood gazing at the receding shore whose storm-lashed cliffs had been as prison walls to her for nearly two years. There were tears in her eyes, but they were tears of thankfulness that Esther had been at last set free from the bondage of flesh whose chains had become so cruel. The end that might so well have been one of terror, had been peace. Rachel had done her job and done it well; she had no regrets or pinings, nothing but deep thankfulness that the end had come and she had been there to aid.

Now she was returning to that other duty that Lady Losford more than hinted should have had a prior claim on her—to wit, the care of her own daughter! her little Christina that she had left a child and would find a married woman. Poor Rachel did not find it entirely easy to hold in control those poignant regrets for an experience that could now never be hers. The love star had dawned in her darling's life and she had not been at hand to watch its rising!

Whatever the quality of that love, the surprising marriage that every one seemed to regard as a calamity was now an accomplished fact, and so far—to the two principally concerned—the idea of calamity seemed very remote indeed.

In the lid of her letter-case, lying so that she saw it each time she opened it, was Desmond's letter to her. That partly shy, partly proud, wholly wistful letter, so self-revealing that already as they drew

nearer each other on the visible universe Rachel felt her heart and mind bridging the space that lay between them in search of newer and better understanding of this man who loved her darling with such passionate need.

Rachel entertained no idea that Christina's life would be an easy one or the task given her lightly achieved, but that it would ultimately be performed she never doubted. In her finite, ignorant way how different a love would she have chosen to bestow on her daughter, how that spirit of life reverence, that beautiful, fresh vitality and joyousness should have grown and expanded rising with an equal help-mate to bounds the very singers of the earth had never fettered in words, instead of reaching down and back into the abyss of sorrow and pain to raise one more soul to its own pure altitude. But neither from Esther's prison-isle, nor from the immediate vicinity of Christina herself, could the deepest maternal love have dared to set aside the course which the Divine Wisdom had chosen for that which was entrusted to it. It was only superficially that Rachel's spirit shook and faltered in response to the little hurricane of indignation that Lady Losford had hurled across the sea to her.

But Rachel's thoughts were not entirely of Christina. There were times when thoughts of her own future occupied her more cruelly. Only now on this long, dreary journey had she leisure, and unhappily lassitude of mind, to enable her to conjure up the picture of the empty life that lay before her.

Torrens, and Torrens without Christina — also without Rudolph! In spite of her absorbing love for her child, Christina had never taken Rudolph's place with Rachel; only as the mere nearness of a smaller image will blot out the larger distant object so had her child's presence stood between her and full realisation.

tion of the ever-widening space that lay between her and her husband.

Those short summer days of courting, that enriching autumn and spring of dear companionship, of lessons in a world so strange to her nature that the very recalling of them seemed a mere delirious dream, those strange, restless stirrings of depths now silent forever, all these things swept across her mind, making a picture not of events, but of unbelievable waves of feeling, which she told herself incredulously had been hers twenty years ago.

In her own heart Rachel did not credit Christina with like sensations. It seemed to her there was either a quality lacking or a quality added to the girl's love as revealed in her letters, the precise nature of which made it apparently possible for her to write of the joy and glamour of those early days which Rachel felt would have been beyond expression for herself.

A young couple got engaged on board on the way home. Rachel used to watch them with curious, pitiful interest. Had it really been like that with her? — so pretty, so trivial, provocative of smiles? Even now, twenty years after it was finished forever, she felt herself blushing with fear it might have been. . . . No, it had not been like that, she was sure of it! With such thoughts for companions she mingled with her fellow-travellers with smiling, peaceful eyes and outwardly calm, untroubled bearing.

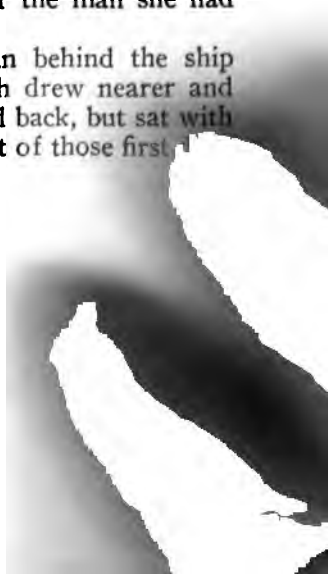
Then one day she fell to wondering if Rudolph had seen the simple announcement of his daughter's marriage. Did he ever think of this unseen daughter of his at all? She could not disguise from herself the disappointment she felt that her foolish hope for their meeting had remained unfulfilled.

What if she again followed up the slender clue she had once held, or should she advertise? She could

think of no wording that would not wake him to anger. . . . Also there was Vallery. . . .

Again her thoughts would trail off to Christina's letters. For a long time past Rachel had been conscious of something that was not said in them; some thought that only expressed itself in a certain unexpected tenderness and comprehension that was as manna to her hungry heart. It might only be that their separation had revealed to Christina how deep was the tie between them, yet Rachel could not rest satisfied with this solution. It half pleased her and half added to her vague misgivings that this new tenderness and understanding held good through Christina's engagement and marriage. Whatever place Desmond occupied in Christina's life he did not stand between her and her mother yet. At times Rachel had cherished this thought, at other times she rejected it indignantly. She did not wish Christina to love her less, but because of this very hunger in her own heart, she longed to feel assured that Christina loved Desmond more . . . just as she, Rachel, still stretched out empty hands for the man she had lost.

Day by day the waste of ocean behind the ship widened and the stars of the north drew nearer and nearer, and Rachel no longer looked back, but sat with her face to the north, and the unrest of those first days passed from her.



CHAPTER XXXIII

THE little fishing fleet reached the harbour about nine o'clock the next morning, and the women stood at the doors of their cottages or loitered about the little wooden landing stage, that could not be called a pier, until from the cheery calls of the men they knew all was well with husband, brother, and lover, and turned back to their household occupations as calmly as if the last twenty-four hours had not held for them the familiar and dreary threat of possible disaster; some few women stayed about the pier to help land the fish, and Christina waited on the shore just outside the group till her own "man" was free to come to her, like any other self-respecting fisherman's wife. He came at last, with laughing eyes and wet clothes, and rather a weary face, and they went up the steep little path to the north tower entrance together.

There was an air of excitement and gladness about Christina that was new to Desmond, but it was not till they were half way up the path, and she had heard of the wonderful night catch, that she put the telegram in his hand telling of Mrs. Massendon's start for home. He read it silently. This was what accounted for her joyous air! He tried very honestly to share in that joy. But the dim unrest of the previous evening had stolen into his heart again as his foot touched land, and now it set chains on his tongue so that he failed to make anything clear except that he was trying to be glad. It was an injustice to himself, for Desmond, deep in his heart, longed to see this

mother who was so different from his own experience of motherhood.

"It will be a long, long six weeks," said Christina; "but I must write to Sir Vallory and to Torrens at once, and oh, Desmond! we must meet her."

"You can easily do that!"

He hated himself for the coldness he recognised in his own tone, yet he could not control it.

Christina glanced up at him and went on as if he had not spoken.

"I am longing to see you two together more than anything in life, Desmond. Remember, you are not to think she is a dear, odd and unusual sort of being as Lady Losford does, or to think her alarming as Mrs. Chancely does . . . though how any one could think mother alarming is more than one can imagine!"

"I have every reason to be alarmed at her," Desmond replied a little drily.

She slipped in front of him on the steep path and put her hands on his shoulders.

"Have I really gone off so much?" she demanded with anxiety. "What do you suggest I should do? There are all sorts of advertisements of people who promise to make one look young and blooming and remove wrinkles — is it so very bad?"

He had to laugh, and then he looked into her half laughing, tender eyes and kissed her.

"I am not afraid of her comments on your appearance unless she thinks you are too sunburnt. Christina, why don't you lose your temper with me?"

"How do you know I have any to lose?" she demanded teasingly.

"I have seen it in your eyes."

"Wait till you really deserve it! How the wind is rising, Desmond."

He turned and looked out to sea.

"Yes, it is good luck it has kept comparatively quiet so long. We thought we were in for bad weather last night."

Then with an irrelevance that startled Christina, he asked:

"When do you expect to see Dr. Consett again?"

They were going up the steps into the tower and Christina paused and looked back down the path, though her eyes ached to scrutinise his face and read the purpose of the question.

"There is no one on the sick list in the Bay now. We could ask him to dinner. I had thought of driving over to Datchet this afternoon—come with me!"

She was a frequent visitor at the Consetts' herself, but so far Desmond had never accompanied her there, or anywhere else beyond the immediate vicinity of Strancebury.

He was on the point of refusing now, and then altered his mind. Perhaps some recollection of last night's thoughts still dwelt with him.

"I'll come."

Christina merely nodded as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. When he had gone up to change she went to order the motor. It seemed to her the spring sunshine, despite the rising wind, was so full of gladness and promise it set her singing.

Desmond heard her voice as she crossed the courtyard. He stopped in his toilet and wondered if she had a habit of singing. He thought not. Her mother's return must mean a great deal to her. Her happiness naturally must have many other springs than in her present life; his better self forced him to acknowledge they were only *other* springs.

They motored over to Datchet accordingly and Christina refrained by as much as a glance from betraying her little triumph, the very thought of which

set her heart beating with pleasure. He continued to put down her good spirits to the morning's telegram, with all the perverse stupidity of a man who had, even unknowingly, set his face towards the fatal horizon of jealousy.

Miss Arethusa was in trouble with an incubator, and the chauffeur and Christina lent valuable aid, while Desmond was carried off by the doctor to inspect a new greenhouse that at that time was his special hobby.

It was the doctor who had first seen the car approaching, and had made wild bets with himself as to the identity of the second passenger. He was just able to conceal his surprise from Desmond, though his twinkling eyes betrayed themselves to Christina. She took the first chance of hurrying away to find Miss Arethusa and left them alone. She was quite sure that Desmond must want to talk to the doctor very badly to have broken through his ordinary shrinking reserve like this. She could not believe he was unwell, for since the autumn he had had no return of his old troubles, and of late it had been quite apparent his strength had marvellously improved. The incubator proved a serious business. It was a new importation and Miss Arethusa did not like it; she considered it unnatural.

"I will not put it where the hens can see it," she confided to Christina. "It seems such a reproach, but it's so hard to get good sitters nowadays, that I had to get one or give up half my stock."

She did not add "and half my little income, too," as she might have done.

"The worst is," she continued, "that I cannot feel chickens reared in this way are of any use except for market. It is too much to expect them to be domesticated or good mothers."

The chauffeur, who was adjusting the lamp that did

duty for a feathered maternity, remarked he supposed that was what was the matter with "modern wimmen." At which Miss Arethusa got pink and Christina led her away.

"I don't know quite what Giles meant, my dear, but I know he does not like women."

"He likes chauffeuring," said Christina cheerfully.

Meanwhile the doctor was showing his latest toy to his visitor. The tiny greenhouse contained many pots; few flowers, and much hope.

"Come into my den," said the doctor, when he had exhausted his toy, "that is, if you don't mind the smell of drugs and sight of odd things; the place isn't big enough to separate business from pleasure."

He led the way by a glass door straight into his "den."

"Come in," said the doctor.

It was only afterwards he remembered the slight hesitation before Desmond followed him across the threshold.

"He wants something," thought Dr. Consett. He talked generally for a short time and then let the conversation drop.

"Dr. Consett," said Desmond slowly, "are you in the habit of misleading your patients as completely as you misled me?"

"Bless my soul!" cried the other, spinning round with a red face and angry eyes, and then he subsided in his chair again and eyed Stressborn askance.

"How many years of life would you put to my credit now?"

"A goodly store, please Heaven, with your constitution."

"Do you think I should have married her, had I known this?"

The doctor stuck manfully to his guns.

"I told you what I thought was the truth," he said

unblushingly. "I had no right to do so, but it was because I was fairly certain you wouldn't marry her unless you were told, that I did it. Good Heavens, man! wasn't she to get anything out of it?"

Desmond flung out his hand:

"It's her life!"

"Well, what more can she want; she can't have you longer. What do you know about women?" he scoffed. "I tell you they must be making something to be happy. She's doing that, she'll ask nothing better of life."

"Putting pieces together!" Desmond laughed drearily.

The doctor took out his pipe and filled it with trembling fingers. He spilt the tobacco and swore softly. He was very angry with Stressborn, he told himself, but it needed a great deal of telling.

"Do you expect me to poison you to verify my own prophecy?"

"I have no doubt you meant to be kind —"

It was the accusation of cruelty, nevertheless.

Desmond got up.

"She is just twenty," he said unsteadily. "She's had a singularly happy, sheltered childhood; she's seen a glimpse of the world from a window, and she's tied up for perhaps a long life to a man who has to live with the curtains down!"

"Is the view so pleasing after all?" snapped the other. Desmond did not heed.

"I won't swear it, but I believe I shouldn't have married her if you had not said that."

"Good Heavens! Here's a man complaining because in some unaccountable way he's found himself strong and healthy instead of a crocky invalid! There's no pleasing some people."

Desmond turned upon him again.

"I tell you again it's not me — it's her, and it's not

what she will get — it's what she won't have — ever," he said fiercely.

"Poof! she'll get all she wants, trust a woman to do that."

"Besides," added the doctor, to break the uncomfortable silence that fell between them. "It's a certainty that if Mrs. Stressborn had not married you, my little prophecy would have come true. Anyhow, it's one of those things which crop up now and then, and defy the art of Æsculapius."

Desmond was even more silent than usual during the drive home. He offered Christina no explanations of his wish to see Dr. Consett, probably it never occurred to him one was necessary. He would have found it difficult to explain his own desire to "have it out" with the doctor, probably it had its origin in the half fascinating, half disturbing thoughts that had pursued him across the night-veiled sea, and in any case had been sufficiently strong to make him overcome his reluctance to enter another man's house, if only to learn more surely just where he stood. His thoughts concentrated themselves now into a study of Christina. Was it credible her love for him could outweigh the isolation that shut him round? How could he hope to tell when habitude should tread on the spontaneity of her happiness, or in what fine line she found room for its growth here in Strancebury? With his erring masculine judgment it seemed to him that he knew nothing of the real import of her former life, of her comings and goings, her friends, all the innumerable passing events of which Christina had never spoken, just because to her they were passing events that counted for naught. She spoke to him fully of the matters that to her were of supreme importance; of her relationship to her mother, of impressions, of faiths, of aspirations, and all those things of which the real fabric of her life was woven.

But like a child stumbling through the alphabet, Desmond needed the plain pictures of her human intercourse to read aright the woman whom till lately he had not even contemplated as understandable.

He made some excuse to sit opposite to her that he might see her the better. How amazingly happy she looked! When she turned her face towards him it was as if the sun shone in a golden streak across the greyness of existence. He could never look at her and keep clear in his mind what was precisely the nature of the disquieting thoughts that had begun to haunt the hours that were empty of her face.

It was not till they were entering the courtyard that Desmond clearly remembered he had actually broken the rule of isolation, which he dreaded for Christina, that afternoon, for the first time for five years.

He had entered the house of the one man who had been kind to him and practically accused him to his face of lying to him! How maddeningly impossible the whole situation was!

The evening had turned cold and wet, and the library looked homelike and comfortable with the curtains drawn over the blank shutters and the many shaded lamps breaking the shadows. They still dined there at a little table placed before the fire, as on the never-forgotten evening of Christina's coming, and the meal still held for Desmond some of the magic and unreality of the one occasion.

Afterwards Christina said she must write letters and would he play to her the while?

"I can write much nicer ones than and far more quickly, and then I can watch you."

So he played and she sat by the fire with her writing-board on her knee, biting her pen and finding it anything but easy to write after all.

She had made two attempts that day already on a

letter to her father. Ever since the arrival of the telegram, behind all her gladness of mind, she had been occupied in thinking how she should best ensure his presence in the most auspicious place for a meeting, and further how she was going to bring about such a meeting at all!

She made another attempt and again consigned the letter to the flames — the only possible way would be to see him herself.

Rudolph had refused persistently to come to see her or to meet Desmond, either as a friend or in his true relationship, or indeed under any circumstances. He had refused with a harshness that had really hurt Christina a great deal, though he had assured her with almost brutal frankness, it had nothing to do with any personal antipathy to Desmond.

But she would have to see him now. The more she thought of it the more imperative it seemed. If she trusted to letters, he might even at the last evade her and that meeting, to which, in her singleness of heart, Christina looked as the certain step to her parents' reconciliation.

Rudolph was still in London, and Christina and he corresponded with regularity. He had taken a rooted objection, however, to the name of Tennent, and since Christina set her face steadily against the many and ingenious sobriquets her father suggested, it had ended in her addressing him as "Massendon."

"Only till I am bored with it," he told her. "And only because it will be easy for you to hoodwink Desmond if he takes that interest in your correspondence that a young husband should do."

To which Christina had replied rather indignantly that it was no question of deceiving Desmond, but merely the question of keeping her word to her father, and she besought him not for the first time for per-

mission to tell Desmond, to which request he had replied swiftly by return of post.

Dear Christina,—

As I have no inclination to live abroad at present, I shall be glad if you will continue to remember your word is given to

Yours sincerely,

R. H. MASSENDON.

It was the only time he did so sign his name to her. They had made peace since then.

Christina thought of all this as she sat by the fire trying to write, and listening to Desmond's music, which was fitful and uncertain, and filled her with dim misgivings. The fire sizzled and spluttered as the rain came down the wide open chimney, and up high among the black rafters the shadows of the swaying tapestries moved to and fro.

It came to her with a sudden startling revelation that she could not leave Desmond here alone even for a few days, not with that mood on him that throbbed and echoed in the wandering notes.

She wrote a short letter to her father saying she hoped her mother would soon be home, but refrained from mentioning the wire, further than she hoped to be in London shortly and would see him, and added with a sudden insight into her own need of some lost quality in her present world, that she wanted to see him again with all her heart. Then, having addressed the letter, she tossed it down on a pile of others ready for the morning post and went across to Desmond, and demanded some steady, solid music.

"It means more light," he complained.

She lit the candles ceremoniously and curtseyed to him.

"Why steady and solid?"

"Palestrina is a great deal more conducive to a

night's rest than Desmond Stressborn," she replied, and put some music in front of him.

He played obediently, and then stopping, turned over the leaves idly.

"Queer old Johnnies these," he admitted; "but they *are* satisfying — like a lunch of bread and cheese in an open boat!"

Christina laughed.

"And Bach is like a solemn feast, and Brahms a supper to the gods. What made you learn the organ in the first place, Desmond?"

He began something else and talked spasmodically as he played.

"I was always music-mad, though it's no Stressborn taste, but the Caberlys were all players — cards or music, you know. It was Father Thrynne who taught me — he came here when I was about twelve — an awful good sort, I owe something to him — he found out I cared, and taught me — used to take me to York and the Leeds Festivals. He died the year before I went to London — bad luck for me — he used to talk about them, these old musicians, as if he understood. He made me see, anyhow, what they aimed at —"

He had forgotten the music on the page and trailed off into vague rippling melodies that seemed overcharged with recollections.

"I began learning the violin, and I was having lessons in London — but that went — five years — and the sort of work — I suppose I had not got ear enough — it went, anyhow. The last year they used to let me play the American organ in the chapel for Service. The Protestant Service, that is — sometimes I gave them Brahms for voluntaries, but they preferred this sort of thing."

He broke into a loud, fierce march, full of blatant chords and crude plagiarisms. Christina leant her

head against his arm so that he could not play, and he stopped and looked down at her.

"It's not a bad memory altogether, my dear," he said quietly.

Christina never tried to check him when he dropped into reminiscences like this. She thought them better uttered than treasured up, still she never actually encouraged them, though the temptation to gather new knowledge of him in this way was often very strong.

"My father hated my playing," he told her now, which was again a fact that was not without value to her understanding. "I suppose because it was something I got from the other side."

"Fancy not being able to like Brahms!" she sighed. "I am not musical, but that is such a joy—I feel quite sorry for him."

Desmond gave a little dry laugh, but he played her her favourite Brahms, and then a Fugue of Scarlatti's that was intricate and required all his attention. He played it well and she felt she had scored another small victory, for, as a rule, when he had started talking of those old days he played badly and fitfully, and it was hard to distract him. He seemed, however, so interested in the fugue, playing over bits again and again, that she felt able to bid him good-night with a good heart, and left him there still filling the echoes with glorious sounds that shut out the chill discomforts of the night.

It was quite late when he left his instrument and put out the lights one by one. The last lamp stood on the writing-table, and as he stooped there he saw the little pile of letters Christina had written and left for the next day's post; and foremost on them lay one addressed to "R. H. Massendon, Esq."

Desmond had not the least intention of entertaining curiosity over his wife's correspondence, yet, although he saw the address without meaning to read

it or caring to, the thought thrust itself into his mind that "R. H. Massendon" was not Sir Vallory, and that he had seen letters so addressed before. She had doubtless many relations; it was natural she should write to them. They were nothing to him.

He had to tell himself this, however, two or three times in the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THROUGH the long, tedious journey the rain had accompanied them, first in a thin, drizzling mist, that dragged across the country-side like a torn cobweb, then in more determined manner till as London's grey out-pushing wings came in sight it had settled into a steady pour that knew its own business and had no idea of shirking it.

Throughout the journey Desmond had betrayed neither restlessness nor interest. Christina had purposely left him to see to the details of their journey since their start from Datchet Station, and, in spite of his almost tragic inexperience, he had forgotten nothing that could add to her comfort except the companionship of his own thoughts. He had sat looking out of the window at the half-obliterated country hour after hour, and she, instead of being, as he fancied, engrossed in the books and papers with which he had plentifully supplied her, had watched his face, noted every changing expression, breaking in on his reverie when some fleeting look called for interposition, and in her heart repeated over and over again that the experiment, on which she had embarked, must prove good in the end.

London gave them a poor welcome of sloppy streets, and pavements turned into shallow streams, a panorama of shining umbrellas and scurrying cabs. As they drove through the streets Desmond kept his eyes as resolutely turned from the passing pageant of rain-sodden life as Christina kept hers on it.

It amazed her to find how familiar London looked, for until now she had regarded it as a strange city

in which she was but a stranger, and yet, even in the poor welcome it offered them to-day, she found she was no longer a stranger, but the familiar guest, and the rain-washed streets, the dripping umbrellas, the sound of the passing feet, and the roaring accompaniment of the traffic, meant more to her than they had on the day they had first dawned on her as a part of this great mother of cities.

London was hardly more familiar to Desmond than to her. He had spent barely three years of his conscious life there, though in his remoter childhood there had been a yearly exodus from the comparative freedom of Strancebury to the more confined and even stricter rule of the tall, grey, ugly house in Manchester Square. It was still his, dismantled, shut up, plastered with half-obliterated notices "To Let" all over its ugly face. But no tenants more particular than rats were likely to take it in its present condition, and there was no money to make it more habitable, so there it remained, a dreary encumbrance to its owner, and an eyesore to its neighbours.

Desmond had not even mentioned the existence of this house to Christina, but they happened to pass through the identical Square. It was the only time he looked out of the window. It stood on the opposite side to that on which they were driving; its shuttered eyes leered blankly down on the chilly world.

"I don't wonder it doesn't let," Desmond remarked dreamily.

"That house? No, I don't either; what a dull looking place!"

"It's mine," Desmond told her, without pride or interest, and Christina stared at him with amazement.

"It is our town residence," he explained with gentle irony. "It's belonged to the Stressborns since George the Third's day. But even Henry Stressborn won't live there now, though I believe Parsons offered it

him rent free. I don't blame him; I can't spend any money on it, and he can't either."

"Can't you sell it?"

"Entailed, or it wouldn't be mine!"

Christina hardly knew what to say. She was sure there was something wrong, for there were no other houses to be let in the square; it might be ugly, but it was in a good quarter. She determined she would add it to the list of things on which she meant to question her father.

It was a long drive to the *Alexandra*, which was the hotel she had selected for their stay; at least, Christina had suggested it and Desmond had offered no objection, either to that or any other idea, once he had brought himself to agree to her wish to stop two weeks in London before Mrs. Massendon arrived. Desmond metaphorically "shut his teeth" and went through with it without imposing any conditions. But even he had not guessed how completely his own reluctance would be justified by his sensations as they stood in the entrance hall, watching the luggage brought in; it seemed to Desmond that in the little concourse of people idling in the place, there must be men who would recognise him, and worse — suspect him of attempting to claim an acquaintanceship. He tried not to see them, tried, too, to restrain his longing to hurry away to their rooms, out of sight of the curious eyes that scrutinised them both. Had he only known it, the greater part of those onlookers were greater strangers than himself to the world in which they were now flung together, and their interest in the pretty girl with the smiling, kindly eyes that seemed so interested in everything, and in the silent, nervous-looking man who accompanied her, was chiefly stimulated by the deference and attention paid by the staff to the occupiers of the best suite of rooms in the hotel, who had arrived without man or maid!

Christina had selected this hotel because she had a vague recollection that it looked out on the Park, and she had once called there with Lady Losford. She had never stayed in any big hotel and she found a certain pleasure in it. It almost savoured to her of an adventure. She had looked forward to dining downstairs and watching the comings and goings of others, but the evident relief Desmond betrayed when the door of their sitting-room closed behind the servant who had taken them up, led her to suggest dinner upstairs that night. Again Desmond betrayed quite unconsciously immense relief.

Christina soon found that her husband's presence in town need be no hindrance to her own movements. Desmond never refused to go anywhere she asked him, but it was quite obviously a great trial to him, and the second day of their stay Christina found it an easy matter to arrange to call on her father.

She had written to say she was coming, and though he had not replied to her he had waited in as she desired, and even sat near the window that gave the best view down the street, though he pretended this was merely because there was a better light there.

He had not come to the door to meet her; he heard her pleasant voice talking to Mrs. Swanmore on the stairs and had waited till the door actually opened before even rising. Christina had gone with a sense of real pleasure and relief that dwarfed for the moment all thought of the remarkable difference in her position between her last visit and now. She realised it in a flash as she kissed her father.

Rudolph was as undemonstrative as ever, but Christina felt as if some extra barrier had risen up between them. Perhaps it was the half laughing, half scoffing "Mrs. Stressborn, I am charmed to receive you," with which he greeted her.

She stood for just a second covered with confusion,

while he leant against the table and considered her from head to foot very carefully.

Perhaps he expected her to put on the airs of a newly married woman and wished to discountenance such a proceeding at once. But Christina had as little of the newly married air as could well be imagined; indeed, Rudolph, who certainly had looked for something of the sort, was not only agreeably disappointed but set his wits working to find credible assurance that this daughter of his had actually adventured position, engagement, and marriage, since he last saw her.

She went naturally to the chair that had formerly been hers, took off her hat, leant back and looked at him, smiling. There was a little element of shyness in her smile that was new, the only newness he could discover in her.

"I could hardly tear myself away to come to you," she said. "Desmond has got the dearest old bookman there with treasures that even I wanted to handle."

"So you were at no trouble to invent excuses?"

"He never asks where I am going," she said. "I don't like not telling him, but how can I help it?"

"Nothing easier," he told her, with a fine assumption of indifference. "You have only to drop me. If you will know disreputable people, you must take the consequences."

Christina put out her hand.

"Oh, don't!" she said; "it hurts, it's the sort of thing I'm always fighting."

"You poor child!" His voice was half scoffing, half tender again. "Oh, Christina, what a fool you have been!"

"I've not!" she cried indignantly. "I am as happy as any girl could be, and Desmond is as good as gold!"

"And takes not the slightest interest in your goings

on? Well, I know that is the modern equivalent for a good husband, but I did not expect it to be your ideal somehow."

She laughed at him, it was the only thing to do.

"It's very convenient for us anyway, and I have so much to say to you, and I want such heaps and heaps of advice."

"Good Heavens! Advice from me? I swear I advise no one, not even myself; it's the devil's own way of making mischief."

"Asking advice or following it?"

"You've not taken it anyhow," he returned rather grimly. "If you recollect, I did advise you not to bring Stressborn to London."

Christina's face grew grave.

"I have wondered," she said, without looking at him, "whether, after all, you were not right there?"

"You have not much belief in my paternal wisdom for all the strain you put on it when it suits your convenience."

"I felt you could not know Desmond as I did."

Rudolph paid attention to his cigarette and made no answer.

"I thought it was just living alone that made him feel like that," she confessed in a low voice; "but I am beginning to understand it is more than that, and yet I can't believe he ought to shut himself up." She raised her eyes to her father and they were hungry for agreement. There was no good not agreeing now, he thought.

"Oh, he'll get used to it in time; if you have hold enough over him to make him face it once you have hold enough to see it through."

"I learnt yesterday almost by accident," Christina told him in the same anxious way, "what it was he so dreaded; it's the idea of meeting that one man again—the man who was his friend—I asked him

how it could matter — I think he feels if he did meet him all his old hate of him, which he is trying so hard to get over, would flame out."

Rudolph just stopped a queer, hard little laugh in time.

"Who would that injure?" he asked rather drily.

"Desmond!" she answered quietly. "And knowing that now, I wondered if after all I ought not to give up staying so long here; but he won't go to Torrens until he has seen my mother, and—" She stopped suddenly.

"And what?" Rudolph watched from the corner of his eyes with dangerous alertness.

Now Christina had meant to re-establish fully the old relationship between them before she told him of her mother's near return, but she had implied too much, his question showed her that. She must not await fuller preparation.

"She lands at Southampton next week," she said simply.

"Then I don't know why you took the trouble to come here."

His tone was rough, almost brutal, and he got up and walked away from her.

Christina looked steadily out of the window, but her heart beat fast.

"It was the chief reason for coming."

"A sentimental good-bye?" He flung the question at her contemptuously. "I thought you had better sense, Christina."

"There is no sentiment nor good-bye!" she tossed back at him indignantly, or seemingly so. "It's a plain matter of business. Desmond and I are going down to Southampton, and shall bring her straight back to town; and will you tell me if you think she will like the Alexandra Hotel, and if you will meet us there, or come in that evening, unless," she added

slowly, "you would rather meet her yourself at Southampton?"

Rudolph drew in his breath with a queer little angry sound. Christina did not move, but she was afraid of him in that minute, and there was a strange, throbbing sound in her ears.

He spoke at last, coldly and hardly.

"You are under a misapprehension. I have no intention of meeting your mother merely because I have had the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

"In the very, very middle of your heart you have," she persisted gently. "That is why you are here in these rooms, and why you let me be here, and why you write to me."

He faced round on her furiously.

"It's not, I swear it's not! I kept in touch with you because you amused me—nothing else—I always meant to drop you as soon as you bored me, anyhow before she came back. Did you think, you little fool, you had a prodigal father to lead to the feast?" He laughed sharply.

"Not in the least," Christina said in the slow, deliberate way she had when she was unusually excited; "though I took it for granted you would wish to thank her for the loan which apparently did not bore you so soon as you expected.

"I haven't gone back on my word to you," she went on, "though it has cost me more than it cost you to own to being yourself. I have deceived my best friends, I am deceiving my husband now, I have done everything but lie direct. Do you think for a moment I should have done it only because it was nice and amusing to be with you? You know I should not, you would despise me if I had. I made no agreement with you because I trusted you. If I was not such a fool as to think—to dare to think of you as a prodigal to be brought back home, you at least must also have

been not such a fool as to think I have not known, from the moment you told me who you were, that you and she must meet. That, that's what it is all for — why we met, it's nothing to do with either of us, it's just what God means. You can put off the inevitable, of course, and run away, but all the same, you will have to meet in the end, or I should not be here now."

His mind fought against the quiet assurance of her creed, he crashed to the doors of incredulity between him and this persistent faith. 'His life was his own, he told himself, his movements were his own, his will was his own! But it was not his will that had led them to meet originally — or had it been? It was not his wish that led him to disclose himself, that at least was in opposition to every inch of will, though he would have liked to deny it.

He could go away as she said, "run away" had been her expression, and he smiled at it grimly enough. Well, he could run away still and postpone the inevitable. The thing was, it meant just that postponement — nothing else. He knew it, otherwise what were the meanings of his own wild efforts to keep the chasm between them unspanned. He was fighting the inevitable every time he had opposed such a bridge in those old days.

Christina was plucky; if she had flinched or shown the least fear of him, he would have despised her. She had not even looked at him. She had tact as well as pluck, the tact that knows when to go straight for the thing, and not to beat about the bush.

He strolled across the room and looked out of the window.

"I met Vallory the other day," he remarked casually. "He cut me dead quite neatly. He doesn't cut Stressborn, does he?"

The devil in him that would strike at his own best

beloved in blind defence saw her wince and was interested.

"If it's any comfort to you, you did not deceive Vallory," he added. "He cuts me himself, but he would not interfere with you meeting me. He draws the line in such amazing places, you see."

Poor Christina bit her lip and fought hard to keep back the tears that somehow had got into her eyes. It was all so heartlessly cruel.

"You had better pass on your advice as to running away to Vallory. Considering what he has let you in for, I wouldn't be in his shoes when Rachel returns for anything."

It was the first time her name had crossed his lips for years and he caught himself up sharply, but Christina only knew he was striking her again in her most vulnerable point. It was the last lunge of a man who was beaten, but she did not know that.

She had come to her father with a strange assurance of finding some support and counsel. He was a man, and it seemed to her so rational that he should help her to deal with a man. She had come, too, with the intention of gently bringing him to the point to which they had so ungently jumped, and a sense of futility and weakness dragged down her defences for the moment. Every word that could be turned into adverse criticism of Desmond hurt her with a sharpness that was like physical pain. The very thing from which she essayed to lead him had taken grip in her own soul.

She rose and picked up her hat.

"I know now," she said rather huskily, "that it was not only for Desmond's sake I wanted to come to London. I wanted to see you, I thought you would be able to help me — It is not always easy, I know so little about men — but it will be kind if you will forget anything I have ever said about him; perhaps

you will write and say where you would rather meet my mother?"

"You are going to give me up as a bad job after all?" he enquired ironically.

She turned to him, her eyes full of tears.

"You are not mine," she said. "You are hers, just as Desmond is mine."

There was not the least touch of reproach in her voice, and he would have resented it if there had been.

But he saw the tears in her eyes, and his selfish heart woke suddenly to the fact that this daughter of his had been fighting a hard fight alone, had been in strange places, yes, and perilous, and was going back to her fight unhelped and uncheered.

Moreover, she had given him to Rachel. However he might hurt her, in Christina's eyes he was still Rachel's.

Rudolph was suddenly ashamed, and that was why he nearly let her go, for shame made a coward of him. Her hand was on the door and he looked up.

"Christina! I apologise, I was a brute, can't you make allowance? A wounded man doesn't care how he strikes—you've beaten me, you know—for a time."

He had to save his pride even then, but Christina turned first white, then red, and stood still irresolute.

"I apologise to Desmond, too," he said hastily, with a rueful smile. "Christina, don't you know you have set him above my wicked tongue by your love? I was jealous!"

She laid her head on his shoulder and he put his arm round her and kissed her.

"Go on keeping your word and I'll—think of it," he said lightly.

And Christina realised she must leave it at that.

CHAPTER XXXV

AFTER the interview with her father, Christina ceased to put any pressure on Desmond in the matter of his accompanying her on expeditions of either business or pleasure. She invariably asked him if he would come, but if he showed a preference for the Library of the British Museum, or for the haunts of certain booklovers and collectors, or even if he frankly preferred staying in, she made no attempt to urge him against his wishes. She had really never realised there could be any ground for his apprehension in encountering his fellow-men until now, and it smote her to the heart to see how steadily he refused to see the passing faces or individuals of any crowd; but he never spoke about it and his silence was harder for Christina to bear than any open resentment would have been.

There was one entirely satisfactory evening, however, when they both dined with Sir Vallory, who had called and had himself asked Desmond to come in a purely informal way. Rather to Christina's surprise, Desmond had consented quietly, without hesitation.

There was no one to meet them and Sir Vallory made it quite plain this was for his own pleasure and not for theirs. After the first half hour Christina had the satisfaction of seeing Desmond for the first time at his ease and self-forgetful with a fellow-man, and by the end of the evening she was aware of a new element in her possible regard for him, of a curious pride and content cut adrift from pity at last. She blessed Sir Vallory in her heart and then recollected he had cut her father in the street. This considera-

tion, which rendered her thoughtful on the way home, did not mitigate her joy that Desmond had been a success.

There was no doubt about the success. Desmond had betrayed a certain charm, a half shy, wholly genuine interest in his host, that was as productive of self-forgetfulness as it was the product of it.

The Desmond that should have been and might still be, had to a fine degree that particular sense of interest in a fellow-being, which is derived from no philosophical or scientific origin, but is just the instinct of good comradeship and a happy power of comprehending the importance of trivialities in life. It was this power which had endeared him to the fishing folk of Strancebury, which had till the day of his disaster endeared him to every man, woman, and child, that knew him, with the solitary exceptions of his own parents, whose narrow circle of mutual hate had destroyed, rather than dulled, their capacity to love. It was here lay half the tragedy of Desmond's isolation. For a man whose natural instinct is to love his fellows and not to criticise them, there is an additional pang in ostracisation which the cynic is spared.

The Chancelys had called on Christina immediately on hearing of her being in town, but she and Desmond had been out, and though she returned the call, she did not take Desmond with her. Fond as she was of Mrs. Chancely, the element of curiosity which she discerned beneath her kindly interest in them set Christina on her guard. She wanted Desmond to meet people, but she could not tolerate the idea of his being regarded as a show even in the minor sense of being her husband. It would all be far easier, she told herself, after her mother had returned. Once she and Desmond had made friends, Christina felt there would be no more trouble for her. She had to take some little pains to satisfy her conscience, as to her wish to meet

her mother and introduce Desmond before arranging the more difficult matter of reintroducing her to Rudolph. She wanted the terms of friendship between Desmond and her mother sealed before the new element could distract Rachel's attention.

The only other friend who called on them was Lady Losford, who sent word of her intention, and found them both in. She confided her impressions of Desmond to Vallory afterwards: "Plenty of breeding and too much conscience."

Christina went to lunch with her, but she could not persuade Desmond to go. In spite of the sparseness of her social engagements, Christina found plenty to do. She shopped and wandered into quaint, unvisited museums with Desmond, or without him, and spent a great deal of her spare time with her father. Since her first interview with him Rudolph's whole manner to her had changed. He talked to her of Desmond with kindness and, if he was amused at her serious maternal care of her husband, he did not betray it. He asked what they did, and how Desmond spent his time, and once procured for her a book that she had vainly tried to purchase for her husband. He forgot his axiom anent good advice, and gave much that was serviceable both then and after, concerning the masculine manner of looking at things. Only once did he refer to the near future, and then he had remarked carelessly that he had an invitation to visit the Tourmals in Paris.

Because of his kindness and apparent unconcern about the immediate future, Christina never felt sure of him. There was an uneasy suspicion in her mind that he meant to evade the meeting, and every time she arrived at Number 5 Montly Street, and was told that he was at home, she felt a heart-beat of relief. She managed to see him nearly every day for a few minutes; he was always to be found at his rooms about

three o'clock, she discovered. It was an hour that was particularly convenient for her, though she did not connect the two facts together.

Desmond seldom cared to go out in the afternoon, and he never asked her where she went, so she was under no necessity of making excuses. Indeed, if Desmond had questioned her, she would have relinquished her visits in spite of her anxiety, rather than deliberately deceive him. Perhaps her preoccupation over her father blinded her to Desmond's curious and studied disregard of her comings and goings. To her inexperience and to that spirit of personal freedom which was part of her upbringing it seemed quite natural they should each pursue their own fancies without displaying curiosity or concern. She would tell Desmond any little incident of interest that had happened when they were apart, but it never struck her to give a detailed account of her movements, or to demand the same from him. If he were more distant and more silent than usual, she put it down to the new surroundings. Sometimes she wished she had managed things better for him, yet there was always that evening at Hampstead to remember. But in reality Desmond became daily more oblivious of the strain of his environment, and more keenly awake to some barrier between him and Christina which something, or someone, in this wilderness of London had interposed.

That seed of jealousy of the outstanding features of her life of which he knew nothing shot up with alarming rapidity here, in the seat of so many unshared incidents of former days. He became aware very quickly of her habit of going out about three o'clock, and of a very faint trace of anxiety in her manner which had disappeared when she returned. She had spoken more generally of her former friends, he had heard her mention names before strange to him, but he had never heard her mention the name that had

appeared on the letter he had seen on the writing-table at Strancebury Castle. Whoever "R. H. Massendon" might be, he could be no common friend of Christina and Sir Vallory, since there had not been the faintest mention of his name between them. Desmond hated himself for his startling, clear memory of that letter, but while at Strancebury he had honestly tried to put it away; here in London there was either overmuch time or too many suggestive happenings for him to resist the thought, and with that thought there was let loose in his soul a fear that grew with every step of his new-found liberty, the thought that Christina had married him from pity. It was as if she freed him from one bondage only to deliver him to another. Day by day, as his love for her grew from dim reverence to the passionate limits of human love of which he was capable, this fear had spread its choking tentacles over his mind. She had given him so much that he was ashamed to ask for more, ashamed to question her, ashamed to doubt her. He could give so little that it seemed to him he was cut off from all right to claim more of her than she had given, and in the mistiness of his imperfect mental sight, he did not see she had given all.

So daily between them a barrier rose, and Christina, absorbed in her struggles to keep touch with her father, remained unaware of what was actually happening. She did not even know that when she had gone out, he went out, too, generally to The Oratory, sometimes to Westminster Cathedral. He was always in before she returned, until one afternoon, when she had found Rudolph was out and no message left for her, she had come back quickly, the anxiety in her heart making strong headway against the principles in which she had been trained. She hoped to find a letter explaining her father's absence, but there was none. Desmond came downstairs as she was

enquiring, with a country woman's small appreciation of the posts, when the next delivery would be in; Desmond heard her and he noted her unusual look of perturbation at once. It cleared away as she saw him.

"Are you going out, Desmond?" she asked; "and may I come, too?"

Clearly the reason that had taken her out just before three as usual was unproductive to-day! Desmond, however, told her he was going to the Oratory and would be pleased if she would come, but his voice was a little chilling.

"I should love to. Is there anything special on?"

He told her "No," and added that he often went, and that he had made friends with the organist there, and sometimes had played the organ. It was then Christina realised there was some cloud between them. That anything which would afford him such great pleasure could have happened and she only know it now, troubled her. It was as if Desmond as well as her father had slipped out of her ken for the moment.

The organist was practising when they arrived, and Desmond left Christina sitting in a quiet side chapel while he went up to the organ loft. Presently Christina knew it was he playing, the music seemed to her strangely severe and austere, and out of place in the palatial splendour of that building. She had hoped that the place and music and opportunity for prayer would restore her broken confidence, but the atmosphere within or without only roused a sense of oppression and desire to push aside some intervening veil that had got between her and peace.

Desmond soon rejoined her, and as they were about to re-enter the hotel she stopped irresolutely on the steps.

"I didn't do all I wanted to just now," she said

slowly. "I think if you don't want me, I'll go and finish before tea."

He said he did not want her and asked if she would have a taxi.

When he had put her in he waited a second to see if she would tell him where to direct the driver to take her; it would have been more natural to ask her, yet he found it impossible to do so.

"I shan't be long," she said a little wistfully. "Tell him to drive to"—then she plainly hesitated—"to Montly Street," she concluded, and she looked so conscious and unhappy in saying it, that if Desmond had not been so wrapped up in his own misery, he would have noticed it, and jumped in and demanded to share her trouble at any cost.

As it was, he went back into the hotel with a maddening recollection that Montly Street was connected in his mind with the name "R. H. Massendon."

Rudolph had not returned. Christina went up to his rooms and left a note for him. Her instinct and reason both assured her she must leave the matter of the meeting as it was, or lose the chance of it altogether. He had said he would think of it. That bound him to nothing, yet Christina felt her chief hope lay in his refusal to discuss it at all. It would have been easy for him to refuse to see her, but turn the matter which way she would, there was no confidence for her, for he might merely be making the most of the last days he meant to allow her. It is doubtful, even if he had given her his word, if she would have taken it. He was a strong man and Desmond was a weak one, but she would have trusted the latter before the former. The most hopeful thought was that in three days more her mother would be there and the matter settled, and this worrying concealment done with.

When she got back she suggested Desmond should

take her to a theatre; they could have a box and come away early if it bored him, she said.

Desmond never remembered what the play was. He sat in the back of the box and watched Christina with aching eyes. He had just enough common sense left to know he was acting foolishly, and that there was no earthly reason why he should not ask her straight out who "R. H. Massendon" might be, instead of letting his mind be dragged towards a resolution that was neither wise nor dignified.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE most obtuse observer must have noticed the relief on Christina's face when she opened the only letter that awaited her on the breakfast table next morning. It was merely an off-hand line from her father saying he was sorry she had fatigued herself by calling twice that day, and that he would probably be in between three and four the next afternoon if she was in the neighbourhood of Montly Street.

Entirely unconscious of her own tell-tale countenance, Christina chatted cheerfully to Desmond, proposing various plans for the morning, none of which, contrary to his usual custom, did he seem inclined to accept. He had watched every changing feature of her face, and would have given much to hold out his hand for the letter which had cleared away her gravity of the previous moment. He told her rather hesitatingly that Parsons and Fretzens had asked him to see them that morning and that probably Henry Stressborn would be there.

Christina was profoundly interested at once, whereupon he said he was not certain he was going.

She laughed and paused behind his chair a moment with her hands on his shoulders.

"You mustn't be stand-offish, dear," she said. "We haven't got so many relations that we can afford to ignore them."

"You have plenty, haven't you?" he asked mechanically.

"Very few. There was Aunt Esther and some very distant cousins of my mother's."

"Sir Vallory," he suggested.

"Yes, Sir Vallory."

The little pause was pregnant with meaning for him, but she said nothing else. He pushed back his chair sharply and rose.

"When shall we go?"

"There's no need for you to waste the morning in a dingy office," he returned.

"But I do so want to see him."

"Who? Parsons?"

"No, you goose, your cousin."

"It's a pleasure that will keep."

"Well, if he is nice, will you bring him back to lunch?"

"I could promise safely on that condition," he answered drily, "but he wouldn't come. There isn't the remotest chance of it."

"You are not very complimentary, sir," she returned, laughing. "Now I feel sure he is as anxious to see me as I am to see him."

Finally, at Desmond's suggestion it was settled she should go to lunch with Mrs. Chancely, and that they should meet again at the hotel about three o'clock. She telephoned to Mrs. Chancely to say she was coming, drove to Parsons's office with Desmond, and then returned to Regent's Park, too amazed to find herself acting on his suggestion instead of him on hers, to trouble about his unusual indifference to her presence. She was indeed pleased that he should wish to transact the business without her. It seemed a sign that her experiment had not been made entirely in vain.

It was quite pleasant to be in the gay, cheerful house in Regent's Park again. Mrs. Chancely petted and made much of Christina, and searched her face with motherly solicitude for token of her exchanged estate just as Rudolph had done, and found none.

"Now guess who is coming to luncheon," she said, when she had persuaded Christina to set aside custom and take off her hat. ("I never can bear people sitting down to meals as if they had just dropped in casually," Mrs. Chancely remarked; "and I've known people go upstairs to put their hats on for lunch as if they were aids to digestion.")

"Who is coming?" Christina asked, without the remotest idea of the coming shock.

"Mr. Tennent. I wired to him the moment I got your message. You used to be such friends and I thought he would like to meet you again. We don't see much of him now, though Walter was dining with him last night."

Christina continued to pat her hair into shape with shaking hands. Luckily Mrs. Chancely had plenty to talk about and did not notice her agitation.

How could he, oh, how could he have placed them both in such an awkward situation? She was half angry, half amused, and very puzzled. He must be very sure of her, or did it mean something she would not for the world have it mean? — that he had seized this way and opportunity to meet her where they had first met, in order to end where they had begun. She followed Mrs. Chancely downstairs with a beating heart. Mr. Tennent had arrived meantime and was in the drawing-room.

"I shall want a new introduction," he said pleasantly, as he rose to greet them. "I could not miss the opportunity of meeting Mrs. Stressborn. It was kind of you, Mrs. Chancely."

His cool audacity and his perfect ease were irresistible. Christina answered with a demure shyness that was by no means feigned, and then tried to punish him by devoting her attention to Walter Chancely, who came in five minutes later. Still Mr. Tennent sat next to her at lunch and was assiduous in his

efforts to talk to her and amuse her in befitting manner.

“If you remember — which is hardly likely — the first time we met I prophesied you would not long leave Paradise for our dull world, Mrs. Stressborn, but surely you need not have retreated to the wilds of Yorkshire?”

“My memory is good enough to recollect being told Yorkshire was a county heaps of people went to, to shoot and do horrid things of that kind.”

“Isn't it? Surely you fish?”

Christina laughed. She had told him long ago of Desmond's passion for the fishing boats.

“We don't fish in your way,” she declared a little defiantly. “You would not like it at all, it means real work and men's livings.”

She turned her attention to Mr. Chancely, who plied her with questions of the neighbourhood of Fremly, and was shocked to find she knew so little about it.

Presently she heard Mr. Tennent remarking to his hostess that one of the disadvantages of the country was that one always knew who one was going to meet, while in town there was a delightful uncertainty about it.

“Is that really an advantage?” Christina questioned with a suspicious tilt of her chin.

“Certainly, what can be more advantageous than the unexpected for those who have wit enough to use it?”

“I think the unexpected is generally disconcerting.”

“You libel your own wit. Will you be long in town, Mrs. Stressborn?”

Mrs. Chancely here interposed to ask what day Mrs. Massendon would arrive, so Christina answered both questions together.

"She arrives on Friday and we go to meet her, and then come straight back to London."

"Oh, I thought you would go straight to Torrens," Mrs. Chancely remarked with some surprise.

"We wish to meet some friends in London first."

Christina looked steadily at Mr. Tennent as she spoke.

He sighed.

"That's the worst of ending a voyage, there are always such a lot of tiresome things someone thinks we must do at once. Do be merciful to your mother, Mrs. Stressborn, and remember London will not run away."

"But People might!" Christina returned quite calmly. "Remember you told me once you liked to be free to go off at a day's notice."

"You mustn't judge the world by me. It's not every one who can wander at will, you know; and I call a day's notice quite a lengthy preparation."

"Are you thinking of going away?" Mrs. Chancely asked him, rather mystified.

Christina broke her roll into little pieces and stared at her plate. He was so slow in answering that her courage was strained to breaking point. Was he prompted by sheer love of mischief or did he not realise her extreme tension? She got little satisfaction from his answer.

"I shall be going away soon, though I have not settled the day yet. It's the great charm of being a free man to know that one need never settle a day."

"But you may cause other people something more than inconvenience."

Christina spoke low and her voice was not quite steady. He looked at her with an odd little smile and then his face changed. He had not realised she was taking it so hardly.

"I don't think, Mrs. Stressborn, that any one who

knew me would allow themselves to be put to the slightest inconvenience for me. I never pledge myself to be anywhere or go anywhere, until I am sure it's what I mean to do."

Christina wondered not without reason if he had taken the trouble to accept Mrs. Chancely's sudden invitation on purpose to say this to her, when she could not urge her own wishes on him. His capacity to hurt her and his casualness about it roused her anger with him, and he knew it. He gave her ample opportunity to give it play against his own wit, but Christina steadily refused to grant him even this concession and treated him with a dignified politeness that caused him the most exquisite enjoyment.

Yet as they lingered in the drawing-room after lunch, taking the coffee Mabel dispensed with her new air of impressiveness, Christina could not keep her eyes off her father, and they were after all wistful eyes. She felt how much he could do for her, how completely she could trust him, if he would but let her. She felt vaguely injured by this deception he was making her practise. Except for that one thing it was pleasantly familiar to be sitting here in the gay drawing-room listening to Mrs. Chancely's rather rambling, kindly comments on life, and even Mr. Chancely's fatuous manner was less trying than of old.

Nevertheless, she took her leave as soon as she could, wondering if Mr. Tennent meant to accompany her.

But he said good-bye to her under Mrs. Chancely's very nose, so to speak, remarked how pleasant it had been to meet her again, and hoped for a repetition of that pleasure in the future, all in the most obviously correct style.

When he left, about five minutes after she had gone, he walked and walked fast, and possibly could not have told why his feet led him through certain streets

and squares — Manchester Square — unless it was that Christina had told him her husband had a house there he could not let.

Desmond had not returned when Christina got back. She pulled a long rocking-chair to the window and awaited him rather anxiously. Something within her groped and fretted for shelter from the "tangleation" of events that seemed to have gathered round her. She wanted Desmond to soothe her and make light of the things that troubled her. She did not remember that at least half her worries were solely on his account, because the Desmond to which her mind turned was the Desmond of her vision, and he would have shared any one's burden and never known it was a burden.

It was about half an hour after she had entered that Desmond came back. She just turned her head to greet him with a smile and then sprang to her feet.

His face was set and hard and curiously flushed, and the look in his eyes was bad to see. He walked across the room and sat down on the sofa staring before him, and he took no notice of her at all.

She sat down by him and touched his hair with a little caressing gesture.

"Desmond, what is wrong? What has happened?"

Her touch more than her words seemed to rouse him and he looked at her curiously.

"I knew," he said at last, in a thick, dull voice, "I knew that I should meet him if I came to this damned town."

She slipped her hand into his, strong and ready to help again in the power of her love.

"When I left Parsons's — I had had a bad time there, Henry was — well, I wanted to walk, I think I must have gone miles —" He paused, remember-

ing in a detached sort of way that he had meant originally to go down Montly Street. "—I went to Manchester Square — we had spoken of the house — it was just outside of it — I met him face to face."

He gave no name or other explanation, but Christina understood. The strange fear he had of meeting the man, who at least had given him the last push towards ruin, might be morbid, but it was horribly real to her at last.

Desmond suddenly rose, pushing her hand away, and walked up and down the room talking vaguely, sometimes to her directly, sometimes to himself.

"I thought he was going to speak to me — and then — he walked on. . . . He's in London now, I always felt it — I may meet him any day. . . . If he looks at me again like that — as if he meant — *pity* — I should kill him!"

His voice never altered its dull, monotonous note and he did not look at her.

"It was a mistake coming. I must go back — one never gets out — he would be there whatever road I tried, to see I didn't get away — Hate is one of the deadly sins, you know. It's choking me, I can't ever get free from that!"

Again he walked up and down, up and down, and his mind took another turn.

"I told him I could not get the money, that he would not get it either even if he did write to them. Would he? I wish you would tell me." He stopped, gazing at Christina with unseeing eyes.

"He said he was going away, that's why he must have the money. Would he have got it if he had written? That is what I can never learn now — I meant to tell Jackson —"

She got him to sit down again at last, and presently her quiet, cheerful voice had effect, for he evidently made a great effort and pulled himself together, say-

ing he feared he had made a fool of himself, but he'd had rather a shock. She persuaded him to lie down and try to sleep, and he said he would. She sat by him till the grey dusk of the spring evening had settled down, and little twinkling lights shone through the trees in the Park.

She thought he slept, and with a little sigh of relief tried to bring her mind to the solving of her own next step.

She felt the situation was far beyond her, for she had no standard by which to measure the rationalism of Desmond's attitude. She thought of Sir Vallory, but Hampstead was a long way off. There remained her father. He would both know and understand, at all events he could advise her.

Desmond had not moved, he must be asleep. She could do no more for him without advice. It was dreadful to feel how her old faith and confidence in her own intuition had gone, for the time only perhaps, but, nevertheless, gone. She got up very softly and went to the writing-table.

"Dear, I am going out for a little time. I will come back in half an hour. I hope you will not wake, but in case you do be sure I shall not be long."

This she wrote and this she put where Desmond must see it if he woke, and then she went out closing the door quietly behind her.

But Desmond had not been asleep. He had been aware of every movement and though he lay still for a few minutes after she had gone, his mind played dully with the reason of her going, and what she had written.

He had wanted to speak to her before she went and had failed. What was there to say that was not futile, weak, and incomprehensible? He wanted her, and

yet her presence had been like a reproach to him. He rebelled against her pity, as against the thought he had given her the right to exercise it.

Still he wanted her. He sat up suddenly and caught the paper she had left; there was just light enough for him to read it.

Why did she want to go out? It seemed to him there was imperative need to ask her that, and he went swiftly down to the hall with the paper still in his hand. She had not started yet, she was standing in the vestibule waiting for her taxi, which drew up as Desmond pushed open the swing doors and went out. If she had looked round she must have seen him close behind her, but it was just beginning to rain and she looked out at the sky instead. The porter opened an umbrella.

"Tell him to drive to 5, Montly Street," she said clearly, and went down the steps. Desmond, not three paces from her, heard the words as clearly as the man to whom they were addressed heard them; he stood quite still for a moment, and then turned back slowly and blundered into a big man coming out. Desmond apologised politely. The man looked after him curiously. Going upstairs he passed a lady who remarked to her friend in the hall: "Did you see that man? — he looks as if he had had bad news."

The two sat in the hall talking a little while, and then Desmond passed them again and went out, rejecting the offer of the porter to call him a taxi, though he stopped at the first row he came to and took one, telling the man to drive to Montly Street.

In the dim confusion of his mind Desmond struggled with the idea that he was doing something foolish and irrational, indeed he hardly knew what it was he meant to do or expected to happen. The previous event of the day shrunk back into the remoter shad-

ows, and all he really understood was that Christina was his, and that his fear and hatred for someone in his past was transferred to someone in her life — that life of hers in which he had no share.

That was the ground-work of his jealous fever, but on it he raised a superstructure of impossibilities that had no connexion with any sane belief or judgment, mere wild nightmares of suggestion that never clearly showed their faces. He stopped the taxi at the end of Montly Street and got out, though the rain was coming down in earnest now.

It was proof of his mental unbalance that when the door was opened he asked mechanically if Mrs. Stressborn was there.

It happened that Mrs. Swanmore herself in the temporary absence of the waiter had answered the door, and she replied, smiling, that Mrs. Stressborn had just come, and did he want to see her? and who should she say?

But Desmond put her aside and went on towards the stairs. She hurried after him, panting and expostulating, and he heard her call out:

“Mr. Tennent, Mr. Tennent, there’s someone coming up!”

He stopped and caught the banisters in his hand and tried to shake off the confusion that was on him; then he saw a door opposite and opened it. The shaded lights were lit and, sitting by the fire with her back to him was Christina, and on the arm of her chair sat a man and she was leaning against him, and he had his arm round her.

This man turned quickly as Desmond opened the door and faced him, and Desmond saw it was the same man whom he had met two hours previously in Manchester Square.

CHAPTER XXXVII

DESMOND gave a queer little choking laugh and shut the door behind him.

Christina and Rudolph both started up, and the latter caught Christina to him and held her with her face hidden against his shoulder. He would not let her see Desmond for the moment.

"It's all right, Christina," he said quietly. "I expected something like this would happen. Desmond, sit down and pull yourself together a bit."

His eyes, hard and set like steel, were all that held Desmond still there at the doorway, with working hands and a face chalky white, and suddenly lined and old.

Christina made an ineffectual struggle to free herself, but her father held her tightly. He thought Desmond was for the time out of his mind.

"What made you come here?" he asked steadily. "Did you know she was my daughter?"

In the curious pause it seemed as if something snapped. Very slowly the dreadful tension on Desmond's face relaxed. He groped blindly for a chair and sat down, panting a little.

Rudolph set Christina free and she ran to her husband and knelt by him.

"Dear, what has happened? Did you want me? Oh, I ought not to have left you."

But he pushed her back from him and his eyes were still fixed on Rudolph.

"Christina is your daughter?"

There was a queer metallic note in his voice that she had never heard before, and it frightened her.

"She has that misfortune," Rudolph assured him drily. "If it interests you to know, I deserted her mother nineteen years ago. I did not quite conform to her standard, you see."

He walked across to the sideboard, dashed some brandy into a glass with a modicum of water added to it, and brought it to Desmond.

"You had better drink this," he said curtly, "you hardly want to be laid up on my hands, I suppose." He pushed the glass towards Desmond, who did not even see it. He was still looking from one to the other with strange, burning eyes.

It was as if some little, thin, internal tongue of flame was running through every fibre of his being, leaving a trail of fire behind it, that in a few moments would break out into visible blaze. Christina again leant towards him.

"Come away, my dear. I will tell you all there is to know, when we're alone."

He got up sharply and jerked his hands from her and again gave the queer, horrible, little laugh.

"Father!" cried Christina, springing to her feet with a terrible fear on her. "What does it mean? Make him understand!"

"It means," said Rudolph coldly, "that your husband would much rather you were not my daughter. He doesn't like me—he's no reason to." Again he pushed the glass nearer Desmond. "You'd better drink. You see now why I could not stop and speak to you in Manchester Square, it was taking a little too much advantage of you,—even for me. Oh, it's the devil of a mess, isn't it?"

He dared not look at Christina now. It had come to him suddenly that Desmond was not the only person who had had a shock. He spoke to her with his eyes on the other, and his voice was thin and sharp.

"You'll appreciate my desire you should hold your tongue now, Christina. I meant to vanish before this could come out. However, you will both have plenty of time to hate me together."

Desmond stood between them, gripping the edge of the table with his hands. The little flame was spreading, covering more and more ground. The thin shell that still hid it from view was hot to breaking point, then it would burst up towards heaven.

But Christina, mute with the aching pain of her own discovery, was blind and saw nothing of that gathering conflagration. She only felt the whole question too cruel to face then and there, and her feminine instinct of self-preservation prompted her to turn to the side issue.

"Why did you follow me, Desmond?"

He spoke then, haltingly and incoherently, still making valiant efforts to hold back the fire within. His hands as they gripped the table grew white.

"I came — because I wanted to know who R. H. Massendon was — I suppose I was jealous of him — of everything about you that was not mine — you wrote to him. Perhaps he wrote to you, but you never mentioned him. . . . I don't know why you call him Massendon when his name is Tennent — anyhow it's tremendously economical for me — I might have gone on hating two people all my life instead of one.

"I've always been afraid you married me for pity," he added drearily, "but now I suppose it was partly for — his sake — to put right —"

She cried out at that.

"Desmond, are you mad? I didn't even know — you must believe me!"

Rudolph swore audibly. He had a maddening, childish desire to run away.

"Oh, damn it all!" he exclaimed. "Take the girl

away and settle it yourselves! You can both of you curse me at your leisure!"

Then the flame broke out. Desmond turned on him, and it was as if a hand had wiped out every veil between his naked soul and the man he faced. His white hot passion quivered and flashed across his face. All the pent-up torture of those long years of suppression was as tinder to the newly kindled fire of fierce resentment struck from his naturally passionate nature. The words poured from him in a torrent, stumbling and sliding over each other in very urgency of utterance, and the listeners were held silent, almost abashed before him.

"Curse you? I've spent nine years of my life doing that, and still all that's worth having is yours and the dregs are mine! I'd better curse the weakness that has no remedy but a curse! Do you know there was a time when you were a sort of idol to me — when I looked to you to rid me of the miserable fear of men which was mine since a child? You have done it at last! I can't fear any more now. Do you remember," he went on rapidly, and Rudolph gave a very slight gesture of protest which he did not heed, "I asked you once, because you had been my friend, to give me quarter — time — and you threatened to rob me of my honour amongst men? Then when I had stripped myself of honour, of self-respect, and pride, you took the money and despised me! Oh, don't trouble to deny it!" Rudolph had made the shadow of a movement, but from now he kept silence. "No doubt you said to your friends, 'Poor devil!' but in what serves for a heart you said — 'You fool!' I knew it, and in those sickening years the worst torture was to grow accustomed to the thought of you, and feel I had no spirit to be angry. It was the measure of my own wretchedness — knowing you at the root of my evil — and now that I have found some-

thing that was good in life, you are there, too — at the root of it! There's nothing you have not poisoned!"

Twice Christina tried to stop him and twice Rudolph detained her.

"Let him speak — it's fair!" he muttered.

It is doubtful if she heard, but his touch seemed to link her in some cruel, subtle way to him, so that she stood there condemned with her father by the very man she had tried so hard to save! It was at Christina Desmond looked now, and the anguish in his voice made her cover her face.

"When I had nothing but endurance left — she came to me as our Mother of sorrows herself might have come; she gave me her friendship, her pity, and I could bear it — she gave me some love with it — God grant you grace for that, my darling!" He flung out his arm to her and then turned back to Rudolph, and as quickly his voice changed: "And now you set your claim there, you rob me of that! Oh, God in heaven, it is too much! Never to see her again without seeing *you* in her, to take her as your gift — and forgive you! Am I to fall to that? Would I take food and drink from you if I were dying, and shall I take my heart's happiness?"

"Desmond, Desmond!" she cried, with desperate insistence. "Listen to me — nothing has altered really — I am still — I — I belong to you!"

He pulled her to him, his wild eyes blazing into her unflinching ones with a look that drove into the inmost recesses of her being, but she neither faltered nor feared, nor raised the phantom of a barrier to his gaze. She felt him trembling, and saw the big drops that hung from his forehead, and she clung closer and whispered.

"Take me away, dear! Let us go!"

"Yes, together, my love," he muttered, and turned with her to the door.

There he stopped and looked back.

Rudolph was standing still looking after them and his face was turned in the same direction hers had been.

Desmond's whole self seemed to stiffen as he looked, for he was suddenly aware of a dreadful thing. That similarity that had been Rachel's secret joy stood clear before his eyes. All the sorrow that had struck Christina seemed to have touched only those lines that lent her her likeness to her father, so that the two faces — hers, broken with love and grief; his, so hard and mask-like, — were yet alike. Block out the soul animating each, and the two were plainly from the same mould, a subtle mystery once seen, never to be unseen. And Desmond, seeing, was filled with horror.

"I can't face that!" he cried with sharp anguish. "Let me go, for God's sake! — the likeness!"

He flung Christina back from him, sprang to the door, and they heard his feet on the stairs and then the front door clanged to.

The sound seemed to wake them.

"Oh, he's gone!" cried Christina, regaining her balance. "He mustn't go alone! Let me out!"

She was struggling to open the door, but the lock was caught, and her hands seemed useless.

Rudolph, who had rushed to the window, came and pulled her away and deposited her in a chair.

"Stay there!" he commanded. "You can't go, it would be a hundred times worse than my going now. I'll see what's up, but you need not fear. A man who can slam a door like that is safe enough —"

But she held him back a moment, struggling to read her own intuition to know what must be done. Then,

just as once in the past, she had known she must go to Desmond, so now with sharp agony, she knew she must stay away, and she loosed her father and put her hands over her face.

"Don't let him see you," she pleaded, and then he was gone.

She looked up and found herself alone in the same chair where, about fifteen minutes ago, she had been telling her father of Desmond's unhappy encounter in Manchester Square that afternoon.

Rudolph, whose light tones had been taken solely to allay Christina's fears, ran downstairs and out into the street without delay.

The street was deserted from end to end, no sign of any one but a solitary policeman, who was advancing from the far end. Rudolph did not think it possible for Desmond to have got out of sight in the time and he knew he had gone in this direction because he had seen as much from the window. He first passed the policeman, and then turned back and stopped him to ask if he had seen a gentleman take a taxi or cab in the last two minutes.

The policeman shook his head.

"There had been no vehicle in the street for the last quarter of an hour," he said. Then he looked dubiously back in the direction in which he had come, as one loth to interfere in other people's concerns.

A gentleman who had seemed in a hurry had stopped by Dr. Burnett's door, there at the end of the road, and Dr. Burnett was just going in, and had taken him with him. He—the policeman—was just passing as they went in. He thought the gentleman looked ill.

Rudolph slid some money into his hand.

"Dr. Burnett is a newcomer, is he not?" he asked.

and learnt he was of five months' standing only in that neighbourhood.

"A kind gentleman, they say," the policeman admitted cautiously.

Rudolph went back into his own house, gave Mrs. Swanmore an order, and then walked quickly down the street, and knocked at the door of Number 41.

He was kept waiting some little time and when at last a stiff, middle-aged woman opened the door, she did it unwillingly.

The doctor was in, she thought he was engaged, if he liked to wait.

Rudolph stepped inside while she was speaking. The hall was very plainly furnished and very well lit. He was taken into what was evidently a waiting-room, although, contrary to the usual rule, it was a room in which it would be easy instead of hard to wait patiently. There were two comfortable sofas and many easy chairs, and by each a little table with some books and papers. The walls were covered with a soft blue paper and there were only two pictures: one of a splendid nude figure of a youth stretching out eager hands to a rising sun, the other a picture of an eastern Rabbi seated on a bare hillside watching the approach of a group of anxious, nervous people. The Rabbi's face was kind, but also there was an expression of patient tolerance in it that struck one as pathetic.

Rudolph was examining it when the door opened and the doctor came in. The two men looked at each other with obvious interest.

Rudolph was forced to speak first, the doctor making no attempt to do so or to offer apologies for his delay in appearing.

"How is he?" demanded Rudolph, without the slightest preamble.

"Recovering. I conclude he has had a shock and his heart is not very strong."

"Yes, he has had a shock," Rudolph repeated rather grimly.

"Shall I tell him you are here?" asked the doctor, seeing no other remark was offered.

"Not unless you want him to have another attack. Still his wife wished to know how he was."

"Is his wife at hand, Mr. Massendon?"

Rudolph started sharply.

"My name is Tennent," he returned sharply, and gave the other a searching look.

Dr. Burnett bowed and then repeated his question.

"Mrs. Stressborn is at my rooms, at Number 5 — she is my daughter," he added in an off-hand way, with a tinge of antagonism in his voice.

"Does she wish to come?"

"She had better not! there has been a misunderstanding — he is not himself — it will be best if he gets right before he sees her, but she is frightened."

"She need not be — Stressborn, I think you said?"

Rudolph nodded.

"Tell Mrs. Stressborn he is better, she need not be anxious, he will be all right presently."

"If you can persuade him to go back to the Hotel Alexandra, I will send her back there later on — unless you send in to say you want her, or that he won't go."

His casual voice, and persistent indifference to the feelings of the man most concerned, failed to anger the doctor as it would most men. After they had said a few more words Rudolph asked leave to write a note. He was left to do this, then having done it, went away.

"He must be fairly upset himself to stick to that casual air," murmured the doctor, as he went back to

his patient. "He does not alter in the least, just the same as he was as a boy."

For a little while Christina had sat still in the chair, her nerves all on tension, listening intently, half expecting them both to return, and the whole horrible jumble of events to melt as a bad dream. Strangely enough it was not Desmond's physical welfare that troubled her, it seemed to have slipped her consciousness that that was endangered, either by reason of his long immunity to the old heart trouble, or because the greater mental trouble loomed so large in her horizon. It was sharp agony to her to obey her own intuition to keep from him, yet obey it she did, endeavouring to impress on her mind the central fact that all would be well with Desmond and her, if she could keep her faith and obedience to the law in which she had been trained.

Presently Mrs. Swanmore came in with the tea which Rudolph had come back to order. She drank it mechanically and then unable to fight off her restlessness any longer, went to the window and looked out at the now dusky street. It was quite quiet and deserted.

The fact was indisputable that it was her father whom Desmond had such good reason to hate. She, too, had hated this man whose name she had never heard. . . . She stood up and looked into the glass, for the recollection of Desmond's face as he saw the likeness to her father in her was the most horribly vivid point in all the cruel happenings. . . . Yes, the likeness was quite plain even to her. . . . She understood with exact intuition how little Desmond could bear to have that reminder before him at present.

That little addition of limitation to time was the thing that kept her passably calm. For, of course, this was not the end for them, it was just a bad

place — a very bad place — the crossing of which was full of peril, and they must needs cross separately, lest the ground gave way beneath them — still, they would cross. Even if Desmond's attitude was allowed as natural to his temperament' and training, still it was not in accordance with the law of love which she had been taught to regard as the law of life. . . .

Then quite sharply it struck her Desmond might be ill!

She sprang to her feet and ran downstairs and flung open the door.

Still nothing but the empty street. . . .

She forced herself to return to her vigil upstairs, but she could think connectedly no longer; it needed all her power to keep this new panic at bay and not to rush out into the street again, seeking for him.

Then Mrs. Swanmore brought up a note, which she tore open with trembling hands.

Desmond is all right. He got a little faint and a doctor at the end of the street here took him in and is looking after him. But there is no point in your going to see him yet. They will go back to the hotel directly; you had better wait where you are for the present, and go when they have gone. No need to worry, the doctor says. I will be in very soon. R. M.

With this assurance, such as it was, she had to be contented; it served to distract her thoughts from her own affairs to her father's again. How did she feel with regard to him? Christina saw clearly enough the adjustment of Desmond's troubles was not more hers because her father was in a great degree responsible for them. It was hers because of the surety of her vision of Desmond as set free from them. Moreover, try as she would, she still failed to connect her father with this man who had wronged Desmond,

In the sorrow and pity that filled her heart, there seemed no room for the poor weed of resentment to flourish; such resentment would have to fall back on herself for she and her father—and consequently her mother—were linked together as surely as she was linked to Desmond.

Her mother! The tears Christina could not shed for herself came to her now at the thought of that old sorrow her mother had lived through—and conquered! She felt she had never realised before what it meant to feel helpless before some cruel event. She had meant to heal that sorrow. She must do so still, it would be surprising selfishness to let her own troubles stand between her and that achievement of which she had dreamed.

Such thoughts travelled through her mind behind the aching anxiety that was concerned only with the immediate present. At last her father returned.

“You got my note?” he said casually.

She told him “yes,” and questions leapt to her lips to find utterance only in her eyes.

He gave her such particulars as would assure her that in any case Desmond was in good hands.

“Burnett, or whatever the man’s name is,” he added, “said he would send in to you if you were wanted, or if Desmond won’t go back to the hotel. So you had better stay here quietly a bit, if you can put up with it.”

He went and helped himself to a whisky and soda with an air of complete indifference, yet his hand was shaking and for nothing would he have looked at her.

Christina did not say anything. She was thinking of her own inability to occupy herself solely with Desmond and her own affairs.

“You had better leave him alone a bit,” Rudolph said, with sudden decision. “Wait till he asks for you.”

She nodded.

"It will be all right, I expect, but you can settle it all with Vallory."

"I think he is away, and anyhow I can't see him to-night," she returned rather forlornly. Sir Vallory did sound a comforting idea just then.

He looked at her rather oddly.

"I expect he will be down to see you to-night. He came back to-day. I sent him word to the Club you'd want him."

"You sent him word?" she gasped, sitting upright, and gazing at him with amazement.

Rudolph frowned and drank his whisky at one draught.

"You have a confounded way of making one break one's oaths," he grumbled. "I telephoned. Someone has to see you through this. I daresay he will be charmed to find you have found me out."

Christina did not reply this time because she was engaged in trying to see just what was the worth of this thing he had done for her, from his own standpoint.

"You can go back as soon as you like and be quit forever of your disreputable acquaintances," he added, in his most offhand way.

She shook her head.

"If you are meaning yourself, I can't," she told him gravely. "How should I face my mother on Friday if I had to tell her I have known you for nearly two years, and got to love you and then let you go—just as she came back."

"Poof! Don't tell her any such nonsense! I thought you had more sense."

"You mean, then," said Christina, staring into the fire and speaking very slowly; "you mean that I am not to get anything out of all this—trouble, that I have deceived Desmond and made him jealous, ar

that I have practically risked his life and his faith in me, and added to his unhappiness, and that we have gone through this dreadful evening for nothing?"

There was incredulous wonder in her voice which held him silent. He would not be forced to look at matters from such a standpoint, but he was sorry for her.

"You have been very good about sending for Sir Vallory. I do appreciate it, but still that's not why all these things happened."

She looked up at him steadily and he tried to avoid her eyes.

"I only ask you to see her. Haven't I paid for that, and made Desmond pay, too? Is it all for nothing? What is it you are afraid of?"

That told. He flushed and his eyes had a curious glint in them; at last he turned rather fiercely on her.

"Well, if you must know—I am afraid of her forgiveness—but since you hint so neatly I am a coward, I'll see her—when she's here in London. It means nothing, you understand, and she won't thank you; still you shall have what you think you have paid for."

"Thank you!" she said in the same quiet way, though her eyes were full of tears. "You will never be able to hurt me again now!"

She looked up at him and held out her hands, but he would not take them.

"Don't commit yourself," he warned her with a short laugh. "Allow me the poor virtue of taking no advantage of you to-day!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE doctor sat by the bedside watching his now sleeping patient with a curiously intent expression. From time to time his eyes wandered to the photograph of Christina that stood propped up against the mantelpiece. He had arranged the solitary candle he had allowed himself in place of the electric light, so that its shaded rays fell on the photograph. In his mind the doctor reviewed judicially the very scanty information he had gathered from the man who had half stumbled against him, as he was entering the door of his house at the end of Montly Street. It was obvious that he was labouring under some overwhelming emotion, the excitement of which was ebbing away and with it his strength. The dazed expression, the blue lips and halting breath had spoken for him. Dr. Burnett had slid his arm round him.

“Come inside,” he said quietly. “I am a doctor, perhaps I can help you.”

Desmond had made no resistance. The fictitious strength which had carried him so far was spent; moreover, this man's voice seemed strangely reassuring. He remembered afterwards going up the steps into a plain, bare hall, which seemed to melt into a dimly lit room, with the doctor coming and going. But he had no clear idea of what he told him, the good Samaritan asked very little and had seemed to understand with great ease. He understood, for example, that Mr. Stressborn had no friends in town and that he was staying at the Alexandra Hotel with his wife, that something had happened — some shock

of emotion and that he feared to see her again, and therefore would not return to the Hotel.

Nevertheless, two hours afterwards he did return there in Dr. Burnett's company.

"Put all questions of decisions out of your head till you have slept," the doctor had told him with kindly firmness. "No one shall come near you without your consent, I give you my word."

Desmond had trusted him like a child.

"You will stay yourself — you will not leave me?" he begged, and the doctor promised.

Desmond submitted to being put to bed, but protested against a sleeping draught. The doctor agreed and got him to sleep by methods of his own, and now he sat waiting there till the man who had interrupted his first ministrations to Desmond Stressborn should fulfil his promise, and send back the original of that photograph that faced him.

It had been no great surprise to him to find it there. He had known her new name was Stressborn and it seemed to him only natural that of all the thousand units of medical practitioners in London he should happen to be the one called to help this man. Presently he would meet her again, and by no action of his own taking. Line by line he recalled the face of the girl whom he had met twice in his life and which yet lived with him night and day and was part of his very life.

He must tell her, of course, that though he was a full-fledged doctor with innumerable letters after his name, still he was a man who worked on his own lines and was "out of the pale" in the estimation of his fellow-workers. It would not trouble her, he knew, and was glad, for he believed he could help her husband. . . . What was it that had happened?

She was Rudolph Massendon's daughter! Strange ground from which to raise such possibilities of spirit-

ual perfection. . . . Would he find her expanded and deepened by the life to which he had helped to send her on that summer evening, some nine months ago? Or would he find her stepped down from her own heritage of divine perception, the better to give help to the man who needed her?

Desmond moved restlessly. Burnett rose and bent over him and touched his head lightly, and by and by he lay quiet again.

At last there came a low tap at the door. He stood still a moment, almost as if he were gathering courage to answer it, and then he went out, carefully closing the door behind him.

Christina was awaiting him in the passage, and she had questioned him before she had recognised him.

"You!" she cried. And the relief in her face was good to see.

She led the way straight to the sitting-room.

"I told you if you had real need of me I should be there," he said. "Mr. Stressborn's better. He should be all right in the morning — in body, that is. Can I help you? He will be quite safe for a few minutes." This he added because he saw her glance wander to the door.

She led the way straight to the sitting-room. In the light there she looked white and childlike, and she sat down wearily.

He remained standing opposite her.

"Let me tell you what I do know," he said; "and then you can fill in the gaps if you wish. You are Rudolph Massendon's daughter, and I expect you have not known that very long. Also I suspect your husband doesn't like your father. I gathered that on our way."

"Did *he* tell you — my father?" she asked wonderingly.

He shook his head.

"That you were his daughter — yes, he said his name was Tennent. He did not recognise me, but I remember him very well. He and Sir Vallory were often with Lady Losford when they were younger. My father was Lord Losford's coachman — my brother is with Lady Losford now."

He watched quietly and she looked up at him with a puzzled air.

"But you?" she questioned.

"I had a turn for learning and got passed on to the secondary schools — and then scholarships — such things happen, you know. Do you remember the evening on the Heath?"

She nodded.

"You sent me to Desmond?"

"Are you sorry?"

He smiled as he asked it.

"I am glad every day of my life."

There was a little pause. He would have been ill pleased with any other answer, yet his face was a little wistful.

Presently she remembered some explanations were due from herself; she gave them in a few words.

"He learnt suddenly that my father, whom he did not know to exist, was the same man who had once injured him, and seeing us together — I had gone to Montly Street to see my father — he — Desmond — thought there was a likeness. I am afraid there is — he does not want to see me just now till he forgets —"

Her attempt to meet his gaze and smile was rather piteous.

"That will pass in time," he said very quietly and steadily. "You know it, don't you?"

She said, "yes."

"I have promised him to stay here to-night."

"Thank you."

The clock on the mantelpiece began striking ten in a hurried manner; they both waited till it had stopped.

Then she told him what had actually happened.

"What shipwreck there might be if you were not strong," was his comment.

"I am not strong—I am very weak and tired," she protested.

"You are going to bed now and to sleep. You will know he is safe, I shall not leave him."

The next twenty-four hours were like a dream to Christina, in which only half her being was concerned. The other half was engaged in keeping grip of her assured faith in the ultimate outcome of the position.

Desmond had awakened better in body, but he had steadily refused to see her, and nothing would move him from his determination to return to Strancebury that day. He accepted David Burnett's offer of escort without demur, and he wrote Christina a pathetic letter, begging her forgiveness and patience in what he was doing.

"I know I am utterly unreasonable, but I am not mad now," he wrote. "Don't judge of me by your own high standard, but I cannot take from you what I have done. I want to keep all that has been ours unspoilt, if I can. Perhaps some day when I have learnt to forgive, I shall be able to see things again like other people."

Neither Sir Vallory nor David made any attempt to urge her one way or another. They could not have prevented her seeing Desmond if she were so determined, and it is even doubtful if Sir Vallory would not have backed her wishes, but Christina had no such intention. She wrote to him in reply:

"Whenever you want me I am ready," she said, "and you will send some day, for hate does not last

and love does. Forgive me if you can for deceiving you — it was for my mother's sake."

She stood at the window with dry eyes watching the cab depart with him and David Burnett, but her face was very white and strained when she turned back to Sir Vallory, who mentally underlined another score against his brother.

He listened to all she had to say, but he refused to discuss Rudolph with her, except with regard to her mother, when he was obliged to know her intentions.

"I suppose you mean them to meet?" he asked.

She said, "Yes," that her father had promised that.

"Understand, for myself, I would not lift a finger to bring that meeting about, but I do not dare to prevent your doing it, or I should have stopped you before."

"You did know, then? He was right, I did not believe it."

Sir Vallory looked at her curiously.

"Your mother sets higher store on my virtues as a guardian than you, then."

His voice was a little dry.

She was at last aware of his care for her, and of an affection in her life of which she had been almost unconscious, and she held out her hands to him with dim self-reproach.

"You have been so good, and I — such a trouble! I wish I had not to hurt you now."

"I am quite used to being Number Two," he told her in the same dry tone. And Christina knew now, it was her father who had ever taken the first place with respect to others besides herself.

They were to go down to Southampton together to meet her mother, and to return to these rooms, and all future plans were to await Rachel's convenience.

"You can have her to yourself all the way up to

town," he told her. "But I want to dine with you that evening."

He looked rather straight at Christina, who read his desire for one evening with Rachel before his brother came between them.

"You will not let it separate you, even if anything comes of the meeting?" she asked wistfully.

"I've a great sympathy with Desmond," was his rather grim reply.

They went down to Southampton together the next day, and on the way Sir Vallory told her all he could remember about David Burnett. His father had been coachman in the Losford family, and was an old and valued servant. He had married the daughter of a Methodist preacher.

"I believe she was an uncommon woman," said Sir Vallory. "David was the eldest son and he had been rather remarkable as a child. He must be older than he looks. I remember he used to be brought up to the house—a little sunny-haired chap who feared nothing and who wasn't a bit spoilt, but had an odd, assured manner of getting his own way. He took to learning like a duck to water and had a faculty for getting more information out of one sentence in his lesson books than most boys out of a volume. That," continued Sir Vallory in a contemplative fashion, "is a gift which is very little understood. Some have it, others haven't. Those who have would be educated if they were thrown on a desert island with only an A, B, C. It's as if information merely jogged their memories. Probably it's a combination of intuition, imagination, and a power of self-projection. Well, this boy had it in a fantastic degree—His father has a little farm near Bashford now, and I think his brother still drives Emily. He's probably driven you scores of times."

He dropped back into contemplation again.

"Burnett tells me," he said presently, "that he studied in Paris and has been half over Europe. Some old doctor he worked with left him a small competence. What an amazing person he is to look at!"

Christina agreed thoughtfully in rather a surprised way. She had entirely forgotten this aspect of David Burnett, who represented for her an epitome of all her belief and faith as manifested in a strong man.

They reached Southampton a good hour before the boat was expected, and there was the usual dreary wait by the dingy wharf in company with other expectant watchers. They wandered about the empty, deserted sheds and watched the setting out of a scanty refreshment stall. They lingered by the great dry dock and gazed at the crippled monster within, that looked forlornly helpless under the indignity of its situation. At the end of the nearest jetty a little group of people gazed expectantly down the glittering, winking reaches of Southampton Water, on watch for the red funnels of the R. M. S. *The Tweed* to show between the grey row of discarded Union liners tugging painfully at their bonds in the rising tide.

She came at last, a slow-moving dark bulk on the dancing waters, in through the narrow way to the side of the wharf.

Rachel was there among the rest, a thin, grey-clad figure waving to them. They were in the train presently, in the carriage reserved for them, and Sir Valory had gone to seek the solace of a "smoker," after informing inattentive ears that a tea-basket would be brought them at Basingstoke. He joined them again at Waterloo and saw that Rachel had been told everything.

"You will dine with us to-night?" she asked, in that gentle, sincere voice he had missed so greatly for two years.

He promised that readily.

After dinner Rachel sent Christina away quite frankly.

"I want to talk to Vallory," she said, "and you promised to unpack for me."

After all, when they were alone, it appeared as if they had little to say.

"She has told you all there is to know, I expect?" he began, and then stopped reflectively. "Rachel, do you remember how you beguiled me into charge of her, saying she would be no trouble?"

"I have not called you to account yet," she replied with a faint smile.

"Are you going to call me? I ask you to put it to my credit that I did not interfere between them?"

He was not speaking of Desmond. She held out her hands to him.

"I thank you with all my heart for that! Let my affairs rest, tell me about these children—Desmond?"

He sat down opposite her.

"Which first?"

"Desmond," she repeated.

He nodded.

"I am in the position of the looker-on who sees more than he is suspected of seeing," he told her with gentle satire. "I think Desmond's attitude quite natural, you know, and I respect him a good deal the more for having sufficient force of character to hold to his own opinion. A man who can hate so well can love well, too."

"Is it hate?" she asked quietly.

"What else?"

"Fear?"

It was a suggestion only, but he frowned.

"Isn't hate always mixed up with fear? A man

fears for his pride, his freedom, his sense of justice. It's pride with a mixture of all three with Desmond, but chiefly pride."

She rested her chin on her hand and listened attentively.

"You dear saints of the earth don't always realise that's what's essential to a man on the level of Desmond and myself." He paused almost imperceptibly and Rachel's eyes grew very soft and tender.

"What's essential is that they should care vitally about something in themselves. I take it as a thoroughly healthy sign that Desmond's pride can be so deeply hurt that he can resent it like this—even to sacrificing his love. I think, Rachel, that what Christina has done, and done well, is to give him back his pride."

He paused.

Rachel's eyes were on the fire.

"I see," she said thoughtfully; "that's useful. Thank you, Vallory;—and Christina?"

"Ah, there you have already the advantage of me—you have been with her at least seven hours. What can I add?"

"You think Desmond does love her?"

She looked at him quite steadily now and he met her gaze.

"Too much for his own intentions, Rachel. Give him time. I think he does not understand her kind of love. Perhaps I should not myself."

"We are back again at Desmond," she remarked with a little smile.

"I told you Christina was beyond me."

CHAPTER XXXIX

“NO, I will not go up. Take up my card to Mrs. Stressborn as I told you,” insisted Rudolph sharply to the bebuttoned page.

But Christina was coming down the stairs and was by his side before the boy could start.

“Oh, Father!”

“You said eleven, I believe?” was Rudolph’s greeting, in a particularly unfriendly tone.

“And it’s ten minutes past,” she returned, shaking her head; “the longest ten minutes I have ever known.”

“You can blame the police. I don’t regulate the traffic in Bond Street.”

“Come upstairs.”

But he paused even then.

“I hoped you had thought better of it,” he complained.

“No, you did not, you would never forgive me if I were to refuse to let you go up now,” she said, slipping her arm in his.

“No man likes to be made a fool,” he answered curtly. “I can’t help you making mistakes.”

He followed her with every endeavour to maintain an expression of bored reluctance. Just at the door of the sitting-room she stopped, as if she meant to say something, and then thought better of it.

“Here he is, dearest,” she said, opening the door. “And he says it was a block in Bond Street that made him late.”

She stood looking from one to the other with shin-

ing eyes, smiling at them encouragingly, and went out, closing the door.

Rudolph hesitated a minute and then walked across the room towards Rachel, talking as he went.

"You'll exonerate me from all blame in this, I hope, Rachel. It's entirely Christina's fault—one of her whims! And apparently she always gets her own way!"

Rachel, who had risen, sat down again, trembling a little, and he stopped opposite her, leaning on the back of a high chair. Now and again he looked at her with a swift, scrutinising glance, but he avoided her direct gaze.

"Christina's whims have generally some sense in them. Don't you like her?" She schooled her voice to calmness with an effort.

"Christina? Yes."

"But you think her spoilt?"

"I think her adorable and—" he added with a simplicity quite unusual, "I am glad of a chance of thanking you for letting me know her."

"She gave you my message?"

"I believe so." He stood upright and turned to the mantelpiece. "I am glad to think you have her."

"I have not got her now," Rachel said rather wistfully.

Rudolph just raised his eyebrows.

"It would seem so. Christina has not much reason to congratulate herself for her introduction to me, I'm afraid, though by the by," he added reflectively, "I did that myself. So you need not feel responsible."

Since he was not looking at her now Rachel could let her hungry eyes take their fill. It did not seem to her he had altered much, so time tricks those with whom he moves in line. Certainly the hard lines on

his face were more set — they had only been possible shadows before — and his hair was splashed with grey on the temples.

If only she might go up and put her arms round him and claim him, how easy it would be. But Christina had warned her she must be careful and that if she showed any feeling he would probably go. So she sat still and tried to keep her restless fingers quiet.

“It’s been a hard two years for you, Rachel,” he remarked, with a palpable attempt to make conversation. “I hope you were able to do something for your sister.”

“She died very peacefully; I do not grudge the time, Rudolph.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

Again, after another little pause, he went on.

“I hope you don’t think I am to blame for Christina’s marriage, I might have stopped it, but I hardly felt justified in interfering. Now, of course, I see I was mistaken.”

“I am not sure,” she answered thoughtfully, with returning confidence. “It can’t be a mistake if they love each other, can it?”

“You think not? I think that might be the greatest mistake of all.”

The faint tinge of bitterness in his voice fed her new-found confidence.

Suddenly he turned and faced her.

“Rachel, you were not justified in deceiving the child.”

“Deceiving her? But I have not done so.”

“The message — you mentioned it just now — she believed it. It was preposterous to let her think it was any fault of yours.”

“But it was,” said Rachel quite simply, and tea came to her eyes.

“It’s not arguable between us.”

He walked across the room and looked out of the window.

She sat with bent head and the tears that had gathered dropped slowly on her clasped hands. He hated women to cry, and she hoped he would not see.

Rudolph was behind her now and could look at her as he chose without fear of meeting her eyes—that was if he wanted to. Her hair was far too grey for her years, he decided, not knowing it had grown no greyer in the last eighteen years. He was vaguely vexed that Christina did not resemble her more—Well, it was no use looking, though he would have liked to see again that curious little mystified smile that used to reward his occasionally cryptic speeches to her. Anyhow he had kept his word to Christina, and could go.

“As I said before, Christina has a great faculty for getting her own way, and I hope you won’t mind her having carried out this idea of hers, Rachel—on the whole I’m glad we’ve met—and if things come right with Desmond, I don’t know that he is to be pitied—you’ll be so good to him.”

He was standing by her chair now and his hands were shaking a little, though his voice was so calmly steady. He wanted desperately to be gone.

“Good-bye, Rachel, I’m sorry if it’s upset you and reminded you—of—it wasn’t my seeking—I’m going.”

“Rudolph, my dearest!”

Her arms reached his, holding him, dragging him to her, he tried not to see her, but still slowly, as if overpowered by a greater will than his own, he yielded, knelt by her side and laid his head on her shoulder like a child seeking forgiveness.

“Rachel!” he whispered, with a little gasp. “I surrender!”

CHAPTER XL

THE three of them went down to Torrens together as soon as David Burnett returned from Yorkshire — which he did in three days — and had given his account to Christina.

“Mr. Stressborn is much better. Indeed, I think he will not be ill that way again. I know that’s contrary to usage, but time will prove — but you must still give him time. It will all come right, you know.”

He watched her half-averted face anxiously, and put his hand on hers.

“Can’t you trust?” he asked in a low voice.

“Yes.” She turned to him and smiled. “It’s only that patience is a hard virtue sometimes, but I do believe you.”

It was easy to believe the man who echoed her own belief, but it was oddly satisfactory.

They decided to postpone any announcement of the news of Rudolph’s return till after they were established at Torrens. Sir Vallory, of course, knew, and he wrote Rachel a letter which she kept to herself. It was a strange journey to Wiltshire. Rudolph met them at the station, and from his unembarrassed demeanour, one might have thought it had been his daily habit for the last twenty years to escort his wife and daughter about.

Certainly what was usually a very tedious journey was well beguiled by his presence. He was entertaining and witty, but he devoted most of his attention to Christina, and before the journey was

over, she had nearly forgotten there was any element of strangeness in it. Rachel leant back in her seat and watched them with quiet, interested eyes.

They had to change stations at Salisbury and while Christina was engaged at the bookstall, Rudolph walked down the deserted platform with Rachel, and was silent and preoccupied until they reached the remote end, when he found his voice.

"At this eleventh hour, Rachel, are you sure you want me to come? It's quite easy for me to go back to town, you know, and give you longer time to think of it."

She answered him simply:

"I've thought of it for twenty years, my dear."

"But I shall have changed."

"So shall I."

"I shall only stay just as long as you want me."

"It's all I ask." She hesitated and then put her hand on his arm. "But I want you to understand you are quite free to go or come any time you like — only think of it as headquarters — home — and you are master there, please — I must ask you that."

"I believe I couldn't help being so," he returned ruefully. "It's the way I'm made."

"It's a way I like," she said simply.

Towards the end of the journey, however, Rudolph grew silent. It seemed to him preposterous that there should be no change in the hot, little station on the verge of the Plain. The horses and carriage that met them (Rachel had never ventured on a motor) had a most maddening resemblance to those he had chosen and bought for Rachel just after their marriage. The carriage was painted the same dark green he had selected in preference to the chocolate brown that had been distasteful to him. Even Kebbley, the station-master, looked very little different, it was merely the matter of whiter hair.

No word had been sent to Torrens of the changed state of affairs. Three arrivals had been expected and three arrivals had come. The footman who met them was a fairly new importation, and was quite unaware the tall, offhand gentleman with the "masterly" manner was not the expected Mr. Stressborn.

But when they went out to the carriage and Baverstock, the old coachman, turned to smile a welcome to his mistress, he started, and the smile stiffened on his lips.

"Good evening, Baverstock," said Rudolph casually. "I see you still favour roans—that young horse is a good one."

Baverstock murmured something in reply as they started. They reached Torrens safely, but it had little to do with the mental equilibrium of the coachman who was, as he told his "Missus" afterwards, "all of a tremble." Torrens stood in all its sleepy beauty aglow in the light of the setting sun. Its loveliness made Christina feel anew the sharp disappointment that Desmond was not there to see it with her. That disappointment itself was not softened by the realisation that for the first time in her life she was not first in her mother's thoughts. She was too generous by nature for the fact to grieve her, but it gave her an odd sense of isolation, and set her memory playing round the thought of that grimmer, barer home of hers in the North.

As they drove into the yew-encircled courtyard neither of the two women guessed that Rudolph would have given all he possessed to be in the train *en route* for London. He got out and helped them alight, but he kept his back turned to the door where stood Mrs. Winch, backed by a *possé* of maidservants, assembled to welcome their dearly loved mistress.

Rachel smiled on them.

"I am so glad to be home again," she said, "and I

thank you all for your welcome. I will see you all presently — Alice," she singled out a middle-aged maid who had been in the house since her fifteenth year; "Alice, will you take your Master's things to the blue room and unpack for him?"

Then she turned to Rudolph and put her hand on his arm, and drew him in.

"Mrs. Winch has not altered much, has she, Rudolph?" she said cheerfully.

The little group of maids scattered, the young ones curious and mystified, the older ones speechless with astonishment.

The three of them found themselves alone in the hall, and Rudolph looked round with something of the expression of a trapped animal.

"Good God! Does nothing ever change in this place?" he muttered, and Rachel, who heard him, came to his side.

"There is one change," she said, and her glance carried his to Christina, who stood looking out of the end window into the garden.

A very distinct expression of relief came to his face.

"Ah, yes, there's Christina!" he repeated and went across to her.

Rachel looked after him with her quiet, tolerant smile. She was not in the least bit hurt. She went away to interview Mrs. Winch.

"Whoever has had all those flower beds made near the house," grumbled Rudolph over Christina's shoulder.

"I did," she returned with defiance; "there were no flowers anywhere near, nothing but grass."

"There shouldn't be. Don't you know it's a Tudor house?"

She flung open the window and gave him a scornful glance.

"Smell the mignonette," she insisted. "If Tudor people had known how to garden, they would have had flowers there."

"You are a Goth, that turf's centuries old."

"I'm not saying it isn't, but there's too much of it. Come and see the terrace."

They went out together, Rudolph still grumbling.

About a quarter of an hour before the dinner gong sounded, Rudolph knocked at Rachel's door. She was still in a soft, silk wrapper, and she was doing her hair, which in spite of its greyness was yet long and abundant. She stood quite still and caught her breath. Then she laid down her brush — there was only one person who ever knocked on her door like that.

"Come in!" she called, and he entered.

It was ever Rudolph's way to plunge into deep water at once. He could not stand shivering on the brink and a gradual approach was equally impossible to him. He had come back here to Rachel and it was her wish he should come back on the old footing — then, as far as he was concerned, there must be no intermediary step, he must take it up where he left it off or leave it alone altogether.

Because it had been his use to come into her like this, at this hour, he did it now; and because it had been his use he went up to her and kissed her, and tried not to see the silver light in her hair.

"Make haste and put it up, you will be late," he told her.

That also was customary. Then he sat down in a big chair by the window just in reach of her dressing-table.

"Look here, Rachel, haven't you anything to say to your female servants about? Because, if so, for heaven's sake, let me send for a man. I must have some

to swear at! There was a boy at Mrs. Swanmore's who wasn't shaping badly. He'll do for the present. May I send for him?"

"My dear Rudolph, of course you may. Send for whom you like — and — and —" She looked at him with horror-struck eyes, "I am dreadfully afraid that there is no whisky! You see, we never take wine except on festivals. We will have champagne to-night — but whisky — what shall we do?"

"Have you and Mrs. Winch drunk it all then?" he demanded severely, with laughing eyes.

"All what?"

"All the whisky. There were dozens in the cellar."

Rachel laughed.

"Would it be good? You had better go and look with Mrs. Winch. She has the keys."

She had finished her hair now and stood gazing out of the window.

"It is lovely to be here again."

"It has points," he admitted. "I'll go and see Mrs. Winch."

He rose slowly and strolled towards the door. Then he paused and came back to her.

"How well you understand, Rachel — Don't think me such an unfeeling brute as I seem — go on understanding —"

He spoke with a great effort, playing with the trifles on her table the while. Then he went out and she heard him shouting for Mrs. Winch downstairs. Rachel went on understanding.

The days passed and it was amazing how soon the whole establishment accepted the altered state of affairs. Rudolph held his head high and assumed, without any apparent difficulty, the position Rachel had asked him to take. Christina could not help ob-

serving that he filled it with great ease, and that he was served with an alacrity and obeyed with a promptitude that proclaimed him master of the situation as well as of the house.

His relations with her, however, were on a different footing. He sought her company on every possible occasion, and it was she who accompanied him to the outlying corners of the estate, and she with whom he argued, whom he teased, and to whom he turned the instant some look or whisper of the old days fretted his greatly tried nerves. He seemed to find in Christina a reason and excuse for his former existence at Torrens, and with her by his side his position now was unassailable and he took every care to render it more so.

But with Rachel all things were different. Just at first Christina resented rather indignantly her father's quiet matter-of-fact assumption of his right to direct and even control her mother's movements and decisions, but she soon saw that this was a manner entirely reserved for public use and that, even then, the very quality of his voice altered when he spoke to his wife, that even in the most flagrant upsetting of the standing orders in her little kingdom, he treated Rachel with a fine deference and regard that was as natural to him as his obvious power of ruling. Christina did not know that this deference had been as clearly defined and as much a part of the old life as his "mastership" itself.

The element that was new and which underlay the whole of his plan of action was known only to Rachel and himself. Only when they were entirely alone did the new note of half-shamed homage and deference appear, and his very tenderness cloaked itself in an unspoken apology. To Rachel at first, in private, he submitted all those plans and changes he proposed

to carry out with such high-handed cheerfulness, and his eyes would speak to her when his lips gave denial to the very mainspring of his actions.

Neither Christina nor Rachel knew how often, when all slept, Rudolph would slip out of the quiet house, plunge through the embracing woods and come out on the open down, and walk for miles under the stars or lie on the dry thyme-scented turf and sleep like a child. Sometimes, on moonlight nights, he rode far and hard, and the next morning the groom he had imported for his own use would hurriedly brush down a horse, who had certainly not gone to bed in the condition he was found in the morning; but the groom held his tongue. Rudolph's servants as a rule were not talkative.

Such of the outside world as were entitled to hear of the change were duly informed by Rachel herself, and received the information with varying degrees of surprise according to their several temperaments. Probably the most profoundly affected was Mrs. Chancely who, poor lady, was so upset by it that for several days she did nothing but walk from room to room, recalling the curious condition of things that had actually occurred under her roof.

"It was I who asked him to dinner first and sent them in together," she murmured plaintively. "If I had only known."

"If you had known, the only difference would have been that Mr. Tennent — I suppose we must call him Mr. Massendon though — would not have come, so nothing would have happened," Mabel remonstrated calmly. "For my own part, I do not think Christina behaved well in deceiving us, though I suppose it is wrong to judge." Which, nevertheless, she continued to do with what she believed to be fine impartiality. Mabel was becoming very like her Aunt Marion. Lady Losford declared it was only what she expected.

would happen, which by the way was not at all true, though she genuinely thought so when she said it. Either her sense of humour was stronger, or her standard of moral rectitude lower than Mabel Chancely's, but certainly she chuckled quite gleefully over the idea that "that little fraud" had carried out her plan right under Sir Vallory's nose. She did not blame Christina in the least. "Rudolph could always get over a woman," she insisted, "no matter if she were eighty or eighteen."

Later on summer flamed across the Downs, and still Christina had heard no word from Desmond. She grew more silent and grave, and, if she still never failed to respond to a call on her natural gaiety from without, it was also clear it was far less spontaneous than of old.

She heard frequently from Miss Arethusa and occasionally from Dr. Consett, and once in a way from Father Maitland, who was supplying Father Mathews' place during a well-earned holiday. Christina derived a good deal of comfort from that fact, for it had been partly Desmond's own doing, and it was a healthy sign that he had no desire to slip back into the old dreary existence. The fact remained, however, that he neither wrote to her nor apparently mentioned her name, and Christina, in spite of her brave heart, felt at times that the world was rather a lonely, unsatisfactory place. She had one other consolation which perhaps helped her at this juncture of affairs as nothing else could have done, and that was the correspondence she carried on with David Burnett, and which in part prevented her from realising too acutely the inevitable little break between her mother and herself. Rachel was not aware of any such break. Her love for her child was as it had always been, complete and embracing. Rudolph had not usurped Christina's place in her heart, because Chr

tina had never taken his. That love had been new, entirely maternal, protecting, and responsible, but her love for Rudolph was of quite a different nature, and if the maternal element crept into it now and added a wistfulness to her eyes and a deeper patience with his moods, still at the back her love was the same, fierce and passionate and unspent.

It was Rudolph who saw the change in Christina and knew its cause. That accusing conscience, which was one of the penalties he paid for the altered condition of his life, reproached him whenever he caught sight of the shadowed face. He told himself it was merely that apart from her natural joyousness he had no use for her and his concern was purely selfish. But it was not.

One hot day he went out and found her in the hammock at one end of the grassy terraces for which the place was famous. She was trying in a desultory sort of way to write a letter. Rudolph flung himself on the grass beside her, and frowned because the shadow on her face had been so clear as he approached.

"This place is like the Palace of the Sleeping Beauty," he grumbled. "Don't you ever want to get away and feel you are alive?"

She regarded him languidly, but with interest. He looked very much alive indeed with his slim figure and that abounding sense of vitality that had redoubled itself in the simple, unexciting out-of-door life at Torrens.

"I have often wondered," she remarked meditatively and with considerable daring, "how it is you have been able to take it so well — and why you did?"

"I'll tell you," he returned with equal deliberation, and looking up at her with that side-long glint in his eyes that bid her beware of him, "I was desperately hard up — lodgings, food, and clothes, you know, cost a great deal — and my luck had deserted me. What

are three hundred a year to live on — for me? As it is," he flung out his arm airily, "this is much cheaper — if dull."

She answered gravely — It was certainly cheaper — for him! Then she demanded suddenly.

"Why do you do that? Of course I understand, but I might have believed you."

"Of course, you might."

"Supposing I had?"

"Then you would have believed also you had a worse specimen for a father than you had thought."

"And you wouldn't have minded me thinking it?"

"I hope I should have been polite enough not to let you see it, also," he added quietly; "you might have disliked me so much you would have gone away."

"Am I very much in your way here?"

He met her eyes frowningly and returned in a grumbling tone, "I have no use for a conscience."

"I am sorry," she tried to smile at him. "But these hot days — it's cool here, but at Strancebury there's hardly any shade — I wonder if Mrs. Gubbins has fixed up the 'tatties' again —" She broke off and bit her lip. He stretched out his hand and rocked her hammock.

"She's probably fixed them up, or he'd have sent for you. Haven't you found out that's what we men are like yet? And don't you think, Christina, he has had time enough to grow some common sense? What does Burnett say?"

He asked half seriously, half laughing. He could never bring himself to take David Burnett seriously.

"He says I shall know when I must move."

"Poof! Will you write to Desmond yourself, Christina?"

"No!"

She spoke with such deliberate intentness that he sat up and observed her closely.

"Do you mind telling me why?" he asked mildly.

"If I wrote to him or if I saw him, I could make him want me and I could go back — it would be my will and my wish, not his. Oh, don't you see that would be no good at all — he would behave so nicely — try not to let me see — but I should know. It would be as he said — all spoilt!"

"Saints and angels!" he ejaculated softly. "How wonderful you women are!"

He kept silence a few minutes and then remarked:

"Does your objection to Strancebury include the rest of Yorkshire?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Merely that I have been offered the loan of a house and some grouse shooting, and the use of a yacht for August. It would rather have waked one up, but unfortunately it's in Yorkshire."

"Why do you want to shoot grouse?"

"To eat," he told her solemnly, "and to prevent our neighbours shooting them." She realised he was laughing at her and knew it was no use to argue the matter.

"Oh, if it were merely a question of eating, we might rear you some here."

"I doubt it," he returned hastily. "But you needn't worry, I expect they'll fly too fast for me to hit them. It's Yorkshire that's the real point of issue."

He lay back on the grass again with his hat tilted over his eyes, but not so as to obscure his vision of Christina. She looked dreamily away into the shady woods. She loved every path, every tree, every familiar hollow, and every curve of those distant Downs, yet for days her heart had been sick for the bare cliffs and desolate coast of her northern home. If she could have been sure of herself she would have

urged a meeting with Desmond — but how could she meet him and leave him unbiassed?

It did not occur to her that her father had any ulterior purpose in this proposal of his. She had felt his restless spirit was longing for change and she told herself it would be great selfishness to stand in the way of what was evidently a congenial idea to him. . . . It could do Desmond no harm for her to be in the same county with him. . . . If she could only see someone who saw him and assure herself he was well. . . .

She told her father she had no objection to Yorkshire at all.

He offered no more explanations, but said he'd see what Rachel said.

He talked to Rachel that night about Christina, and she, poor soul, convicted in this one instance of blindness to her child's happiness, was overcome with contrition, so that he had work enough to comfort her before divulging as much of his plan of action as he chose to tell her.

His own theory was that if once these two exasperating people were within measurable distance of each other, either Nature would be too strong for them, or Rachel's Providence might condescend to make use of the opportunity he so obligingly offered. At all events it would be doing something. Nothing annoyed him so much as preposterous attempts to disguise one's real feelings. He considered it Christina's worst fault.

CHAPTER XLI

ON the cool side of Strancebury Head the clear, deep water lapped against the sheer cliff and gurgled in and out the half-submerged entrance to a little cave, that at high water would be completely hidden. Desmond and Father Maitland were seated somewhat perilously on a narrow ledge of rock that projected over this cave. They had got there by scrambling over the bare boulders that lay round the foot of the cliff and to these, by means of the boat now fastened behind the largest rock and out of their sight.

Desmond had a fishing line in his hand, the other end of which was garnished with strange tackle and stranger bait. Father Maitland was armed with a queerly shaped landing net on a long pole and he plainly did not know how to handle it. They both peered down into the brown water and now and again Desmond carefully moved the line.

"Water's a great magnifier," he whispered; "probably the chap's not bigger than the crayfish we had for breakfast this morning—if it isn't I'll talk to Hadley."

"He's a Methodist, so it won't be much good," remarked the other. "These rocks are hard, Stress-born."

"And hot!"

Desmond moved cautiously.

"Do you think it possible a lobster could catch a dog?"

"It would depend on the dog. An ill-conditioned,

ignorant little puppy like that was, would not stand much chance. What business the children had on the rocks I can't make out — there's no way off when the tide has turned."

"One could swim, I suppose?" Father Maitland sat up and looked out over the oily heaving sea and blinked. He was not accustomed to the glare yet.

"One could swim if one knew what to avoid — Chebble Race and the current that sets round the point! The trouble would be with an incoming tide, to get far enough out to clear the rock there; the water is sucked through a hole. Can't you hear it?"

They both listened. There was certainly a faint sound as of an indrawn breath from the spur of cliff that hid the shore of the North Bay from them.

"With an outgoing tide one would have to mind the Race," Desmond concluded, jerking his line. "There is something there." He bent over the water.

"Don't fall in!" muttered the other man nervously.

"I should be harder to digest than the puppy.— Look, there he is."

The line he held was being dragged back into the cave with great rapidity, then was quiet. Desmond dragged in his turn. The water broke into eddies as if disturbed in its depths. Desmond shifted his place and twisted the line round his hand.

"As soon as I shout, drop the net down in front of the cave," he directed excitedly, "and keep it there till I say 'Scoop!'"

Again he jerked his line and pulled. The dark shade in the depths was clear of the cave now. Desmond alternately loosed and tightened his line and sent it in dexterous coils down through the water, peering over intently.

"Now!" he shouted, and Father Maitland dropped the net in with a splash.

"Can you feel bottom?" panted Desmond — and then, "Scoop!"

Father Maitland scooped.

The net was suddenly so heavy it nearly slipped from his grasp, but Desmond caught at it, and between them they dragged it up to the surface of the water.

"Hadley told no lies," gasped Desmond. "Saints alive, what a monster!"

The gigantic lobster that was struggling in the meshes of line and net was truly enormous, and it was in an enormous rage. Its evil-looking claws flung themselves here and there, and its feelers thrust frantically through the wide meshes of the net.

"He'll break out in a minute," cried Desmond. "I must go in."

He slid off the ledge as he spoke, on to a submerged rock; the water was up to his knees, but he managed to get grip of the net and to hoist it on to the still dry rock behind him.

"It must be killed," he said, when he had scrambled up and Father Maitland had scrambled down, and they stood watching the clumsy, angry movements of the creature. "We'll let Hadley do it, if you don't mind rowing back with it as a passenger."

They went back to the boat, carrying the net gingerly between them. A barricade of such spare matter as the boat allowed was erected between the lobster and their feet, and they pushed off and rowed round to the South Bay.

"Why not the North Bay?" asked Father Maitland suddenly.

"Because it's bad landing, and Hadley's working round there. He's got first right to slaughter the brute — it was his puppy."

It was certainly an evil-looking thing and Hadley regarded it with sombre interest.

"Little better than a cannibal, I call it," he remarked.

"I don't think the puppy was even a distant cousin," Desmond told him. "But perhaps you know best. Anyhow, kill it — and, Hadley, there's no reason for children playing on those rocks even at low water. Tell your wife so."

The two men went up to the Castle quite satisfied but rather weary with their afternoon's sport. It was Father Maitland and not Desmond who found the path steep. Desmond looked well and sunburnt, and his eyes were bright and alert. There was no trace at all of that deliberateness of movement that once had so troubled Christina.

By the little open space below the north door, where Christina had sat one momentous morning to read her letters, Desmond paused.

"Let's sit here," he suggested. "It's so stuffy inside."

Father Maitland consented placidly. He was quite used to Desmond's determined avoidance of the house on every possible pretext, and equally used to the change that came over him directly the four walls of a room shut him in.

They lay on the bank and smoked. The gorse bush still flamed and scented the air as it had done when Christina sat there. There was very little shadow, what there was Father Maitland appropriated; Desmond preferred the sun. Out to sea the oily swell of the waves was broken by a long serpentine streak of bustling water that did more than dance in the sunlight.

"That's the Race," said Desmond, pointing. "It sets in off the edge of the Flats there — the ledge of half hidden rocks, like a reef — and then bends back round to Parley."

"I know about Parley," murmured the

“ ‘ Small fishing village six miles south of Strancebury Head. Population 378, of which some thirty are Catholics.’ ”

“ So many? ” said Desmond. “ I didn’t know that. It will be a bigger place than Fremly some day. It’s got a better offing. Why, there’s a yacht! ”

The unusual sight of a big sailing yacht came round the point.

Desmond, after looking at her, remarked:

“ That’s *The Amazon*. I suppose Wartoun let it after all. He’s abroad, I know. ”

“ How can you see that at this distance? ” sighed the priest. “ It’s as much as I can do to see it’s a boat. ”

Desmond leant back, but his eyes followed the yacht rather jealously.

“ One gets to know them, there are not so many yachts about here, you see — it’s not the *Solent*, ” he said meditatively. “ I always wanted one — by Jove, *how* I’ve wanted one! ”

“ Can’t you have it? ”

“ Out of the question. ”

His companion sat looking at him for some time in silence, and at last said:

“ May I say something, Stressborn? ”

“ It’s no use, ” Desmond answered hastily. “ Better not. ”

“ It would set my mind at rest. ”

“ Oh, well, if you must. ”

“ How long is this going on? ”

“ I don’t know. I can’t think of it. ”

There was a line of dogged resistance about Desmond’s mouth that would have caused Christina some surprise.

“ But you must think. You are doing wrong. ”

Desmond interposed.

“Am I talking to Father Maitland, my Director, or to Basil Maitland, my friend?”

“Can’t I be both?”

“Not for purposes of conversation. Otherwise — yes, as far as any man can be. I’ve told you before about this, but I will tell you once more, if you wish. Tennent injured me — and she righted me as far as she could — I don’t care whether she knew about him or not, it doesn’t seem to me to make any difference. She is his daughter. I thought I had not enough pride or self-respect left to resent anything, but I find I have, and such as it is won’t let me take anything from — his daughter. I believe she’d understand if they’d let her — and she has her mother and her own life and her friends. After all, she’s only known me twenty months — I did her wrong in marrying her, and it won’t make it less wrong to hold her to the life here and the consequences —”

Maitland gave a slight gesture of dissent, but he did not interrupt. There was something pitiful in these poor arguments that Desmond offered with such evident effort to be calm and logical.

He went on less deliberately, though, and his voice changed.

“There’s no quarrel between us — none at all, thank God! It’s all as it was. To me she is still —” He failed to complete this — “She cared for me and pitied me, that’s a kind of love, I think. I am not ungrateful.” There was bitterness in his tone, though, and then he burst suddenly into a passionate vehemence the other had not thought possible from him.

“Don’t you see, Maitland, that’s just the point. I could just bear pity from Christina, but not from Tennent’s daughter. If I give in, it means the loss of my solitary bit of self-respect. The worst side of

me doesn't want to keep it. It wants *her* here instead, every minute of time — and I think it's driving me mad. I can't see the way out. To sacrifice Christina to my pride? — Why, it's damnable — to sacrifice my last bit of pride to get my own happiness? — I don't know how, but I feel it's pulling her down — Oh, confound you, Maitland!" He sprang to his feet. "Why will you make me think of it all out here? Isn't it bad enough to have to meet it every time I go in?"

He turned aside with a curious little impatient gesture, and went up a tiny track hardly more than a goat path that wound into regions the other man had not explored.

Father Maitland continued to sit where he was, in meditation on the unexpectedness of human nature. He saw clearly enough that so long as Stressborn thought like this there was no doubt that he and his wife must remain apart, but there seemed no reason for not wishing he could be brought to see differently. For it was equally clear the time was coming when Desmond would have to think of it all, when the length of purposeless days would rise in ghastly procession before him, and he would find he had lost forever that attribute of resigned acceptance which had carried him through the past years. It had been a crutch that had made them possible to him and Christina had taken it away.

On the following day, as Desmond crunched across the pebbles on the Southern Bay, he met a stranger. It was a lady, tall and slight; she was dressed plainly in grey, that much was clear to see, also she was leaning on Porton's capstan; but what she was doing in the Bay at all it was harder to determine, or what she could find to interest her so profoundly in the fishing boats that were getting ready to go out. When Desmond passed her she was looking out to sea; the white

sails of a yacht — probably the same they had seen yesterday — were visible. Desmond concluded she must have driven over from Fremly or Parley, as she was quite a stranger to the immediate neighbourhood.

He lifted his hat as he passed her and would have gone on, but she stopped him.

“I wish you would tell me, are those boats going out or coming in?”

“They are just going out,” Desmond told her. “There’s a breeze outside and the fish are on the move.”

He spoke slowly and looked at her intently, and now he made no movement to go on.

“I know so little about the sea,” said the stranger. “But it fascinates me. I was thinking just now when you came up how full of life it is — not only the life that means a livelihood — the earth is like that, too — but it’s beautiful and furious, and restful and horrible, and it weeps and rages and sobs, and it laughs and is glad, and no one dare make a joke of it, any more than they dare joke about God.”

She spoke quite naturally. It was clearly the thought of her heart at that moment, it was creditable of Desmond to recognise as much. He increased the distance between them, but he did not take his eyes from her.

“No, one does not venture to joke about the sea,” he repeated mechanically — “not we who live by it.”

Then she seemed to awake to the situation and smiled at him in a pretty, apologetic manner.

“I hope you won’t mind my coming, Desmond,” she said. “Were you going out with the boats to-night?”

It was in his mind to say “Yes” and escape, but that seemed cowardly to him, so he told her “No.”

“I’m quite alone,” she said quickly, noting his apprehensive glance round. “They are sailing — that’s

the yacht." She nodded towards the sea. "We are staying at a place near Whitby for grouse shooting, and there's a yacht, too, and so till the twelfth they are amusing themselves by cruising round. Christina likes it, but I don't, and as they were going to be away at least three nights, it just struck me I might come over here. Christina doesn't know anything about it. Won't you shake hands?"

He offered his hand mechanically.

"You haven't much reason to be pleased to see me now," she said apologetically. "But I wanted to meet you so badly. It was a disappointment."

"The shortest way to the house is up the cliff path, if it's not too steep for you," he continued to say and she assured him it was not.

It was with very dire misgivings that Desmond led Rachel into the library, where the tatties again shed their softening influence on the strong sunlight streaming in through the windows.

He pushed back a chair for her out of a ray of blinding white light and tried to think of something to say, but could find nothing.

"You mustn't be vexed at my coming," said Rachel gently. "I have not come to talk about Christina nor to ask you to let her come back nor foolish things like that, but ever since I had your letter I have wanted to know you very badly, to be great friends and to have a son of my own. If I can't hope all that now, at least I thought we might still be friends, in a way."

"You are only too good," he stammered. "I should have thought you would not have wanted to have anything to do with me."

"Ah, but don't you see, I am so dreadfully sorry because it was so much my fault. It was done for me, you know. I am afraid Christina put me before you, she ought not to have done it, but she did not think she was doing wrong, I'm sure. Isn't it curious

how often people think because a thing is hard to do it must be right?"

"There doesn't seem to me to be any rule of right and wrong at all," Desmond told her bluntly. "What seems quite wrong to some people is likely to be quite right to others. Did you say you were staying at Datchet?"

"Yes, with Miss Consett. I wired to them from York."

"Did you drive over?"

"Dr. Consett drove me down to the Bay and he is going to call for me later on. Is that your organ? I hope you will not mind playing to me before I go, if it's not bothering you too much?"

She looked quite anxiously at him. Somehow Desmond knew she was in earnest about it, that she really did want to hear him play; indeed, in a little while he found that she was in earnest about everything, and that her interest in the place and himself was personal, and entirely independent of Christina.

Rachel, in fact, was quite incapable of pretending anything, as Rudolph had very well known when he made his remarkably cunning suggestions and left them to her to mature.

She herself explained her interest as the result of her not having much imagination.

"I cannot make pictures of anything as Christina does," she said. "And until now I had always seen whatever she had seen that was of any importance, so it makes me feel 'cut off from her.'"

She did not mention Rudolph, and Desmond never connected the idea of Mrs. Massendon with this enemy to his peace. Indeed, he was still too bewildered by her appearance to think of anything connectedly. He rang the bell and ordered tea, and sent a request to Father Maitland to attend.

That very mystified gentleman — for there had

been no opportunity of explaining matters — fell under Rachel's spell even more completely than Desmond did; her unexpectedness, her apparently irrelevant remarks that were never really irrelevant when one understood the drift of them, and her gentle, placid manner was so remote from their experience that she might almost have been a visitor from another world.

She told them of her life in that far-off land and of her voyage home; told odd, funny little stories against herself with delightful unconsciousness, but which enrolled both men as her acknowledged champions against the world.

It was not till Desmond rose to ring for tea to be removed that he brought himself to ask the question that had struggled for utterance all the time.

"I hope Christina is well?"

It was preposterous so simple a hope should be so difficult to state. Father Maitland looked at him in meditative surprise.

"Oh, yes," Rachel answered, and considered a moment. "I don't think Christina is ever otherwise than well, you know."

Her eyes sought Father Maitland's, and it was precisely as if she said to him unheard by Desmond, "Oh, the pity of all this!"

"I wonder," she remarked thoughtfully, "if Dr. Consett will wait for me down at the Bay or come up here? I am afraid I did not make it clear."

Again it was Father Maitland she addressed.

"I'll go down and see, and leave word if he's not there."

He did not bid her good-bye; he had every intention of seeing her again.

But when she and Desmond were once more alone there was a slight change in her face.

It was impossible for Rachel to be otherwise than

true to herself and she would not have Desmond think her visit was quite disconnected with Christina. It was Desmond, however, who gave her the opportunity of speaking frankly.

That pride of his, and the instinct for self-protection which made him swear over and over again to himself he would not ask anything concerning Christina, fought hard with the hunger in his heart; and the compromise he arrived at was what such compromises usually are, a mere revealing of the struggle itself.

"Perhaps you will like to see Christina's room?" he suggested. "There may be things she will want. Mrs. Gubbins will pack up anything you point out. I suppose she would write to her if she was actually wanting anything?"

He stammered through this sentence in no very creditable way.

Rachel shook her head.

"It is nice of you to think of it, but she does not want anything from here, I am sure. I think she would much rather be allowed to go on thinking she is just visiting us."

Desmond stood quite still, looking down at the carpet at his feet.

"My dear," said Rachel, with much tenderness in her voice, "it is always so much better to leave things time to settle themselves instead of forcing them on, for that generally means hurting someone. It seems to me a sign of weakness to want to bring matters to a head, as it is called. As if we could not trust God's way! But, Desmond," she went on more earnestly, "though I meant just what I said about not wanting to persuade you one way or another, still would it hurt you very much to tell me just how you feel about it all now, and what you want, if you know yet? It would help me to help her. She is quite well, but she is not very happy, Desmond," she sighed.

"Not happy?" he repeated sharply. "But she has you."

Rachel drooped her head.

"I'm afraid," she said in rather a low tone, "that I have been very selfish and taken up with my own happiness which she had given me. Forgive me, Desmond, I shall not forget again."

But he could find nothing to say to that at all. The full force of this new complication, of Rachel's happiness and its cause, suddenly became apparent to him and most unreasonably, considering the short time he had known her, filled him with dismay.

"That's partly why I came. I felt I could help her to be happy if I knew just how you felt now."

"How can I tell you," he muttered, "without hurting you?"

"Because I am Rudolph's wife?"

His face flushed under the tan and he looked away from her.

"It couldn't hurt me what you think of him. So many people have thought like that for the last twenty years, you see. But what one loves one understands — and makes allowances for others."

And Desmond sat by her side and told her.

In substance it was the same he had told Father Maitland, but it was also much more. He told her more plainly of the struggle still going on between his self-respect and his love, of his longing for her who had first opened the doors of his life to him again and yet of the conviction he could not accept her service and her pity any more — now.

"She wanted to make a man of me," he said, "and I think in a way she has succeeded. Only it happens to be just this way, you see. I've found myself, it's not much of a self, but it's all I have. Forgive me

if you can and make her understand — but don't think it's easy."

Rachel leant forward and laid her hand on his arm.

"My dear, you are very brave and you are right. As long as you feel you mind her being Rudolph's daughter, you must stay apart. We must all have patience. I had thought you might write to her, but it's best not — Only I wish you would be friends with me — you need not fear I will weaken your decision — if you will write to me — or —"

"I will — I will!" he cried. "Oh, you are wonderful, I don't mind your being his wife, I don't think I believe it!"

Rachel laughed softly.

"But I am, indeed I am, and I love him better than any one on earth. Still, it's not for his sake, no, nor quite for Christina's I want to be friends, but I liked you so much for your letter, and I did want" — she blushed quite prettily — "I did so want to pretend I had a son of my own."

When Dr. Consett called about an hour later he drove away again without Mrs. Massendon.

CHAPTER XLII

THE yacht swung lazily at her moorings and rolled in the long slow swell which passed on to flow with a heavy rush of water over the little wooden landing stage at Parley half a mile away.

A hammock, chairs, cushions, and books, were spread about under the awning on deck. Christina lay in the hammock, which certainly kept her on a level, though it threw the surrounding world into mad perspective, and it swung her violently from left to right with each roll. She was a good enough sailor in a general way and did not mind bad weather, but she certainly was not enjoying this dead calm and swell. Rudolph watched her with a faint smile.

"Would you like to go ashore, Christina?" he asked.

"I'm not enjoying this much," she owned frankly; whereupon her father laughed.

"Wake up, Burnett, and take her to Parley and show her the sights. I'll tell them to get the boat ready."

David Burnett, who was very far from being asleep and who was enjoying himself immensely, expressed his entire readiness.

"There's no reason," Rudolph remarked in a languid drawl, "why you should not take a carriage — if you can find one — and drive over to Datchet and call on those doctor people. They may have visitors, though."

"It's not very likely," said Christina lazily. She had made no effort to move seeing the boat was not yet ordered. "I'd like to see them."

He drew out a letter he had received that morning, tossed it dexterously to her and leant back watching her with half-shut eyes.

Christina glanced at it and then cried out:

“From mother? — at Datchet, why?”

At that moment a heavy, indiscriminating roll sent her straight out of the hammock on to the deck.

David and Rudolph both rushed to the rescue.

“I should like to go immensely,” were her first words as they picked her up and deposited her in a chair.

“You should say, ‘Thank you very much, kind gentlemen, for rescuing me,’” her father remarked severely.

“I’ll order the boat,” said Burnett, and walked away.

Rudolph stood smiling down at Christina.

“Tell me about it,” she demanded with a searching glance.

“There isn’t anything to tell. She seems to have got bored with her own company — though she assured me she would not — and to have hit on the brilliant idea of visiting her son-in-law. I know no more than that. Would you care to go to Datchet?”

Christina wavered. She told herself she had no business to entertain the idea, and then again that it could not possibly do harm. There was no likelihood of Desmond being there, but the Consetts might have seen him. She looked across at Strancebury again and realised that it was already an impossibility for her to leave that part of the world without going — nearer!

“I wonder if I ought?”

“Just as you like; I only thought you had had about enough of this — blessed calm — they say it is going to break.”

He looked out over the sea northwards. Christina looked, too, and then back over the land.

Strancebury Head stood out clearly; it was hard to tell where rock ended and building began. There did not seem to be a streak of shadow on the bare walls and cliff.

"Of the two I prefer Torrens in the summer," Rudolph murmured.

"In winter it's beaten with storms," she told him.

Burnett came up to say the boat was nearly ready, and Christina, with an obvious effort, rose and went cautiously down the companion to fetch a hat and other suitable attire.

"If she wants to stay at Datchet the night, we could pick her up at Fremly to-morrow," Rudolph said as the two men stood waiting by the boat. "It's going to change, but till it does this is poor work."

"I think," Burnett remarked thoughtfully, "that Mrs. Stressborn will not be sorry to get back to Whitby."

He nodded towards Strancebury as he spoke.

"Well, I did not order the calm, but it's just as well to give Providence a hint sometimes — and an opportunity."

David met his quizzical glance with an unruffled smile.

"I have not the least doubt the hint has its place in the plan, too," he returned.

They held on to the shrouds swinging to and fro with the movements of the yacht.

"Will you go to Strancebury?" demanded Rudolph suddenly.

"No, I am giving no hints, you see."

The other looked relieved.

"Oh, that's all right," he answered, with a careless laugh. "But it would be a pity if Stressborn thought it a put-up job."

"A great pity!" was the somewhat dry response.

Christina came up at that moment and they helped her into the boat.

"Perhaps your mother will join us at Fremly, too?" Rudolph suggested. "She ought to put in a day or so with the yacht."

"But why, if she does not like it?"

"It's such gross extravagance," he told her gravely.

"A house she finds dull, a moor she does not shoot, and a yacht she does not use at all — all, I veritably believe, to give her an excuse of paying a call!"

Christina looked troubled.

"I thought it was your friend," she began.

Rudolph laughed.

"Send word from the coastguard if you are not coming back to-night."

The boat pushed off.

"If Providence is so blind as not to take that hint," he thought, "it's a poorer sort of thing than Rachel thinks."

He stretched his arm and yawned wearily.

"Beastly weather!" he muttered.

The roll had subsided next morning and there was a gathering of clouds on the north, but the sea remained placid. The faint little breeze that sprang up carried them with some difficulty as far on the route to Fremly as Strancebury Head, and then dropped entirely, leaving them stranded and helpless for a while.

"It's just as well they stayed on shore," sighed Rudolph, and despatched a boat on the long row to Fremly to lay in stores, so that there might be no delay if the breeze sprang up and they wanted to go further that evening.

By twelve o'clock he was bored to extinction and decided he would take the dinghy and row over to the low shoal of flat rocks between Parley and Strance-

bury, to bathe there in the shadowed water, which somehow looked inviting in the heat.

The dinghy was lopping behind, ready enough for Rudolph's purpose. It did not strike him that there was no man in sight as he climbed down into it, or that he had not mentioned his purpose to any one. The men were at dinner, and the one who should have been keeping a lookout was intent on patching a shore-going boot.

Rudolph rowed slowly and reached the Flats without much trouble. As he got near he noticed he got into a current of dancing water which made rowing easy.

The Flats were a series of ledges that ran far out to sea between Parley Point and Strancebury Head, and they rose in step-like terraces as they neared the land. It was low tide now and the lowest terrace was uncovered. He fastened the boat to the rocks and proceeded to undress in a leisurely manner. He was a good swimmer and the water was refreshing, but he noticed a decided undertow. He could see the yacht about three-quarters of a mile off, and it struck him he had been silly to bring the boat, he might very well have swum there from the yacht. Certainly it was cooler and a breeze was rising. He fancied the streak of dancing water had widened.

There was no doubt about this breeze now and Rudolph swam back to the dinghy as quickly as he could, chuckling to think of the captain's wrath at being delayed in his start. He climbed into the boat and began to dress.

A cloud came over the sun, and the sea, which had been so blue, turned grey suddenly. On the yacht they were clearly getting ready to start. It then struck Rudolph he had not told any one he was going off her.

It would be awkward if they did start without him, and he hastened his dressing.

He reached over to pull out the stone to which he had fastened the boat. It was wedged securely in a wide crack in the rock, and pull as he would, he could not free it. He did not want to cut the rope, which was a new one, so he sprang ashore and scrambled over the seaweed-covered rocks till he could get at the crack.

Even then it was not easy and he dropped something out of his pocket as he pulled. Then it gave way rather suddenly and he narrowly escaped a fall. He put his foot on the rope as he bent to pick up his scattered possessions.

But as he stood up, the rope seemed to slip from under him like an eel, and he turned to see there was no boat!

In that moment the dancing water had caught it as a toy offered to it, swung it round, flung it here and there, rushed it along, and finally dashed it against a projecting rock, and shattered it.

Rudolph stood gazing after it in amazement rather than consternation. The thing had been so quick and unexpected, the movement of that dancing water had become so rapid and the width of it so great, also the tide was leaping over the ledge of rock on which he stood.

But at sea the yacht had spread her sails and was going well against the breeze.

Rudolph awoke to his position.

He had no boat, and even if he had his chances of catching up the yacht were infinitesimal, supposing even he could have crossed the Race, which was now tearing by at terrific speed.

They would miss him, and the dinghy, on the yacht eventually, but he remembered with no sense of com-

fort he had sent the only other boat to Fremly. Perhaps he could walk across the Flats to the shore. He turned his face landward with this intention and abandoned the almost hopeless and useless chance of signalling the yacht.

Rudolph found it anything but easy walking over the slippery ground. There were big fissures and cracks between the rocks covered with the long seaweed, and several times he nearly came to grief. He was a little relieved when he stood on the second terrace, which was some two feet higher than the first, and looked back and saw the yacht had put about. So they had missed him, he smiled a little grimly thinking how very little it mattered. Still he ought to make the shore before the tide came up. There was a small sailing boat in sight, and he lost some time waving to it. Then it passed from view. A few yards farther on he came to a stand and this time with undisguised dismay, for between him and the third terrace was a rushing river of water about thirty feet broad, that whirled and sucked at itself and broke into little whirlpools like a veritable mill-race.

This was the Dancing Water of Chebbly Race, which, starting at the southern end of the Flats, followed the edge of them till it came to this channel which it had, no doubt, cut for itself, and then turned sharply to the left, bent and doubled till it had encircled the outer ledge of Flats in an impassable ring. Just at the bend of the channel was the rock against which his boat had dashed itself to pieces, and from here he ceased to wonder at that event.

Where the Race eventually went to or how the tide affected it, did not concern Rudolph in the least. He recognised it was out of his power or that of any other man to cross it, and at the far end it seemed to fling itself against some jagged teeth of rock, and to loose itself again in its own wild origin.

Away on his right there was an upstanding fragment of stone some seven feet higher than the ledge on which he stood. It seemed to him remotely possible that this might not be covered at high water, especially as the tide was neap. It seemed at least worth trying. He clambered up on it and looked round. He could see from here, not only Strancebury Head, but Strancebury Bay itself — the southern one. Perhaps he could signal there. A few minutes' trial showed him this was impossible, for he could not distinguish even the boats on the beach, and what he had taken for people was evidently the pier or the end of the jetty.

Rudolph sat down on the driest spot he could find and took out his cigarette case. He had eight cigarettes. "It's a pity to waste them," he remarked. "I hope I shall have time to finish them all."

Opposite him Strancebury Head and the Castle on it stood out with straight, hard outline against the sky. There was no sign of the sailing boat, as he had vaguely hoped.

Rachel had a note in her hand as she stood looking across the courtyard at Desmond, who was superintending some simple repairs on the east wing. The freckled boy who had brought the note stood by nervously fingering the mixture of two wheels and some odd pieces of iron he called a bicycle.

"Go and ask Mr. Stressborn to come to me," said Rachel; "your bicycle will not come to harm. Lean it against the wall."

The boy obeyed and so did Desmond, who was by her side at once.

Rachel moved further into the shade out of hearing of the freckled youth.

"I have had a note from Datchet, Desmond — from Christina," she said anxiously. "I felt I ought

to tell you at once — that must have been the yacht we saw yesterday — Christina came ashore at Parley last night and went to the Consetts' thinking to find me there, for I wrote to Rudolph to Parley on the chance they would send for letters, and said I was going there for the night. I suppose he told her; I did not mean him to do that. This is to ask me if I will join her — I am not going," she added quickly. "Still, I thought I ought to tell you in case you should hear and think it was planned."

"I should never think that of you," he told her gravely.

"Well, will you see what she says?"

He hesitated and then put out his hand for the letter.

"My darling Mother," it ran. "I was so startled when father told me you were at Datchet that I tumbled out of the hammock. He suggested David and I should land at Parley and drive over and see you. We did that and found you not at all — not here but there! I am sure you have a very good reason for what you are doing, though I cannot understand it, and I hope you like Desmond very much. I am going to join the yacht again at Fremly this afternoon, if they can get there; David went on this morning. Father thought you would like to join us at Fremly and go back by sea. Will you come over to Datchet this afternoon and see me? I expect Desmond could send you. I hope he is well. I mustn't send my love, I suppose, but I do envy you. Has Mrs. Gubbins put up the tatties?"

CHRISTINA."

Rachel refrained from looking at him as he read, and he knew it and was grateful.

The temptation almost mastered him, and he handed the letter back to her without a word, though his hand shook.

They both stood silent awhile.

"There's her motor in the stable," he said at last.

"Would you like it to fetch her and take her on to Fremly from here?"

"Come here?"

"It would give her pleasure to see you here. I could go sailing, I had thought of it."

"But it would mean turning you out of your own house for half a day?"

"I am often away much longer. Besides, it is not Christina who turns me out. It's myself. I think I should like to feel she had been here again."

"May I tell her so?"

He hesitated and then nodded.

"And may I stay with you till Friday, Desmond?"

"Please, as long as you will."

"Then I'll write to her to come."

"I'll order the motor." He still paused. "Dr. Burnett, is he with them then?"

"Yes. Christina wished it. How helpful he is, Desmond."

"He makes one feel—strong," Desmond agreed.

He still hung on his steps.

"Tell her—" he began; "tell her—no, tell her nothing. If I haven't courage to meet her, I won't send a message. Good-bye, till the evening."

He went away abruptly, gave the necessary orders to the much underworked chauffeur, bade him ask for Mrs. Stressborn's thin motor coat, lingered awhile in the stable, and then went down the steep path to the sea.

There was a breeze now. He thought he would take out the little half rater. It would require some sailing if the wind stiffened.

The man who helped him remarked that the weather would harden and it was no tide for cockle shells.

He nodded, knowing that very well.

He steered out carefully between the buoys that marked the danger zone of the Race on the one hand

made a careful measurement of the rising tide, and regulated his smokes accordingly. He found it was not cheerful work waiting to be drowned, but that probably it was no worse than waiting to be hanged. He resisted very steadily every thought that turned landward, and to others. He felt chilled and rather sick, and he was wondering if after all he might not have got over the Flats and found a way out of the circle at the other end. Then he saw something moving in the water before him. It looked like a man's head, but, of course, that was preposterous. It came nearer and nearer, and he saw it was a man swimming with long, slow strokes, taking advantage of every wave and ripple, and evidently very much at home in the water.

Rudolph watched him with an interest in which his personal concern seemed to have no part. Presently the water was only up to the swimmer's waist and he stopped swimming, then it came up to his knees and he was under the rock.

"Give me a hand up," he said.

Rudolph bent down and helped him up. Obviously he was in the middle of a bad dream.

The clouds that had gathered had now dispersed, and the sky was again blue and clear. The wind had been too much for them, but the sea still ran high, mounting and mounting as if laughing at discomfited Pluvius.

The two men looked at each other strangely with vague distrust. Then Desmond spoke:

"How did you get here?"

"In the dinghy, which is no more. I had a swim and then the tide turned and the boat got away — that pretty water down there seemed to take a fancy to it, and broke it in pieces at the corner. Could I have got off at the far end?"

"No. You can swim, then?"

"Moderately well. Not through that," he indicated the Race. "How did you come? Is there a channel I might have found?"

He seemed terribly anxious to convince himself he had not sat there like a fool when a possible way of escape was open.

Desmond reassured him.

"No channel, unless you knew; about five men know it."

He sat down on the rock beside Rudolph.

"There is no hurry. It will be easier in a quarter of an hour's time."

"When did you see me?" asked the other curiously.

"About twenty minutes ago. I was out by the Bunny Buoy. I left the boat hitched up there, we must swim to it."

"Across that?" enquired Rudolph drily, indicating the Race.

"Through it — at the right point. It's back there. When you reach the edge of the ledge jump out and then fight to keep your head up the stream, and count thirty breaths; that should carry you to a little rock where one can get out of the Race, once one has grip of it."

"It sounds amusing. Will you smoke?"

"I am too wet, thank you."

They sat silent for a few minutes more, then Desmond remarked:

"You had better take off your boots and some clothes. It's about time to make a move."

Desmond stood up when he saw he was ready.

"I'll go first, follow as near as you can."

He repeated his directions precisely and clearly.

"Now!" he said, and stood poised at the edge of the rock and then plunged in.

It was not a pleasant swim across the Flats. It was shallow water and the waves — though small — were short and choppy, still it presented no real difficulties to good swimmers, and Desmond noted with thankfulness that Rudolph could swim rather more than moderately well, only he swam too fast as many fresh water swimmers do when in the sea. Presently they were in view of the rushing, encircling stream, and Desmond looked back and called out:

“This is the edge — remember! — Thirty!”

Rudolph was aware in some far distant point of consciousness realising it was stupendous nonsense to think of “besting” that current; there was a terrific noise in his ears and a sense of suffocation. At his thirty-second count he was dashed sideways against a sharp edge of rock, and then he felt a hand grasp his and something came in reach of his grip, and he held on literally for dear life.

The first thing he saw clearly was Desmond’s face quite near him white and anxious.

“I feared you had missed it,” he gasped. “It’s an ugly job, but we’re out of it. When you have your breath we can go on to the buoy.”

Rudolph thought it was strangely quiet, though he could see the great green waves rolling past them, and felt them carrying them up and down like floats. He did not realise that Desmond was shouting at him to make him hear at all, but he realised there was a dull pain in his side.

“The worst’s over now,” Desmond called out.

Rudolph nodded. He felt he was as little fit to encounter the second worst as to return the way they had come.

“Don’t try to go fast or make way,” he heard his companion say. “Just keep afloat and let the waves carry you on.”

Once more they gave themselves to the water. It

was a long swim over glassy, green mountains, down hollows that seemed to have no bottom, and there was nothing to mark their progress. Yet Desmond made for the buoy as surely as a fell man would make for his home across a moor. When they reached the boat Desmond helped Rudolph in with some difficulty, and both men sat on the floor of the cockle shell and struggled for breath.

Desmond crawled to the locker, hoping he might find some forgotten bottle of soda water left over from a picnic, or even his flask, which he had more than once left there; but there was nothing to find. Rudolph watched him wistfully.

"A drink would be good," he muttered.

"*Will* be good," corrected Desmond cheerfully. He had quite recovered his breath, but he did not like the look of Rudolph at all. Perhaps his face said as much, for Rudolph made a great effort and sat up.

"What next?" he asked, with a little gasp, and instinctively his hand went to his side and he caught it back, but not before the other had seen.

"Well, we can't row, for one oar's gone overboard," said Desmond quietly. "I am sorry, Tennent, I ought to have left it secure."

He was unaware he had called him by name, but Rudolph was acutely aware of it. However, he only indicated the sail.

Desmond nodded.

"Yes, we shall have to try it. She has been banging herself about on the old buoy," he added anxiously. "I hope she is all right."

He busied himself with the sail and Rudolph made conscientious efforts to carry out his brief directions.

It has been one of Rudolph's few virtues to recognise a better man than himself at any sport, though he had not found much opportunity of practising it. He exercised it now.

"Take the tiller and keep her head straight for the library — those three windows with green blinds. If you don't keep her true, we shall be swamped."

Rudolph did his best to obey. He felt a languid interest in the neat way the sail went up. Then Desmond made a dash for the tiller.

"You can't help now — I know the coast. You lie down flat."

They were racing with the wind apparently straight for Strancebury Harbour. Rudolph could make out there were people on the jetty watching them. He tried to calculate how many minutes would elapse before he got that drink, when Desmond suddenly put down the helm, the boat came over, and they were on a new tack, beating out beyond the headland.

He looked at Desmond curiously.

"There's no making the South Harbour in this wind and tide," Desmond explained shortly, "the back wash would carry us smash against the cliff. I am going to try the North Bay, though it's bad landing."

The sun was shining brightly now, and the great, green, heaving waters were foam-capped. The waves rolled under them, not straight for the Bay as Rudolph had fancied at first, but sideways, rushing on to the bare face of the cliff to meet with crashing embrace their fellows flung back from the unmoved rock.

It was a pretty sight to watch, but Rudolph felt he would rather have seen it from the shore. Presently he saw Desmond's attention was fixed on a spot in the boat, then saw him suddenly shift his feet and brace himself against the back of the seat.

"What damned luck — it's a leak!" said Desmond quietly.

"Is there a bailer?"

Rudolph asked, not because he thought it would be any use, but it would be better than doing nothing.

"Yes, in the locker. I can hold it like this for a few minutes, but not on the next tack. I'll get as near in as possible. We must swim for it again."

The water trickled in and Rudolph tried to scoop it up without much success.

"She'll carry a lot of water going this way," Desmond remarked, "but we must come round or we shall never swim it. Now, be ready!" he called. He moved his foot and the water spurted in. The boat came partly round and then seemed to hang irresolute.

"She's going!" cried Desmond. "Jump clear!"

She heeled over and the sea poured in. Then a great wave swept them both right out clear of the sail as she settled down.

"Pugh! This is stiff!" spluttered Desmond, as he got free of the wave. "Are you all right?"

He hung on his stroke and looked round. Rudolph was close behind, but he was clearly not doing more than keeping afloat. He nodded, however, to Desmond and tried to signal him to go on.

The shore which just now had seemed so near, appeared to have retreated to an immense distance. Rudolph was quite aware that he could not possibly reach it, but he did not believe that Desmond could either, hampered by his weight.

Apparently Desmond thought otherwise, for he swam by him and tried to insist on his turning on his back and being towed.

Then he caught hold of him.

Rudolph gave a faint struggle to get free.

"Let go! you've done all you can!" he gasped. And then he went under.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE way down to the North Bay from the Castle had lately been repaired. It led from the garden to the shore by a series of ladder-like steps and narrow ledges cut in the cliff, straight on to the beach, where two cottages only stood guard over some piles of lobster pots and small boats. Rachel did not consider it an easy way, but she wanted to walk along the shore with Christina and see the hut where Christina had first met Desmond, and somehow they could talk more freely here than in the house. Yet somehow the sea distracted them. The flying purple shadows from the vanishing clouds, the green and violet sea, and the voice of it, claimed their minds so that they ceased to want to talk.

Round in the South Bay the men were gathered together, watching with much perplexity the manoeuvres of a little boat.

"It's nut like him to run a risk like 'at — if we could get a boaät oot —"

That was clearly impossible.

"Let be it, t' maister knaws his waäy aboot better nor yr. He gwine roond Ah tell yo," remarked another.

"Saaid soa," uttered this speaker a few minutes later, as the boat altered its course.

"Whae hez he getten wiv him?" demanded Porton sharply, with eyes still fixed on the little sail.

"Hezn't onybody wivout he's picked up a conger," retorted the man who had seen Desmond off.

Porton snorted and turned away. He walked deliberately up the rock path to the Castle.

“Wheer’s he gwine?”

No one responded.

But Porton walked boldly into the north tower and directed the powerful glass that stood there on the little white sail, still discernible in the distance.

Christina and Rachel had seen the boat, too, but neither of them spoke of it. Rachel did not know it was Desmond’s boat, and Christina tried not to be conscious of it.

“Who would have thought such waves would get up so soon?” Rachel said dreamily.

Christina told her of other occasions when she had seen an apparently calm sea break into storm in a short two hours.

They had stopped for a moment to look back towards the cliff and Christina gave a sudden exclamation.

Three or four men were hurrying down the steep steps to the shore, and there already a little cluster of women and men were watching the tactics of the small boat which was far nearer land now than when they had last looked.

“There is something wrong,” said Christina quietly. “Those are South Bay men and they would not come that way unless in a hurry; it’s private.”

They hastened their steps and Christina began to run.

The boat was almost lost in the trough of the sea, but still for one moment one could see the sail. Then it disappeared.

The men had already pushed a boat out into the water, but the waves would have none of it and carried it back.

“They can baith swim, Missis, and he’s a fine swimmer is t’ maister,” muttered a kindly, rough voice in Christina’s ear.

She nodded, she was telling herself this all the time. Rachel came to her elbow.

"It will be all well, my dear, see there's a man going in to meet him."

Porton — who was one of the few fishermen who could swim — was indeed already in the water swimming out to the two dark heads that appeared and disappeared in the waves, and he had taken a rope with him.

"Whae is t' other mon?"

They all seemed to ask this under their breath. Superstition lay strong on them and though not a man of them would have thought twice if he could serve the Master a turn, not a man would have ventured without misgiving to the aid of a stranger.

Another man had followed Porton, but the former had sufficient start to get in sight of the two half-drowned men before this one was half up to him. He saw them clearly, got nearly within touch and then he was washed back out of reach. This happened three times. Christina watched with strained, intent eyes and never spoke.

"'Tisn't like t' maister to find 'at bit waäy ower mich," a young fisher boy remarked, and was promptly silenced by his elders.

But Porton was a determined swimmer and the fourth time he got over the big roller that hid them.

Desmond was too spent to see his rescuer, and the first thing he knew was the end of the rope under his grasp.

"Get him ashore," he tried to say. "He's nearly gone."

Half a dozen men, up to their arm-pits in the sea, met them and dragged them ashore; and a last wave made one furious snatch at its escaped prey, and swept rescued and rescuers right up the beach to the very feet of the waiting women.

The men gathered round the stranger.

Desmond struggled up from Porton senior's arms and looked at Rachel.

"I tried my best," he gasped.

Rachel bent her head down to him.

"I know," she whispered. "Thank you for that!"

Someone was standing among them giving directions quietly and firmly — someone who had arrived a few minutes before in a motor car, who touched Christina on the shoulder and said:

"There's plenty to do before we give up hope — tell her that, she knows how to help."

The men carried Rudolph up to the cottages and there David Burnett, who had arrived so unexpectedly, and the elder Porton, who knew his business, fell to work on the apparently drowned man.

Desmond lay still on the shore between Christina and Rachel and as often as he tried to move, young Porton set his big hand on him and laid him back with gentle but quite irresistible force. Someone brought out blankets from a cottage and spread them over him. Christina tucked them closer from time to time.

Rachel sat very still — she saw nothing, her whole being was absorbed in the life struggle going on behind them. She would not even turn, lest sight should deaden the insistent, unceasing prayer of her heart.

"I wonder," said Christina presently in a low voice, "how David got here?"

It was Desmond who made attempt to answer her.

"I expect," he said feebly — "No, Porton, I can't speak all right — let me be — the yacht would have got to Fremly, and he heard there and came back."

They looked not a whit enlightened and he made another effort, looking at Christina now.

"Your — father was out in the dinghy —"

yacht started — they could not have missed him at first — Burnett would have heard —”

Someone came down from the group by the cottage towards them and was questioned solely by looks. Christina caught her mother's hand.

“Yes, he's coming round they think. The doctor gentleman says, ‘Will you get things ready at the Castle?’”

Christina nodded, and rose. Desmond tried to follow her example.

“Go with her!” he said weakly to Porton. “You can change up there in my room, help her all you can. I'll be all right directly.”

Porton looked doubtfully at Mrs. Massendon, but evidently decided she was to be trusted and went away with rapid steps after Christina. Rachel sat still by Desmond again and slipped her hand into his, as she noted his wistful glance in the direction of the steep steps up which Christina was climbing with Porton behind her.

“Wouldn't you like to go and see how he is?” he suggested. “I'm all right here.”

She shook her head.

“Not just yet. I can help just as well here — better,” she said. “Tell me what happened if you are well enough?”

“Oh, I have been in the water too often to take harm,” he protested, “but we had had rather hard work; that last bit was a shade beyond a joke.”

He told her what had occurred in an inadequate way.

“He got badly hit on the rock or he would have been all right,” was his only comment. “I wonder if they've found that out. He never owned it — and he wanted me to go on.”

A second message arrived to say Mr. Massendon had regained consciousness, and Mrs. Massendon was to come to him; they were going to take him up to

the Castle as soon as it was possible. Rachel had gone before the message was half delivered.

Desmond sat up and pushed off the blankets.

"They'll want a stretcher. That sail there ought to do."

He got to his feet and had to lay hold of the messenger.

"What awful rot to feel like this," he muttered, but he persevered and got as far as the group. Only David Burnett and Rachel were by Rudolph now.

"I knew we were to win," said Burnett quietly, as he looked down at Rachel, "directly I saw you could sit there and — help!"

Father Maitland and Desmond sat out on the terrace below the library windows smoking and talking till the stars came up and bejewelled the purple sky.

David Burnett had long ago explained how he had arrived at Fremly, and how the yacht raced in as fast as wind and wide canvas would take her, and signalled violently for someone to come aboard. The captain told how the moment they had found Mr. Massendon was not on board they had first put about, and then realising with dismay the loss of the dinghy rendered them useless, had set sail for Fremly, hoping against hope to find Mr. Massendon had in some incomprehensible way rowed ashore at Strancebury, and would have sent a message to meet them.

David had undertaken to go back to Strancebury with a motor and see what could be learned by bringing tidings to the Castle. He had arrived at the entrance to the drive just as the little group on the north shore dragged the half-drowned man in. It was all as simple as it was opportune.

"The wind's quite gone down," said Burnett.
"Any one who did not know this was a miracle, it is miraculous! The fleet will get out."

"You bear it no grudge?" questioned Father Maitland.

He referred to the sea, not the fleet, and Desmond understood.

"I? No! It's never been anything but a friend to me."

"Even to-day?"

David was silent a moment, thinking.

"Certainly to-day," he owned in a low voice.

Father Maitland nodded contentedly.

"The command to do good to them that hate you is just as good the other way about," he remarked.

"Do good to those you hate."

Desmond knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"Oh, I don't know," he stammered awkwardly.

"One doesn't think at the time — I felt it odd when I saw who it was on the Jan Stone for — a moment — he has extraordinary pluck, he wanted me to leave him in the end."

There was a sound of moving within the room and Christina came to the door.

"Desmond, would you play to us?"

"If you wish. Is your mother here?"

They were all there, David Burnett, too. He had left Rudolph comfortably asleep. The lamp light streamed out of the open windows and quenched the stars, and voices broke across the night silence.

Desmond came in and wandered over to the organ.

He played his favourite old Italian music, and the quiet dignity of it was like balm to their over-stimulated nerves.

At last he broke into something of his own, some prelude to the thoughts he could not speak.

Christina slipped out on to the terrace and David followed her.

They stood silent for a few minutes. Then he said:

"You have done your work well, Mrs. Stressborn."

She looked out at him and then out into the blackness of the great space below them.

"Not I — it is the sea that has made him whole. David, I am a little frightened!"

"Why?"

"I should be content with so little," her voice was unsteady.

He shook his head.

"Remember what we have said. This Love which is so beautiful, which is the best we can attain on the human side of things, must be taken with open eyes and open hands, by those like yourself if it is to be of good to you. There must be no 'chance' for you, no 'perhaps,' no 'may be.' He is beyond your pity now. You and he are not to drift, you are to grow. If he cannot do without you, most certainly you must not be able to do without him. I hope before we all go away you will find this out, even if you are not certain of it now."

She hung her head, self-convicted before his impassionate judgment of her.

"I am not saying your compassion was not good, not divine in its meaning and purpose, but it's over, and you are feeling a little lost. Perhaps that's how your mother felt when she heard you were to be married — you have to re-adjust yourself to things — he's got to make you adjust yourself to — Love!"

They leant over the wall and gazed down into the dim darkness below them.

"Do you remember the morning in the pine woods at Bashford?" he said. "It was a wonderful morning. I went there this spring just to thank God for it."

"Surely it is I who should do that," she told him in her true, frank voice. "It was you helped me to be strong enough — and to understand."

“To understand your husband? Yes, but it was you helped me to be strong enough to understand—yourself!”

Desmond's music came out to them, throbbing with beauty and another note that she had never heard in his playing before. She stood listening a moment and then quite forgetful of her companion, went in and up to Desmond's side; but when he looked round at her, she drew back and without adequate reason her face flushed.

David stayed outside in the night.

CHAPTER XLIV

“**H**AVE you more letters to send, Christina?” asked Desmond, pausing by her writing-table.

She handed him one and leant back with an air of relief.

Desmond took them out and came back to her. He stood leaning against a chair, regarding her gravely and a little anxiously.

“He is really quite himself to-night,” she remarked.

“Mother has rather hard work to keep him prisoner.”

“I sympathise with him,” Desmond said. “It’s ghastly work staying in bed when one’s seedy, but when one feels well —!”

“Oh, he’s not in bed, and I am not sure he feels well. Still by to-morrow we think we can get off.”

He fidgetted uneasily with a pencil he took up.

“There isn’t any hurry, is there? And surely Burnett and your mother are enough?”

He broke off and looked at her straightly.

“Are you too angry with me to stay, Christina?”

“My dear!” She put her hands in his and pulled him near her.

“I could never be angry — and you saved him.”

“I didn’t know, when I went, Christina,” he muttered apologetically.

She laughed softly.

“Or you would not have gone? Oh, Desmond, dear, you know nothing about yourself.”

He returned to his first point.

“You will stay?”

She got up and sighed.

"I think not, Desmond."

"Christina!"

She could not look at him, but she answered steadily enough.

"What are you asking me for? Have you come to the conclusion you can't do without my — pity?"

He hung his head.

"Is it too lonely here now without me?"

To that he said "Yes," sharply.

"You *are* appealing to my pity, then?"

"I'm appealing to you," he returned doggedly.

"I could take the veriest crumb you offered me."

She shook her head.

"Your pride surrenders, then — for I am still his daughter, Desmond."

He gave an impatient gesture.

"What does it matter now? Christina, why do you play with me?"

He came a step nearer.

"I want to know just how it is between us," she insisted, but her heart began to beat strangely, "because I do not pity you at all."

"You need not — they say the sea changes men, Christina, perhaps it changed me. I don't care whether you pity me or not, I am not going to let you go away. Why do you fence with me like this? You love me and I love you, isn't it enough?"

He spoke with a certain rough passion that made her shake. She got up and walked across the room to the window, but he followed her with dogged persistence.

"You are not to escape so. We must settle it once for all! Christina, you came to me as an angel at need, you've set me free — and I want you —"

"As an angel?" she asked quickly, her face turned from him.

"No," he caught her hands and pulled her round

to him sharply and his voice held a new note. "I don't know what all this means at all, but you are mine — mine — mine! Part of me. I will not let you go!"

She looked up straight into his eyes and knew her vision was no longer a vision, but a reality.

"I want my wife," he told her, and drew her within his arms.

EPILOGUE

“LISTEN, Desmond. He’s made mother buy a four-cylindereed Daimler, and he’s taken her — or she’s taken him, he says, to Newbury Races. My mother! — he says it’s a reward for entertaining the village children.”

Desmond got up and came round to her.

“Let me see,” he demanded; “it sounds a bit incredible.”

Christina gave him the letter.

“The games they played,” wrote Rudolph, “were much too intricate for me. I tried for a long time to get the hang of Sally Walters and There came Three Dukes a-riding, and when I did I was so shocked that I had to rack my brains to find some more seemly pastime. The only thing I could think of was motoring, so I got the new car out and the new chauffeur, and collected bunches of such innocents as could be dragged from these indecorous games, and took them for rides to Studbury and back. Rachel (he always called her so to Christina) professed to be scandalised, but I told her I was far more scandalised at the games I was expected to play. I’m horribly overworked and getting as thin as a flagstaff over the starting of this Rest Home. I want it turned into a Rest Home for overworked aviators, which would be popular, and subscriptions would pour in, but Rachel won’t hear of it. . . .”

At the end he remarked that Vallory — “who until now has not only commanded my dislike, but earned my respect, is in a fair way to lose the latter. It’s

all Rachel's fault. She won't leave well alone. He is to come down here next week, and the cellar will bring forth its choicest and the fatted calf will be killed. I shall see to that myself—I can't help it if it's the wrong way round. It's how I should have written it. And I suppose I shall have to fall on his neck and weep, or will he do the weeping? I don't like to ask Rachel about these things in case she makes me go to church to learn them."

"Which means that Sir Vallory is going to make the best of a bad job—I fear he still thinks it that," said Christina with a sigh. "I wonder how she can risk it. They will both be so clever and polite and unbearable."

"She will manage them," Desmond assured her. "Do you think Sir Vallory would care to come here afterwards?" he suggested diffidently. "Of course, it's not very lively, but he doesn't mind there not being a lot of people round."

"I expect he'd be delighted, he will love to browse round among the books."

"He could take you to Mappleton."

Christina rubbed her cheek against her husband's rough sleeve.

"He could, but he won't—you foolish goose, I believe you secretly believe I pine for the ice cream and string bands of Lady Mappleton's garden fête? I'd sacrifice myself if you wanted badly to go, but as you won't, the Viennese Band itself won't drag me."

He ought to have believed her, but a dwindling fear that she must hanker after wider society than was there still obtruded itself. Some day that fear would dwindle right away, she knew that, and smiled at him.

• They were seated in the little room that used to be Miss Eleanor's. Christina rose and went out of the open French window into the little garden, and here Desmond found her some time after, gazing thought-

fully at the long row of windows on the first floor.

"What are you looking at?" he asked.

She slipped her arm in his.

"You know that sunny room at the end of the wing there, the room you don't like?"

"It was my room as a boy. I haven't much reason to like it, my dear."

"It's very sunny, and there's really nothing the matter with the room."

"What do you want it for? There are plenty of other rooms."

"It's the only one in the house that has not been swept clean."

He understood her to mean more than of dust or cobweb and he knew she spoke truth. It was the very last retreat of those defeated shadows.

"It's sunny," she repeated, "and I was thinking, Desmond, it would make a beautiful nursery."

THE END

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