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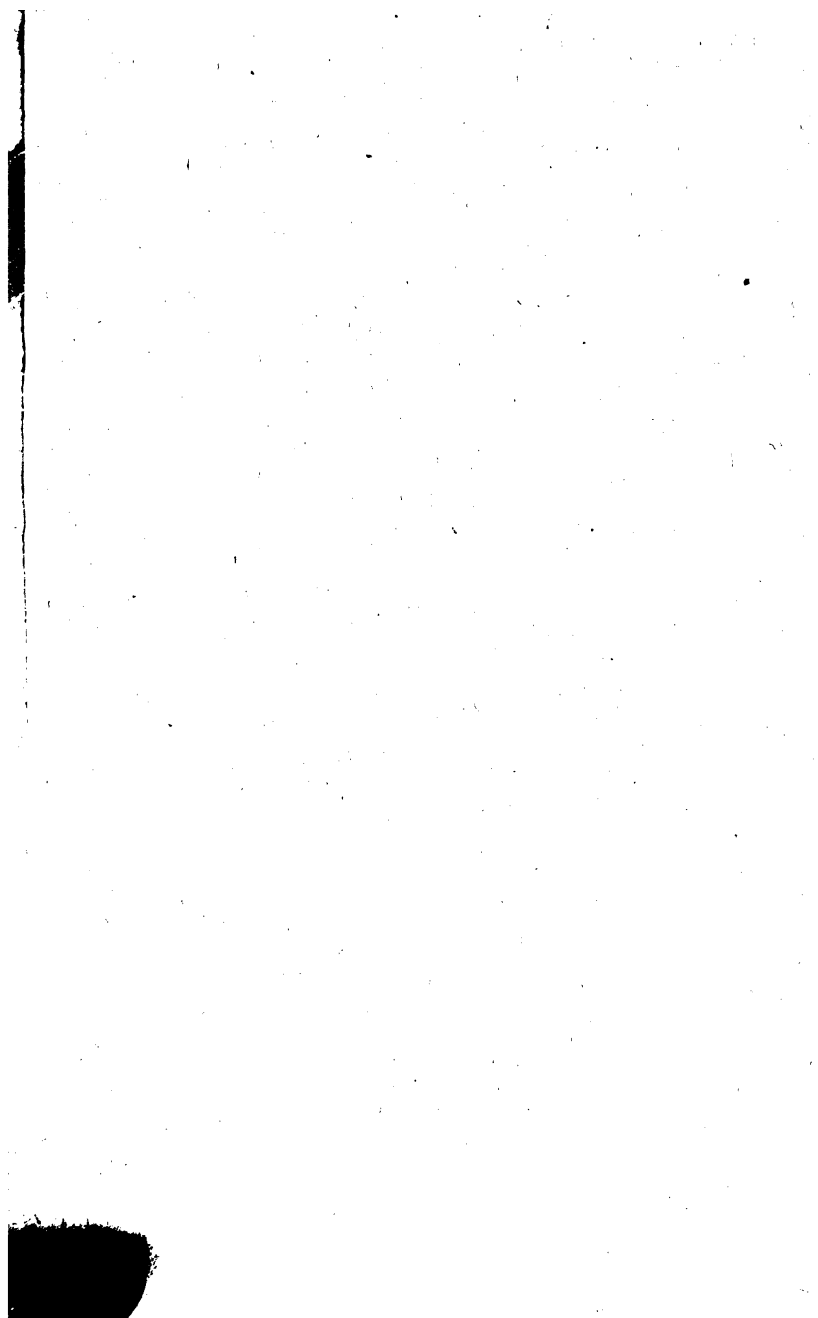


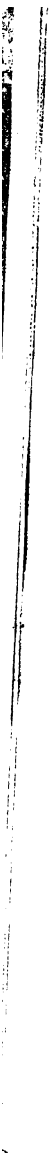
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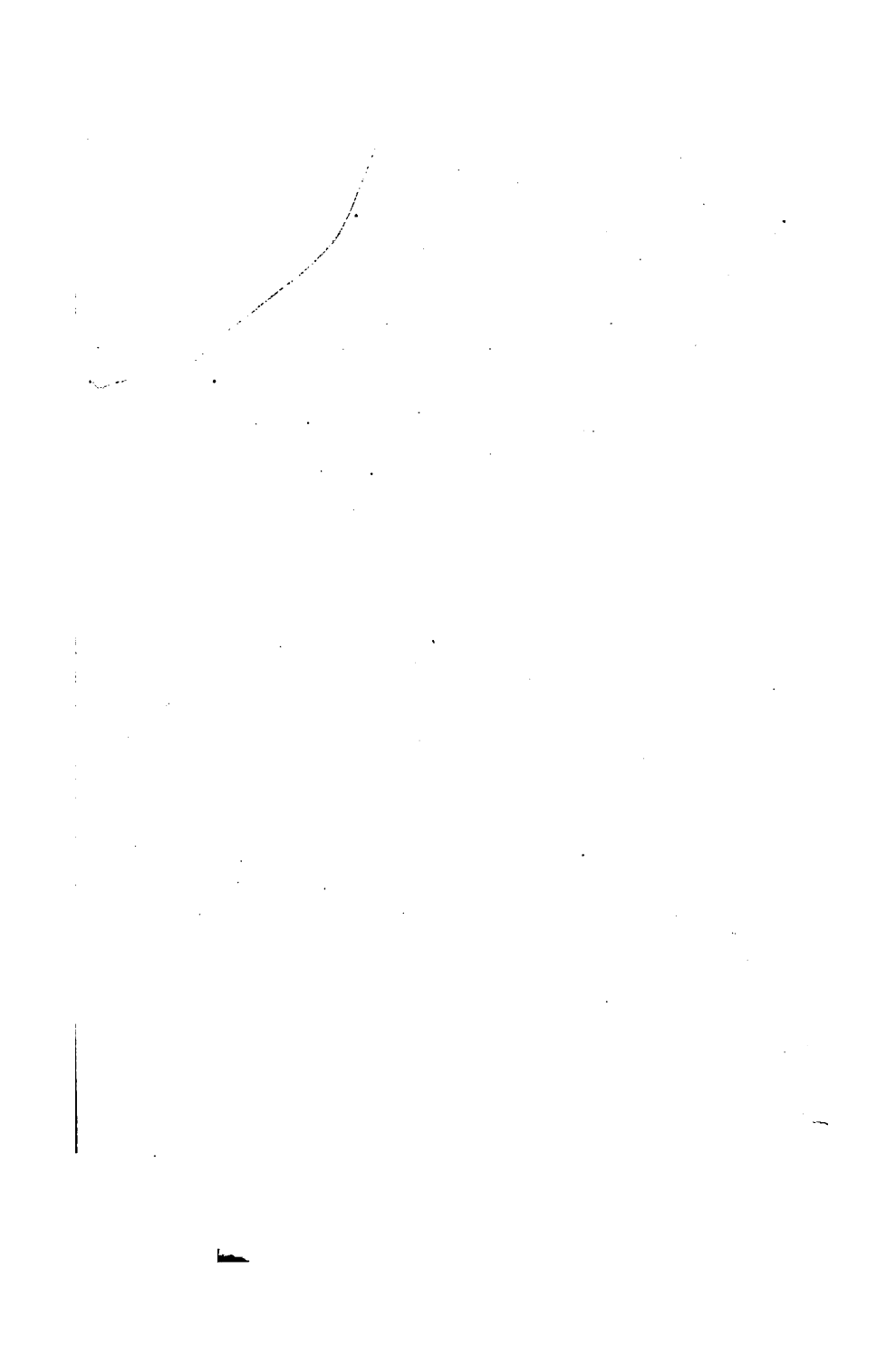
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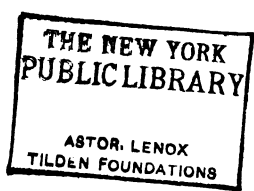


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He bowed gravely, and without a word turned and walked away.—
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THE GATES OF LIFE

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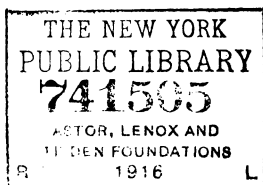
BRAM STOKER

*Author of "Dracula," "Miss Betty," "The Jewel of
Seven Stars," Etc.*

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WILLIAM
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THE GATES OF LIFE

FORE-GLIMPSE

"I WOULD rather be an angel than God!"

The voice of the speaker sounded clearly through the hawthorn tree. The young man and the young girl who sat together on the low tombstone looked at each other. They had heard the voices of the two children talking, but had not noticed what they said; it was the sentiment, not the sound, which roused their attention.

The girl put her finger to her lips to impress silence, and the man nodded; they sat as still as mice whilst the two children went on talking.

The scene would have gladdened a painter's heart. An old churchyard. The church low and square-towered, with long mullioned windows, the yellow-gray stone roughened by the waste and stress of ages and tender-hued with growth of lichens. Round it clustered many old tombstones tilted and slanted in all directions; amongst them a few stately monuments, rising patrician fashion. Behind the church a line of ancient yews so gnarled and twisted in their thick brown stems, so worn and broken and wasted with time and storm, that one could well imagine that long ago from them came the furnishing of battle when the bowstrings twanged and the clothyard shafts whistled on their deadly way.

The churchyard was full of fine cedars. Here and there amongst the dotted tombs and headstones many beautiful

blossoming trees rose from the long green grass starred with wildflowers. The laburnum glowed in the June afternoon sunlight like a glory of burnished gold. The lilac and the hawthorn and the clustering meadowsweet which fringed the edge of the lazy stream mingled their heavy sweetness in a sleepy fragrance which intensified the satisfying hum of myriad insect life. Everywhere on the fringes of the place where culture had once set its hand the more elemental forces of cosmic beauty had manifested themselves. The yellow-grey crumbling walls were green in places with wrinkled harts-tongues dwarfed by the stricture of their roots, and were topped with sweet-williams and spreading house-leek, and stone-crop and wild wallflowers of red-brown and golden yellow whose delicious penetrating sweetness made for the intoxicating, drowsy repose of perfect summer.

But amid all that mass of glowing colour the two young figures seated on the grey old tomb stood out conspicuously. Both were clad in hunting scarlet. The man was in conventional hunting-dress: red coat, white stock, black hat, white breeches, and top-boots. The girl was one of the richest, most glowing, and yet withal the daintiest figures the eye of man could rest and linger on. She was in riding-habit of scarlet cloth, with the revers of the open jacket of the same shade of silk. Her black hat was tipped forward by the piled-up masses of her red-golden hair. Round her neck instead of a collar was a white lawn scarf made in the fashion of a man's hunting-stock, close fitting round the neck and sinking into the gold-buttoned waistcoat of snowy twill. The corner of a dainty pocket-handkerchief peeped from the pocket cut man fashion in the left breast of her jacket; in the button-hole on the right rever was a tiny bud of a white moss rose. As she sat with the long skirt across her left arm her tiny black top-boots appeared underneath. Her gauntleted gloves were of white buckskin; her riding-whip was plaited of white leather, topped with ivory and banded with gold at the joining.

Even in her fourteenth year Miss Stephen Norman was

of striking beauty; beauty of a rarely composite character. In her the various elements of her race seemed to have cropped out. The firm-set jaw, with chin broader and more square than is usual in a woman, and the wide fine forehead and aquiline nose marked the high descent from Saxon through Norman. The glorious mass of red hair, full, thick, massive, long and fine of the true flame colour, showed the blood of another ancient ancestor of Northern race, and suited well with the voluptuous curves of the full, crimson lips, albeit their cutting showed that the passionate instincts were, if reproduced at all, repeated under conditions of self-restraint unknown in the older type. The black eyes, deep blue-black, or rather purple-black, the raven eyebrows and eyelashes, and the fine curve of the nostrils spoke of the Eastern blood of the far-back wife of the Crusader. For the rest she gave promise of a good height. Already she was tall for her age, with something of that lankiness which marks the early development of a really fine figure. Long-legged, long-necked, as straight as a lance from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot, and with head poised on the proud neck like a lily on its stem.

Stephen Norman as a girl certainly gave remarkable promise of a splendid womanhood. Pride, self-reliance, dominance and masterdom were all marked in every feature; in her carriage and bearing and in every twist and turn of her lightest movement.

Her companion, Harold An Wolf, was some five years her senior, and by means of those five years and certain qualities of his nature had for a long time stood in the position of her mentor. He was of fine stature, six feet four in height, deep-chested, broad-shouldered, lean-flanked, long-armed. He was big-handed, like Sir Beaumains in "Prince Arthur," "called so from the size and beauty of his hands"—signs of knightly breeding in a chivalric age, when the biggest man could wear the strongest armour and the biggest hand could hold the weightiest sword. His eyes were grey-blue, his straight hair brown. The nose was fair-sized with

sensitive nostrils; it was non-aquiline rather than straight. The chin and jaws were broad and massive; the lips, thick rather than thin, were marked at the corners with an iron determination.

The two sat quiet, listening. Through the quiet hum of afternoon came the voices of the two children. Outside the lych-gate, under the shade of the spreading cedar, the horses stamped occasionally as the flies troubled them. The grooms were mounted; one held a delicate-limbed white Arab, the other a great black horse.

"I would rather be an angel than God!"

The little girl who made the remark was an ideal specimen of the village Sunday-school child. Blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked, thick-legged, with her straight brown hair tied into a hard bunch with a morsel of much-creased, cherry-coloured ribbon. Her printed cotton frock was starched out to show the needlework of her own doing round the edge of the petticoat. The white cotton stockings were clean, and the spring-side boots, with the inevitable tags sticking out fore and aft, were scrupulously blackened. A glance at the girl would have satisfied the most sceptical as to her goodness. Without being in any way smug she was radiant with self-satisfaction and well-doing. A child of the people; a help to her mother; a good angel in the house; a little mother to her brothers and sisters; cleanly in mind and body; self-reliant, full of faith, cheerful. Before the truthful, patient, resolute look of those clear young eyes stretch a long vista of light, passing over the winds and seas of human existence and leading up to the very Gates of Life.

The other little girl was prettier, but of a more stubborn type; more passionate, less organised, and infinitely more assertive. Black-haired, black-eyed, swarthy, large-mouthed, snub-nosed; the very type and essence of unrestrained, impulsive, emotional, sensual nature. A seeing eye would have noted great and inevitable danger for the early years of her womanhood. She seemed amazed by the self-abnegation implied by her companion's statement; after a pause she replied:

"I wouldn't! I'd rather be up at the top of everything and give orders to the angels if I chose. I can't think, Marjorie, why you'd rather take orders than give them."

"That's just it, Susan. I don't want to give orders; I'd rather obey them. It must be very terrible to have to think of things so much, that you want everything done your own way. And besides, I shouldn't like to have to be just!"

"Why not?" the tone of voice was truculent, though there was a wistfulness in it also.

"Oh, Susan. Just fancy having to punish; for of course justice needs punishing as well as praising. Now an angel has such a nice time, helping people and comforting them, and bringing sunshine into dark places. Putting down fresh dew every morning; making the flowers grow, and bringing babies and taking care of them till their mothers find them. Of course God is very good and very sweet and very merciful, but oh, He must be very terrible."

"All the same I would rather be God and be able to do things!"

Then the children moved off out of earshot.

The two seated on the tombstone looked after them. The first to speak was the girl who said:

"That's very sweet and good of Marjorie; but do you know, Harold, I like Susie's idea better."

"Which idea was that, Stephen?"

"Why, didn't you notice what she said: 'I'd like to be God and be able to do things?'"

"Yes," he said after a moment's reflection. "That's a fine idea in the abstract; but I doubt of its happiness in the long-run."

"Doubt of its happiness? Come now, what could there be better, after all? Isn't it good enough to be God? What more do you want?"

The girl's tone was quizzical, but her great black eyes blazed with some thought of sincerity which lay behind the fun; the sensitive nostrils of her aquiline nose expanded

and became set. The young man shook his head with a smile of kindly tolerance as he answered:

"It isn't that—surely you must know it. I'm ambitious enough, goodness knows; but there *are* bounds to satisfy even me. But I'm not sure that the good little thing isn't right. She seemed, somehow, to hit a bigger truth than she knew: 'fancy having to be just.'"

"I don't see much difficulty in that. Any one can be just!"

"Pardon me," he answered, "there is perhaps nothing so difficult in the whole range of a man's work." There was distinct defiance in the girl's eyes as she asked:

"A man's work! Why a man's work? Isn't it a woman's work also?" She beat with a certain impatience with her riding-whip on the side of her boot.

"Well, I suppose it ought to be, theoretically; but practically it isn't."

"And why not, pray?" After the manner of the elders of her sex the mere suggestion of any disability of woman as such aroused immediate antagonism. Her companion suppressed the smile which was growing round his mouth as he answered deliberately after a pause:

"Because, my dear Stephen, the Almighty in His wisdom has so ordained matters that justice is not a virtue which women can practise. Mind, I do not say women are unjust. Far from it, where there are no interests of those dear to them they can be of a sincerity of justice that can now and again make a man's blood run cold. But justice in the abstract is not an ordinary virtue: it has to be considerate as well as stern, and above all interest of all kinds and of every one——" The girl interrupted hotly:

"I don't agree with you at all. You can't give an instance where women are unjust. I don't mean of course individual instances, but classes of cases where injustice is habitual." The suppressed smile cropped out now unconsciously round the man's lips in a way which was intensely aggravating to the girl and made her feel quite hot.

"I'll just give you a few," he said. "Did you ever yet know a mother just to a boy who outclassed her own boy at school?" The girl reflected, then she spoke:

"Well, you may be right there. Mind I don't altogether admit it, but I accept it as not on my side. But this is only one case."

"A pretty common one, all told. Do you think that Sheriff of Galway, who in default of a hangman hanged his son with his own hands, would have done so if he had been a woman?" The girl answered at once:

"Frankly, no. I don't suppose the mother was ever born who would do such a thing. But that is not a very common case, is it? Have you any other?" The young man paused as if thinking before he spoke:

"There is another, but I don't think that I can go into it fairly with you."

"Why not?"

"Well, because after all you know, Stephen, you are only a girl and you can't be expected to know." The girl laughed:

"Well, if it's anything about women surely a girl, even of my tender age, must know something more of it, or be able to guess at all events, than any young man can. However, say what you think and I'll tell you frankly if I agree with you—that is if a woman can be just in such a matter."

"That is the very point. As you are a student of logic I may point out that the question involves a *petitio principii*."

"I understand, 'begging the question.' Let us have the point."

"Shortly it is this: Can a woman be just to another woman, or to a man for the matter of that, where either her own affection or a fault of the other is concerned?"

"I don't see any possible reason to the contrary. Surely pride alone should ensure justice in the former case, and the consciousness of superiority in the other." The young man shook his head:

"Pride and the consciousness of superiority! Are they not very much the same thing. But whether or no, if either

of them has to be relied on, I'm afraid the scales of Justice would want regulating, and her sword should be blunted a bit in case its edge should be turned back on herself. I have an idea that although pride might be a guiding principle with you individually, it would be a failure with the average. However, as it would be in any case a rule subject to many exceptions I must let it go."

He looked at his watch and rose up. Stephen followed him; transferring her whip into the hand which held up the skirt, she took his arm with her right hand in the pretty way in which a very young girl clings to her elders. Together, she leaning heavily on his arm, they went out at the lich-gate. The groom drew over with the horses. Stephen patted hers and gave her a lump of sugar from her pocket. Then putting her foot into Harold's ready hand she sprang lightly into the saddle. Harold swung himself into his saddle with the dexterity of an accomplished rider.

As the two rode up the road, keeping on the shady side under the trees, Stephen said quietly, half to herself as if the idea of the sentence had impressed itself on her mind:

"To be God and be able to do things!"

Harold rode on in silence. The gravity of some vague growing thought was upon him.

CHAPTER I

STEPHEN

STEPHEN NORMAN of Normanstand had remained a bachelor until close on middle age, when the fact took hold of him that there was no immediate heir to his great estate. Whereupon, with his wonted decision, he set about looking for a wife. He had been a close friend of his next neighbour, Squire Rowly, ever since their college days. They had, of course, been often in each other's houses, and Rowly's young sister—almost a generation younger than himself, and the sole fruit of his father's second marriage—had been like a little sister to him too. She had, in the twenty years which had elapsed, grown to be a sweet and beautiful young woman. In all the past years, with the constant opportunity which friendship gave of close companionship, the feeling never altered. Squire Norman would have been surprised had he been asked to describe Margaret Rowly, and found himself compelled to present the picture of a woman, not a child.

Now, however, when his thoughts went womanward and wifeward, he awoke to the fact that Margaret came within the category of those he sought amongst. His usual decision ran its course. Possibility became probability, probability became certainty; the semi-brotherly feeling gave place to a stronger and perhaps more selfish feeling. Before he even knew it, he was head over ears in love with his pretty neighbour.

The ideas of a middle-aged man are tempered by habit and custom; so Stephen Norman did not rush hot-foot to declare himself to the lady. He was, however, no laggard in love; but not to frighten the girl by a too sudden onslaught, he

THE GATES OF LIFE

began a series of veiled attentions which threw them into more constant companionship. Norman was a fine man, stalwart and handsome; his forty years sat so lightly on him that his age never seemed to come into question in a woman's mind. Margaret had always liked him and trusted him; he was the big brother who had no duty in the way of scolding to do. His presence had always been a gladness; and the sex of the girl, first unconsciously and then consciously, answered to the man's overtures. In a little while Norman felt himself justified in speaking to Rowly, who had long been guardian as well as brother; for his father and his father's wife had both been dead for years. Squire Rowly was delighted; Margaret's consent was soon obtained.

When in the fulness of time it was known that an heir was expected, Squire Norman felt that his best hopes were being fulfilled. He took it for granted that the child would be a boy, and he held the idea so strongly and so tenaciously that his wife, who loved him deeply, gave up warning and remonstrance after she had once tried to caution him against too fond a hope. She saw how bitterly he would be disappointed in case it should prove to be a girl. He was, however, so fixed on the point that she determined to say no more. After all, it might be a boy; the chances were equal. If it were not, then sufficient to the day would be the evil thereof. The Squire would not listen to any one else at all; so as the time went on his idea was more firmly fixed than ever. His arrangements were made on the base that he would have a son. The name was of course decided. Stephen had been the name of all the Squires of Normanstand for ages—as far back as the records went; and Stephen the new heir of course would be.

Like all middle-aged men with young wives he was supremely anxious as the time drew near. In his anxiety for his wife his belief in the son became passive rather than active. Indeed, the idea of a son was so deeply fixed in his mind that it was not to be lightly disturbed; not even by his anxiety for the young wife whom he idolised.

When instead of a son a daughter was born, the Doctor and the nurse, who knew his views on the subject, held back from the mother for a little the knowledge of the sex. The sin of Eve had been visited heavily on the young mother, and travail had come attended by fears. Dame Norman was so weak that the Doctor feared lest anxiety as how her husband whom she adored would bear the disappointment, might militate against her. Therefore the Doctor, as soon as he could be spared, with a whispered caution to the nurse, sought the Squire in his study, where he had long suffered in a silent agony of anxiety. He went resolutely at his task; for here he had only to bear the unpleasantness of a man's disappointment and not the responsibility of a woman's life.

"Well, Squire, I congratulate you on the birth of your child!" Norman was of course struck with the use of the word "child" instead of "son;" but the cause of his anxiety was manifested by his first question:

"How is she, Doctor? Is she safe?" The child was after all of only secondary importance! The Doctor, more used to such scenes, and more in control of himself, breathed more freely; the subject of the question had lightened his task. There was, therefore, more assurance in his voice as he answered:

"She is safely through the worst of her trouble, but I am greatly anxious as yet. She is very weak. I fear anything that might upset her."

The Squire's voice came quick and strong:

"There must be no upset! And now tell me about my son?" He spoke the last word half with pride, half bashfully.

"Your son is a daughter!" There was silence for so long that the Doctor began to be anxious. Squire Norman sat quite still; his right hand resting on the writing-table before him became clenched so hard that the knuckles looked white and the veins red. After a long slow breath he spoke:

"She, my daughter, is well?" The Doctor answered with cheerful alacrity:

"Splendid!—I never saw a finer child in my life. She will be a comfort and an honour to you!" The Squire spoke again:

"What does her mother think of her? I suppose she's very proud of her?"

"She does not know yet that it is a girl. I thought it better not to let her know till I had told you."

"Why so?"

"Because—because—Norman, old friend, you know why! Because you had set your heart on a son; and I know how it would grieve that sweet young wife and mother to feel your disappointment. I want your tips to be the first to tell her; so that you may assure her of your happiness in that a daughter has been born to you."

The Squire put out his great hand and laid it on the other's shoulder. There was almost a break in his voice as he said:

"Thank you, my old friend, my true friend, for your thought. When may I see her?"

"By right, not yet. But, as knowing your views, she may fret herself till she knows, I think you had better come at once."

All Norman's love and strength combined for his task. As he leant over and kissed his young wife there was real fervour in his voice as he said:

"Where is my dear daughter that you may place her in my arms?" For an instant there came a chill to the mother's heart that her hopes had been so far disappointed; but then came the reaction of her joy that her husband, her baby's father, was pleased. There was a heavenly dawn of red on her pale face as she drew her husband's head down to her and kissed him.

"Oh my dear," she said, "I am so happy that you are pleased!" The nurse took the mother's hand gently and held it to the baby as she laid it in the father's arms.

He held the mother's hand as he kissed the baby's brow.

The Doctor touched him gently on the arm and beckoned

him away. He went with careful footsteps, looking behind as he went.

After dinner he talked with the Doctor on various matters; but presently he asked:

"I suppose, Doctor, it is no sort of rule that the first child regulates the sex of a family?" The Doctor paused before answering; he felt that he had a duty to do, for it might before long be necessary to warn his friend against false hopes.

"No, of course not. Otherwise how should we see boys and girls mixed in one family, as is nearly always the case. But, my friend," he went on, "you must not build hopes so far away. I have to tell you that your wife is far from strong. Even now she is not so well as I could wish, and there yet may be change." The Squire leaped impetuously to his feet as he spoke quickly:

"Then why are we waiting here? Can nothing be done? Let us have the best help, the best advice in the world." The Doctor raised his hand.

"Nothing can be done as yet. I have only fear."

"Then let us be ready in case your fears should be justified! Who are the best men in London to help in such a case?" The Doctor mentioned two names; and within a few minutes a mounted messenger was galloping *ventre à terre* to Norcester, which was the nearest telegraph centre where messengers could be sent at such an hour. The messenger was to arrange for a special train if necessary. Shortly afterwards the Doctor went again to see his patient. After a long absence he came back, pale and agitated. Norman felt his heart sink when he saw him; a groan broke from him as the Doctor spoke:

"She is much worse! I am in great fear that she may pass away before the morning!" The Squire's strong voice was clouded with a hoarse veil as he asked:

"May I see her?"

"Not yet; at present she is sleeping. She may wake strengthened; in which case you may see her. But if not——"

"If not?"—the voice was not like his own.

"Then I shall send for you at once!" The Doctor returned to his vigil. The Squire, when left alone, sank on his knees with his face in his hands; his great shoulders shook with the intensity of his grief.

An hour or more passed before he heard hurried steps approaching. He sprang to the door:

"Well?"

"You had better come now."

"Is she better?"

"Alas! no. I fear her minutes are numbered. School yourself, my dear old friend! God will help you in this bitter hour. All you can do now is to make her last moments happy."

"I know! I know!" he answered in a voice so calm that his companion wondered.

When they came into the room Margaret was dozing. When her eyes opened and she found her husband beside her bed there spread over her face a glad look; which, alas! soon changed to one of pain. She motioned to him to bend down. He knelt and put his head beside her on the pillow; his arms went tenderly round her as though by his iron devotion and strength he would shield her from all harm. Her voice came very low and in broken gasps; she was summoning all her strength that she might speak:

"My dear, dear husband, I am so sad at leaving you! You have made me so happy, and I love you so! Forgive me, dear, for the pain I know you will suffer when I am gone! And oh, Stephen, I know you will cherish our little one—yours and mine—when I am gone. She will have no mother; you will have to be father and mother too."

"I will hold her in my very heart's core, my darling, as I hold you!" He could hardly speak from emotion. She went on:

"And oh, my dear, you will not grieve that she is not a son to carry on your name?" And then a sudden light came

into her eyes; and there was exultation in her weak voice as she said:

"She is to be our only one; let her be indeed our son! Call her by the name we both love!" For answer he rose and laid his hand very, very tenderly on the baby as he said:

"This dear one, my sweet wife, who will carry your soul in her breast, will be my son; the only son I shall ever have. All my life long I shall, please Almighty God, so love her—our little Stephen—as you and I love each other!"

She laid her hand on his so that it touched at once her husband and her child. Then she raised the other weak arm, and placed it round his neck, and their lips met. Her soul went out in this last kiss.

By degrees Squire Norman began to shake off the apathy of his grief. As the personal side of it became less keen, so memory began to have its compensations.

Time is, after all, the only spiritual anodyne. The Future, when we shall meet those who are gone before; and the Past, when the dead come back to us in memory and in sleep, are its two phases.

The throbbing of a living heart has a music which is at least in harmony with the music of the Spheres.

With his coming back to the interests of life, the pleasure of Stephen Norman in his little daughter grew. He had from the first loved the baby in that it was the legacy of his darling, and the bond between them; and also with that love which is a mystery of fatherhood. But now he began to love his child for her own sake.

Little Stephen had winning ways which sent deep roots into her father's heart. Time went quickly by, and Norman was only recalled to its passing by the growth of his child. But his baby was one and one only. Any change in it was not only in itself a new experience, but brought into juxtaposition what is, with what was. The changes that began to mark the divergence of sex were positive shocks to him, for they were unexpected.

At first there was through all his love for his child a certain

resentment of her sex. His old hope of a son had been rooted too deeply to give way easily. But when the conviction came, and with it the habit of its acknowledgment, there came also a certain resignation, which is the halting-place for satisfaction. But he never, not then nor afterwards, quite lost the old belief that Stephen was indeed a son. This belief tinged all his after-life and moulded his policy with regard to his girl's upbringing. If she was to be indeed his son as well as his daughter, she must from the first be accustomed to boyish as well as to girlish ways. This, in that she was an only child, was not a difficult matter to accomplish. Had she had brothers and sisters, matters of her sex would soon have found their own level.

There was one person who objected strongly to any deviation from the conventional rule of a girl's education. This was Miss Laetitia Rowly, who took after a time, in so far as such a place could be taken, that of the child's mother. Laetitia Rowly was a young aunt of Squire Rowly of Norwood; the younger sister of his father and some sixteen years his own senior. When the old Squire's second wife had died, Laetitia, then a conceded spinster of thirty-six, had taken possession of the young Margaret. When Margaret had married Squire Norman, Miss Rowly was well satisfied; for she had known Stephen Norman all her life. Though she could have wished a younger bridegroom for her darling, she knew it would be hard to get a better man or one of more suitable station in life. Also she knew that Margaret loved him, and the woman who had never found the happiness of mutual love in her own life found a pleasure in the romance of true love, even when the wooer was middle-aged.

Though Stephen was a sweet child she was a wilful one, and very early in her life manifested a dominant nature. This was a secret pleasure to her father, who, never losing sight of his old idea that she was both son and daughter, took pleasure as well as pride out of each manifestation of her imperial will.

Miss Rowly seldom saw any individual thing to disapprove

of. She it was who selected the governesses and who interviewed them from time to time as to the child's progress.

Stephen's affection for her "Auntie" was never affected by any of the changes. Others might come and go, but there no change came. The child's little hand would steal into one of the old lady's strong ones, or would clasp a finger and hold it tight. And then the woman who had never had a child of her own would feel, afresh each time, as though the child's hand was gripping her heart.

With her father she was sweetest of all. In the nature of every woman, old or young, there is something of motherhood; and with Stephen this found expression with regard to her father. She began to realise, in some subtle way, which is the gift of dawning intelligences, that he wanted her help. He did not seem to have any one else to play with. All who came into her own life, except the male servants, always kissed her; but no one, not even the nurse of Auntie, kissed him. Then came the realisation of his loneliness, and with it the desire to help, to protect. As he had kisses from no one else, he must have a double share from her.

CHAPTER II

HAROLD

SQUIRE NORMAN had a clerical friend whose rectory of Carstone lay some thirty miles from Normanstand. They had been chums at Trinity, Cambridge, and the boyish friendship had ripened and lasted. When Harold An Wolf had put in his novitiate in a teeming Midland manufacturing town, it was Norman's influence which obtained the rectorship for his friend. An Wolf's marriage and the birth of a son had kept him closer to home. Mrs. An Wolf had been killed in a railway accident a couple of years after her only child had been born. The last time the two men had met was when An Wolf had come over to Norcester to aid in the burial of his friend's wife. When they met again after a lapse of some years, each found the other somewhat changed, in all but their old affection.

An Wolf was delighted with the little Stephen. Her dainty beauty seemed to charm him; and the child, seeming to realise what pleasure she was giving, exercised all her little winning ways. The rector, who knew more of children than did his friend, told her as she sat on his knee of a very interesting person: his own son. The child listened, interested at first, and then enraptured. She asked all kinds of questions; and the father's eyes brightened as he gladly answered the pretty sympathetic child, already deep in his heart for her father's sake. He told her about the boy who was so big and strong, and who could run and leap and swim and play cricket and football better than any other boy with whom he played. When, warmed himself by the keen interest

of the little girl, and seeing her beautiful black eyes beginning to glow, he too woke to the glory of the time; and all the treasured moments of the father's lonely heart gave out their store. The other father, thrilled with delight because of his baby's joy with, underlying all, an added pleasure that the little Stephen's interest was in sports that were for boys, looked on approvingly, now and again asking questions himself in furtherance of the child's wishes.

And so all the afternoon as they sat in the garden, close to the stream that came out of the rock, An Wolf told father's tales of his only son. Of the school races when he had won so many prizes. Of the swimming match in the Islam River when, after he had won the race and had dressed himself, he went into the water in his clothes to help some children who had upset a boat. How when Widow Norton's only son could not be found, he dived into the deep hole of the intake of the milldam of the great Corstone mills where Wingate the farrier had been drowned. And how, after diving twice without success, he had insisted on going down the third time though people had tried to hold him back; and how he had brought up in his arms the child all white and so near death that they had to put him in the ashes of the baker's oven before he could be brought back to life.

Here the child wept, and flew to her father for comfort; and hung round his neck, and buried her face in his comfortable waistcoat where she could hear his heart beat and his watch tick. The two men were moved also; partly by the heroism of the deed and its touching issue, and partly by the child's emotion. The clasp of their hands, in fresh renewal of old friendship, over the baby's head seemed to link together the two fathers and the two children. When Stephen recovered, for her weeping was not from sorrow but only emotion, and asked for more stories of Harold whilst all the time she clung tight to her father's neck lest they should frighten her, till the presence of Mrs. Jarrold, loom-

ing on the edge of the lawn, called to mind that tea-time had come.

Even the child's anxiety to hear more, gave way before the habit of obedience. She slid down from her father's knee and coming over to Dr. An Wolf, gravely held out her hand and said: "Good-bye!" Then she kissed him and said:

"Thank you so much. Won't you come soon again, and tell us more?" Then she jumped again upon her father's knee and hugged him round the neck and kissed him over and over again. When she had taken Mrs. Jarrold's hand she let it go and ran back to her father and pulled down his head and whispered in his ear:

"Daddy, please make Harold's daddy when he comes again, bring Harold with him!"

After all it is natural for women to put the essence of the letter in the postscript!

That was indeed a happy day, whose memory never faded from the minds of any of them; and, did the dead have power to watch the footsteps of those they loved on earth, the spirits of two women would have hovered round in happiness. Did their wings rustle, that might have been the cool breeze which fanned the foreheads of both men as after the child's departure they instinctively raised their hats, as though in the presence of something holier than themselves.

Two weeks afterwards Dr. An Wolf came again and brought Harold with him. The time had gone heavily with little Stephen when she knew that Harold was coming with his father. At last the time came and she went out to the hall door with her father to welcome the guests. At the top of the great granite steps, down which in time of bad weather the white awning ran, she stood holding her father's hand and waving a welcome.

The meeting was a great pleasure to both the children, and resulted in an immediate friendship. The small girl at once conceived a great admiration for the big, strong boy nearly twice her age and more than twice her size. Mrs. Jarrold,

from the moment she set eyes on him, liked the big kindly-faced boy who treated her like a lady, and who stood awkwardly blushing and silent in the middle of the nursery listening to the tiny child's proffers of affection. For whatever kind of love it is that boys are capable of, Harold had fallen into it.

As for Harold's new-found affection it was as deep as his nature. An only child who had in his memory nothing of a mother's love, his naturally affectionate nature had in his childish days found no means of expression. A man child can hardly pour out his full heart to a man, even a father or a comrade; and this child had not, in a way, the consolations of other children. Though many of Dr. An Wolf's friends who were mothers made much of the pretty, quiet boy, and took him to play with their children, he never seemed to get really intimate with them. Boys he knew, and with them he could hold his own and yet be on affectionate terms. But girls were strange to him, and in their presence he naturally was shy.

From his boyhood up to his twelfth year, Harold's knowledge of girlhood never increased nor did his awe diminish.

His first glimpse of Stephen was, he felt, one that he never could forget. She had insisted on putting on the red riding habit which Daddy had given her for her birthday, and now she stood on the top of the steps all glorious in hunting pink, with the habit held over her arms, with the tiny hunting-boots all shiny underneath. She had no hat on, and her beautiful hair of golden red shone in its glory. But even it was almost outshone by the joyous flush on her cheeks as she stood waving the little hand that did not hold Daddy's.

During luncheon Stephen was fairly silent; she usually chattered all through as freely as a bird sings.

The ride after luncheon was a memorable one. The whole party had gone into the stable; and whilst there Harold had shown so much knowledge of the horses and was so easy with them that Topham himself suggested that he should be

allowed to choose one for his own riding. The Squire and his father were at first both willing; but they took some concern when they found that he had selected one of the biggest horses in the stable, the Squire's pet hunter, Robin Hood. The elders looked at one another apprehensively; but they were reassured when old Topham, slapping his leg with delight, said half aloud to himself:

"Dang me, if young master bean't right. He have his head screwed on, he have! There bean't a 'orse in the stables as safe to ride for all his speed and bottom as Robin!"

When it came to Stephen's pony being led by a groom, even a mounted one, that wilful young lady rebelled.

"I'm perfectly well able to ride Peter Simple. You know that, Daddy dear. You saw me ride him all alone yesterday in the paddock!" In her own pretty, little, wilful head she was determined that if Harold could ride a big horse she could ride a little one. Finally she consented to a compromise suggested by herself.

She had pictured to herself Harold riding out with her on the big horse; and having made up her mind to it she would not go back. Herein came her strength and her weakness; when she had made up her mind to anything, she would carry it out, if possible. Here she could accomplish it, the price being her own yielding. So as usual when she gave up, she gave up very gracefully. With a sunny smile she said out at once:

"All right! Daddy. Harold must ride Robin Hood. I'll let Martin take the rein. But he must have a big horse too!"

None of the three loved the little maid the less for her generous yielding up of her own wishes.

Topham remarked *sotto voce* and in mixed metaphor to Mrs. Jarrold, who was privileged to follow her young lady anywhere:

"Ain't it wonderful, ma'am! These colts as won't obey their elders with whip or spur will obey like lambs without a bleat when one of their own kind only bigger gives the orders!"

'And so she rode off, radiant. Between the two big horses her own white pony, with its pretty mistress a blaze of scarlet and white, looked like an animated toy, and a lovely toy too.

At first Harold was shy; but shyness could not last long in the company of Stephen. He looked so big and strong perched up on the big horse, and his experiences were so much more dazzling than her own that she simply adored him. The ride was all too short.

That evening when going to bed she came to say good-night to Daddy. After she had kissed him she also kissed "old Mr. Harold," as she now called him, and as a matter of course kissed Harold also. He coloured up at once. It was the first time that a girl had ever kissed him.

The next day from early morning until bed-time was one long joy to Stephen, and there were few things of interest that he had not been shown; there were few of the little secrets which had not been shared with him as they went about hand in hand. Like all manly boys Harold was good to little children and patient with them even if there must be a certain exercise of the virtue of self denial. But on this occasion no effort was required. He was content to follow Stephen about and obey all her behests. He had fallen in love with her to the very bottom of his boyish heart.

When the guests were going, Stephen stood with her father on the steps to see them off. When the carriage had swept behind the farthest point in the long avenue, and when Harold's cap waving from the window could no longer be seen, Squire Norman turned to go in, but paused in obedience to the unconscious restraint of Stephen's hand. He waited patiently till with a long sigh she turned to him and they went in together.

That night before she went to bed Stephen came and sat on her father's knee, and after sundry pattings and kissings whispered in his ear:

"Daddy, wouldn't it be nice if Harold could come here altogether? Couldn't you ask him to? Oh, I *wish* he was here!"

CHAPTER III

AT NORMANSTAND

It was not long before Dr. An Wolf and Harold came again to Normanstand.

This second visit was even more successful than the first, for in his absence came to Stephen remembrance of things which she had intended to do and say and had forgotten at the time. These were now stored up afresh in her memory ready for his advent. Thus there was no lack of purposed pleasure, and the days were not long enough for enjoyment. There is this difference between childhood and other 'hoods'; and it was but the beginning of many visits; for though the father could not often leave his work the son could come without trouble. Each time he came the Squire as well as Stephen liked him better. He had given him a horse, a fine, big horse of the same strain as Robin Hood; and the boy thought nothing of riding over and returning after one full day.

When he was at Normanstand Stephen insisted on all sorts of boyish games. There was not any one to object; for Aunt Laetitia was seldom at the house at such times, and Mrs. Jarrold did not see any reason why the child should not enjoy herself in such a way. It was healthy play, and she was happy; what more was required! The only person who could have objected was the Squire; and he secretly not only approved but rejoiced. The more boyish the girl was, the better he was pleased, and the nearer came her education to his wish. Time had not, in this respect, softened his old idea.

Stephen must have playmates; she insisted on it now that

she had tasted the pleasure. So her father began to ask to the house such children of neighbours as were available.

To Stephen the most attractive of these companions was a boy some three or four years older than herself. Leonard Everard, the only son of a gentleman, retired partner of a bank, who had not long before purchased a moderate estate between Norcester and Normanstand. He was a pretty boy, with blue eyes and curly light brown hair. His features gave promise of being handsome, and he had a figure well-fashioned and alert. His movements were as light and graceful as those of a young fawn. He first won her attention by refusing to agree to her wishes—a thing as strange to her experience as it was striking to her feminine mind. She remembered it when she had forgotten more important things. She thought it was independence; but this particular thing simply arose from selfishness. She wanted one thing, but he wanted another. He did not think of the future at all, or indeed of anything outside his own immediate purpose. But she, not knowing his nature, was struck with that something she had not seen in other people. All around her gave her sympathy, even when they denied her wishes; but this new boy who refused with a brutal “no” became at once a power to her. And then he was so pretty! The black eyes which she saw in her mirror were nothing like these blue ones; the sunny brown hair seemed sweet and reposeful after the contemplation of her own flaming red. The other children were somewhat amazed, for the imperious little lady had so impressed her own will as well as her own individuality on them that opposition to her wishes was new to them all. At the first she was not over pleased; but there was compensation in the thought that this was a real boy who was masterful. Every fibre in her little feminine body realised the fact. She was glad, too, that Harold was not there; for Harold had a way of making every one obey him, and she felt that this boy must not be compelled to play by a boy so very much bigger than himself. Already she had a shrewd idea of Harold’s force. He was in the back-

ground of her mind as a power; a power that she could command, and in which she had implicit faith. A child of lesser nature would have sulked, or would have refused to play any other game, and so have wrought out her own desires. But Stephen was above such pettiness. Her sunny nature, though impulsive was reasonable; unless the thing was very desirable she did not wish to make any one else uncomfortable. Moreover, Leonard was her guest; the virtue of hospitality had been in the blood of her race for too many centuries to be easily neglected.

"Very well," she said, in her pretty high-bred way, "you choose, Leonard, we'll play at what you like."

Leonard had chosen at once. He had no qualms or scruples in a matter of gratifying his own desires. The thought of any consideration for his hostess or any of the other children, or for any girl manifestly weaker than himself, did not even suggest itself to him. He would have been mightily surprised if it had.

Leonard's pleasure had not, all told, been increased by his opposition and the giving way to it. The little girl had, in her dignified haughtiness, mortified him, though he had not immediately been aware of it.

A little after this time a great blow fell upon Harold. His father, who had been suffering from repeated attacks of influenza, was when in the low condition following this seized with an attack of pneumonia, to which in a few days he succumbed. Harold was heart-broken. But there was much work to be done, and he tried to attend to it, for the state of his father's finances was a despairing one. The rectorship of Carstone was but a poor one, and there had not been any opportunity of saving.

When Squiré Norman had returned to the house with him after the funeral, he sat in silence holding the boy's hand till he had wept his heart out. By this time the two were old friends, and the boy was not afraid or too shy to break down before him. There was sufficient of the love of the old generation to begin with trust in the new.


Presently, when the storm was past and Harold had become his own man again, Norman said:

"And now, Harold, I want you to listen to me. You know, my dear boy, that I am your father's oldest friend, and right sure I am that he would approve of what I say. You must come home with me to live. I know that in his last hours the great concern of your dear father's heart would have been for the future of his boy. And I know, too, that it was a comfort to him to feel that you and I are such friends, and that the son of my dearest old friend would be as a son to me. We have been friends, you and I, a long time, Harold; and we have learned to trust, and I hope to love, one another. And you and my little Stephen are such friends already that your coming into the house will be a joy to us all. Why, long ago, two or three years ago when first you came, she said to me the night you went away: "Daddy, wouldn't it be nice if Harold could come here altogether?"

The remembrance of those pleasant days came back to Harold so strongly, and with them so keen a sense of his great loss, that his grief broke out afresh. The other was patient with him; he understood. When the second burst of grief was over he went on:

"And it will be a great comfort to me to have you with me. After all, Stephen is only a little girl, and you will be her big brother and look after her and keep her from harm. And you have been educated so well that you can help her with her lessons. We two, my girl and I, shall, I know, be happy; and I hope you will also be when time has dulled a little the edge of your grief. Don't ever be afraid to cry, my dear boy, now or hereafter, when you think of that good, good man!"

And so Harold An Wolf came back with the Squire to Normanstand, and from that day on became a member of his house and as a son to him. Stephen's delight at his coming was of course largely qualified by her sympathy with his grief; but it would have been hard to give him more comfort



than she did in her own pretty way. Putting her lips to his she kissed him, and holding his big hand in both of her little ones, she whispered softly:

"Poor Harold! You and I should love each other, for we have both lost our mother. And now you have lost your father. But you must let my dear daddy be yours too!"

At this time Harold was between fourteen and fifteen years old. He was well educated in so far as private teaching went. His father had devoted much care to him, so that he was well grounded in all the Academic branches of learning. In this was included logic, in which his father had a firm belief, thinking—and thinking rightly—that was the base of the organisation and correctness of thought. He was also, for his years, an expert in most of the manly exercises. He could ride anything, shoot straight, fence, run, jump or swim with any boy more than his age and size.

In Normanstand his education was continued by the rector. The Squire used often to take him with him when he went to ride, or fish, or shoot; frankly telling him that as his daughter was, as yet, too young to be his companion in these matters, he would act as her *locum tenens*. His living in the house and his helping as he did in Stephen's studies made familiarity perpetual. He was just enough her senior to command her childish obedience; for in young days real obedience is that which is given willingly, and not either as a matter of course, or in ultimate fear of consequences. It is given, not to the older generation, but to the older members of the new. There were certain qualities in Harold's nature which were eminently calculated to win and keep the respect of women as well as of men. He was the very incarnation of sincerity, and had now and again, in certain ways, a sublime self-negation which, at times, seemed in startling contrast to a manifestly militant nature. By a sort of unconscious chivalry he was generally found fighting on the weaker side. Harold's father had been very proud of his ancestry, which was Gothic through the Dutch, as the manifestly corrupted prefix of the original name implied, and he

had gathered from a constant study of the Sagas something of the philosophy which all unconscious to themselves lay behind the ideas of the Vikings. For a parson, Dr. An Wolf held particularly militant ideas; it was with personal feeling that he used to say to his son:

"There never was, my boy, such philosophy making for victory as that held by our Vikings. It taught that whoever was never wounded was never happy. It was not enough to be victorious. The fighter should contend against such odds that complete immunity was impossible. Look at the result! A handful of them from the bays and creeks of the far northern seas would conquer cities and whole lines of coast. Why, their strength, and endurance, and resolution, perfected by their life of constant hardihood and stress, became so ingrained in their race, that to this day, a thousand years after they themselves have passed away, their descendants have some of their fine qualities. Go where you will throughout this country, or any seaboard of Europe, and you will find that where the old type remains they dominate their fellows. Ay, even where the passing of centuries has diluted their blood with that of weaker races. Fight, my boy, fight! Look at that hecatomb of skulls in the crypt at Hythe and see the wounds all in front; better still, see the cicatrices of the old wounds. Clean cuts they are, each of which looks as if made with a pickaxe. You will get some idea there of the strength and endurance and resolution of this mighty race. Let your cause be ever a just one; and you need never lack such whilst sin and crime and wickedness and weakness and shame are in the world. Then fight, fight against any odds! If you go down, you go down in truth and honour! And the battle of truth and honour is God's battle!"

Naturally the normal playtime of Stephen became somewhat different after the coming of Harold. The compensation to the little girl, who studied more assiduously under his assistance, was that she was to play more vigorously under it also. Together they rode distances long for her. They had walks through the woods and over the wolds; and

when now and again she was overtired, the boy's strong back was available for her help. The cricket field took new and more definite organisation. And the many pets, fish, flesh, and fowl, were inspected from headquarters with a regularity hitherto unknown. Stephen was beginning to learn the real lesson of her life; and her father watched with secret delight to see growing in her mind more and more of that constant regularity of intention which makes the mental attitude of man. It really seemed to him that his old hope regarding a son was now taking a practical shape. To Harold it was all pleasure, work and play alike; when once the shock of his great sorrow began to lift, and the natural resilience of youth to manifest itself. His blind adoration of the beautiful child became in reality intensified; but inasmuch as it was now brought into daily use, and as the human littlenesses began to point out to him that his divinity was after all but clay, there sprang up a new feeling of friendship or comradeship. But far back in his mind, and lifted high to those regions which are the sacred places of a boy's soul, the figure of the child as he had first seen her, and now glorified by his memories and dreams, was enshrined beside the mother of whom his memory was so dim, and the father of whom to think was anguish mingled with joy.

Childhood builds its own shrines; and these live untarnished and unimpaired to the end. It may be that as middle age creeps on us their size seems to diminish by the proportions of other things that loom larger into our lives. But when old age begins to gallop towards us the things of earth begin to dwindle; and so the old shrines take on again their ancient grandeur. Thus the circle of humanity is completed: a want, an emotion, a passion, a pain, a memory. And then the pristine dust, that has for a time been glorified by the touch of the Creator, and sullied by the touch of life, and purified by pain, goes back to dust again.

CHAPTER IV

A VISIT TO OXFORD

THE next important move in the household was Harold's going to Cambridge. His father had always intended this, and Squire Norman had borne his wishes in mind. Harold joined Trinity, the college which had been his father's, and took up his residence in due course.

Before he went he succeeded, partially, in convincing Stephen of the necessity of yielding obedience to her governess. At this time of her life Stephen was distinctly rebellious to constituted authority that she did not approve of. To only four people did she yield any obedience whatever: her father, whom in a motherly spirit she protected against pain; her uncle, who was so much of a chum, and who so seldom exercised authority that her yielding to his wishes did not seem like obedience at all; Aunt Laetitia, of whom as a superior member of her own sex she stood somewhat in awe; and Harold. Her new governess, Miss Howard, was too weak to control her; this she knew, and availed herself of her knowledge. She knew the extreme limit of her own power of resistance, without a disagreeable in the shape of an appeal to her father; and with her usual exercise of common sense took care not to exceed it.

Dame Nature who knows all secrets, and who can see why flowers grow and how babies turn into men and women, must now and again smile with that broad motherly smile of hers when she sees by what natural processes the mind arrives at truth; when it fondly imagines that it is finding a new and abnormal way for itself. Stephen, being rebellious and proud,

did not care that Miss Howard, whom in her heart she despised, should be her superior in certain branches of knowledge. She therefore set herself to work with such assiduity that before very long she became, almost if not quite, the equal of her teacher. And here came the opportunity for Dame Nature's double smile, the broad one which combines the enjoyment of the irony and the satisfaction at good work well done. For the imperious young lady found her natural logic at fault. She had despised Miss Howard from the standpoint of her own ignorance, *a fortiori* would she despise her from the height of her equality. She had been looking forward to this enjoyable relief to her feelings as the reward of an earnest and well-sustained effort. But it did not come. On the contrary, she began to respect more than she had done the woman who she knew must have gone through a similar period of arduous endeavour; and respect was followed by understanding. Then the really generous nature of the girl asserted itself; her heart warmed towards the lonely, loveless woman who seemed to have so little whilst she had so much. To Stephen the toleration which comes, first with equality and then in greater degree with superiority, was an enlarging and a strengthening influence. She began to understand better the causes of things; and with wonder came the handmaidens of Wonder: Curiosity and Fear.

And here it was that the "essential difference" of the girl's character began to manifest itself intellectually. She had no use for fear. It was not without dismay as to consequences, whilst she secretly gloried in the success of her tuition, that Miss Howard realised the coming possibilities of her pupil's character. Her daring conclusions frightened her; her searching questions and her unflinching analysis of things set before her pupil, puzzled as much as they alarmed her.

But all the time of this growing she never lost her grasp on those things to which she had already set her hands. Her range of friendships, naturally limited by her circumstances

in life, was enlarged to the full; and if she had not many close friends there were at least of them all that was numerically possible.

Amongst the young friends who came from time to time during his holidays was Leonard Everard, now a tall, handsome boy. He was one of those boys who develop young, and who seem never to have any of that gawky stage so noticeable in the youth of men made in a large pattern. He was always well-poised, trim-set, alert; fleet of foot, and springy all over. In games he was *facile princeps*, seeming to make his effort always in the right way and without exertion, as if by an instinct of physical masterdom. His universal success in such matters helped to give him an easy debonair manner which was in itself winning. So physically complete a youth has always a charm. In its very presence there is a sort of sympathetic expression, such as comes with the sunshine. It was not without a deep understanding of the secrets and analogies of nature that the old Greeks made the Sun God a beautiful and fascinating youth!

Stephen always in Leonard's presence showed something of the common attitude. His youth and beauty and sex all had their influence on her. The influence of sex, as it is understood with regard to a later period of life, did not in her case exist; Cupid's darts are barbed and winged for more adult victims. But in her case Leonard's masculine superiority emphasised by the few years between their ages, his sublime self-belief, and, above all, his absolute disregard for herself or her wishes or her feelings, put him on a level at which she had to look up to him. The first step in the ladder of pre-eminence had long ago been achieved when she realised that he was not on her level; the second when she experienced rather than thought that he had more influence on her than she had on him. But after all he was only an episode in a young life which was full of interests. Term after term came and went; the holidays had their seasonable pleasures, occasionally shared in common. That was all. Of

course Stephen, being of womankind, noticed how the round jacket developed tails; how the spreading collar became a standing one; how neckties of new and radiant patterns came into being; and how even a flamboyant taste in socks began to develop. It is possible that Stephen would have thought more of Leonard, and have seen him oftener, only that Harold was generally home from college at the same time. And there were so many things which she had to do with Harold, so many things held over till his coming, that it was seldom that there was time left for anything else.

Harold's attitude was the same as ever. He was of a constant nature; and now that manhood was within hail of him the love of his boyhood was ripening to a man's love. Each holiday between the terms became mainly a repetition of the days of the old life. They lived in the past.

To live in the Past is all very well. But the Past stands still whilst the Present is a moving force. With each step new objects come into view; new joys and fears; new loves and sympathies. The whole circle of Cosmic existence trembles eternally into new life.

Amongst the things that did not change was Stephen's riding dress. The scarlet habit had never been a thing for everyday wear, but had from the first been kept for special occasions. Stephen herself knew that it was not a conventional costume; but she rather preferred it, if on that account alone. In a certain way she felt justified in using it; for a red habit was a sort of tradition in the family. In the great dining-room at Normanstand were two pictures of ladies of the house in scarlet. One that Lady Diana by whom nearly two hundred years ago the Normans became allied to the house of Dalrymple, and to whose picture, by Thornhill, Stephen bore so striking a likeness, save her black eyes. The other was the Countess of Heply, painted by Gainsborough in his early days. Once at a schoolroom tea, at which Stephen was a guest, when one pert young damsel questioned the taste of wearing such a dress, she replied with an air of tolerant gravity which made her questioner squirm:

"It isn't my own idea. My father likes it; and so do I for the matter of that. But in our past we have a sort of tradition. One must not forget one's ancestors, you know! May I have another cup of tea?"

By a natural process, however, the wearing of the red dress became confined to gala occasions. It was not for the stress of daily life; and whenever she put it on there came with it the feelings of her youth. All her old memories, and old faiths, and old hopes were renewed again.

It was on one of these occasions that she had gone with Harold into the churchyard where they had heard the discussion regarding God and the Angels. Lady Heply had been giving a great garden party, chiefly to the members of the hunt; and had asked that all should wear their hunting pink. To Stephen, of whom she was very fond, she had made a special request:

"I want you, my dear, to come in your pretty red habit that you wore on the first day of the hunting. Your father says you may come as it is only a garden party, and there will be lots of young girls who, like you, are not yet out. Indeed, the dress being unusual, will show that it is an exceptional occasion." Lady Heply was very proud of her young kinswoman, and knew right well that there would be no more attractive figure in her garden than the young heiress of Normanstand.

It was a gallant cavalcade that swept up the long avenue of Heply Royal, between the double lines of century-old oaks, that June afternoon. Squire Norman, with Harold beside him, both on their great black horses, and Gilbert Rowly on his chestnut. Between her father and her uncle, on her white Arab, all life and animation, Stephen rode with an exulting spirit which seemed to shine through her in radiant colour. Behind, riding abreast, came the four black-clad, splendidly-mounted grooms, their horses' hoofs making rhythmic time on the hard sand.

When Stephen was about sixteen she went for a short

visit to Oxford. She stayed at Somerville with Mrs. Egerton, an old friend of her mother's, who was a professor at the college. She sent back her maid who had travelled with her, as she knew that the college girls did not have servants of their own. The visit was prolonged by mutual consent into a duration of some weeks. Stephen fell in love with the place and the life, and had serious thoughts of joining the college herself. Indeed she had made up her mind to ask her father to allow her, knowing well that he would consent to that or to any other wholesome wish of hers. But then came the thought that he would be all alone at home; and following that came another thought, and one of more poignant feeling. He was alone now! Already, for many days, she had left him, for the first time in her life! Stephen was quick to act; well she knew that at home there would be no fault found with her for a speedy return. Within a few hours she had brought her visit to an end, and was by herself, despite Mrs. Egerton's protest, in the train on the way back to Norcester.

In the train she began to review, for the first time, her visit to the university. All had been so strange and new and delightful to her, that she had never stopped for retrospect. Life in the new and enchanting place had been in the moving present. The mind had been receptive only, gathering data for later thought. There was something in the stir and movement, the endless shifting of the pieces which made up the kaleidoscope of life, ever bringing up new thoughts, new emotions, new experiences; new combinations of thought and emotion and experience in endless variety, till the brain reeled. It was like trying to understand and formulate into memory a glimpse of a new and strange world. During her visit she had had no one to direct her thought, and so it had been all personal, with the freedom of individuality at large. Of course her mother's friend, skilled in the mind-workings of average girls, and able to pick her way through intellectual and moral quagmires, had taken good care to point out to her certain intellectual movements and

certain moral lessons; just as she had in their various walks and drives pointed out matters of interest—architectural beauties and spots of historic import. And she had taken in, loyally accepted, and thoroughly assimilated all that she had been told. But there were other lessons which were for her young eyes; facts which the older eyes had ceased to notice, if they had ever noticed them at all. The self-content, the sex-content in the endless tide of young men that thronged the streets and quads and parks; the all-sufficing nature of sport or study to whichever their inclinations tended. The small part which womankind seemed to have in their lives. Stephen had had, as we know, a peculiar training; whatever her instincts were, her habits were largely boy habits. Here she was amongst boys, a glorious tide of them; it made now and again her heart beat to look at them. And yet amongst them all she was only an outsider. She could not do anything better than any of them. Of course, each time she went out, she became conscious of admiring glances; she could not be woman without such consciousness. But it was as a girl that men looked at her, not as an equal. And somehow, unconsciously at first, but afterwards more, if not quite, consciously, she found in herself a tendency to look up, to admire. There was some strange want in her; something which she did not know, which was new to her; which was full of delicious, languorous negation of self; not pain, not joy, not sorrow nor regret, not longing; but whose prolonged sensation was ended in tears. A sort of divine dissatisfaction with self which comes when sex begins to stir. All this had not been thought of in the whirl of new life, when every breath drawn was a gush of fresh excitement. But it all went into that great storehouse which we call memory. The review of it was to come later, when little things and big all jumbled together in the maelstrom would be separated; when each placed in proper isolation would assume its true proportion. For as well as personal experience and the lessons of eyes and ears and intelligence, there were other things to classify and adjust;

things which were entirely from the outside of her own life. The fragments of common-room gossip, which it had been her fortune to hear accidentally now and again. The half confidences of scandals, borne on whispered breaths. The whole confidences of dormitory and study which she had been privileged to share. All were parts of the new and strange world, the great world which had swum into her ken.

As she sat now in the train, with some formulation of memory already accomplished in the two hours of solitude, her first comment, spoken half audibly, would have surprised her teachers as much as it would have surprised herself, if she had been conscious of it; for as yet her thinking was not self-conscious:

"Surely I am not like that!"

It was of the women she had been thinking, not of the men. The glimpse which she had had of her own sex had been an awakening to her; and the awakening had not been to a pleasant world. All at once she seemed to realise that her sex had defects—littlenesses, meannesses, cowardices, falsenesses. That their occupations were apt to be trivial or narrow or selfish; that their desires were earthy, and their tastes coarse; that what she held to be goodness was apt to be realised only as fear. That innocence was but ignorance, or at least baffled curiosity. That . . .

A flood of shame swept over her, and instinctively she put her hands before her burning face. As usual, she was running all at once into extremes.

And above all these was borne upon her, and for the first time in her life, that she was herself a woman!

For a long time she sat quite still. The train thrilled and roared on its way. Signals and points had their sphere of moving endeavour. Through tunnels the train flashed, and the roaring stopped with the sudden silence of freedom as it rushed into daylight. Crowded stations took and gave their quantum of living freight; but the young girl sat abstracted, unmoved, seemingly unconscious. Her mind had passed the

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receptive and the reflective stages, and was now at practical work. She was, if not looking into the future, at least trying to forestall difficulties. All the dominance and energy of her nature were at work.

If, indeed, she was a woman, and had to abide by the exigencies of her own sex, she would at least not be ruled and limited by woman's weakness. She would plan and act and manage things for herself, in her own way. She had some good models of manhood within the circle of her own life, and she would take from them example and all the lessons of the nature of man which she could get. Fortunately her father had never gainsaid her; on the contrary, he had wished her to grow up in manly ways. At last she seemed to understand something of his purpose in her peculiar education. How strong and good it was! How she would henceforth bend herself to it; and would so fashion her own acts that they would not be tinged with the woman's weakness of which she had had so painful an experience!

Whatever her thoughts might be, she could at least control her acts. And those acts should be based not on woman's weakness, but on man's strength!

CHAPTER V

THE NEED OF KNOWING

WHEN Stephen announced her intention of going with her father to the Petty Sessions Court, there was a sort of consternation amongst the female population of Normanstand and Norwood. Such a thing had not been heard of in the experiences of any of them. Courts of Justice were places for men; and the lower courts dealt with a class of cases. . . . It was quite impossible to imagine where any young lady could get such an idea. . . .

As for Miss Laetitia Rowly she was simply in a state of militancy. She fully recognised to herself that she had a difficult task before her, for she was by now accustomed to Stephen's quiet method of having her own way. For three years past the girl had set herself resolutely down to certain branches of study and did not seem to flinch from conclusions resulting from any of them. In Miss Rowly's young days political economy was not a subject which ladies were supposed to understand, or to have any traffic in. As for sociology, it was considered by the same class of women to be a sort of unknown terror, something in the nature of anarchy and infidelity, if not so overtly indecent as either of them. As to physiology, it was simply a word in use amongst scientific men, and associated in ordinary minds with lint and scalpels and that new creation of man's mind "anæsthetic"—whatever it might mean. Such terms as "amorphous" or "formative influences" did not exist. "Sex" or "sexual" were not words which could be used lightly even amongst women; or ever except on occasions of necessary gravity, before men at all.

Knowing the gravity of the task before her, Miss Laetitia made a careful toilet before driving over to Normanstand. Behold her then, sailing into the great drawing-room at Normanstand with her mind so firmly fixed on the task before her as to be oblivious of minor considerations. She was so fond of Stephen, and admired so truly her many beauties and fine qualities, that she was secure and without flaw in her purpose. Stephen was in danger, and though in her heart of hearts she doubted if she would be able to effect any change, she was determined that at least she should not go into danger with her eyes unopened. The still air of the great room, sweet with treasured lavender and *pot pourri* seemed to quiver, vibrant to the emotion of coming battle.

Stephen entered hastily and ran to her. She loved her great-aunt; really and truly loved her in every mood and tense of the word. And indeed it would have been strange if she had not, for from the earliest hour which she could recollect she had received from her nothing but the truest, fondest affection. Moreover she deeply respected the old lady, her truth, her resolution, her stern purpose, her kindness, her charity, her genuine common-sense ability. Stephen always felt safe with her aunt. In the presence of others she might now and again have a qualm or a doubt; but not with her. There was an abiding calm in her love, answering love realised and respected. Her long and intimate knowledge of Laetitia made her aware of her moods. She could read the signs of them. She knew well the meaning of the bonnet which actually seemed to quiver as though it had a sentience of its own. She knew well the cause of her aunt's perturbation; the pain which must be caused to her was perhaps the point of most resistance in herself—she having made up her mind to her new experience.

"You look troubled, Auntie! I hope it is nothing serious?"

"It is, my dear! Very serious! Everything is serious to me which touches you."

"Me, Auntie!" Hypocrisy is a fine art. Morals have

nothing to do with it, unless they be material for its use. Stephen's voice, even in her seeming surprise, did not give any doubt; any more than did the wonderment of her widely opened eyes.

"Yes! yes, Stephen. Oh! my dear child, what is this I hear about your going to Petty Sessions with your father?"

"Oh, that! Why, Auntie dear, you must not let that trouble you. It is all right. That is necessary!"

"Necessary!" the old lady's figure grew rigid as she sat up, and her voice was loud and high. "Necessary for a young lady to go to a court house. To hear low people speaking of low crimes. To listen to cases of the most shocking kind; cases of low immorality; cases of a kind, of a nature of a—a—class that you are not supposed to know anything about. Really, Stephen! . . ." She was drawing away her hand in her indignation. But Stephen held it tight, as she said very sweetly:

"That is just it, Auntie. I am so ignorant that I feel I should know more of the lives of those very people!" Miss Laetitia interrupted:

"Ignorant! Of course you are ignorant. That is what you ought to be. Isn't it what we have all been devoting ourselves to effect ever since you were born? I think it would be well if the young women of this age would read their Bible more attentively. Read your third chapter of Genesis and remember what came of eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. That tree in Eden was not the only one of its kind, my dear. Or if it was, some one took that sword and cut slips from it. They grew fast, my dear, the outcomings from that tree! Roots or seeds, slips, or cuttings, or graftings, it is all the same! They manage to get into all our gardens!" She paused; the formulation of her epigram had been of some relief to her. Stephen realised this and capped her epigram:

"I think the Tree of Knowledge must have been an orange tree." The old lady looked up, her interest was aroused.

"Why?"

"Because ever since Eden other brides have worn its blossom!" Her tone was demure. Miss Rowly looked sharply at her, but her sharpness softened off into a smile.

"H'm!" she said, and was silent for a while. Stephen seized the opportunity to put her own case:

"Auntie dear, you must forgive me! You really must, for my heart is set on this. I assure you I am not doing it merely to please myself. I have thought over the whole matter. Over, and over, and over again; but always to the same result. Father has always wished me to be in a position—a position of knowledge and experience—to manage Normanstand if I should ever succeed him. From the earliest time I can remember he has always kept this before me, and though of course I did not at first understand what it meant, I have seemed in the last few years to know better. Accordingly I learned all sorts of things under his care, and sometimes even without his help. I have studied the estate map, and I have been over the estate books and read some of the leases and all such matters which they deal with in the estate office. This only told me of the bones of the thing. I wanted to know more of our people; and so I made a point of going now and again to each house that we own. Of seeing the people and talking with them familiarly; as familiarly as they would let me, and indeed so far as was possible considering my position. For, Auntie dear, I soon began to learn—to learn in a way there was no mistaking—what my position is. And so I want to get to know more of their ordinary lives; the darker as well as the lighter side. I would like to do them good. I can see how my dear daddy has always been a sort of power to help them, and I would like to carry on his work; to carry it further if I may. But I must know. My life is so different from theirs that I must know more of their ultimate hopes, more of their controlling fears. And from what I have heard hinted here and there and gathered from their conversations, the police court is the place of all others associated in their minds with fear.

They are not afraid of hospital; indeed they rather look on it as a place of rest and luxury. But they fear the gaol!"

She paused for a moment as if in thought; and in the pause her aunt spoke. She had been listening to the young girl with growing interest, and with growing respect too, for she realised the intense earnestness which lay behind her words and her immediate purpose. Her voice and manner were both more softened than they had been:

"But, my dear, surely it is not necessary to go into the Court to know these things. The results of the hearing of each case by the magistrates become known."

"That is just it, Auntie," she answered quickly. "The magistrates themselves have to hear the two sides of the case before even they can make up their minds. I want to hear both sides, too! If people are guilty, I want to know the cause of their guilt. If they are innocent, I want to know what the circumstances can be which make innocence look like guilt. In my own daily life I may be in the way of just such judgments; and surely it is only right that judgment should be just!"

Again she paused; there rose before her mind that conversation in the churchyard when Harold had said that it was difficult for women to be just.

Miss Rowly reflected too. She was becoming convinced that in principle the girl was right. But the details were still as repugnant as ever to her; concentrating her mind on the point where she felt the ground firm under her, she made her objection:

"But, Stephen dear, there are so many cases that are sordid and painful!"

"The more need to know of sordid things; if sordidness plays so important a part in the tragedy of their lives!"

"But there are cases which are not within a woman's, a girl's province. Cases that touch sin. . . ."

"What kind of sin do you mean? Surely all wrongdoing is sin!" The old lady was quite embarrassed. Not by the fact, for she had been for too many years the mistress of a

great household not to know something of the subject on which she spoke, but that she had to speak of such a matter to the young girl whom she so loved.

The sin, my dear, of . . . of woman's wrongdoing . . . as woman . . . of motherhood, without marriage!" All Stephen's nature seemed to rise in revolt.

"Why, Auntie," she spoke out at once, "you yourself show the want of the very experience I look for!"

"How? what?" asked the old lady amazed and bristling. Stephen took her hand and held it affectionately as she spoke:

"You speak of a woman's wrongdoing, when surely it is a man's as well. There does not seem to be blame for him who is the more guilty. Only for poor women! . . . And, Auntie dear, it is such poor women that I should like to help. . . . Not when it is too late, but before! But how can I help unless I know? Good girls cannot tell me, and good women won't! You yourself, Auntie, didn't want to speak on the subject; even to me!"

"But, my dear child, these are not things for unmarried women. I never speak of them myself except with matrons." Stephen's answer flashed out like a sword; and cut like one:

"And yet you are unmarried! Oh, Auntie dear, I did not and I do not mean to be offensive, or to hurt you in any way. I know, dear, your goodness and your kindness to all. But you limit yourself to one side!" The elder lady interrupted:

"How do you mean? one side! which side?"

"The punishment side. I want to know the cause of that which brings the punishment. I want to know something of the beginnings of things. There surely is some cross road in a girl's life where the ways part. I want to stand there if I can, with warning in one hand and help in the other. Oh! Auntie, Auntie, can't you see that my heart is in this. . . . These are our people; Daddy says they are to be my people; and I want to know their lives right through; to understand their wants, and their temptations, and their weakness. I

must read from cover to cover the book of their lives. Bad and good, whatever it be, I must know it all! I must know it all; or I shall be working in the dark, and may injure or crush where I had looked to help and raise."

As she spoke she looked glorified. The afternoon autumn sun shone full through the great window and lighted her up till she looked like a spirit. Lighted her white diaphanous dress till it seemed to take shape as an ethereal robe; lighted her red hair till it looked like a celestial crown; lighted her great dark eyes till their black beauty became swept in the tide of glory.

The heart of the old woman who loved her best heaved, and her bosom swelled with pride. Instinctively she spoke:

"Oh, you noble, beautiful creature! Of course you are right, and your way is God's way!" With tears that rained down her furrowed cheeks, she put her arms round the girl and kissed her fondly. Still holding her in her arms she gave her the gentle counsel which was the aftermath of her moment of inspiration.

"But, Stephen dear, do be careful! Knowledge is a two-edged sword, and it is apt to side with pride. Remember what was the last temptation of the serpent to Eve: "Your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil."

"I shall be very careful," she said gravely.

With concern mingled with pride Miss Rowly realised the growing independence, the more marked self-dependence of Stephen. Now and again she tried to deflect or modify certain coming forces, so that the educational process in which she had always had a part would continue in the right direction. But she generally found that the girl had been over the ground so thoroughly that she was able to defend her position. Once again, when she had ventured—she began to feel now that it was really venturing to discuss a new subject with her—to remonstrate with her regarding her attitude of woman's equality with man, she felt as if Stephen's barque was indeed entering on dangerous seas. The occasion had

arisen thus: Stephen had been what her aunt had stigmatised as "laying down the law" with regard to the position of a married woman, and Miss Rowly, seeing a good argumentative opening, remarked:

"But what if a woman does not get the opportunity of being married?" Stephen looked at her a moment before saying with conviction:

"It is a woman's fault if she does not get the opportunity!" The old lady smiled superiorly as she answered:

"Her fault? My dear, what if no man asks her?" This seemed to her own mind a poser; as she spoke she raised her lorgnon to look at its effect.

"Still her own fault! Why doesn't she ask him?" The lorgnon was dropped in horrified amazement. She sat speechless for a few seconds, and then breathlessly gasped out:

"My dear!" Stephen went on impassively. It was quite apparent that she was speaking out of a settled conviction:

"Certainly! Why shouldn't she? Marriage is a union. As it is in the eye of the law a civil contract, either party to it should be at liberty to originate the matter. If the twain are to be one flesh as the Bible says; and if, as we are taught, there should be equal understanding and communion between them, how else is this to be done? If a woman is not free to think of a man in all ways, how is she to judge of the suitability of their union? And if she is free in theory, why not free to undertake if necessary the initiative in a matter so momentous to herself?" The old lady actually groaned and wrung her hands; she was horrified at such sentiments. They were daring enough to think; but to put them in words! . . .

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" she moaned out, "be careful what you say. Some one might hear you who would not understand, as I do, that you are talking theory." Stephen's habit of thought stood to her here. She saw that her aunt was distressed, and as she did not wish to pain her unduly, was willing to divert the immediate channel of her fear.

She took the hand which lay in her lap and held it firmly whilst she smiled in the loving old eyes.

"Of course, Auntie dear, it is theory. But still it is a theory which I hold very strongly!" . . . Here a thought struck her and she said suddenly:

"Did you ever . . . How many proposals did you have, Auntie?" The old lady smiled; her thoughts were already diverted.

"Several, my dear! It is so long ago that I don't remember!"

"Oh yes, you do, Auntie! No woman ever forgets that, no matter what else she may or may not remember! Tell me, won't you?" The old lady blushed slightly as she answered:

"There is no need to specify, my dear. Let it be at this, that there were more than you could count on your right hand!"

"And why did you refuse them?" The tone was wheedling, and the elder woman loved to hear it. Wheedling is the courtship by the young of the old.

"Because, my dear, I didn't love them."

"But tell me, Auntie, was there never any one that you did love?"

"Ah! my dear, that is a different matter. That is the real tragedy of a woman's life." In flooding reminiscent thought she forgot her remonstrating; her voice became full of natural pathos:

"To love; and be helpless! To wait, and wait, and wait; with your heart all aflame! To hope, and hope till time seems to have passed away, and all the world to stand still on your hopeless misery! To know that a word might open up Heaven; and yet to have to remain mute! To keep back the glances that could enlighten; to modulate the tones that might betray! To see all you hoped for passing away . . . to another! . . ."

Stephen bent over and kissed her, and then standing up said:

"I understand! Isn't it wrong, Auntie, that there should

be such tragedies? Should not that glance be given? Why should that tone be checked? Why should one be mute when a single word might, would, avert the tragedy? Surely the very essence of tragedy is that it is all unnecessary. We don't call the evils or sorrows of life that come naturally or by accident tragedies. A woman's heart is everything to her. I suppose we must take it that on it rests all the happiness of her life; and if these tragedies are to occur, they occur to the young when all the span of life is before them. Is it not possible, Auntie, that there is something wrong in our social system when such things can happen and can happen so often?

"Some day women must learn their own strength, as well as they have learned their own weakness. They are taught this latter from their cradles up; but no one ever seems to teach them wherein their power lies. They have to learn this for themselves; and the process and the result of the self-teaching are not good. In the University Settlement I learned much that made my heart ache; but out of it there seemed some lesson for good." She paused; and her aunt, wishing to keep the subject towards higher things, asked:

"And that lesson, Stephen dear?" The blazing eyes turned to her so that she was stirred by them as the answer came:

"It is bad women who seem to know men best, and to be able to influence them most. *They* can make men come and go at will. *They* can turn and twist and mould them as they choose. And *they* never hesitate to speak their own wishes; to ask for what they want. There are no tragedies, of the negative kind, in *their* lives. Their tragedies have come and gone already; and their power remains. Why should good woman leave power to such as *they*? Why should good women's lives be wrecked for a convention? Why in the blind following of some society fetish should life lose its charm, its possibilities? Why should love eat its heart out, in vain? The time will come when women will not be afraid to speak to men, as they should speak, as free and equal. Surely

if a woman is to be the equal and lifelong companion of a man, the closest to him—nay, the only one really close to him: the mother of his children—she should be free at the very outset to show her inclination to him just as he would to her. Don't be frightened, Auntie dear; your eyes are paining me! . . . There! perhaps I said too much. But after all it is only theory. Take for your comfort, Auntie dear, that I am free and heart-whole. You need not fear for me; I can see what your dear eyes tell me. Yes! I am very young; perhaps too young to think such things. But I have thought of them. Thought them all over in every way and phase I can imagine."

She stopped suddenly; bending over, she took the old lady in her arms and kissed her fondly several times, holding her tight. Then, as suddenly releasing her, she ran away before she could say a word.

CHAPTER VI

THE T-CART

WHEN Harold took his degree, and had returned to Normanstand, the Squire took an early opportunity of bringing him alone into his study. He spoke to him with what in a very young man would have seemed diffidence:

"I have been thinking, Harold, that the time has come when you should be altogether your own master. I am more than pleased, my boy, with the way you have gone through college; it is, I am sure, just as your dear father would have wished it, and as it would have pleased him best." He paused, and Harold said in a low voice:

"I tried hard, sir, to do what I thought he would like; and what you would." The Squire went on more cheerfully:

"I know that, my boy! I know that well. And I can tell you that it is not the least of the pleasures we have all had in your success, how you have justified yourself. You have won many honours in the schools, and you have kept the reputation as an athlete which your father was so proud of. Well, I suppose in the natural order of things you would go into a profession; and of course if you so desire you can do that. But if you can see your way to it I would rather that you stayed here. My house is your home as long as I live; but I don't wish you to feel in any way dependent. I want you to stay here if you will; but to do it just because you wish to. You can move about or change just as you will. To this end I have made over to you the estate at Camp which was my father's gift to me when I came of age. It is not a very large one; but it will give you a nice position of your own,

and a comfortable income. And with it goes my blessing, my dear boy. Take it as a gift from your father and myself!"

Harold was much moved, not only by the act itself but by the gracious way of doing it. There were tears in his eyes as he wrung the Squire's hand; his voice thrilled with feeling as he said:

"Your many goodnesses to my father's son, sir, will, I hope, be justified by his love and loyalty. If I don't say much it is because I do not feel quite master of myself. I shall try to show in time, as I cannot say it all at once, all that I feel."

Harold continued to live at Normanstand. Camp was in reality a charming place. A couple of servants were installed, and now and again he stayed there for a few days as he wished to get accustomed to the place. In a couple of months every one accepted the order of things; and life at Normanstand went on much as it had done before Harold had gone to college. There was a man in the house now instead of a boy: that was all. Stephen too was beginning to be a young woman, but the relative positions were the same as they had been. Her growth did not seem to make any ostensible difference to any one.

When the day came for the quarterly meeting of the magistrates of the county of Norcester, Squire Rowly arranged as usual to drive Squire Norman. This had been their habit for a good many years. It was a beautiful morning for a drive, and when Rowly came flying up the avenue in his T-cart with three magnificent bays, Stephen ran out on the top of the steps to see him draw up. Rowly was a fine whip, and his horses felt it. Squire Norman was ready, and, after a kiss from Stephen, climbed into the high cart. The horses stood stock-still, their flanks quivering; they knew that the moment of action was close. The men raised their hats and waved good-bye. A word from Rowly; with a bound the horses were off. Stephen stood looking at them delighted; all was so sunny, so bright, so happy. The world was so full

of life and happiness to-day that it seemed as if it would never end; that nothing except good could befall. The cart, running as smooth as if its wheels were on rails, became lesser and lesser up the long straight of the avenue and swept out of sight. Harold, later on that morning, was to go into Norcester also; so Stephen with a lonely day before her set herself to take up loose-ends of all sorts of little personal matters. They would all meet at dinner as Rowly was to stop the night at Normanstand.

Harold left the club in good time to ride home to dinner. As he passed the County Hotel he stopped to ask if Squire Norman had left; and was told that he had started only a short time before with Squire Rowly in his T-cart. He rode on fast, thinking that perhaps he might overtake them and ride on with them. But the bays knew their work, and did it. They kept their start; it was only at the top of the North hill, five miles out of Norcester, that he saw them in the distance, flying along the level road. He knew he would not now overtake them, and so rode on somewhat more leisurely.

The Norcester highroad, when it has passed the village of Brackling, turns away to the right behind the great clump of oaks where it was said the Druids used to hold their rites. From this the road twists to the left again, making a double curve, and then runs to Norling Parva in a clear stretch of some miles before reaching the sharp turn down the hill. From the latter village branches the by-road over the hill which is the short cut to Normanstand.

When Harold turned the corner under the shadow of the oaks he saw a belated road-mender, surrounded by some gaping peasants, pointing excitedly in the distance. The man, who of course knew him, called to him to stop.

"What is it?" he asked, reining up.

"It be Squire Rowly's bays which have run away with him. Three on 'em, all in a row and comin' like the wind. Squire he had his reins all right, but they 'osses didn't seem to mind 'un. They was fair mad and bolted. The leader

he had got frightened at the heap o' stones theer, an' the others took scare from him."

Without a word Harold shook his reins and touched the horse with his whip. The animal seemed to understand and sprang forward, covering the ground at a terrific pace. Harold was not given to alarms, but here might be serious danger. Three spirited horses in a light cart made for pace, all bolting in fright, might end any moment in calamity. Never in his life did he ride faster than on the road to Norling Parva. Far ahead of him he could see at the turn, now and again, a figure running. Something had happened. His heart grew cold: he knew as well as though he had seen it, the high cart swaying on one wheel round the corner as the maddened horses tore on their way; the one jerk too much, and the momentary reaction in the crash! . . .

With beating heart and eyes aflame in his white face he dashed on.

It was all too true. By the side of the roadway on the inner curve lay the cart on its side with broken shafts. The horses were prancing and stamping about along the roadway not recovered from their fright. Each was held by several men.

And on the grass two figures were lying. Rowly, who had of course been on the off-side, had been thrown furthest. His head had struck the milestone that stood back on the waste ground before the ditch. There was no need for any one to tell that his neck had been broken. The way his head lay on one side, and the twisted, inert limbs, all told their story plainly enough.

Squire Norman lay on his back stretched out. Some one had raised him to a sitting posture and then lowered him again, straightening his limbs. He did not therefore look so dreadful as Rowly, but there were signs of coming death in the stertorous breathing, the ooze of blood from nostrils and ears as well as mouth. Harold knelt down by him at once and examined him. Those who were round all knew

him and stood back. He felt the ribs and limbs; so far as he could ascertain by touch no bone was broken.

Just then the local doctor, for whom some one had run, arrived in his gig. He too knelt down beside the injured man, a quick glance having satisfied him that there was only one patient requiring his care. Harold stood up and waited. The doctor looked up, shaking his head. Harold could hardly suppress the groan which was rising in his throat. He asked:

"Is it immediate? Should his daughter be brought here?"

"How long would it take her to arrive?"

"Perhaps half an hour; she would not lose an instant."

"Then you had better send for her."

"I shall go at once!" answered Harold, turning to jump on his horse, which was held on the road.

"No, no!" said the doctor, "send some one else. You had better stay here yourself. He may become conscious just before the end, and he may want to say something!" It seemed to Harold that a great bell was sounding in his ears.—"Before the end! Good God! Poor Stephen!" . . . But this was no time for sorrow, or for thinking of it. That would come later. All that was possible must be done; and to do it required a cool head. He called to one of the lads whom he knew could ride and said to him:

"Get on my horse and ride as fast as ever you can to Normanstand. Send at once to Miss Norman and tell her that she is wanted instantly. Tell her that there has been an accident; that her father is alive, but that she must come at once without a moment's delay. She had better ride my horse back as it will save time. She will understand from that the importance of time. Quick!"

The lad sprang to the saddle, and was off in a flash. Whilst Harold was speaking, the doctor had told the men, who, accustomed to hunting accidents, had taken a gate from its hinges and held it in readiness, to bring it closer. Then under his direction the Squire was placed on the gate. The

nearest house was only about a hundred yards away; and thither they bore him. He was lifted on a bed, and then the doctor made fuller examination. When he stood up he looked very grave and said to Harold:

"I greatly fear she cannot arrive in time. That bleeding from the ears means rupture of the brain. It is relieving the pressure, however, and he may recover consciousness before he dies. You had better be close to him. We must keep the room clear. There is at present nothing that can be done. If he becomes conscious at all it will be suddenly. He will relapse and probably die as quickly."

For perhaps a dozen minutes Harold waited in awful expectancy. With all his senses alert he kept his eyes on the senseless form before him, while with ears in whose drums his pulses seemed to beat he listened for the coming hoof-strokes of his horse which was bearing Stephen.

All at once Norman opened his eyes, and seeing him said quietly, as he looked around:

"What place is this, Harold?"

"Martin's—James Martin's, sir. You were brought here after the accident."

"Yes, I remember!" He shuddered a little. "I saw poor Rowly's head hit the stone; then I felt myself falling. Am I badly hurt? I can feel nothing!"

"I fear so, sir! I have sent for Stephen."

"Sent for Stephen! Am I about to die?" His voice, though feeble, was grave and even.

"Alas! sir, I fear so!" He sank on his knees as he spoke and took him, his second father, in his arms.

"Is it close?"

"Yes."

"Then listen to me! If I don't see Stephen, give her my love and blessing! Say that with my last breath I prayed God to keep her and make her happy! You will tell her this?"

"I will! I will!" He could hardly speak for the emotion

which was choking him. Then the voice went on, but slower and weaker:

"And Harold, my dear boy, you will look after her, will you not? Guard her and cherish her, as if you were indeed my son and she your sister!"

"I will. So help me Cod!" There was a pause of a few seconds which seemed an interminable time. Harold felt the blood rushing down the back of his neck, and his knees were trembling. Then in a feeble voice Squire Norman spoke again:

"And Harold—bend down—I must whisper! If it should be that in time you and Stephen should find that there is another affection between you, remember that I sanction it—with my dying breath. But give her time! I trust that to you! She is young, and the world is all before her. Let her choose . . . and be loyal to her if it is another! It may be a hard task; but I trust you, Harold. God bless you, my other son!" . . . He moved his head listening intently. Harold's heart leaped. The swift hoof-strokes of a galloping horse were heard. . . . The father spoke joyously:

"There she is! That is my brave girl! God grant that she may be in time. I know what it will mean to her hereafter?"

The horse stopped suddenly. Stephen's voice was heard, quick and low:

"Is he alive still? Where is he? Let me come to him at once!"

A quick patter of feet along the passage, and then Stephen, half dressed with a peignoir thrown over her, swept into the room. With the soft agility of a leopard she threw herself on her knees beside her father and put her arms round him. The dying man motioned to Harold to raise him. When this had been done he laid his hand tenderly on his daughter's head, saying:

"Let now, O Lord, Thy servant depart in peace! God bless and keep you, my dear child! You have been all your life a joy and a delight to me! I shall tell your mother when

I meet her all that you have been to me! Harold, be good to her! Good-bye—Stephen! . . . Margaret! . . .”

His head fell over, and Harold, laying him gently down, knelt beside Stephen. He put his arm round her; and she, turning to him, laid her hand on his breast and sobbed as though her heart would break.

The bodies of the two squires were brought to Normanstand. Rowly had long ago said that if he died unmarried he would like to lie beside his half-sister, and that it was fitting that, as Stephen would be the new Squire of Norwood, her dust should in time lie by his. When the terrible news of her nephew's and of Norman's death came to Norwood, Miss Laetitia hurried off to Normanstand as fast as the horses could bring her. Well she knew what a passion of grief her dear Stephen would be in; and she felt that her place was beside her. With the power which comes with age she put aside her own feelings and devoted herself to the girl she loved so deeply. She would have time for her own sorrow afterwards.

Her coming was an inexpressible comfort to Stephen and from that hour Miss Rowly stayed at Normanstand. Stephen wanted her; and she wanted to be with Stephen. After a time, when grief began to fade into sweet memory, and when now and again in far apart moments of forgetfulness a wintry smile might be seen, the old lady began to realise a new life. It was one thing to see occasionally the girl whom she so loved, and another to be always with her. With the tolerant adaptability of old age she settled herself to the girl's ways, and ideas, and ambitions. She was content to wait, and help, and love. Stephen, too, felt the influence of the sweet companionship; she yielded herself to her aunt in a way which was as new to herself as it was to every one else.

After the funeral Harold, with an instinctive delicacy of feeling, had gone to live in his own house; but he came to Normanstand every day, and so things went on outwardly at Normanstand very much as they had done before the

coming of the tragedy. Her aunt saw and approved. The old lady began to secretly hope, and almost to believe, that her niece had laid aside those theories whose carrying into action she so dreaded.

But theories do not die so easily. Their place is so far behind action, that action, which is of necessity in the immediate foreground, may obscure or hide them. It is from theory that practice takes its real strength, as well as its direction. And did the older woman whose life had been bound under more orderly restraint but know, Stephen was following out her theories, remorselessly and to the end.

CHAPTER VII

THE RESOLVE

THE months since her father's death spread into the second year before Stephen began to fully realise the loneliness of her life. She had no companion now but her aunt; and though the old lady adored her, and she returned her love in full, the mere years between them made impossible the companionship that youth craves. Miss Rowly's life was in the past. Stephen's was in the future; for when did youth ever comprehend the reality of the flying hours? And loneliness is a feeling which comes unbidden to a heart. But true true-love is the shyest thing on earth, and such secrets are so finely evanescent that they hardly outlive the moment of the telling. The knowledge of their existence remains.

Stephen felt her loneliness all round. In old days Harold was always within hail, and companionship of equal age and understanding was available. But now his very reticence in her own interest, and by her father's wishes, made for her pain. Harold had put his strongest restraint on himself, and in his own way suffered a sort of silent martyrdom. He loved Stephen with every fibre of his being. All the strings of his being, physical as well as spiritual, were tuned to the note of her existence and character. Day by day he came toward her with eager step; day by day he left her with a pang that made his heart ache and seemed to turn the brightness of the day to gloom. Night by night he tossed about for hours thinking, thinking, wondering if the time would ever come when her kisses would be his. . . . For in all a healthy man's dreams of the woman he loves, her body that God has made, as well as her soul, has its

due and relative place. But the tortures and terrors of the night, the longings and outpourings of heart and soul and mind which seemed to quiver through the darkness out into space, had their effect on his days. It seemed as if the mere act of thinking, of longing, gave him ever renewed self-control, so that he was able in his bearing to carry out the task he had undertaken: to give Stephen time to choose a mate for herself. Herein lay his weakness—a weakness coming from his want of knowledge of the world of women. Had he ever had a love affair, be it never so mild a one, he would have known that love requires a positive expression. It is not sufficient to sigh, and wish, and hope, and long, all to oneself. Stephen felt instinctively that his guarded speech and manner were due to the coldness—or rather the trusting abated worship—of the brotherhood to which she had been always accustomed. At the time when new forces were manifesting and expanding themselves within her; when her growing instincts, cultivated by the senses and the passions of young nature, made her aware of other forces, new and old, expanding themselves outside her; at the time when the heart of a girl is eager for new impressions and new expansions, and the calls of sex are working within her all unconsciously, Harold, to whom her heart would probably have been the first to turn, made himself in his effort to best show his love, a *quantité négligeable*. A man loves a woman, and seeks that woman's love; a woman seeks love. To love for love's sake is much more a feminine than a masculine act. Stephen in all her vague longing for companionship, which had at bottom a physical basis, was sublimely unconscious of her own desires. This is a part of virginity; its weakness and its strength. After all, there is nothing so self-centred, nothing so nobly self-reliant, nothing so callously, wickedly cruel as virginity. It knows no lesson of bitter experience. It acknowledges no worthiness of intention without execution. It has no toleration for weaker forces, no matter in what character they may be turned; no understanding of what is; no pity for what was; no fear for what is to be.

Thus Stephen, whilst feeling that the vague desires of budding womanhood were trembling within her, had neither thought nor knowledge of their character or their ultimate tendency. She would have been shocked, horrified, had that logical process, which she applied so freely to less personal matters, been used upon her own intimate nature. In her case logic would of course act within a certain range; and as logic is a conscious intellectual process, she became aware that her objective was man. Man—in the abstract. “Man,” not “a man.” Beyond that, she could not go. At her age and with her bringing up, she had neither data to help thought, nor a desire to raise the veil which hides the mysteries of sex, her own or the opposite. It is not too much to say that she did not ever, even in her most errant thought, apply her reasoning, or even dream of its following out either the duties, the responsibilities, or the consequences of having a husband. She had a vague longing for younger companionship, and of the kind naturally most interesting to her. There thought stopped. Incipient yearning came to the end of its warrant! All beyond was full of vague, nebulous, languorous mystery; all delightful, and all quickened with a thrill of fear.

This state of mind, and body—for the body rather than the mind is in this matter the parent of thought—continued for some time, and began to have its effect upon her. The woman within her was unconsciously coming to its strength. Her aunt saw, and understood, and feared. This phase of a young girl's life is best known to her elders who have learned to understand from their own suffering, their own delight. She was very tender with the child whom she so loved, and no mother could have been of better or larger understanding. But whilst she feared she gloried; for Stephen's beauty seemed now to grow, hour by hour. The slimness of her extreme youth was disappearing and in its stead was perfect poise and adjustment of figure, which is after all one of the greatest charms which is given to any one destined to motherhood. The slightly increased fulness

of her cheeks and throat showed up the fine colour of her skin; her eyes were more lustrous, and in their added brightness seemed to have enlarged. Her movements were more elastic, without losing anything of their freedom. She seemed generally to be the very incarnation of grace, even at those languorous moments when voluptuous fancy unconsciously swayed her thoughts, and through her thoughts, her body.

With the cultivated instinct of a lifetime the old lady grew more watchful than she had hitherto been; and in her own mind she challenged all and sundry the men who were within the circle of her niece's life.

One only of her male acquaintances did not at this time appear. Leonard Everard, who had some time ago finished his course at college, was living partly in London and partly on the Continent. His very absence made him of added interest to his old playfellow. The image of his grace and comeliness, of his dominance and masculine force, early impressed on her mind, began to compare favourably with the actualities of her other friends; those of them at least who were within the circle of her personal interest. In Stephen's mind had been but a very mustard-seed of regard for him. Indeed it had hardly gone further than the interest which comes from isolation. But new lights were breaking for Stephen; and all of them, in greater or lesser degree, shone in turn on the memory of the pretty self-willed dominant boy, who now grew larger and more masculine in stature under the instance of each successive light. *Omne ignotum pro mirifico*. Stephen knew the others fairly well through and through. It did not need much effort for an intellect so acute and direct and unflinching as her own to see through and understand commonplace characters. The usual mixture of good and evil, of strength and weakness, of purpose and vacillation, was quite within the scope of her own feeling and of her observation. But this man was something of a problem to her; and, as such, had a prominence in her thoughts quite beyond his own worthiness. He might be very good or very bad, she did not know which; and, not

knowing, did not particularly care. Had she been of larger experience and more watchful of her own interests, she would have understood the force of this negation, and perhaps have come to a conclusion other than that which was forcing itself upon her.

From the nature of her feeling and her peculiar surroundings she could make confidence with no one, and so was being eternally thrown back upon herself. With each throwing back of the little waves of feeling the object at which they aimed was advanced.

In movement of some form is life; and even ideas grow when the pulses beat and thought quickens. Stephen had long had in her mind the idea of sexual equality. For a long time, in deference to her aunt's feelings, she had not spoken of it; for the old lady winced in general under any suggestion of a breach of convention. But though her outward expression being thus curbed had helped to suppress or minimise the opportunities of inward thought, the idea had never left her. Now, when sex was, consciously or unconsciously, a dominating factor in her thoughts, the dormant idea woke to new life. She had held that if men and women were equal the woman should have equal rights and opportunities as the man. It had been, she believed, an absurd conventional rule that such a thing as a proposal of marriage should be entirely the prerogative of man.

And then came to her, as it ever does to woman, opportunity. Opportunity, the cruelest, most remorseless, most unsparing, subtlest foe that womanhood has. Here was an opportunity for her to test her own theory; to prove to herself, and others, that she was right. They—"they" being the impersonal opponents of, or unbelievers in, her theory—would see that a woman could propose as well as a man; and that the result would be good. It was time that that old bubble of woman's artificial weakness should be pricked; and hers should be the hand that would do it. . . .

It is a part of self-satisfaction, and perhaps not the least dangerous part of it, that it has an increasing or multiplying

power of its own. The desire to do increases the power to do; and desire and power united find new ways for the exercise of strength. Up to now Stephen's inclination towards Leonard had been vague, nebulous; but now that theory showed a way to its utilisation it forthwith began to become, first definite, then concrete, then substantial. When once the idea had become a possibility, the mere passing of time did the rest. In all creation nothing stands still. So with ideas, which are, after all, the avatars of facts. These two have their periods of force and weakness, of growth and decline; and of ideas as well as of things, it is youth that is the period of growth. Stephen's idea grew in sleeping time as well as in the waking hours. Unconscious cerebration knows no rest; least of all when the root idea on which it works has its origin in the flow of the blood, in the thrilling pulse, in the beating heart which never stops or pauses and whose quickening makes, sooner or later, for life and new creation. The growth was accompanied by heat, as growth ever is in some form; and after many days and nights of thought, of hoping and dreaming, Stephen became in quite a feverish condition. Her aunt saw—and misunderstood. It is in the merciful dispensations of nature that now and again we see least of the things that are open to our gaze. Miss Laetitia, because she knew no cause for her grand-niece's indisposition, overlooked any mental cause as absolutely as though no such thing had ever existed.

Stephen recognised her aunt's concern for her health in time to protect herself from the curiosity of her loving-kindness. Her youth and readiness and adaptability, and that power of play-acting which we all have within us and of which she had her share, stood to her. With but little effort, based on a seeming acquiescence in her aunt's views, she succeeded in convincing the old lady that the incipient feverish cold had already reached its crisis and was passing away. But she had gained certain knowledge in the playing of her little part. All this self-protective instinct was new; for good or ill she had advanced one more step in not only

the knowledge but the power of duplicity which is so necessary in the conventional life of a woman.

For nearly two weeks Stephen's resolution was held motionless, neither advancing nor receding; it was veritably the slack water of her resolution. She was afraid to go on. Not afraid in sense of fear as it is usually understood, but with the opposition of virginal instincts; those instincts which are natural, but whose uses as well as whose powers are unknown to us.

The next few days saw Stephen abnormally restless. She had fairly well made up her mind to test her theory of equality of the sexes by asking Leonard Everard to marry her; but her difficulty was as to the doing it. She knew well that it would not do to depend on a chance meeting for an opportunity. After all, the matter was too serious to allow of the possibility of levity. There were times when she thought she would write to him and make her proffer of affection in this way; but on every occasion when such thought recurred it was forthwith instantly abandoned. During the last few days, however, she became more reconciled to even this method of procedure. The fever of growth was unabated. At last came an evening which she had all to herself. Miss Laetitia was going over to Norwood to look after matters there, and would remain the night.

After dinner in her boudoir she set herself to the composition of a letter to Leonard which would convey at least something of her feelings and wishes towards him. In the depths of her heart, which now and again beat furiously, she had a secret hope that when once the idea was broached Leonard would do the rest. And as she thought of that "rest" a languorous dreaminess came upon her. She thought how he would come to her full of love, of yearning passion; how she would try to keep towards him, at first, an independent front which would preserve her secret anxiety until the time should come when she might yield herself to his arms and tell him all. How she would listen with ear down whilst he should whisper the story of his love; listen anxiously lest

he should discover, too soon, the tumult of her heart. And then the rapture, the silent still joy as she could lay her head on his breast and admit that she loved him too. She did not try to imagine his words; she only thought of the substance, the effect of them. And as she thought of what words she would use to him she felt herself blush so deeply that she put her hands before her face and instinctively rose up, shaking herself as does one suddenly disturbed in sleep. She was all at once aware that as yet it was but a dream. She had not written to Leonard; and Leonard, so far as she knew, was as yet in absolute ignorance of his good fortune. "His good fortune" was a fairly good rendering of her thought into words; for, as has been said already, Stephen was essentially an egoist. For hours she wrote letter after letter, destroying them as quickly as she wrote, as she found that she had but swayed pendulum fashion between overtiness and coldness.

At last she made up her mind. She would write to Leonard merely asking him to see her. The letter itself was short enough, and was too simple in itself to justify the painful, almost humiliating, beating of her heart as, after reading it over carefully, she sealed it.

"Dear Leonard,—Would it be convenient for you to meet me to-morrow, Tuesday, at half-past twelve o'clock on the top of Cæster Hill? I want to speak about a matter that may have some interest to you, and it will be more private there than in the house. Also it will be cooler in the shade on the hilltop.—

Yours sincerely,

STEPHEN NORMAN."

Having posted the letter she went about the usual routine of her life at Normanstand, and no occasion of suspicion or remark regarding her came to her aunt.

In her room that night when she had sent away her maid, she sat down to think, and all the misgivings of the day came back at first in full force. This was a true sleepless night,

when sleep was wanted but would not come. Stephen wished for it, hoped for it. She wanted to be at her best on the morrow; to be most alert with her brains, to be absolute mistress of herself, to look her best.

But the Drowsy God would not come for wishing, and so she tossed through the long hours till once again she saw the grey light steal round the edges of her blinds. There was this much to the good: she felt that there had been no harrowing subject of thought; nothing to regret!

Leonard received the letter at breakfast-time on the morning. He did not give it any special attention, as he had other letters at the same time, some of which were, if less pleasant, of more immediate importance. He had of late been bombarded with dunning letters from tradesmen; for during his University life, and ever since, he had run into debt extravagantly. The moderate allowance which his father had made to him he had treated as cash for incidental expenses, but everything else had been on credit. Indeed he was beginning to get seriously alarmed about the future, for his father, who had paid his debts once, and at a time when they were by comparison with the present inconsiderable, had said that he would not under any circumstances pay any others which he might make. It was therefore with concern and anxiety that he opened his letters every morning.

Stephen rose fresh and in good spirits, despite her sleepless night. When youth and strength are to the fore, a night's sleep is not of much account, for the system once braced up is not allowed to slacken. Had she enjoyed her customary long and sound sleep it is possible that she might have abandoned her enterprise; for, being a woman, the courage of her purpose was of that purely feminine kind which is strong so long as it is not checked or broken. It is true that as the time grew closer her nerve was less marked. And just before it she was a girl—and nothing more; with all a girl's diffidence, a girl's self-distrust, a girl's abnegation, a girl's

plasticity. It was the striking of the clock, which sounded in her ears like twelve separate peals of thunder of ever-swelling volume, which recalled her to herself and braced her to the coming ordeal.

In the more purely personal aspect in her enterprise Stephen's effort was more conscious. It is hardly possible for a pretty woman to seek in her study of perfection the aid of her mirror, and to be unconscious of her aims. There was a certain sense of triumph in her glance as she took her last look in her mirror; a full gratification of her own wish to show herself in the best way possible to her. It was a very charming picture which the mirror reflected. Her tall, slim figure and long delicate neck seemed made to bear with grace the shapely head. Her hair was glorious, so that the rich colour of her cheeks, whose ripe red seemed to come through the clear skin rather than be a part of it, seemed in exquisite keeping. The great, black, sweeping lashes, which veiled the eyes when they fell over, gave new force to the dark lighting of the black eyes when they smiled or frowned, or when they gazed tenderly, or looked out with passionate longing. There was something tropical in those eyes, something reminiscent of another land and another time. Centuries seemed to have been obliterated, and in the sockets of this up-to-date twentieth-century girl gleamed the very eyes of that Saracen maid who had cheerfully left her glowing sunlight for the chilly north to be with her lord.

It was with a satisfied consciousness of power that she threw her last backward glance into the mirror and went out to her tryst.

It may be that there is a companionship in a mirror, especially to a woman; that the reflection of oneself is an emboldening presence, a personality which is better than the actuality of an unvalued stranger. Certainly, when Stephen closed the door behind her and stood in the wainscoted passage, which was only dimly lit by the high window at either end, her courage seemed to begin at once to ooze away. At first came the nervousness which is antecedent to doubt.

The nerves are the sleepless guardians of human safety, and their blind susceptibility is quicker than the manifestations of thought. This nervous submission to as yet unknown influences is part of the garb of Reason; warning, and doubt, and fear are pearls in her girdle.

Probably for the first time in her life, as she left the long cloistered shade of the long passage and came out on the staircase flooded with the light of the noonday sun, Stephen felt that she was a girl—"girl" standing as some sort of synonym for weakness, pretended or actual. Though her whole nature was repugnant to the task, she forced herself to the effort of repression. It would, she felt, have been to her a delicious pleasure to have abandoned all effort; to have sunk in the lassitude of self-surrender.

The woman in her was working; her sex had found her out!

But there is no fiercer fight known than sex in arms against itself. Thought after thought, of struggle, of surrender, of abandonment of her purpose, of acceptance of the power of convention flashed through her mind with lightning-like rapidity. Each footstep down the carpeted stair, though in fact so silent, seemed to sound like thunder, as though she walked on a drum-head resonant of doom. Then came a mingling of future and present; of distance which obliterated all perspective. . . . She turned and looked around her, as though she was conscious of being watched. Then, seeing that she was all alone, she went on her way with settled purpose; with flashing eyes and glowing cheeks—and a beating heart. A heart all woman's since it throbbed the most with apprehension when the enemy, Man, was the objective of her most resolute attack. She knew that she must keep moving; that she must not stop or pause; or else her whole resolution must collapse. And so she hurried on, fearful lest a chance meeting with anyone might imperil her purpose.

She met no one on the way, and the absence of necessity for self-control seemed to restore her courage. On she went through the faint moss-green paths where the red earth was

hardened by the rains of a century falling softly through the towering trees. Through the headlands of meadows rich with flowering grasses and the many reds of the summer wild-flowers. The clover was fragrant, and the humming of bees seemed a fitting accompaniment to the sleepy sway of the ripening grass. Through narrow paths with edges blurred with trampled corn, where the scarlet poppies stood forth conspicuous and triumphant, and where chickweed and spreading ground-plants lost the delicacy of their natural green and grew red and brown in the unaccustomed sunshine. And so on, up through the path cut in the natural dipping of the rock that rose over Cæster Hill and formed a strong base for the clump of great trees that formed a landmark for many a mile around. During the first part of her journey between the house and the hilltop, she tried to hold her purpose at arm's length; it would be sufficient to face its terrors when the time had come. In the meantime the matter was of such overwhelming importance that nothing else could take its place; all she could do was to suspend the active part of the thinking faculties and leave the mind only receptive.

As she drew near the appointed place her pace grew slower and slower; the woman in her was unconsciously manifesting itself. She would not be first in her tryst with a man.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MEETING

Two opposite feelings strove for dominance as Stephen found herself on the hilltop, alone. One a feeling natural enough to anyone, and especially to a girl, of relief that a dreaded hour had been postponed; the other of chagrin that she was the first. Had she been as cool-headed as she sometimes was, the fact would have sounded a note of warning to her; but it is of the very essence of her sex that a woman is not cool at a really critical time.

After a few moments, however, one of the two militant thoughts became dominant: the feeling of chagrin. With a pang she thought if she had been a man and summoned for such a purpose, how she would have hurried to the trysting-place; how the flying of her feet would have vied with the quick rapturous beating of her heart! How all her soul would have gone out in gladness to the loving heart which had summoned her! How . . . With a little sigh and a blush like dawn, she remembered that Leonard did not know the purpose of the meeting. And there came over her fear, alarm, dread—whatever it is of ill that reduces the lofty nature of hope to prose level; a very humiliating thought of chagrin that what she hoped for was not coming freely and unsought.

For nearly half an hour Stephen sat on the rustic seat under the shadow of the great oak, looking, half unconscious of its beauty and yet influenced by it, over the wide landscape stretched at her feet.

The time passed in waiting had in one way its advan-

tages to the girl: though she was still as high-strung as ever, she acquired in it a larger measure of control over herself. The nervous tension, however, was so complete physically that all her faculties were acutely awake; very early she became conscious of a distant footstep. Ordinarily she could not have heard it so far off, and this fact came filtered through imagination so that she attributed the additional power to the existence of love. The thought made her blush, and for a little while she sat still in a silent ecstasy. She was awaiting her lover, and it was he whose feet she heard crushing the débris of the wood which lay below. Since Eve waited in the Garden the waking of her lord, down all the ages in every country and under all conditions, this has been a sound to quicken a woman's pulses and to thrill her with delight.

To Stephen's straining ears the footsteps seemed wondrous slow, and more wondrous regular; she felt instinctively that she would have liked to have listened to a more hurried succession of less evenly-marked sounds. The march of a lover's feet makes its own music which is not limited or regulated by the custom of the schools. But notwithstanding these thoughts, and the qualms which came in their turn, the sound of the coming feet brought great joy to Stephen's heart. For, after all, they were coming; and coming just in time to prevent the sense of disappointment at their delay gaining firm foothold. It was only when the coming was assured that she felt how strong had been the undercurrent of her apprehension lest they should not come at all.

Very sweet and tender and beautiful Stephen looked at this moment. The strong lines of her face were softened by the dark fire in her eyes and the feeling which glowed in the deep blushes which mantled her cheeks. The proudness of her bearing was no less marked than ever, but in the willowy sway of her body there was a yielding of mere sorry pride. It were as though a goddess had relaxed the rigour of the marble of her statue and stepped down from her pedestal in the temple to be all human for the time. In all the many moods

which the gods allow, to good women there is none so dear or so alluring, consciously as well as instinctively, to true men as this self-surrender. Whoso has ever experienced it has felt a thrill of rapture which seems to have come with the completion of the circuit of some divine electric force. As Leonard drew near, Stephen sank softly into a seat, doing so with a guilty feeling of acting a part. When he actually came into the grove he found her seemingly lost in a reverie as she gazed out over the wide expanse in front of her. He was hot after his walk, and with something very like petulance threw himself into a cane armchair, exclaiming as he did so with the easy insolence of old familiarity:

"What a girl you are, Stephen! dragging a fellow all the way up here. Couldn't you have fixed it down below somewhere if you wanted to see me?"

Strangely enough, as it seemed to her, Stephen did not dislike his tone of mastery. There was something in it which satisfied her. The unconscious recognition of his manhood, as opposed to her womanhood, soothed her in a peaceful way. It was easy to yield to a dominant man. She was never more womanly than when she answered him softly:

"It was rather unfair; but I thought you would not mind coming so far. It is so cool and delightful here; and we can talk without being disturbed." Leonard was lying back in his chair fanning himself with his wide-brimmed straw hat, with outstretched legs wide apart and resting on the back of his heels. He replied with grudging condescension:

"Yes, it's cool enough after the hot tramp over the fields and through the wood. It's not so good as the house, though, in one way: a man can't get a drink here. I say, Stephen, it wouldn't be half bad if there were a shanty put up here. There could be a tap laid on where a fellow could quench his thirst on a day like this!"

Before Stephen's eyes floated a momentary vision of a romantic chalet with wide verandah and big windows looking over the landscape; a great wide stone hearth; quaint furniture made from the gnarled branches of trees; skins on

the floor; and the walls adorned with antlers, great horns, and various trophies of the chase. And amongst them Leonard, in a picturesque suit, lolling back just as at present and smiling with a loving look in his eyes as she handed him a great blue-and-white Munich beer mug topped with cool foam. There was a soft mystery in her voice as she answered:

"Perhaps, Leonard, there will some day be such a place here!" He seemed to grumble as he replied:

"I wish it was here now. Some day seems a long way off!"

This seemed a good opening for Stephen; for the fear of the situation was again beginning to assail her, and she felt that if she did not enter on her task at once, its difficulty might overwhelm her. She felt angry with herself that there was a change in her voice as she said:

"Some day may mean—can mean everything. Things needn't be a longer way off than we choose ourselves, sometimes!"

"I say, that's a good one! Do you mean to say that because I am some day to own Brindehow I can do as I like with it at once, whilst the governor's all there, and a better life than I am any day? Unless you want me to shoot the old man by accident when we go out on the First." He laughed a short, unmeaning masculine laugh which jarred somewhat on her. She did not, however, mean to be diverted from her main purpose in such a way, so she went on quickly:

"You know quite well, Leonard, that I don't mean anything of the kind. But there was something I wanted to say to you, and I wished that we should be alone. Can you not guess what it is?"

"No, I'll be hanged if I can!" was his response, lazily given.

Despite her resolution she turned away her head; she felt that she could not meet his eyes at this moment. It cut her with a sharp pain to notice when she turned again that he was not looking at her. He continued fanning himself with his hat as he gazed out at the view. She felt that the critical

moment of her life had come, that it was now or never as to her fulfilling her settled intention. So with a rush she went on her way:

"Leonard, you and I have been friends a long time. You know my views on some points, and that I think a woman should be as free to act as a man!" She paused; words and ideas did not seem to flow with the readiness which she expected. She felt that her tone was didactic—like a school-mistress lecturing a class. Leonard's arrogant assurance completed the dragging her back to earth which her own self-consciousness began:

"Drive on, old girl! I know you're a crank from Crankville on some subjects. Let us have it for all you're worth. I'm on the grass and listening."

Stephen paused. "A crank from Crankville!"—this after her nights of sleepless anxiety; after the making of the resolution which had cost her so much, and which was now actually in process of realisation. Was it all worth so much? why not abandon it all now? . . . Abandon it! Abandon a resolution! All the obstinacy of her nature—she classed it herself as firmness—rose in revolt. She shook her head angrily, pulled herself together, and went on:

"That may be! though it's not what I call myself, or what I am usually called, so far as I know. At any rate my convictions are honest, and I am sure you will respect them as such, even if you do not share them." She did not see the ready response in his face which she expected, and so hurried on:

"It has always seemed to me that a—when a woman has to speak to a man she should do so as frankly as she would like him to speak to her, and as freely. Leonard, I—I," as she halted, a sudden idea, winged with possibilities of rescuing procrastination came to her. She went on more easily:

"I know you are in trouble about money matters. Why not let me help you?" He sat up and looked at her and said genially:

"Well, Stephen, you are a good old sort! No mistake

about it. Do you mean to say you would help me to pay my debts, when the governor has refused to do so any more?"

"It would be a great pleasure to me, Leonard, to do anything for your good or your pleasure."

There was a long pause; they both sat looking down at the ground. The woman's heart beat loud; she feared that the man must hear it. She was consumed with anxiety, and with a desolating wish to be relieved from the strain of saying more. Surely, surely Leonard could not be so blind as not to see the state of things! . . . He would surely seize the occasion; throw aside his diffidence and relieve her! . . . His words made a momentary music in her ears as he spoke:

"And is this what you asked me to come here for?"

The words filled her with a great shame. She felt herself in a dilemma. It had been no part of her purpose to allude to his debts. Viewed in the light of what was to follow, it would seem to him that she was trying to foreclose his affection. That could not be allowed to pass; the error must be rectified. And yet! . . . And yet this very error must be cleared up before she could make her full wish apparent. She seemed to find herself compelled by inexorable circumstances into an unlooked-for bluntness. In any case she must face the situation. Her pluck did not fail her; it was with a very noble and graceful simplicity that she turned to her companion and said:

"Leonard, I did not quite mean that. It would be a pleasure to me to be of that or any other service to you, if I might be so happy! But I never meant to allude to your debts. Oh! Leonard, can't you understand! If you were my husband—or—going to be, all such little troubles would fall away from you. But I would not for the world have you think . . ."

Her very voice failed her. She could not speak what was in her mind; she turned away, hiding in her hands her face which fairly seemed to burn. This, she thought, was the time for a true lover's opportunity! Oh, if she had been a man, and a woman had so appealed, how he would have

sprung to her side and taken her in his arms, and in a wild rapture of declared affection have swept away all the pain of her shame!

But she remained alone. There was no springing to her side; no rapture of declared affection; no obliteration of her shame. She had to bear it all alone. There, in the open; under the eyes that she would fain have seen any other phase of her distress. Her heart beat loud and fast; she waited to gain her self-control.

Leonard Everard had his faults, plenty of them, and he was in truth composed of an amalgam of far baser metals than Stephen thought him; but he had been born of gentle blood and reared amongst gentlefolk. He did not quite understand the cause or the amount of his companion's concern; but he could not but recognise her distress. He realised that it had followed hard upon her most generous intention towards himself. He could not, therefore, do less than try to comfort her, and he began his task in a conventional way, but with a blundering awkwardness which was all manlike. He took her hand and held it in his; this much at any rate he had learned in sitting on stairs or in conservatories after extra dances. He said as tenderly as he could, but with an impatient gesture unseen by her:

"Forgive me, Stephen! I suppose I have said or done something which I shouldn't. But I don't know what it is; upon my honour I don't. Anyhow, I am truly sorry for it. Cheer up, old girl! I'm not your husband, you know; so you needn't be distressed."

Stephen took her courage *à deux mains*. If Leonard would not speak she must. It was manifestly impossible that the matter could be left in its present state.

"Leonard," she said softly and solemnly, "might not that some day be?"

Leonard was an egotist and the very incarnation of selfishness. In his blind selfishness he blundered brutally, as, meaning only to pass safely by an awkward conversational corner, he replied:

"No jolly fear of that! You're too much of a boss for me!"

The words and the levity with which they were spoken struck the girl as with a whip. She turned for an instant as pale as ashes; then the red blood rushed from her heart, and face and neck were dyed crimson. It was not a blush, it was a suffusion. In his ignorance Leonard thought it was the former, and went on with what he considered his teasing.

"You always want to engineer a chap your own way and make him do just as you wish. The man that has the happiness of marrying you, Stephen, will have a hard row to hoe!" His "chaff" with its utter want of refinement seemed to her, in her high-strung earnest condition, nothing short of brutal, and for a few seconds produced a feeling of repellence. But it is in the nature of things that opposition of any kind arouses the fighting instinct of a naturally dominant nature. She lost sight of her femininity in the pursuit of her purpose; and as this was to win the man to her way of thinking, she took the logical course of answering his argument. If Leonard Everard had purposely set himself to stimulate her efforts in this direction he could hardly have chosen a better way. It came somewhat as a surprise to Stephen, when she heard her own words:

"I would make a good wife, Leonard! A husband whom I loved and honoured would, I think, not be unhappy!" The sound of her own voice speaking these words, though the tone was low and tender and more self-suppressing by far than was her wont, seemed to peal like thunder in her own ears. Her last bolt had sped. The blood rushed to her head, and she had to hold on to the arms of the rustic chair or she would have fallen forward. She saw, in one of those phases of emotion when our natural senses are purely receptive, her knuckles grow white with the intensity of her grasp.

The time seemed long before Leonard spoke again; every second seemed an age. She seemed to have grown tired of waiting for the sound of his voice; it was with a kind of surprise that she heard him say:

"You limit yourself wisely, Stephen!"

"How do you mean?" she asked, making a great effort to speak.

"You would promise to love and honour; but there isn't anything about obeying."

As he spoke Leonard stretched himself out again luxuriously, and laughed with the intellectual arrogance of a man who is satisfied with a joke, however inferior, of his own manufacture. Stephen looked at him with a long look which began in anger—that anger which comes from an unwonted sense of impotence, and ends in tolerance, the intermediate step being admiration. It is the primeval curse that a woman's choice is to her husband; and it is an important part of the teaching of a British gentlewoman, knit in the very fibres of her being by the remorseless etiquette of a thousand years, that she be true to him. The man who has in his person the necessary powers or graces to evoke admiration in his wife, even for a passing moment, has a stronghold unconquerable as a rule by all the deadliest arts of mankind.

Leonard Everard was certainly good to look upon as he lolled at his ease on that summer morning. Tall, straight, supple; a typical British gentleman of the educated class, with all parts of the body properly developed and held in some kind of suitable poise. Clear of eye, clean-skinned, sun-burned with the delicate sun-burning which comes to a skin consistently healthy; his curly yellow-brown hair cut short showing the round head which marks the athletic rather than the intellectual type of man. There was stamped all over him that sort of unconscious self-possession and indifference to results which create a belief in oneself and make one independent of the ideas of others.

As Stephen looked, the anxiety and chagrin which tormented her seemed to pass away. She realised that here was a nature quite different from her own, and which should be dealt with in a way unsuitable to herself; and the conviction seemed to make the action which it necessitated more easy

as well as more natural to her. It was thus that she learned her first great lesson of tolerance. Men are tolerant of ideas; women are tolerant of persons. Toleration is a recognition of different standards of excellence. Perhaps for the first time in her life Stephen understood that it may be necessary to apply to individuals a standard of criticism unsuitable to self-judgment. Her recognition might have been summed up in the thought which ran through her mind:

"One must be a little lenient with a man one loves!"

There is a virtue in toleration which is its own reward, and an ease which comes of its exercise; Stephen, when once she had allowed the spirit of toleration to work within her, felt immediately its calming influence on herself. It was therefore with brighter thoughts and better humour that she went on with her task. A task only, it seemed now; a means to an end which she desired.

"Leonard, tell me seriously, why do you think I gave you the trouble of coming out here?"

"Upon my soul, Stephen, I don't know."

"You don't seem to care either, lolling like that when I am serious!" The words were acid, but the tone was soft and friendly, familiar and genuine, putting quite a meaning of its own on them. Leonard looked at her indolently:

"I like to loll."

"But can't you even guess, or try to guess, what I ask you?"

"I can't guess. The day's too hot, and that shanty with the drinks is not built yet."

"Or may never be!" Again he looked at her sleepily.

"Never be! Why not?"

"Because, Leonard, it may depend on you."

"All right then. Drive on! Hurry up the architect and the jerry-builder!"

A quick blush leaped to Stephen's cheeks. The words were full of meaning, though the tone lacked something; but the news was too good. She could not accept it at once; she

decided to herself to wait a short time. Ere many seconds had passed she rejoiced that she had done so as he went on:

"I hope you'll give me a say before that husband of yours comes along. He might be a blue-ribbonite; and it wouldn't do to start such a shanty for rot-gut!"

Again a cold wave swept over her. The absolute difference of feeling between the man and herself; his levity against her earnestness, his callous blindness to her purpose, even the commonness of his words chilled her. For a few seconds she wavered again in her intention; but once again his comeliness and her own obstinacy joined hands and took her back to her path. With chagrin she felt that her words almost stuck to her throat, as summoning up all her resolution she went on:

"It would be for you I would have it built, Leonard!" The man sat up quickly.

"For me?" he asked in a sort of wonderment.

"Yes, Leonard, for you and me!" She turned away; her blushes so overcame her that she could not look at him. When she faced round again he was standing up, his back towards her. She stood up also. He was silent for a while; so long that the silence became intolerable, and she spoke:

"Leonard, I am waiting!" He turned round and said slowly, the absence of all emotion from his face chilling her till her face blanched:

"I don't think I would worry about it!"

Stephen Norman was plucky, and when she was face to face with any difficulty she was all herself. Leonard did not look pleasant; his face was hard and there was just a suspicion of anger. Strangely enough this last made the next step easier to the girl; she said slowly:

"All right! I think I understand!"

He turned away from her and stood looking out on the distant prospect. Then she felt that the blow which she had all along secretly feared had fallen on her. But her pride as well as her obstinacy now rebelled. She would not accept a silent answer. There must be no doubt left to torture her

afterwards. She would take care that there was no mistake. Schooling herself to her task, and pressing one hand for a moment to her side as though to repress the beating of her heart, she came behind him and touched him tenderly on the arm.

"Leonard," she said softly, "are you sure there is no mistake? Do you not see that I am asking you," she intended to say "to be my husband," but she could not utter the words, they seemed to stick in her mouth, so she finished the sentence: "that I be your wife?"

The moment the words were spoken—the bare, hard, naked, shameless words—the revulsion came. As a lightning flash shows up the blackness of the night the appalling truth of what she had done was forced upon her. The blood rushed to her head till cheeks and shoulders and neck seemed to burn. Covering her face with her hands she sank back on the seat behind her, crying silently bitter tears that seemed to scald her eyes and her cheeks as they ran.

Leonard was angry; his pride was hurt. Why should he have been placed in such a ridiculous position! He did not love Stephen in that way; and she should have known it. He liked her and all that sort of thing; but what right had she to assume that he loved her? He was in truth that perfect selfish egotist who lives in the moment and whose impelling force is his immediate desire. Now as he stood looking out over the landscape, without taking in its beauty or even noticing it, for his thought was self-centred, his own grievance mastered him. It had been hard enough to have had to reply indirectly to such a challenge; but now to have it forced on him to give a definite answer "yea or nay" with the added ignominy of having it taken for granted that he did not know even enough to understand what she was driving at, was intolerable! All the weakness of his moral nature came out in his petulance. He knew it, and that made him more angry than ever. Stephen might well have been at a loss to understand his anger, as, with manifest intention to wound, he answered her:

"What a girl you are, Stephen. You are always doing something or other to put a chap in the wrong and make him ridiculous. I thought you were joking—not a good joke either! Upon my soul, I don't know what I've done that you should fix on me! I wish to goodness——"

If Stephen had suffered the red terror before, she suffered the white terror now. It was not injured pride, it was not humiliation, it was not fear; it was something vague and terrible that lay far deeper than any of these. Something which held in its misty outline the whole formidable future with its myriad means of alarm. Under ordinary circumstances she would have liked to have spoken out her mind and given back as good as she got; and even as the thoughts whirled through her brain they came in a torrent of vague vituperative eloquence. But now her tongue was tied. Instinctively she knew that she had put it out of her power to revenge, or even to defend herself. She was tied to the stake, and must suffer without effort and in silence.

Most humiliating of all was the thought that she must propitiate the man who had so wounded her. All love for him—had there indeed been any—had in the instant passed away from her; or rather she realised fully the blank, bare truth that she had never really loved him at all. Had she really loved him, even a blow at his hands would have been acceptable; but now . . .!

She shook the feelings and thoughts from her as a bird does the water from its wings; and, with the courage and strength and adaptability of her nature, addressed herself to the hard task which faced her in the immediate present. With eloquent, womanly gesture she arrested the torrent of Leonard's indignation; and, as he paused in surprised obedience, she said:

"That will do, Leonard! It is not necessary to say any more; and I am sure you will see, later on, that at least there was no cause for your indignation! I have done an unconventional thing, I know; and I dare say I shall have to pay for it in humiliating bitterness of thought later on! But

please remember we are all alone! This is a secret between us; no one else need ever know or suspect it!"

She rose up as she concluded. The quiet dignity of her speech and bearing brought back Leonard in some way to his sense of duty as a gentleman. He began, in a sheepish way, to make an apology:

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, Stephen." But again she held up the warning hand:

"There is no need for pardon; the fault, if there were any, was mine alone. It was I, remember, who asked you to come here and who introduced and conducted this melancholy business. I have asked you several things, Leonard, and one more I will add—'tis only one: that you will forget!"

As she moved away, her dismissal of the subject was that of an empress to a serf. Leonard would have liked to answer her; to have given vent to his indignation that, even when he had refused her offer, she should have the power to treat him as if he was the one refused, and to make him feel small and ridiculous in his own eyes. But somehow he felt constrained to silence; her simple dignity outclassed him.

There was another factor too, in his forming his conclusion of silence. He had never seen Stephen look so well, or so attractive. He had never respected her so much as when her playfulness had turned to majestic gravity. All the boy and girl strife of the years that had gone seemed to have passed away. The girl whom he had played with, and bullied, and treated as frankly as though she had been a boy, had in an instant become a woman—and such a woman as demanded respect and admiration even from such a man.

CHAPTER IX

AFTERMATH

As Stephen went down the hill her pace was medium, neither hurried nor slow; her pride made either extreme impossible to her. Leonard walked with her, she not resenting but seeming to treat him with the same old *camaraderie* to which he was accustomed. How she did it she never knew. She was so braced up to the situation that things seemed natural to her to do which, had she thought and attempted them consciously, would have seemed hideous. Her heart seemed to sink within her at every footstep she took, and her knees to give way; but by some divine, desperate courage she was able to face each thought. But her will itself seemed to have lost its primitive strength, and to be set in tenacity rather than command. Yet the habit of life was able to assert itself; her outward bearing gave no sign of the tortured soul within.

At first they went side by side. But as the undergrowth came closer in their branches and foliage, one or other had now and again to go first; and that one was always Stephen. When she knew that her face could not betray her, her heart began to beat less wildly. As to Leonard there was over him a vague feeling of chagrin, of disappointment, of inferiority. The position of the dog which follows "to heel" is hardly one of exceptional honour: he was not ill satisfied when the path bifurcated, affording him an opportunity of turning towards his own home. Even through the egoism of his magnificent selfishness was borne a sense that he was not wanted. And with that sense came another, less conscious

but worthy of remembrance for later use, that the same force which moved him to that sense was not altogether to his ultimate disadvantage. In a purely selfish nature there is a distinct sub-consciousness ever on the watch for ultimate gain.

Stephen, who seemed to have eyes in the back of her head—all over her, became aware of his purpose of parting from her; and the sense of it gave her new calm and more strength of self-control. In the flush of it came back some of her courage. She was able to stand for a few minutes at the parting of the ways talking to her companion with an easy nonchalance which, when he came to think over matters on his way home and afterwards, filled him with an uneasy concern. A momentary exultation thrilled her. This, coming after her anguish of spirit, so far served as a nervous stimulant that Leonard, on shaking hands with her as he said good-bye and noting the natural flush on her cheeks and the brilliant light in her eyes, had a sudden impulse to take her in his arms and make love to her. The impulse was, however, only momentary. There was something in her air or manner, something more definitely negative than her brilliant beauty was positive, of such warning repulsion that its activity helped to quicken his departure.

When he had gone, Stephen moved on her way more slowly. She felt that to seem to linger would put her in the wrong; it would never do now to let Leonard think for an instant that she had the slightest concern at parting from him. Henceforth she was no longer free to move at what pace she would. She had a secret to keep, an appearance to preserve.

No longer free! The half-formed thought was a momentary anguish; it was as though her virginity had left her. But thought and purpose, and the resourcefulness to carry them into being and if necessary into action, are born of anguish. The motherhood of pain is a factor in the making of a strong life.

As Leonard's steps grew fainter in the distance, she

stopped. Then came the rush of thought, the quick reaction from her high-strung nervous tension. She would have given the world to be able to sit down and weep, there and then, shamelessly amid the shade and shelter of the trees. The thousand eyes of nature, animate or inanimate, had no dread for her. It was the eyes of her own kind which were full of peril. Not for all the created world would she have had any one of her house, not even a passing scullerymaid, see her eyes red or a pallor of her cheek. Henceforth she must be mistress of herself; of her entire self and heart, so thoroughly that by no mischance or forgetfulness could her secret be betrayed. Henceforth! The thought was full of endless awe, but such was to be faced. And so she took up the burden of her pain and went on resolutely, crushing back for the present her thought as she crushed back her tears, though the effort cost her such pain as she thought must be the pain of death. The punishment of her arrogant unwomanliness had, she felt, indeed begun. All at once there burst on her with peculiar vividness the idea that her secret was not in her own keeping. She could herself be silent under torture; but could she count on Leonard! His attitude and conduct towards her had not been such as to inspire either confidence or respect. Then with self-torturing persistency, and with the keenness which the desperate nature of her situation induced, she ran over all her knowledge of Leonard Everard's character. The process was not a long one, for it came in a series of intellectual flashes.

There was, however, this good to her in the new anxiety: it had for the moment taken her thoughts from herself. By the time that the thinning of the trees and the opening of woodland vistas made her aware of proximity in the house, she was more sure of her ability to stand scrutiny and to baffle curiosity.

When once a woman is set, whether by herself or others, to a task which has anything of a social nature, all the resources of her upbringing seem to lend their aid. With seeming nonchalance she passed to the wide lawn from amongst the

grove of carven box trees. She came like a sunbeam, with the sunlight making her beautiful hair to seem like leaping flame as she moved, for she had taken off her hat which she swung idly by the strings as she tripped over the close-cut grass, trilling forth a little song. She strolled all round the garden built beside the rib of rock that rose from the sward, and from whose heart gushed the stream of bright water which rippled down the white paved rivulet which led it to the rose garden. At the fountain she stopped to feed the gold fishes which came fearlessly to snatch greedily the crumbs from between her fingers. And then gay and *debonnaire*, blooming and radiant, though with a heart that felt like lead even while it beat like a trip-hammer, she entered by the French window the drawing-room where her aunt sat placidly working at some of her clothing-club undertakings. The nervous strain from which she suffered was relaxed, be it never so little; and what was lost of this strain became a strength added to her natural self-control. Her voice rang truly, and not with the false note which she feared when she first thought of meeting any member of her household, as she answered her aunt's query as to where she had been:

"Right through the woods, Auntie dear. I have been out quite a long time. It is delightful under the trees up on the hill where there is a cool breeze."

"I almost envy you, my dear," said the elder lady. "I went out for a while; but I was only in the rock garden and in the fir wood. There wasn't a breath of air, and the heat seemed to rise out of the ground; a damp, moist heat with the smell of decaying leaves. It is certainly not cool down here, even in the shade of the trees. But hadn't you better get ready for lunch? It is just on the stroke of two."

Luncheon was a sore trial. To eat at all in her condition of mind was a sort of martyrdom.

The day wore on for Stephen in a torturing obedience to exact routine. She dared not change from her usual attitude or her way of doing things; she dared not hurry lest haste of

any kind should evoke comment or even curiosity. Stephen, however, had passive as well as active courage; she could endure. And at length the long day and evening came to an end. When her maid had left her and she had completed her toilet for the night, she softly locked her door, a thing she had never in her life done before.

And then, for the first time in all that long agonising day, she breathed freely. The reaction after a little began to trouble her more than the high tension and the suspense had done; but after a while there came a third mood, one of stern introspection, of Rhadamanthine self-examination, of merciless self-reproach. All the spiritual suffering of the day seemed to become insignificant when compared with the torture which she now endured. Shame seemed to let loose upon her soul all its torments. All the pride of her nature, all the self-suppression of her life, all her high hopes and ambitions seemed to turn to opposing forces to rend her. She could not endure herself. Even her own image reflected in her mirror became in a sense loathsome. With an impulse which did not give her time to think she blew out her candles, and for a little while found relief in the dark. For in the room it was now pitch dark.

Normanstand was an old-fashioned house, and its ways were of a past generation. Amongst them was the habit of closing windows and shutters and pulling heavy curtains across.

The relief of darkness did not last long. Stephen had lain down on the sofa—she could not endure at present the idea of getting into bed; and as she lay, the darkness itself became quick with fancies. Every torturing event and feeling and thought of the day seemed to take shape. She had not slept for two nights, and though she was strong, still she was only a girl, and the weaknesses of both her sex and her age were against her. Her heart began to beat wildly. She covered with her hands her burning eyes and cheeks. But nothing could shut out the haunting memories of that awful time under the trees on the hilltop. Again,

and again came back to her the shameful moments of waiting for the footsteps that did not come; the agony of trying to utter the shameful words of proposal that despite all her efforts would not come as she intended them.

How the hours of that night passed Stephen never knew, never could recall. Wave after wave of despair, of shame, of apprehension seemed to roll over her, each leaving her in a poorer condition to battle with the coming one. At last she could bear the darkness no longer. She sprang from the sofa, and going over to the window raised the bottom of the blind and looked out. There was a momentary cessation of pain; the mere beauty and peacefulness of the scene was a spiritual anodyne. The soft light of the high-hung moon bathed the spreading lawn and garden in a silver glory. The woods beyond rose, an undulating sea of greenery whose outline was broken here and there by the spreading branches of some tree more stately than his fellows. The leaves, moving in the high exposure where the night wind had full play, seemed as though here the light was of gold. Her eyes unconsciously followed the outline of the woods, till they lit on the high line of Cæster Hill.

As her eyes took in the spot, she shuddered as though she had touched something loathly. Letting the blind slip back into its place, she stood still and silent as though waiting for some new, overwhelming, irresistible terror to assail her.

How long she stood there she knew not. By slow degrees she became conscious that the casements were being lined with streaks of grey; the more penetrative light of the day was upon her. From the woods without came the solitary pipe of some bird more eager or alert than its fellows; then more piping, till the woods became awake with clangour, and the myriad sounds of the coming day became merged in the hum of the dawn.

With a great effort Stephen regained her self-control. She felt that she must not be discovered by her maid in any unusual condition. A new day was before her, and she would

need all her courage and all her ability to face it. She must school herself to the obedience to the routine which had been her external habit, for here only lay security from prying eyes. She would have given worlds to have been able to weep; but this solace was denied her. Her burning eyes might weep blood, but not tears. In a dazed fashion she unlocked her door and got into bed. There for hours she lay waiting, waiting for the day, and what it might bring forth.

Mechanically she saw things change. The windows became sharper and sharper oblongs; the darkness of the room turned to silvery grey, through which familiar objects, one by one, swam into view. Then the silver became gold, and there was a red tinge round the casement edges. The day had come.

Breakfast went on in its usual course.

When finally her release came she strolled out into a beech grove, some little distance from the house, which from her childhood had been a favourite haunt of hers. When she had reached its shade she felt that at last she was alone.

CHAPTER X

ON THE ROAD HOME

WHEN Leonard Everard parted from Stephen he did so in no satisfied condition of mind. In a general way there was a feeling of dissatisfaction: firstly, with Stephen; secondly, with things in general; thirdly, with himself.

"Why had she put him at all in such a ridiculous position? Why had she brought him to such a place, on such an errand? If she wanted to propose to him why couldn't she do it in the house, where, at least, he could begin with a drink? That is just like girls! It was a ridiculous thing letting girls go into college and get such ideas. Home was the proper place for girls, looking after things, and playing croquet and tennis—when they were wanted to play. And sitting out dances. . . . That was the worse of women. They were always getting a fellow into a row of some kind. They were always wanting him to do something he didn't want to do, or crying . . . there was that girl at Oxford. Women were always wanting money; or worse: to be married! Confound women; they all seemed to want him to marry them. There was the Oxford girl, and then the Spaniard, and now Stephen!" This put his thoughts in a new channel. "He wanted money himself. Why, Stephen had spoken of it herself; had offered to pay his debts. Gad! it was a good idea that every one round the countryside seemed to know his affairs. But what a flat he had been not to accept her offer then and there before matters had gone any further. He could have had the debt off his mind and yet be free to do as he wished. Stephen had lots of money, more than any

girl could want. Girls shouldn't be allowed to have so much money; it only spoiled them and made them think that they were better than men. . . . But she didn't give him time to get the thing fixed. . . . If he had only known beforehand what she wanted he could have come prepared . . . that was the way with women! Always thinking of themselves! And now? Of course she wouldn't stump up after his refusing her. What would his father say if he came to hear of it? And he must speak to him soon, for these chaps were threatening to County Court him if he didn't pay up. Those harpies in Vere Street were quite nasty. . . . He wondered if he could work Stephen for a loan. . . ."

Here his thoughts stopped, for the present. If he had been speaking, it would have meant silence; there is a silence of the mind even in a mean and selfish nature. He walked on through the woodland path, his pace slower than before. "How pretty she had looked!" Here he touched his little moustache. "Gad! Stephen was a fine girl anyhow! If it wasn't for all that red hair . . . I like 'em dark better! . . . And her being such an infernal boss!" . . . Then he said unconsciously aloud:

"If I was her husband I'd keep her to rights!"

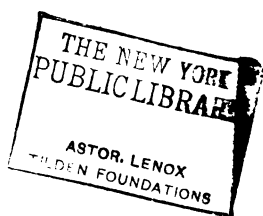
Poor Stephen!

He went on, his thoughts running now altogether in a selfish channel:

"So that's what the governor meant by telling me that fortune was to be had, and had easily, if a man wasn't a blind fool. The governor is a starchy old party. He wouldn't speak out straight and say, "Here's Stephen Norman, the richest girl you are ever likely to meet; why don't you make up to her and marry her?" But that would be encouraging his son to be a fortune-hunter! Rot! as if every man wasn't a fortune-hunter in some way or other. . . . And now, because she didn't tell what she wanted to speak about, or the governor didn't give a hint so that I might be prepared, he had gone and thrown away the chance. After all it mightn't be so bad. Stephen was a fine girl! . . . But



The wave was rising under them and the wind was blowing in a furious puff.—Page 216



she mustn't ever look at him as she did when he spoke about her not obeying. "I mean to be master in my own house anyhow!" he said aloud. As this complete egoist let his thoughts run they ran in channels of his own needs and wishes:

"A man mustn't be tied down too tight, even if he is married. And if there's plenty of loose cash about it isn't hard to cover up your tracks. . . . I think I'd better think this thing over calmly and be ready when Stephen comes at me again. That's the way with women. They don't take "No" from a man. They don't like to take it; it hurts their pride. And goodness knows Stephen has plenty of it. She'll never let the matter rest now. She'd be afraid that I would peach on her, and every time we should meet she'd be half off her head making love to me with one side of her, and pretending all the time with the other that she didn't care a damn about me, or any man. No! this thing is only begun. When a woman like Stephen fixes her cold grey on a man she does not mean to go asleep over it. I dare say my best plan will be to sit tight, and let her work herself up a bit. There's nothing like a little wholesome neglect for bringing a girl to her bearings!" . . .

For a while he walked on in satisfied self-complacency. His communing was now rather visional than thoughtful, and all his visions were centred round himself, his pleasures, his difficulties. At first the pleasures were of paramount importance. With the swift facilities of memory, scene after scene of wild profligacy rose before him. With plenty of money in his pocket he felt that everything was possible. Then doubts began to assail him. Was the money all right? Was it quite sure that Stephen Norman would give him another chance? The measure and method of its bitterness could be guessed by his quick, impatient expression spoken aloud:

"Confound her! why couldn't she have let me know that she was fond of me in some decent way, without all that formal theatrical proposing? It's a deuced annoying thing

in the long run the way the women get fond of me. Though it's nice enough in some ways while it lasts!" he added, as if in unwilling recognition of fact. Again his complacency and vanity soothed him. He walked on a little longer unthinkingly; and then as the path debouched on the highroad he said to himself half aloud:

"Well, she's a mighty fine girl, anyhow! And if she is red I've had about enough of the black! . . . That Spanish girl is beginning to kick too! I wish I had never come across. . . ."

When he got home he found a letter from his father waiting him. He took it to his room before breaking the seal. It was at least concise and to the point:

"The enclosed has been sent to me. You will have to deal with it yourself. You know my opinion and also my intention. The items which I have marked have been incurred since I spoke to you last about your debts. I shall not pay another farthing for you. So take your own course!

"JASPER EVERARD."

The enclosed was a jeweller's bill, the length and the total of which lengthened his face and drew from him a low whistle. He held it in his hand for a long time, standing quite still and silent. Then drawing a deep breath he said aloud:

"That settles it! The halter is on me! It's no use squealing. If it's to be a red head on my pillow! . . . All right! I must only make the best of it. Anyhow I'll have a good time to-day, even if it must be the last!"

That day Harold was in Norcester on business. He had a few things of his own to attend to, a good many of the estates', and one of Stephen's. The latter, after his usual habit of doing anything in which she was concerned, he did first. His own came last. It was late when he went to the club to dine. Whilst waiting for dinner he met Leonard Everard, flushed and somewhat uncertain in his speech. It

was something of a shock to Harold to see him in such a state.

Leonard was, however, an old friend, and man is as a rule faithful to friends in this form of distress. So in his kindly feeling Harold offered to drive home his friend, for he knew that he could thus keep him out of further harm.

At ten o'clock Harold's dogcart was ready and he went to look for Leonard, who had not since come near him. He found him sitting half asleep in the smoking-room, much drunker than he had been earlier in the evening. When Harold came in he tried to pull himself together, and, before Harold could anticipate his movement, drank up a large tumberful of brandy and soda which stood on the table by him. This gave him a temporary alertness, though his companion feared after-consequences. Whilst the wakefulness was on him he got him into an overcoat, and helped him up beside his own seat in the dogcart.

The cool night air, whose effect was increased by the rapid motion, soon increased Leonard's somnolence and for a while he slept soundly, his companion watching carefully lest he should sway over and fall out of the trap. He even held him up as they swung round some sharp corners.

After a time he woke up, and woke in a nasty temper. He began to find fault in an incoherent way with everything. Harold said very little, just enough to prevent any cause for further grievance. Then Leonard changed and became somewhat affectionate. This mood was a greater bore than the other, but Harold managed to bear it with a manner of stolid indifference. Leonard was by this time making promises to do things for him, that as he was what he called a "goo' fell'," he might count on his help and support in the future. As Harold knew him to be a wastrel, over head and ears in debt and with only the succession to a small estate, he did not take much heed to his maunderings. At last the drunken man said something which startled him so much that he instinctively drew himself together with

such suddenness as to frighten the horse and almost make him rear up straight.

"Woa! Woa! Steady, boy. Gently!" he said, quieting him. Then turning to his companion said in a voice hollow with emotion and vibrant with suppressed passion:

"What was it you said?"

Leonard, half awake, and not half of that half master of himself, answered:

"I said I will make you agent of Normanstand when I marry Stephen."

Harold grew cold. To hear of any one marrying Stephen was to him like plunging him in a glacier stream; but to hear her name so lightly spoken, and by such a man, was a bewildering shock which within a second set his blood on fire.

"What do you mean?" he thundered out. "You marry Ste . . . Miss Norman! You're not worthy to untie her shoe! You indeed! She wouldn't look on the same side of the street with a drunken brute like you! How dare you speak of her in such way!"

"Brute!" said Leonard angrily, his vanity reaching inward to his heart and brain through all the numbing obstacle of his drunken flesh. "Who's brute? Brute yourself! Tell you goin' to marry Stephen, 'cos Stephen wants it. Stephen loves me. Loves me with all her red head! Wha're you doin'! Wha!!"

His words merged in a lessening gurgle, for Harold had now got him by the throat.

"Take care what you say about that lady!" he said, putting his face close to the other's with eyes that blazed. "Don't you dare to mention her name in such a way, or you will regret it longer than you can think!"

The struggle and the fierce grip on his throat had sobered Leonard somewhat. Momentarily sobered him to that point when he could be coherent and vindictive, though not to the point where he could think ahead of the present. Caution, wisdom, discretion, taste, were not for him at such a moment, nor any of them. Guarding his throat with both

hands in an instinctive and spasmodic manner he answered the challenge:

"I tell you she loves me. She ought to know. Didn't she tell me so this very day!" Harold drew back his arm to strike him in the face, his anger was too great for words. But the other, seeing the motion and in the sobering recognition of danger, spoke hastily:

"Keep your hair on! You know so jolly much more than I do. I tell you that she told me this and a lot more this morning when she asked me to marry her."

Harold's heart grew cold as ice. There is something in the sound of a voice speaking truthfully which a true man can recognise. Through all Leonard's half-drunken utterings came such a ring of truth; and Harold recognised it. He felt that his voice was weak and hollow as he spoke, thinking it necessary to give at first a sort of official denial to such a monstrous statement:

"Liar!"

"I'm no liar!" answered Leonard. He would like to have struck him in answer to such a word had he felt equal to it, for where he was brought up the reply to such a word is a blow. But if he could not use his muscles, he could his voice, and, anger giving him new power and clearer utterance, he spoke:

"She asked me to marry her to-day on the hill above the house, where I went to meet her by appointment. Here! I'll prove it to you. Read this!" Whilst he was speaking he had opened the greatcoat and was fumbling in the breast-pocket of his coat. He produced a letter which he handed to Harold, who took it with trembling hand. By this time the reins had fallen slack and the horse was walking quietly. There was moonlight, but not enough to read by. Harold bent over and lifted the driving-lamp next to him and turned it so that he could read the envelope. His hand trembled when he saw that the direction was in Stephen's handwriting. He was handing it back when Leonard said again:

"Open it! Read it! You must do so; I tell you, you must! You called me a liar, and now must read the proof that I am not. If you don't I shall have to ask Stephen to make you!" Before Harold's mind flashed a rapid thought of what the girl might suffer in being asked to take part in such a quarrel. He could not himself even act to the best advantage unless he knew the truth. . . . It was necessary that he should know the whole truth, now. . . . Without a word further or delaying a moment he took the letter from the envelope and held it before the lamp, the paper fluttering as though in a breeze. Leonard looked on, the dull glare of his eyes brightening with malignant pleasure as he beheld the other's concern. He owed him a grudge, and by God he would pay it. Had he not been struck—throttled—called a liar! . . .

As he read the words Harold's face cleared. "Why, you infernal young scoundrel!" he said angrily, "that letter is nothing but a simple note from a young girl to an old friend—playmate asking to come to see her about some trivial thing. And you construe it into a proposal of marriage. You hound!" He held the letter whilst he spoke, heedless of the outstretched hand of the other waiting to take it back. There was a dangerous glitter in Leonard's eyes. He knew his man and he knew the truth of what he had himself said, and he felt, with all the strength of his base soul, how best he could torture him. In the very strength of Harold's anger, in the poignancy of his concern, in the relief to his soul expressed in his eyes and his voice, his antagonist realised the jealousy of one who honours—and loves. Second by second Leonard grew more sober, and more and better able to carry his own idea into act.

"Give me my letter!" he began.

"Wait!" said Harold as he put the lamp back into its socket. "That will do presently. Take back what you said just now!"

"What? Take back what?"

"That base lie; that Miss Norman asked you to marry her."

Leonard felt that in a physical struggle for the possession of the letter he would be outmatched; but his passion grew colder and more malignant, and in a voice that cut like the hiss of a snake he spoke slowly and deliberately. He was all sober now; the drunkenness of brain and blood was lost, for the time, in the strength of his cold passion.

"It is true. By God it is true; every word of it! That letter, which you want to steal, is only a proof that I went to meet her on Cæster Hill by her own appointment. When I got there she was waiting for me. She began to talk about a chalet there, and at first I didn't know what she meant——"

There was such conviction, such a triumphant truth in his voice, that Harold was convinced.

"Stop!" he thundered; "stop, don't tell me anything. I don't want to hear. I don't want to know." He covered his face with his hands and groaned. It was not as though the speaker were a stranger, in which case he would have been by now well on in his death by strangulation; he had known Leonard all his life, and he was a friend of Stephen's. And he was speaking truth.

The baleful glitter of Leonard's eyes grew brighter still. He was as a serpent when he goes to strike. In this wise he struck:

"I shall not stop. I shall go on and tell you all I choose. You have called me liar—twice. You have also called me other names, strongly zoological. Now you shall hear the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And if you won't listen to me some one else will." Harold groaned again; Leonard's eyes brightened still more, and the evil smile on his face grew broader as he began more and more to feel his power. He went on to speak with a cold deliberate malignancy, but instinctively so sticking to absolute truth that he could trust himself to hurt most. The other listened, cold at heart and physically; his veins and arteries seemed stagnant.

"I won't tell you anything of her pretty embarrassments; how her voice fell as she pleaded; how she blushed and stammered. Why, even I, who am used to women and their pretty ways and their passions and their flushings and their stormy upbraidings, didn't quite know for a while what she was driving at. So at last she spoke out pretty plainly, and told me what a fond wife she'd make me if I would only take her!" Harold said nothing; he only rocked a little as one in pain, and his hands fell. The other went on:

"That is what happened this morning on Cæster Hill under the trees where I met Stephen Norman by her own appointment; honestly what happened. If you don't believe me now you can ask Stephen. My Stephen!" he added in a final burst of venom as in a gleam of moonlight through a rift in the shadowy wood he saw the ghastly pallor of Harold's face. Then he added abruptly as he held out his hand:

"Now give me my letter!"

In the last few seconds Harold had been thinking. And as he had been thinking for the good, the safety, of Stephen, his thoughts flew swift and true. This man's very tone, the openness of his malignity, the underlying scorn when he spoke of her whom others worshipped, showed him the danger—the terrible immediate danger in which she stood from such a man. With the instinct of a mind working as truly for the woman he loved as the needle does to the Pole he spoke quietly, throwing a sneer into the tone so as to exasperate his companion—it was brain against brain now, and for Stephen's sake:

"And of course you accepted. You naturally would!" The other fell into the trap. He could not help giving an extra dig to his opponent by proving him once more in the wrong.

"Oh no, I didn't! Stephen is a fine girl; but she wants taking down a bit. She's too high and mighty just at present, and wants to boss a chap too much. It's well for a

woman of her type to let her fry for a bit in her own fat. I mean to be master in my own house; and she's got to begin as she will have to go on. I'll let her wait a bit: and then I'll yield by degrees to her lovemaking. She's a fine girl, for all her red head; and she won't be so bad after all!"

Harold listened, chilled into still and silent amazement. To hear Stephen spoken of in such a way appalled him. She of all women! . . . His thoughts were homicidal; Leonard never knew how near sudden death he was, as he lay back in his seat, his eyes getting dull again and his chin sinking. The drunkenness which had been arrested by his passion was reasserting itself. Harold saw his state in time and arrested his own movement to take him by the throat and dash him to the ground. Even as he looked at him in scornful hate, the cart gave a lurch and Leonard fell forward. Instinctively Harold swept an arm round him and held him up. As he did so the unconsciousness of arrested sleep came; Leonard's chin sank on his breast and he breathed stertorously.

As he drove on, Harold's thoughts circled in a tumult. Vague ideas of extreme measures which he ought to take flashed up and paled away. Intention revolved upon itself till its weak side was exposed, and it was abandoned. He could not doubt the essential truth of Leonard's statement regarding the proposal of marriage. He did not understand this nor did he try to. His own love for the girl and the bitter awaking to its futility made him so hopeless that in his own desolation all the mystery of her doing and the cause of it was merged and lost. His only aim and purpose now was her safety. One thing at least he could do: by fair means or foul stop Leonard's mouth, so that others need not know of her shame! He groaned aloud as the thought came to him. Beyond this first step he could do nothing, think of nothing as yet. And he could not take this first step till Leonard had so far sobered that he could understand.

And so waiting for that time to come, he drove on through the silent night.

CHAPTER XI

HAROLD'S RESOLVE

AFTER an unmeasured time, whilst he was thus pondering with set brows, he was startled by Leonard's voice at his side:

"Is that you, Harold? I must have been asleep!" Harold remained silent, amazed at the change. Leonard went on, he was quite awake and coherent now:

"By George! I must have been pretty well cut. I don't remember a thing after coming down the stairs of the club and you and the hall-porter helping me up here. I say, old chap, it was good of you to take charge of me. I hope I haven't been a beastly nuisance!" Harold answered grimly:

"It wasn't exactly what I should have called it!" Then, after looking keenly at his companion, he said: "Are you quite awake and sober now?"

"Quite." The answer came rather defiantly; there was something in his questioner's tone which was militant and aggressive. Before speaking further Harold pulled up the horse. They were now crossing a piece of bare moorland, where anything within a mile could have easily been seen. They were quite alone and would be undisturbed. Then he turned to his companion.

"You talked a good deal in your drunken sleep—if sleep it was. You appeared to be awake!" Leonard answered:

"I don't remember anything of it. I must have been dreaming. What did I say?"

"I am going to tell you. You said something so strange and so wrong that you must answer for it. But first I must know its truth."

"Must! You are pretty dictatorial," said Leonard angrily. "Must answer for it! What do you mean?"

"Were you on Cæster Hill to-day?"

"What's that to you?" There was no mistaking the defiant, quarrelsome intent.

"Answer me! were you?" Harold's voice was strong and calm.

"What if I was? It is none of your affair. Did I say anything in what you have politely called my drunken sleep?"

"You did."

"What did I say?"

"I shall tell you in time. But I must know the truth as I proceed. There is some one else concerned in this, and I must know as I go on. You can easily judge by what I say if I am right."

"Then ask away and be damned to you!" Harold's calm voice seemed to quell the other's turbulence as he went on:

"Were you on Cæster Hill this morning?"

"I was."

"Did you meet Miss—a lady there?"

"What . . . I did!"

"Was it by appointment?" Some sort of idea or half-recollection seemed to come to Leonard; he fumbled half consciously in his breast-pocket. Then he broke out angrily:

"You have taken my letter!"

"I know the answer to that question," said Harold slowly. "You showed me the letter yourself, and insisted on my reading it." Leonard's heart began to quail. He seemed to have an instinctive dread of what was coming. Harold went on calmly and remorselessly:

"Did a proposal of marriage pass between you?"

"Yes!" The answer was defiantly given; Leonard began to feel that his back was against the wall.

"Who made it?" The answer was a sudden attempt at a blow, but Harold struck down his hand in time and held it.

Leonard, though himself a fairly strong man, was powerless in that iron grasp.

"You must answer me! It is necessary that I know the truth. You have already, and when you were seemingly awake and coherent, told me so much that all I want is to verify your statement."

"Why must you? What have you to do with it? You are not my keeper! Nor Stephen's!" The insult cooled Harold's rising passion, even whilst it wrung his heart. It was indeed a poor thing when even such an one as this could trample on it.

"I have to do with it because I choose. Now, clearly understand me, Leonard Everard. You know me of old; and you know that what I say I shall do. One way or another, your life or mine may hang on your answers to me—if necessary!" Leonard felt himself pulled up. He knew well the strength and purpose of the man, and he felt as if there were danger in the air; danger real and close. With his fear came back, as in a half-forgotten dream, the memory of the past hour, and in his distress thought to find refuge in a sort of *bonhomie*. With a light laugh, which he felt to be, as it was, hollow, he answered:

"Well, schoolmaster, as you are asking questions, I suppose I may as well answer them. You seem to be putting into practice the old custom that we learned in school of appealing from Philip drunk to Philip sober. Go on! Ask your questions! Next!" Harold went on in the same calm, cold voice:

"Who made the proposal of marriage?"

"She did."

"Did . . . Was it made at once and directly, or after some preliminary suggestion?"

"After a bit. I didn't quite understand at first what she was driving at." There was a long pause. With an effort Harold went on:

"Did you accept?" Leonard hesitated. With a really wicked scowl he eyed his big, powerfully-built companion,

who still had his hand as in a vice. Then seeing no resource, he answered:

"I did not! That does not mean that I won't, though!" he added defiantly. To his surprise Harold suddenly released his hand. There was a grimness in his tone as he said:

"That will do! I know now that you have spoken the truth, sober as well as drunk. You need say no more. I know the rest. I know it perhaps better than you do, for in the freedom of your sottish drunkenness you spoke out of the blackness of your black heart. I dare say you would be surprised at what you did say. Most men—even brutes like you, if there are any—would have been ashamed even to think the things you said, said openly to me, you hound. You vile, traitorous, mean-souled hound!"

"What did I say?"

"I know what you said; and I shall not forget it. If you want to know, put your thoughts in words—the vilest and meanest of them, and you will have it." Then he went on, his voice deepening into such a stern judicial utterance, as though he were pronouncing a sentence of death, that Leonard was appalled:

"Leonard Everard, you have treated vilely a lady whom I love and honour more than I love my own soul. You have insulted her to her face and behind her back. You have made such disloyal reference to her and to her mad act in so trusting you, and have so shown your intention of causing, intentionally or unintentionally, woe to her, that I tell you here and now that you hold henceforth your life in your hand. If you ever mention to a living soul what you have told me twice to-night, even though you should be then her husband; if you should cause her harm though she should then be your wife; if you should cause her dishonour in public or in private, I shall kill you. So help me God!"

Not a word more did he say; but, taking up the reins, drove on in silence till they arrived at the gate of Brindehow, where he signed to his companion to alight. Then he drove off in silence.

When he arrived at his own house he locked himself in his study. Then, and then only, did he permit his thoughts to have full range. For the first time since the blow had fallen he looked straight in the face the change in his own life. He had loved Stephen so long and so honestly that it seemed to him now as if that love had been the very foundation of his life. He could not remember a time when he had not loved her; away back to the time when he, a big boy, took her, a little girl, under his care, and devoted himself to her. He had been so loyally careful of her, in every way that was for her ultimate good; even to chiding her when such was necessary though it was pain to him. He had grown into the belief that so strong and so consistent an affection, though he had never spoken it or even hinted at it or inferred it, had become a part of her life as well as of his own. And this was the end of that dreaming! Not only did she not care for him, but found herself with a heart so empty that she needs must propose marriage to another man! . . . Oh, that she should do such a thing! She whom he so loved and honoured! She who in his eyes stood so high above her fellows by the right divine of her own personality that her beauty, her intellect, her grace, her sweetness, and all the charms that won her away from common kind, were but attributes of a royal nature! There was surely something, more than at present he knew of or could understand, behind such an act done by her. Why should she ask Everard to marry her? Why should she ask any man? Women didn't do such things! . . . Here he paused. "Women didn't do such things." All at once there came back to him fragments of discussions—in which Stephen had had a part, in which matters of convention had been dealt with. Out of these dim and shattered memories came a comfort to his heart, though his brain could not as yet grasp the reason of it. He knew that Stephen had held an unconventional idea as to the equality of the sexes. Was it possible that she was indeed testing one of her theories?

The idea stirred him so that he could not remain quiet.

He stood up, and walked about the room. Somehow he felt light beginning to dawn upon him, though he could not tell its source, or guess at the final measure of its fulness. The fact of Stephen having done such a thing was hard enough to bear; but it was harder to think that she should have done such a thing without a motive; or worse: with love of Leonard as a motive! He shuddered as he paused. She could not love such a man as he. It was monstrous! And yet she had done this thing. . . . "But the pity of it! The pity of it! Oh, if she had had any one to advise her, to restrain her! But she had no mother! No mother! Poor Stephen!"

The pity of it, not for himself but for the woman he loved, overcame him. Sitting down heavily before his desk, he put down his face on his hands, and his great shoulders shook with the measure of his grief.

Long, long after the violence of his emotion had passed, he sat there motionless, save for his regular breathing. He was thinking, thinking with all the power and sincerity he knew; thinking for Stephen's good.

When a strong man thinks unselfishly some good may come out of it. He may blunder; his own honesty may be an obscuration to his understanding of the motives of others; looking to the loftier side of nature, he may err as to motives or objects originated by its meaner powers. But the conclusion of his reasoning must be in the main nobly right. So it was now with Harold. He knew that he was ignorant of women, and of woman's nature, as distinguished from man's. The only woman he had ever known well was Stephen; and she in her youth and in her ignorance of the world and herself was hardly sufficient to supply to him data for his present needs. To a clean-minded man of his age a woman is something divine. He may know with all his senses that she is a being compact of clay like himself, with all the limitations which curb and lower poor humanity; and yet human weaknesses fade in the glamour of her womanhood. It is only when in later life disappointment

and experience have hammered bitter truth into his brain, that he begins to realise that woman is not angelic but human. When he knows more, and finds that she is like himself, human and limited but with qualities of purity and sincerity and endurance which put his own to shame, he realises how much better a helpmate she is for man than could be the vague, unreal creations of his dreams. And then he can thank God for His goodness that when He might have given us Angels He did give us women!

But such wisdom was not yet for Harold.

But of one thing, despite all minor doubts—despite the seeming of facts, he was quite sure: Stephen did not love Leonard. Every fibre of his being revolted at the thought. She of so high a nature; he of so low. She so noble; he so mean. She so full of high qualities that all around her gave her the love and deference which are almost royal prerogatives; he that could not understand the frank expression of her liking on which the misconception of love was based. He who resented her splendid dignity; who flouted even her beauty! . . . Bah! the belief was impossible.

It was characteristic of the man that in his mind he had abandoned, for the present at all events, his own pain. He still loved Stephen with all the strength of his nature, and his love was as changeless as it was bottomless; but for him the selfish side ceased to exist. He was trying to serve Stephen; and before this compelling effort every other thought had to give way. Even in the keenest moments of his agony he never questioned if she had ever loved him. . . . And yet from a thousand little evidences he had come to believe that she held him somewhere deep in her heart. There are little touches of the hand, little squeezes of one's arm, little sinkings of the voice in moments of sympathy, little glances of understanding which even a nature virgin to sexual feeling cannot misinterpret. These doings, and the recognitions of them, are down on the bed-rock of our nature. Though the glacial detritus of happy or unhappy chance, or the volcanic upheaval of passion, or the slow pro-

cess of alluvial deposits of experience may cover them over and hide them, they ever remain on the very foundations of our being. He had been satisfied that in a manner she loved him in some way and in some degree; and he had hoped in the fulness of time that the childish love would ripen and fructify, so that in the end would come a mutual affection which was of the very essence of Heaven. He believed still that she loved him in some way; but the future that was based on hope had now been wiped out with a sudden and unsparing hand. One thing he had at present to accept, that whatever might be the measure of affection which Stephen might have for him, it was not love as he understood it: love between man and woman; the Aaron's rod of love that swallows up all other loves. He resolutely turned his back on the thought of his own side of the matter, and tried to find some justification of Stephen's act.

It was after many a long cycle of thought when the circle was completed and the starting-place had been reached again and again and again, that the seeking and the knocking had effectual result. Harold came to believe, vaguely at first but more definitely as the evidence nucleated, that Stephen's act was due to some mad girlish wish to test her own theory; to prove to herself the correctness of her own reasoning, the fixity of her own purpose. This seemed to more or less satisfy his masculine intellect. He did not go on analysing further; for as he walked about the room with a portion of the weight taken from his heart he noticed that the sky was beginning to quicken. The day would soon be upon him, and there was work to be done. Instinctively he knew that there was trouble in store for Stephen, and he felt that in such an hour he should be near her.

Harold was inspired by the coming of the new day. There was work to be done, and the work must be based on thought. His thoughts must take a practical turn; what was he to do that would help Stephen? Here there dawned on him for the first time the understanding of a certain humiliation which she had suffered; she had been refused!

And that guessing made him grind his teeth in impotent rage.

But out of that rage came an inspiration. If Stephen had been humiliated by the refusal of one man, might not this be minimised if she in turn might refuse another? Harold knew so well the sincerity of his own love and the depth of his own devotion that he was satisfied that he could not err in giving the girl the opportunity of refusing him. It would be some sort of balm to her wounded spirit to know that Leonard's views were not shared by all men. That there were others who would deem it a joy to serve as her very slaves. When she had refused him she would perhaps feel easier in her mind. Of course if she did not refuse him. . . . Ah! well, then would the gates of Heaven open. . . . But that would never be. The past could not be blotted out! All he could do would be to serve her. He would go early. Such a man as Leonard Everard might make some new complication, and the present was quite bad enough.

It was a poor enough thing for him, he thought at length. She might trample on him; but it was for her sake. And to him what did it matter? The worst had come. All was over now!

CHAPTER XII.

THE BEECH GROVE.

THE grove to which Stephen went was a privileged place; it was protected by a ha-ha, so that it was never invaded from without, and the servants had been always forbidden to enter it. Thus by long usage it had become a place of quiet and solitude for the members of the family.

In this soothing spot had Stephen sought solitude as an anodyne to her tortured soul. The long anguish of a third sleepless night, following on a day of humiliation and terror, had destroyed for a time the natural resilience of a healthy nature. The pent-up passion in her, found its own relief. Her voice was silent, and she moved with slow steps, halting often between the green tree-trunks in the cool shade; but her thoughts ran free, and passion found a vent. No stranger seeing the tall, queenly girl moving slowly through the trees could have imagined the fierce passion which blazed within her, unless he had been close enough to see her eyes, those links between the inner nature and the outward world. At first she was unconsciously governed in a measure by the sense of fear, that prevailing shadow which seemed never to leave her; but gradually the habit of security began to prevail, and the shackles to melt away. Here had she come in all her childish troubles. Here had she fought with herself, and conquered herself. Here the spirits of the place were with her and not against her. Here memory in its second degree, habit, gave her the full sense of spiritual freedom.

As she walked to and fro the raging of her spirit changed its objective: from restraint to its final causes; and chief amongst them the pride which had been so grievously hurt.

How could she have stooped to have done such a thing: to ask a man . . . oh! the shame of it, the shame of it all! How could she have been so blind as to think that such a man was worthy! . . .

Here in the midst of her whirlwind of passion came a solitary gleam of relief: she knew now with certainty that she did not love Leonard; that she had never loved him. In the spiritual insight of her self-reproach, when in her passion she transcended herself, she saw, with eyes of supernatural clearness, that had she felt more vindictively towards him, had she regretted losing a hope that she believed she cherished, she might still have loved him. Did she but know it, there was an even stronger evidence of her indifference to him in the ready manner in which her thoughts flew past him in their circling sweep. For a moment she saw him as the centre of a host of besetting fears; but her own sense of superior power nullified the force of the vision. She was able to cope with him and his doings, were there such need. And so her mind flew back to the personal side of her trouble: her blindness, her folly, her shame.

In truth she was doing good work for herself. Her mind was working truly and to a beneficent end. One by one she was overcoming the false issues of her passion and drifting to an end in which she would see herself face to face and would place so truly the blame for what had been as to make it a warning and ennobling lesson of her life. She was now at the point of the whirlwind when the vacuum of the misdeeds of others left room for her own hot passion to expand. The anger which was finally to be concentrated on herself was vague and valueless; it was anger rather in the abstract than the concrete. And now as her mind moved more freely, and as the restraint of fear of intrusion on her secret thoughts began to pass away, so her bodily movement accelerated. She stepped more quickly to and fro, as does a panther in its cage when the desire of forest freedom is heavy upon it. As by degrees her thoughts began to centre on her own folly, anger—inflamed, undisciplined and undirected—became the

active principle of her thinking. Her eyes, red-rimmed with the strain and vigil of three sleepless nights and a day of the anguish of mortified pride and bitter self-reproach, and blazing with passion just freed from long restraint, might well have told their own story to any seeing eye.

As she swept to and fro, her raging spirit compelling to violent movement, Stephen's eyes were arrested by the figure of a man coming through the aisles of the grove. At such a time any interruption of her passion was a cause for heightening anger; but the presence of a person was as a draught to a full-fed furnace. Most of all, in her present condition of mind, the presence of a man—for the thought of a man lay behind all her trouble, was as a tornado striking a burning forest. The blood of her tortured heart seemed to leap to her brain and to suffuse her eyes. She "saw blood!"

It mattered not that the man whom she saw she knew and trusted. Indeed, this but added fuel to the flame. In the presence of a stranger some of her habitual self-restraint would doubtless have come back to her. But now the necessity for such was foregone; Harold was her *alter ego*, and in his presence was safety. He was, in this aspect, but a higher and more intelligent rendering of the trees around her. In another aspect he was an opportune victim, something to strike at. When the anger of a poison snake opens its gland, and the fang is charged with venom, it must strike at something. It does not pause or consider what it may be; it strikes, though it may be at stone or iron. So Stephen waited till her victim was within distance to strike. Her black eyes, fierce with passion and blood-rimmed as a cobra's, glittered as he passed among the tree-trunks towards her, eager with his errand of devotion.

Harold was a man of strong purpose. Had he not been, he would never have come on his present errand. Never, perhaps, had any suitor set forth on his quest with a heavier heart. Every thought, whichever way he turned, was of pain. All his life, since his very boyhood, had been centred round the girl whom to-day he had come to serve. All his thought

had been for her: and to-day all he could expect was a gentle denial of all his hopes, so that his future life would be at best a blank.

But he would be serving Stephen! His pain might be to her good; ought to be, to a certain extent, to her mental ease. Her wounded pride would find some solace. . . . As he came closer the feeling that he had to play a part, veritably to act one, came stronger and stronger upon him, and filled him with bitter doubt as to his power. Still he went on boldly. It had been a part of his plan to seem to come eagerly, as a lover should come. When he got close to Stephen, all the witchery of her presence came upon him as of old. After all, he loved her with his whole soul; and the chance had come to tell her so. Even under the distressing conditions of his suit, the effort had its charm.

Stephen schooled herself to her usual attitude with him; and that, too, since the effort was based on truth, came with a certain ease to her. At the present time, in her present frame of mind, nothing in the wide world could give her pleasure; the ease which came, if it did not change her purpose, increased her power. As might have been expected from her character and condition of mind, she was the first to begin:

"I suppose you want to see me about something special, Harold, you have come so early."

"Yes, Stephen. Very special!"

"Were you at the house?" she asked in a voice whose quietness might have conveyed a warning. She was so suspicious now that she suspected even Harold of—of what she did not know. The house of Suspicion needs no gateway! He answered in all simplicity:

"No. I came straight here."

"How did you know I should be here?" Her voice was now not only quiet but sweet. Without thinking, Harold blundered on. His intention was so single-minded, and his ignorance of woman so complete, that he did not recognise even elementary truths:

"I knew you always came here long ago when you were a child when you were in——" Here it suddenly flashed upon him that if he seemed to expect that she was in trouble as he had purposed saying, he would give away his knowledge of what had happened and so destroy the work to which he had set himself. So he finished the sentence in a lame and impotent manner, which, however, saved complete annihilation as it was verbally accurate: "in short frocks." Stephen needed to know little more. Her quick intelligence grasped the fact that there was some purpose afoot which she did not know or understand. She surmised, of course, that it was some way in connection with her mad act, and she grew cooler in her brain as well as colder in her heart as she prepared to learn more. Stephen had changed from girl to woman in the last twenty-four hours; and all the woman in her was now awake. After a moment's pause she said; *mirabile dictu*, she said it with a winning smile:

"Why, Harold, I've been in long frocks for years. Why should I come here on this special day on that account?" Even as she was speaking she felt that it would be well to abandon this ground of inquiry. It had clearly told her all it could. She would learn more by some other means. So she went on in a playful way, as a cat—not a kitten—does when it has got a mouse:

"That reason won't work, Harold. It's quite rusty in the joints. But never mind it! Tell me why you have come so early?" This seemed to Harold to be a heaven-sent opening; he rushed in at once:

"Because, Stephen, I wanted to ask you to be my wife! Oh! Stephen, don't you know that I love you? Ever since you were a little girl! When you were a little girl and I a big boy I loved you. I have loved you ever since with all my heart, and soul, and strength. Without you the world is a blank to me! For you and your happiness I would do anything—anything!"

This was no acting. When once the barrier of beginning had been broken, his soul seemed to pour itself out. The

man was vibrant through all his nature; and the woman's very soul realised its truth. For an instant a flame of gladness swept through her; and for the time it lasted put all other thought aside.

But suspicion is a hard metal which does not easily yield to fire. It can come to white heat easily enough, but its melting-point is high indeed. When the flame had leaped it had spent its force; the reaction came quick. Stephen's heart seemed to turn to ice, all the heat and life rushing to her brain. Her thoughts flashed with convincing quickness; there was no time for doubting amid their rush. Her life was for good or ill at the crossing of the ways. She had trusted Harold thoroughly. The habit of her whole life from her babyhood up had been to so look to him as comrade and protector and sympathetic friend. She was so absolutely sure of his earnest devotion that this new experience of a ripper feeling would have been a joy to her, if it should be that his act was all spontaneous and done in ignorance of her shame. "Shame" was the generic word which now summarised to herself her thought of her conduct in proposing to Leonard. But of this she must be certain. She could not, dare not, go farther till this was settled. With the same craving for certainty with which she convinced herself that Leonard understood her overtures, and with the same dogged courage with which she pressed the matter on him, she now went on to satisfy her mind.

"What did you do yesterday?"

"I was at Norchester all day. I went early. By the way, here is the ribbon you wanted; I think it's exactly the same as the pattern." As he spoke he took a tissue-paper parcel from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Thanks!" she said. "Did you meet any friends there?"

"Not many." He answered guardedly; he had a secret to keep.

"Where did you dine?"

"At the club!" He began to be uneasy at this question-

ing; but he did not see any way to avoid answering without creating some suspicion.

"Did you see any one you knew at the club?" Her voice as she spoke was a little harder, a little more strained. Harold noticed the change, rather by instinct than reason. He felt that there was danger in it, and paused. The pause seemed to suddenly create a new fury in the breast of Stephen. She felt that Harold was playing with her. Harold! If she could not trust him, where then was she to look for trust in the world? If he was not frank with her, what then meant his early coming; his seeking her in the grove; his proposal of marriage, which seemed so sudden and so inopportune? He must have seen Leonard, and by some means have become acquainted with her secret of shame.... His motive?

Here her mind halted. She knew as well as if it had been trumpeted from the skies that Harold knew all. But she must be certain. . . . Certain!

She was standing erect, her hands held down by her sides and clenched together till the knuckles were white; all her body strung high—like an over-pitched violin. Now she raised her right hand and flung it downward with a passionate movement.

"Answer me!" she cried imperiously. "Answer me! Why are you playing with me? Did you see Leonard Everard last night? Answer me, I say. Harold An Wolf, you do not lie! Answer me!"

As she spoke Harold grew cold. From the question he now knew that Stephen had guessed his secret. He did not know what to do, and still remained silent. She did not give him time to think, but spoke again, this time more coldly. The white terror had replaced the red:

"Are you not going to answer me a simple question, Harold? To be silent now is to wrong me! I have a right to know!"

In his trouble, for he felt that say what he would he could only give her new pain, he said humbly:

"Don't ask me, Stephen! Won't you understand that I want to do what is best for you? Won't you trust me?"

Her answer came harshly. A more experienced man than Harold, one who knew women better, would have seen how overwrought she was, and would have made pity the pivot of his future bearing and acts and words while the interview lasted; pity, and pity only. But to Harold the high ideal was ever the same. The Stephen whom he loved was no subject for pity, but for devotion only. He knew the nobility of her nature and must trust it to the end. When her silence and her blazing eyes denied his request, he answered her query in a low voice:

"I did!" Even whilst he spoke he was thankful for one thing, he had not been pledged in any way to confidence. Leonard had forced the knowledge on him; and though he would have preferred a million times over to be silent, he was still free to speak. Stephen's next question came more coldly still:

"Did he tell you of his meeting with me?"

"He did."

"Did he tell you all?" It was torture to him to answer; but he was at the stake and must bear it.

"I think so! If it was true."

"What did he tell you? Stay! I shall ask you the facts myself; the broad facts. We need not go into details. . . ."

"Oh, Stephen!" She silenced his pleading with an imperious hand.

"If I can go into this matter, surely you can. If I can bear the shame of telling, you can at least bear that of listening." This she said with a cold, cutting sarcasm which sounded like the rasping of a roughly-sharpened knife through raw flesh. Harold groaned in spirit; he felt a weakness which began at his heart steal through him. It took all his manhood to bear himself erect. He dreaded what was coming, as of old the once-tortured victim dreaded the coming torment of the rack.

CHAPTER XIII

THE END OF THE MEETING

STEPHEN went on in her calm, cold voice:

"Did he tell you that I had asked him to marry me?" Despite herself, as she spoke the words a red tide dyed her face. It was not a flush; it was not a blush; it was a sort of flood which swept through her, leaving her in a few seconds whiter than before. Harold saw and understood. He could not speak; he lowered his head silently. Her eyes glittered more coldly. The madness that every human being may have once was upon her. Such a madness is destructive, and here was something more vulnerable than herself.

"Did he tell you how I pressed him?" There was no red tide this time, nor even again whilst the interview lasted. To bow in affirmation was insufficient; with an effort he answered:

"I understood so." She answered with an icy sarcasm:

"You understood so! Oh, I don't doubt he embellished the record with some of his own pleasantries. But you understood it; and that is sufficient." After a pause she went on:

"Did he tell you that he had refused me?"

"Yes!" Harold knew now that he was under the torture, and that there was no refusing. She went on, with a light laugh, which wrung his heart even more than her pain had done. . . . Stephen to laugh like that! . . .

"And I have no doubt that he embellished that too, with some of his fine masculine witticisms. I understood myself that he was offended at my asking him. I understood it quite well; he told me so!" Then with feminine intuition she went on:

"I daresay that before he was done he said something kindly of the poor little thing that loved him; that loved him so much, and that she had to break down all the bounds of modesty and decorum that had made the women of her house honoured for a thousand years! And you listened to him whilst he spoke! Oh—h—h!" she quivered with her white-hot anger, as the fierce heat in the heart of a furnace quivers. But her voice was cold again as she went on:

"But who could help loving him? Girls always did. It was such a beastly nuisance! You 'understood' all that, I daresay; though perhaps he did not put it in such plain words!" Then the scorn, which up to now had been imprisoned, turned on him; and he felt as though some hose of deathly chill was being played upon him.

"And yet you, knowing that only yesterday he had refused me—refused my pressing request that he should marry me, come to me hot-footed in the early morning and ask me to be your wife. I thought such things did not take place; that men were more honorable, or more considerate, or more merciful! Or at least I used to think so; till yesterday. No! till to-day. Yesterday's doings were my own doings, and I had to bear the penalty of them myself. I had come here to fight out by myself the battle of my shame. . . ."

Here Harold interrupted her. He could not bear to hear Stephen use such a word in connection with herself.

"No! You must not say 'shame.' There is no shame to you, Stephen. There can be none, and no one must say it in my presence!" In her secret heart of hearts she admired him for his words; she felt them at the moment sink into her memory, and knew that she would never forget the mastery of his face and bearing. But the blindness of rage was upon her, and it is of the essence of this white-hot anger that it preys not on what is basest in us, but on what is best. When it is at work all goes down before it. Nothing is spared; and in its evil path high deeds or noble words or holy thoughts are but as dust. That Harold felt deeply was her opportunity to wound him more deeply than before.

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"Even here in the solitude which I had chosen as the battle-ground of my shame you had need to come unasked, unthought of, when even a lesser mind than yours, for you are no fool, would have thought to leave me alone. My shame was my own, I tell you; and I was learning to take my punishment. My punishment! Ha-ha-ha! my punishment! Poor creatures that we are, we think our punishment will be what we would like best: to suffer in silence, and not to have spread abroad our shame!" How she harped on that word, though she knew that every time she uttered it, it cut to the heart of the man who loved her. "And yet you come right on top of my torture to torture me still more illimitably. You come, you who alone had the power to intrude yourself on my grief and sorrow; power given you by my father's kindness. You come to me without warning, considerably telling me that you knew I would be here because I had always come here when I had been in trouble. No—I do you an injustice. 'In trouble' was not what you said, but that I had come when I had been in short frocks. Short frocks! And you came to tell me that you loved me. You thought, I suppose, that as I had refused one man, I would jump at the next that came along. I wanted a man. God! God! what have I done that such an affront should come upon me? And come, too, from a hand that should have protected me if only in gratitude for my father's kindness!" She was eyeing him keenly, with eyes that in her unflinching anger took in everything with the accuracy of sun-painting. She wanted to wound; and she succeeded.

But Harold, though the pain of death was upon him, did not flinch. He stood before her like a rock, in all his great manhood; but a rock on whose summit the waves had cast the wealth of their foam, for his face was as white as snow. She saw and understood; but in the madness upon her she went on trying new places and new ways to wound:

"You thought, I suppose, that this poor, neglected, despised, rejected woman, who wanted so much to marry that she couldn't wait for a man to ask her, would hand herself

over to the first chance comer who threw his handkerchief to her; would hand over herself—and her fortune!”

“Oh, Stephen! How can you say such things—think such things?” The protest broke from him with a groan. His pain seemed to inflame her still further; to gratify her hate, and to stimulate her mad passion:

“Why did I ever see you at all? Why did my father treat you as a son; that when you had grown and got strong on his kindness you could thus insult his daughter in the darkest hour of her pain and her shame!” She almost choked with passion. All the trust and belief of her life had been on a rotten base! There was now nothing in the whole world that she could trust. In the pause he spoke:

“Stephen, I never meant you harm. Oh, don’t speak such wild words. They will come back to you with sorrow afterwards! I only meant to do you good. I wanted . . .” Her anger broke out afresh:

“There; you speak it yourself! You only wanted to do me good. I was so bad that any kind of a husband . . . Oh, get out of my sight! I wish to God I had never seen you! I hope to God I may never see you again! Go! Go! Go!”

This was the end! To Harold’s honest mind such words would have been impossible had not thoughts of truth lain behind them. That Stephen—his Stephen, whose image in his mind shut out every other woman in the world, past, present, and future—should say such things to any one, that she should think such things, was to him a deadly blow. But that she should say them to him! . . . Utterance, even the utterance which speaks in the inmost soul, failed him. He had in some way that he knew not hurt—wounded—killed Stephen; for the finer part was gone from the Stephen that he had known and worshipped so long. She wished him gone; she wished she had never seen him; she hoped to God never to see him again. Life for him was over and done! There could be no more happiness in the world; no more wish to work, to live! . . .

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He bowed gravely; and without a word turned and walked away.

Stephen saw him go, his tall form moving amongst the tree trunks till finally it was lost in their massing. She was so filled with the tumult of her passion that she looked, unmoved. Even the sense of his going did not change her mood. She raged to and fro amongst the trees, her movements getting quicker and quicker as her excitement began to change from mental to physical; till the fury began to exhaust itself. All at once she stopped, as though arrested by a physical barrier; and with a moan sank down in a helpless heap on the cool moss.

Harold went from the grove as one seems to move in a dream. He wanted to get away quickly, silently, unobserved. With the instinct of habitual thought his mind turned London-ward. He met but few persons, and those only cottiers. He saluted them in his usual cheery way, but did not stop to speak with any. He was about to take a single ticket to London when it struck him that this might look odd, so he asked for a return. Then, his mind being once more directed towards concealment of purpose, he sent a telegram to his housekeeper telling her that he was called away to London on business. It was only when he was far on his journey that he gave thought to ways and means, and took stock of his possessions. Before he took out his purse and pocket-book he made up his mind that he would be content with what it was, no matter how little. He had left Normanstand and all belonging to it for ever, and was off to hide himself in whatever part of the world would afford him the best opportunity. Life was over! There was nothing to look forward to; nothing to look back at! The present was a living pain whose lightest element was despair. As, however, he got further and further away, his practical mind began to work; he thought over matters so as to arrange in his mind how best he could dispose of his affairs, so to cause as little comment

as might be, and to save the possibility of worry or distress of any kind to Stephen.

Even then, in the midst of his agony of mind, his heart was with her; it was not the least among his troubles that he would have to be away from her when perhaps she would need him most. And yet whenever he would come to this point in his endless chain of thought, he would have to stop for a while, overcome with such pain that his power of thinking was paralysed. He would never, could never, be of service to her again. He had gone out of her life, as she had gone out of his life; though she never had, nor never could out of his thoughts. It was all over! Stephen was gone from him who would rather have lost the sunlight! He would never see her again! And he had no memory to bring with him into the dark exile from her presence. All the years of sweetness, of hope, and trust, and satisfied and justified faith in each other, had been wiped out by that last terrible, cruel meeting. Oh! how could she have said such things to him! How could she have thought them! He would have bitten out his tongue rather than have said the lightest of hard words to her. He could not have thought hard things of her any more than he could of God! . . . And there she was now in all the agony of her unrestrained passion. Well he knew, from his long experience of her nature, how she must have suffered to be in such a state of mind, to have so forgotten all the restraint of her teaching and her life! Poor, poor Stephen! Fatherless now as well as motherless; and friendless as well as fatherless! No one to calm her in the height of her wild abnormal passion! No one to comfort her when the fit had passed! No one to sympathise with her for all that she had suffered! No one to help her to build new and better hopes out of the wreck of her mad ideas! He would cheerfully have given his life for her. Only last night he was prepared to kill, which was worse than to die, for her sake. And now to be far away, unable to help, unable even to know how she fared. And behind her eternally the shadow of that worthless man who had spurned her

love and flouted her to a chance comer in his drunken delirium. It was too bitter to bear. How could God lightly lay such a burden on his shoulders? It was unfair! It was unfair! If he could do anything for her? Anything! Anything! . . . And so the unending whirl of thoughts went on!

The smoke of London was dim on the horizon when he began to get back to practical matters. When the train drew up at Euston he stepped from it as one to whom death would be a joyous relief!

He went to a quiet hotel, and from there transacted by letter such business matters as were necessary to save pain and trouble to others. As for himself, he made up his mind that he would go to Alaska, which he took to be one of the best places in the as yet uncivilised world for a man to lose his identity. As a security at the start he changed his name; and as John Robinson, which was not a name to attract public attention, he shipped as a passenger on the *Scoriac* from London to New York.

His vague purpose was to cross the American Continent to San Francisco, and there to take passage for the high latitudes north of the Yukon River.

When Stephen began to regain consciousness her first sensation was one of numbness. She was cold in the back, and her feet did not seem to exist; but her head was hot and pulsating as though her brain were a living thing. This state continued for a good while. She had a sensation that time had passed, and was passing still. Then her half-open eyes began to take in her surroundings. For another long spell she began to wonder why all around her was green; green pillars, green roof with a great many windows in it; very far away, and all very still. Then came the inevitable process of reason. Trees! It is a wood! How did I come here? why am I lying on the ground?

All at once wakened memory opened on her its flood-gates, and overwhelmed her with pain. With her hands pressed to her throbbing temples and her burning face close to the

ground, she began to recall what she could of the immediate past. It all seemed like a terrible dream. So like a dream that only for the touch of the cool, moist earth to the backs of her hands she occasionally could not believe in the reality. She seemed, as with shut eyes she tried to recall all that had happened, to be looking on some sort of moving diorama. In her still half-dazed condition its personal aspect seemed hardly a possibility to her. By degrees her intelligence came back to its normal strength, and all at once, as does one suddenly wakened from sleep to the knowledge of danger, she sat up.

Somehow the sense of time elapsed made her look at her watch. It was half-past twelve. As she had come into the grove immediately after breakfast, and as Harold had almost immediately joined her, and as the interview between them had been but short, she must have lain on the ground for more than three hours. She rose at once, trembling in every limb. A new fear began to assail her; that she had been missed at home, and that some one might have come to look for her. Up to now she had not been able to feel the full measure of pain regarding what had passed, but which would, she knew, come to her in the end. It was too vague as yet; she could not realise that it had really been. But the fear of discovery was immediate, and must be guarded against without delay. As well as she could, she tidied herself and began to walk slowly back to the house, hoping to gain her own room unnoticed.

Gaining her room without meeting any one, she at once changed her dress, fearing that some soil or wrinkle might betray her. Resolutely she put back from her mind all consideration of the past; there would be time for that later on. Her nerves were already much quieter than they had been. That long faint, or lapse into insensibility, had for the time taken the place of sleep. There would be a price to be paid for it later on; but for the present it had served its purpose. Now and again she was disturbed by one thought; she could not quite remember what had occurred after Harold had

left, and just before she became unconscious. She dared not dwell upon it, however. It would doubtless all come back to her when she had leisure to think the whole matter over as a connected narrative.

When the gong sounded for lunch she went down, with a calm exterior, to face the dreaded ordeal of another meal.

After lunch she went to her own boudoir where, when she had shut the inner door, no one was allowed to disturb her without some special need in the house or on the arrival of visitors. This "sporting oak" was the sign of "not at home" which she had learned in her glimpse of college life. Here in the solitude of safety, she began to go over the past, resolutely and systematically. She rejoiced, if one can rejoice without any spark of happiness, that as yet she had shed no tear. There had been times when the relief of tears would have been an unspeakable boon; but she had never been in the habit of crying, and the traces of tears would have infallibly arrested the attention of her aunt. As yet she could not afford it; but she longed for the time when she might safely abandon herself to the luxury of grief.

She had already been so often over the memory of the previous humiliating and unhappy day that she need not revert to it at present. Since then had she not quarrelled with Harold, whom she had all her life so trusted that her quarrel with him seemed to shake the very foundations of her existence? As yet she had not remembered perfectly all that had gone on under the shadow of the beech grove. She dared not face it all at once, even as yet. Time must elapse before she should dare to cry; to think of her loss of Harold was to risk breaking down altogether. Already she felt weak. The strain of the last forty-eight hours was too much for her physical strength. She began to feel, as she lay back in her cushioned chair, that a swoon is no worthy substitute for sleep. Indeed it had seemed to make the need for sleep even more imperative.

It was all too humiliating! She wanted to think over what had been; to recall it as far as possible so as to fix it in

her mind, whilst it was still fresh. Later on, some action might have to be based on her recollection. And yet . . . How could she think when she was so tired . . . tired . . .

Nature came to the poor girl's relief at last, and she fell into a heavy sleep . . .

It was like coming out of the grave to be dragged back to waking life out of such a sleep, and so soon after it had begun. But the voice seemed to reach to her inner consciousness in some compelling way. For a second she could not understand; but as she rose from the cushions the maid's message repeated, brought her wide awake and alert in an instant:

"Mr. Everard, young Mr. Everard, to see you, miss!"

CHAPTER XIV.

FATHER AND SON

WHEN Leonard Everard woke the next morning, the events of the previous day began their endless procession through his aching head, and with each revolution he blamed himself more and more for his conduct. With him the disturbing matters were not of equal importance; nor did he have in his mind as complete an image of some of them as of others. Regarding his meeting with Stephen he had of course full recollection of every detail. The only thing which puzzled him was: how he could have been such an utter idiot as to lose such a chance. There had been Stephen Norman, the greatest heiress whom he was ever likely to meet, a girl whom some of the men whom he met, and all of them who knew her, were half crazy about, actually throwing herself at his head. Why had he been such a blind fool as not to accept her at once and improve the occasion to have his debts paid? What sort of stupidity was it that had been upon him? However, so far as Miss Norman was concerned he would be all right. He would see her again in a day or two, or perhaps not so early, and would fix up matters with her. Altogether this part of his thinking was entirely directed against his own stupidity. Sentiment or affection did not in his present condition of headache make any pretence of entering into it.

The other part of his doings with An Wolf was what troubled him most as to recollection. He remembered fully meeting him at the club and being helped into the dog-cart at the start for home. He had a vague remembrance of show-

ing Harold Stephen's letter asking him to meet her at Cæster Wood. Here a sudden thought took him; he got up and looked in his pockets. He could not find the letter, but he laid himself on his bed again with now a fuller remembrance of what had been. He felt angry, very angry; and the anger, if it did not aid his memory, at least helped to clear his brain. Step by step he tried to recollect exactly what Harold had said about his showing the letter.

Last of all he remembered Harold's threat. That is, he remembered the purpose of it though he could not recall the exact words. When these had been spoken he was almost sober; and as he had staggered up the avenue to his own house he had kept repeating them over and over again to himself so that he would not forget them. But he had altered the words so often in his struggles to remember them that only the sense remained. His immediate purpose was to bear them in mind, so that later on, when he should have him at some disadvantage, he would get square with him for his insult. He did not have any immediate purpose of revenge. Harold was a man with whom he felt it would hardly be wise to have a personal quarrel.

That matter of the letter worried him. He had a distinct recollection of insisting that Harold should give it back to him, but he could not remember the end of that branch of the conversation, or whether he had really recovered it. He must find that out, by some means or other. He would have that letter back; he wanted it. He had yet to settle matters with Stephen Norman, and somewhere in the background of his mind, that part where instinct lies, he had an idea that in this it might prove useful to him. Stephen was a peculiar girl, and she might round on him. In that case . . . Every mean selfish instinct of the man made the possession of that letter a desirable thing.

When he got up he found on his dressing-table, where he had left them the day before, his father's note and the jeweller's bill. They irritated him afresh. What dunning beasts those tradesmen were! And how inconsiderate of his

father to keep worrying him like that, when he had had enough worry already about the beastly thing. Well, all that would be over when he married Stephen. And he would have the laugh on the governor. He would have more than the laugh on him; he would make him feel pretty small for always keeping rubbing it in to him about money. . . .

He breakfasted alone, his father having breakfasted hours before. When he had finished, the maid told him that his father wished to see him in the study. He threw into the grate the cigarette which he had just lighted. His father did not smoke himself, and, though he tolerated his son smoking in the dining-room and in his own room, he did not allow it in his study. Leonard's purpose as he went down the passage was expressed to himself:

"I must try a bluff on the governor! I must keep him off that infernal bill till I'm solid with Stephen!" Then he knocked and entered the study.

An acute physiognomist would have classed Mr. Everard as of something of his son's type, but much higher. He too was an egotist, selfish and self-contained. But, unlike his son, he was not in any way a voluptuary. He was precise, cold, exact in all his dealings; a just man in his own view. He would drive a hard bargain, and enforce it. Those who had any dealings with him a second time were careful to be up to time with their part of the bargain. He paid all his dues to the day; and his bills the day before the time allowed for discount had elapsed. He contributed a respectable amount to local charities. His income tax return had never been queried. In his own mind he held himself as a man of honour, and in all matters of exactness fulfilled the letter of the law. But none ever looked to him for sympathy or help; and his tenants, though fairly treated, envied those who held their land from any other estate.

Left a widower whilst his only son was quite a boy, he had never remarried. He had done what he considered his duty to the boy; had a tutor, sent him to Eton and Oxford, and

put before him, habitually, his defections from the standard of conduct laid down for him.

The children of such a man seldom improve on their father. On the contrary they deteriorate. The selfishness and the other lower qualities remain and flourish; but the coldness becomes indifference to the feelings of others, and a general want of moral tone. Morals require heat of some kind. They are hardly indigenous to the animal, natural man; but rather to the civilised man. The self-concentration of the cold-natured man comes out often in his children as voluptuousness; and the voluptuousness of cold natures is a thing to dread.

When Leonard entered the study he found his father in his most stern and aggressive mood. He said coldly as he pointed to a chair:

"Good morning! You were home late last night; and not quite in a condition to be proud of. But that is not the subject I wish to speak of. Sit down!" Leonard took his seat, feeling all the old repellent fears of his boyhood coming over him again. His father went on at once:

"You got my letter?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You noted what I said about some items in that—that—shameful bill?"

"Yes!" This answer was given in a more surly tone.

"Then I am ready to hear what you have to say in the matter. Your explanation: your purpose!" As he spoke the sentences with a premeditated staccato force the elder man placed his finger tips together and leaned back in his chair, a cold self-satisfaction increasing rather than softening the sternness of his face.

Leonard felt that now was his moment for displaying his resources. A man like him, over head and ears in debt, must have a large experience in the way of facing unpleasant situations and a power of making dilatory excuses. Creditors require a deal of persuasion; and neither their taste, manner, nor speech is as a rule calculated to be soothing.

Even patience and forbearance are not prime qualities in a borrower unprepared to repay. The proverb "A soft answer turneth away wrath!" does not apply. Rather as a shield and buckler, the tongue of the ready liar, the optimistic enthusiasm of the *tête montée*, the reasonable setting forth of adequate promises of help. Leonard had over and over again exercised all these powers till his readiness of tongue had become as familiar as his sense of shame was pachydermatous. In the familiar situation all his airiness, even in the grim presence of his father, came back to him. His answer now came almost flippantly:

"The only explanation I can give, sir, is that I thought I was at liberty to spend my allowance in my own way!" His father interrupted to comment:

"Your allowance is three hundred pounds per annum, and ~~this~~ bill is for four hundred and thirty-two pounds, twelve shillings and sevenpence, sterling!" He said the last word with such an impressive air as to make it seem that the fact of the debt being reckoned in sterling added to its enormity.

"Quite so, sir," answered Leonard calmly. "But you will have noticed that the bill extends over a considerable time."

"And what has that to do with it, sir? The money is owed all the same."

"I only mentioned the fact, sir, because your words seemed to imply that an income of three hundred per annum, as you stated it, was exceeded by a hundred and thirty-two, twelve, seven; as though in this one class of expenditure I had more than used my entire income."

"Well, sir?"

"Whereas only an amount which, I would deferentially suggest, is fairly allowable to a man in my—in your son's position, has been charged per annum. You see, father, you have been misled by the items in a long, running account."

If he had intended to inflame his father, he could hardly have done it better. He had intended to inflame him; he depended in part on this to postpone the disagreeable subject of the time of repayment.

But the senior Everard was no fool; and besides he had another matter in hand. Despite his anger he went on his intended way, saying with bitter sarcasm:

"Ah! I trust your creditor may see it in that light, and that for your sake he too may be 'misled by the items in a long, running account.'" Then he went on more briskly:

"Now as to your purpose. When, and I may perhaps ask incidentally how, do you intend to repay it?"

"Oh! directly, sir, when I am settling some other matters. I am just now arranging my affairs; and when I have got all these little matters before me, it won't take long to polish them off. It's only a matter of a cheque-book and a pen and ink anyhow!"

His father looked at him in amazement. Could it be possible, he thought, that Leonard had all along been using his money carefully, merely saving the money whilst he left his debts unpaid. For a few moments he looked at him keenly before speaking:

"And about how long will this arrangement of your affairs take?"

Seeing that Leonard hesitated, he proceeded:

"You see I have to reply to that letter. You have apparently forgotten that it was addressed to me!" Leonard deliberately took the letter and bill from his pocket and after looking at them handed them to his father, saying:

"So it is! Pardon me, sir; I had quite overlooked it."

He felt, however, that he was in a tight place. His thoughts were roaming wide, and comfort came to him in a sudden memory of Stephen's words: "I know you are in trouble about money matters. Why not let me help you? . . . If you were going to be my husband all such little matters would fall away from you!" "Good old Stephen!" he thought to himself. "Crank or no crank, you'll do! This settles it!" Then, with a sort of modified drawl, he answered:

"When? oh! in about a week. Not longer, I expect!" His father rose up, which seeing he rose too.

"Very well!" said Mr. Everard. "For ten days I shall wait to answer this letter—you can keep the bill; though such delay is not according to my habit in dealing with correspondence." Leonard began to move away; but when he was half way to the door his father, who had all the time been watching him keenly, added:

"By the way, here is another letter which you had better take and read at your leisure. You can leave a note for me before you go to bed. I am dining at Norcester to-night and may be back late. I shall want to know definitely in the morning."

"Thank you, sir," said Leonard as he took the paper, with his heart sinking. *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes.*

Leonard thought it wiser not to look at the letter until he was in his own room. When he opened it he gave a low whistle, and his heart sank. It was from the firm of money-lenders to whom he had such a heavy debt, informing his father that, as his son had failed to make payment of his instalment as arranged and had not even acknowledged their applications, they would reluctantly be compelled to take legal action unless the total amount due, with accumulated interest, was repaid within three days. As the letter was dated two days earlier, something should be done at once if a catastrophe was to be averted. Leonard's commentary was characteristic:

"Beastly mean of the governor to keep this back till I had committed myself, and then spring it on me! I'll be even with him for it yet. Nasty old devil!"

There was but one thing for him to do; he recognised that at the very outset of his consideration of the situation. He would have to see Stephen at once. She herself had suggested lending the money. It was she who said that if he were her husband, or going to be, such troubles would not touch him. Well! he was going to be her husband. He had intended that already; but now he would have to hasten the engagement. It was a beastly grind! Every one was pretty selfish! Just as if Stephen couldn't have waited! Never

mind; he would get even with them all, every one of them, some day! Anyhow he must lose no time. He would call at Normanstand this very afternoon and fix up the matter. When they had been engaged and he had kissed her, no doubt but Stephen would offer again to help him out. He could, in their billing and cooing, work round to the subject of his debts. He would pretend to be upset by his father's sternness, and that would bring her up with a round turn. When a woman loved a man she couldn't bear to see him unhappy; she would get out her cheque book. So that was all right! In the meantime he would take a brandy and soda to steady his nerves. But he must be careful. Stephen had an eye like a hawk and would spot it at once if there was anything wrong with a fellow. Well, if she made new matters more unpleasant for him than need be, he'd get level with her later on. A man had always the whip-hand of his wife; that was one comfort. He smiled as he pictured to himself his father's amazement when he should, after another stormy interview which he would take care to protract to the full, hand him a sheaf of receipted bills.

In the early afternoon he lay down for a quiet sleep in order to prepare himself for his ordeal. Then he dressed himself carefully and drove his dogcart over to Normanstand.

CHAPTER XV

A PRIVATE CONVERSATION

THE name braced up Stephen at once. Here was danger, an enemy to be encountered. It would never do to let Leonard Everard see that she was diffident about meeting him; she would go down at once. But she would take the precaution of having her aunt present; for the first, at any rate, till she should have seen how the land lay. Her being just waked from sleep would be an excuse for asking her aunt to see the visitor till she came down. So she said to the maid:

"I have been asleep. I must have got tired walking in the wood in the heat. Ask Miss Rowly to kindly see Mr. Everard in the blue drawing-room till I come down. I must tidy my hair; but I will be down in a very few minutes."

"Shall I send Marjorie to you, miss?"

"No! Don't mind; I can do what I want myself. Hurry down to Miss Rowly!"

How she regarded Leonard Everard now was shown in her instinctive classing him amongst her enemies. When she entered the room she seemed all aglow. She wanted not only to overcome but to punish; and all the woman in her had risen to the effort. Never in her life had Stephen Norman looked more radiantly beautiful, more adorable, more desirable. Even Leonard Everard felt his pulses quicken as he saw that glowing mass of beauty standing out against the cold background of old French tapestry. All the physical side of him leaped in answer to the call of her beauty; and even his cold heart and his self-engrossed brain followed with

slower gait. He had been sitting opposite Miss Rowly in one of the windows, twirling his hat in nervous suspense. He jumped up, and, as she came towards him, went forward rapidly to greet her. No one could mistake the admiration in his eyes. Ever since he had made up his mind to marry her she had assumed a new aspect to him in his thoughts when she was absent. But now her presence swept away all false imaginings; and from the moment that her loveliness dawned upon him something like love began to grow within his breast. Stephen saw the look and it strengthened her. He had so grievously wounded her pride the previous day that her victory on this was a compensation which set her more at her old poise.

Her greeting was all sweetness: she was charmed to see him. How was his father, and what was the news! Miss Rowly looked on with a smiling visage. She too had seen the look of admiration in his eyes, and it pleased her. Old ladies, and especially when they are maiden ladies, always like to see admiration in the eyes of young men when they are turned in the direction of any girl dear to them.

And so they talked for some time, keeping all the while, by Stephen's clever generalship, to the small-talk of the neighbourhood and the minor events of social importance. As the time wore on she could see that Leonard was growing impatient, and evidently wanted to see her alone. She ignored, however, all his little private signalling, and presently ordered tea to be brought. This took some little time; and when it had been brought and served and drunk, Leonard was in a smothered fume of impatience. She was glad to see that as yet her aunt had noticed nothing, and she still hoped that she would be able to so prolong matters, that she would escape without a private interview. She did not know the cause of Leonard's impatience: that he *must* see her before the day had passed. She too was an egoist, in her own way; in the flush of belief of his subjugation she did not think of attributing to him any other motive than his desire for herself. As she had long ago made up her

mind on the final issue of this matter she did not want to be troubled by a new "scene;" so she still held to her tactics of starving out the enemy.

But, after all, Leonard was a man; and man's ways are more direct than woman's. Seeing that he could not achieve his object in any other way, he said out suddenly, thinking, and rightly, that she would not wish to force an issue in the presence of her aunt:

"By the way, Miss Norman," he had always called her "Miss Norman" in her aunt's presence: "I want to have two minutes with you before I go. On a matter of business," he added, noticing Miss Rowly's surprised look. The old lady was old-fashioned even for her age; in her time no young man would have asked to see a young lady alone on business. Except on one kind of business; and with regard to that kind of business gentlemen had to obtain first the confidence and permission of guardians. Leonard saw the difficulty and said quickly:

"It is on the matter you wrote to me about!"

Stephen was prepared for a nasty shock, but hardly for so nasty a one as this. There was an indelicacy about it which went far beyond the bounds of thoughtless conventionality. That such an appeal should be made to her, and in such a way, savoured of danger. Real, practical, ominous danger; danger which should be guarded against! Her woman's intuition gave her the guard, and at once she spoke, smilingly and gently as one recalling a matter in which the concern is not her own:

"Of course! It was selfish of me not to have thought of it before, and to have kept you so long waiting. The fact is, Auntie, that Leonard—I like to call him Leonard, since we were children together, and he is so young; though perhaps it would be more decorous nowadays to say 'Mr. Everard'—has consulted me about his debts. You know, Auntie dear, that young men will be young men in such matters; or perhaps you do not, since the only person who ever worried you has been myself. But I stayed at Oxford and I know

something of young men's ways; and as I am necessarily more or less of a man of business, he values my help. Don't you, Leonard?" The challenge was so direct, and the position he was in so daringly put, that he had to acquiesce. Miss Rowly, who had looked on with a frown of grave displeasure, said coldly:

"I know you are your own mistress, my dear. But surely it would be better if Mr. Everard would consult with his solicitor or his father's agent, or some of his gentlemen friends in such a matter, rather than with a young lady whose relations with him, after all, are only those of a neighbour on visiting terms. For my own part, I should have thought that Mr. Everard's best course would have been to consult with his own father! But the things that gentlemen, as well as ladies do, have been sadly changed since my time!" Then, rising in formal dignity, she bowed gravely to the visitor before leaving the room.

But the position of being left alone in the room with Leonard did not at all suit Stephen's plans. Rising up quickly she said to her aunt:

"Don't stir, Auntie. I daresay you are quite right in what you say; but I promised Mr. Everard to go into the matter. And as I have brought the awkwardness on myself, I suppose I must bear it. If Mr. Everard wants to see me alone, and I suppose he is diffident in speaking on such a matter before you—he didn't play with you, you know!—we can go out on the lawn. It is not so hot as it was, and the seats beside the spring are comfy. We shan't be long!" Before Leonard could recover his wits she had headed him out on the lawn.

Her strategy was again thoroughly good. The spot which she had chosen, though perfectly isolated as to sound, for it was beyond earshot, was quite in the open and commanded by all the windows in that side of the house. A person speaking there might *say* what he liked, but his *actions* must be discreet.

On the lawn Stephen tripped ahead; Leonard followed,

meek as to his motions but inwardly raging. By her clever use of the opening she had put him in a difficulty from which there was no immediate means of extrication. He could not quarrel overtly with Stephen; for if he did so, how could he enter on the pressing matter of his debts. He dared not openly proclaim his object in wishing to marry her, for had he done so her aunt might have interfered, with what success he could not be sure. In any case it would probably cause delay, and delay was just what he could not afford. He felt that in mentioning his debts at just such a moment he had given Stephen the chance which she had so aptly taken. In jockey parlance, she had "roped" him. He had to be on his good behaviour, however; and with an apprehension that was new to him he followed her.

Close to where the spring gushed from the rock was an old Roman marble seat which a bygone Norman had, on his return from his travels, brought with him from the grounds of an Italian villa. It was placed at an angle from the house so that the one of the two occupants which it held within its curve must almost face the house, whilst the other gave to it at least a quarter-face. Stephen seated herself on the near side, leaving to Leonard the exposed position. As soon as he was seated, she began:

"Now, Leonard, tell me all about the debts?" She spoke in tones of gay friendliness, but behind the mask of her cheerfulness was the real face of fear. She had something of the feeling of one who in old days had been placed on the rack. The mention of her letter to him was the first turn of the screw. In itself it was unpleasant, rather than painful; its terror consisted in what was to follow. The wooden rollers had not yet begun to creak. Down deep in her mind was a conviction that that letter was a pivotal point of future sorrow. It was in the meantime quite apparent to her that Leonard kept it as his last resource; so her instinct was to keep it to the front and thus minimise its power.

Leonard, though inwardly weakened by qualms of growing

doubt, had the animal instinct that, as he was in opposition, his safety was in attacking where his opponent most feared. He felt that there was some subtle change in his companion; this was never the same Stephen Norman whom only yesterday he had met upon the hill! He plunged at once into his purpose.

"But it wasn't about my debts you asked me to meet you, Stephen." Stephen's nerves warned her to school herself against coming pain. The rack was tightening quicker than she had expected.

"You surprise me, Leonard! I thought I simply asked you to come to meet me. I know the first subject I mentioned when we began to talk, after your grumbling about coming in the heat, was your money matters." Leonard winced, but went on:

"It was very good of you, Stephen; but really that is not what I came to speak of to-day. At first, at all events!" he added with a sublime *naïveté*, as the subject of his debts and his imperative want of money rose before him. He must look after his own interest. Stephen's eyes flashed; she saw more clearly than ever through his purpose. Such an admission at the very outset of the proffer of marriage, which she felt was coming, was little short of monstrous. Her companion did not see the look of mastery on her face; he was looking down at the moment. A true lover would have been looking up.

"I wanted to tell you, Stephen, that I have been thinking over what you said to me in your letter, and what you said in words; and I want to accept!" As he was speaking he was looking her straight in the face.

Creak!

Stephen answered slowly with a puzzled smile which wrinkled up her forehead:

"Accept what I said in my letter! why, Leonard, what *do* you mean? That letter must have had a lot more in it than I thought. I seem to remember that it was simply a line asking you to meet me. Just let me look at it; I should

like to be sure of what it actually is!" As she spoke she held out her hand. Leonard was nonplussed; he did not know what to say. Stephen made up her mind to have the letter back. Leonard was chafing under the position forced upon him, and tried to divert his companion from her purpose. He knew well why she had chosen that exposed position for their interview. Now, as her outstretched hand embarrassed him, he made reprisal; he tried to take it in his in a tender manner.

Creak! Squeak!

She instantly drew back her hand and put it behind her in a decided manner. She was determined that whatever might happen she would not let any watcher at the windows, by chance or otherwise, see any sign of tenderness on her part. Leonard, thinking that his purpose had been effected, went on, breathing more freely:

"Your letter wasn't much. Except of course that it gave me the opportunity of listening to what you said; to all your sweet words. To your more than sweet proposal!"

Creak! Creak!

"Yes! It must have been sweet to have any one, who was in a position to do so, to offer to help you when you knew that you were overwhelmed with debts!" The words were brutal. Stephen felt so; but she had no alternative. Fine feeling and forbearance were thrown away on a man who made love with a whip! Leonard had some of the hard side of human nature; but he had also some of the weak side. He went on blindly:

"I have been thinking ever since of what you said, and I want to tell you that I would like to do as you wish!" As he spoke, his words seemed even to him to be out of place. He felt that it would be necessary to throw more fervour into the proceedings. The sudden outburst which followed actually amused Stephen, even in her state of fear:

"Oh, Stephen, don't you know that I love you! You are so beautiful! I love you! I love you! Won't you be my wife?"

This was getting too much to close quarters. Stephen said in a calm, business-like way:

"My dear Leonard, one thing at a time! I came out here, you know, to speak of your debts; and until that is done, I really won't go into any other matter. Of course if you'd rather not . . ." Leonard really could not afford this; matters were too pressing with him. So he tried to affect a cheery manner; but in his heart was a black resolve that she should yet pay for this.

"All right! Stephen. Whatever you wish I will do; you are the queen of my heart, you know!"

"How much is the total amount?" said Stephen.

This was a change to the prosaic which made sentiment impossible. He gave over, for the time.

"Go on!" said Stephen, following up her advantage. As he still hesitated she spoke again:

"Don't you even know how much you owe?"

"The fact is, I don't. Not exactly. I shall make up the amount as well as I can and let you know. But that's not what I came about to-day." Stephen was going to make an angry gesture of dissent. She was not going to have that matter opened up. She had had quite enough worry already to-day. . . . She waited, however, for Leonard was going on speaking after his momentary pause. She breathed more freely after his first sentence. He was unable evidently to carry on a double train of thought.

"It was about that infernal money-lenders' letters that the Governor got!" Stephen's anxiety lessened. This open acknowledgment of his true purpose seemed to clear the air. Blackmail is not a pleasant thing to face, but it was a relief to Stephen from the continuance of that awful phase of love-making which she had herself begun.

"What is the amount?" Leonard looked quickly at her; the relief of her mind made her tone seem joyful.

"A monkey! Five hundred pounds, you know. But then there's three hundred for interest that has to be paid also.

It's an awful lot of money, isn't it?" The last phrase was added on seeing Stephen's surprised look.

"Yes!" she answered quietly. "A great deal of money—to waste!" They were both silent for a little while. Then she said:

"What does your father say to it?"

"He was in an awful wax. One of these beastly duns had written to him about another account and he was in a regular fury. When I told him I would pay it within a week, he said very little, which was suspicious; and then, just when I was going out, he sprung this on me. Mean of him! wasn't it? I need expect no help from him." As he was speaking he took a mass of letters from his pocket and began to look among them for the money-lenders' letter.

"Why, what a correspondence you have there. Do you keep all your letters in your pockets?" said Stephen quietly.

"All I don't tear up or burn. It wouldn't do to let the Governor into my secrets. He might know too much!"

"And are all those letters from duns?"

"Mostly, but I only keep those letters I have to attend to and those I care for."

"Show me the bundle!" she said. Then seeing him hesitate, added:

"You know if I am to help you to get clear you must take me into your confidence. I dare say I shall have to see a lot more letters than these." Her tone was too quiet. Knowing already the silent antagonism between them he began to suspect her; and knowing also that her own letter was not amongst them, he used his wits and handed them over to her without a word. She, too, suspected him. After his tacit refusal to give her the letter, she almost took it for granted that it was not amongst them. She gave no evidence of her feeling, however, but opened and read the letters in due sequence; all save two, which, being in a female hand, she gave back to him without a word. There was a calmness and an utter absence of concern, much less of jealousy, about this which disconcerted him. Throughout her reading

Stephen's face showed surprise now and again; but when she came to the last, which was that of the usurers, it showed alarm. Being a woman, a legal threat had certain fears of its own.

"There must be no delay about this!" she said.

"What am I to do?" he answered, a weight off his mind that the fiscal matter had been practically entered on.

"I shall see that you get the money!" she said quietly. "It will be really a gift, but I prefer it to be as a loan for many reasons." Leonard made no comment. He found so many reasons in his own mind that he thought it wise to forbear from asking any of hers. Then she took the practical matter in hand:

"You must wire to these people at once to say that you will pay the amount on the day after to-morrow. If you will come here to-morrow at four o'clock the money will be ready for you. You can go up to town by the evening train and pay off the debt first thing in the morning. When you bring the receipt I shall speak to you about the other debts; but you must make out a full list of them. We can't have any half-measure. I will not go into the matter till I have all the details before me!" Then she stood up to go.

As they walked across the lawn, she said to him:

"By the way, don't forget to bring that letter with you. I want to see what I really *did* say in it!" Her tone was quiet enough, and the wording was a request; but Leonard knew as well as if it had been spoken outright as a threat that if he did not have the letter with him when he came things were likely to be unpleasant.

The farther he got from Normanstand on his way home the more discontented Leonard grew. Whilst he had been in Stephen's presence he had not dared to make protest or opposition. He had come prepared to allow Stephen to fall into his arms, fortune and all. But now, although he had practical assurance that the weight of his debts would be taken from him, he was going away with his tail between his legs. He had not even been accepted as

a suitor, he who had himself been wooed only a day before. He had even been treated like a bad boy; had been told that he had wasted money; had been ordered to bring the full schedule of his debts. Stephen had such an infernally masterly way with her! It didn't matter whether she was proposing to him, or he was proposing to her, he was made to feel small all the same. He would have to put up with it till he had got rid of the debts! He never even considered the debt which he must still owe to her. When that time came he would. . . .

Why was she so persistent about the letter? Was it possible that she suspected he would use it to coerce her; she would call it "blackmail," he supposed. This being the very thing he had intended to do, and had done, he grew very indignant at the very thought of being accused of it. It was, he felt, a very awkward thing that he had lost possession of the letter. He might need it if Stephen got nasty. He thought he would call round that evening by Harold's house, and see if he couldn't get it back.

He did not find him in. The maid who opened the door could give him no information; all she could say was that Mrs. Dingle the housekeeper had got a telegram from Master saying that he had been called suddenly away on business.

On his way home he called at the post-office and sent a telegram to Cavendish and Cecil, the name of the usurers' firm, in accordance with Stephen's direction. He signed it: "Jasper Everard."

CHAPTER XVI

A BUSINESS TRANSACTION

WHEN Stephen had sent off her letter to the bank she went out for a stroll; she knew it would be no use trying to get rest before dinner. Oh, when would she be able to think; able to cry!

The latter thought almost overcame her; for all this day by some strange force she was held back from weeping. She felt as though she would never be able to weep again. And yet the craving for such a relief was on her. Her womanhood was growing.

Slowly she took her way across the hard stretch of finely-kept grass which lay on the side of the house away from the wood. The green sward lay like a sea, dotted with huge trees, singly, or in clumps as islands. In its far-stretching stateliness, which suggested a power of giving rest, there was something soothing. She came back to the sound of the dressing-gong with a better strength to resist the trial before her. Well she knew her aunt would have something to say on the subject of her interference in Leonard Everard's affairs.

Her fears were justified, for when they had come into the drawing-room after dinner Miss Rowly began:

"Stephen dear, is it not unwise of you to interfere in Mr. Everard's affairs?"

"Why unwise, Auntie?"

"Well, my dear, the world is censorious. And when a young lady, of your position and your wealth, takes a part in a young man's affairs tongues are apt to wag. And also,

dear, debts, young men's debts, are hardly the subjects for a girl's investigation. There may be things which are hardly decorous for us women to see. Remember, that we ladies live very different lives from men; from some men, I should say, for your dear father was the best of men, and I should think that in all his life there was nothing which he would have wished concealed. But, my dear, young men are less restrained in their ways than we are, than we have to be for our own safety and protection. Their life is so very, very different; and some of their companionships so unprofitable that really the exposal coming from an intimate inquiry into their accounts might lead to the forming of ideas better left alone." The poor lady was greatly perturbed at having to speak in such a way to the young girl, whom she credited with having the same ignorance of the facts of life as had been existent in her own youth, and of being ruled by the same qualms and diffidences which had been in vogue at that time. Stephen saw her distress; coming over to her, she sat down by her and took her hand.

"I think you are quite right, Auntie dear. It would have been better if I had asked you first; but I saw that Leonard was in distress, and wormed the cause of it from him. When I heard that it was only debt I offered to help him. He is an old friend, you know, Auntie. We were children together; and as I have much more money than I can ever want or spend, I thought I might help him. I am afraid I have let myself in for a bigger thing than I intended; but as I have promised I must go on with it. I dare say, Auntie, that you are afraid that I may end by getting in love with him, and marrying him. Don't you, dear?" This was said with a hug and a kiss which gave the old lady delight. Her instinct told her what was coming. She nodded her head in acquiescence. Stephen went on gravely:

"Put any such fear out of your mind. I shall never marry him. I can never love him." She was going to say "could never love him," when she remembered. Verbal

money is a great help in one's career proper when there is a want to be satisfied.

"Are you sure, my dear? The heart is not always under one's own control."

"Quite sure, Auntie. As sure as I am of my own identity. I know Leonard Everett; and though I have always liked him, I do not respect him. Why, the very fact of his coming to me for money would make me reconsider any view I had formed, had nothing else ever done so. You may take it, Auntie dear, that in the way you mean Leonard is nothing to me; can never be anything to me!" Here a sudden inspiration took her. In its light a serious difficulty passed away from her, and the doing of a thing which had a fear of its own became easy. With a conviction in her tone, which in itself aided her immediate purpose, she said:

"I shall prove it to you. That is, if you will not mind doing something which will save me an embarrassment."

"You know I will do anything, my dearest, which an old woman can do for a young one!" Stephen gave her a loving glance, and squeezed the mitted hand which she held as she went on:

"As I said, I have promised to lend him some money. The first instalment is to be given him to-morrow; he is to call for it in the afternoon. Will you give it to him for me?"

"Gladly, my dear," said the old lady, much relieved. Stephen continued:

"One other thing, Auntie, I want you to do for me: not to think of the amount, or to say a word to me about it. It is a large sum, and I dare say it will frighten you a little. But I have made up my mind to it. I am learning a great deal out of this, Auntie dear; and I am quite willing to pay for my knowledge. After all, money is the easiest and cheapest way of paying for knowledge! Don't you agree with me?"

Miss Rowly gulped down her disappointment. She felt that she ought not to say too much, now that Stephen had set

aside her graver fears. She consoled herself with the thought that even a large amount of money would cause no inconvenience to so wealthy a woman as Stephen. Beyond this, as she would have the handing over of the money to Leonard, she would know the amount. If advisable, she could remonstrate.

Stephen did not dare to breathe freely till she was quite alone; and as she lay quiet in her bed in the dark she thought before sleep came.

Her first feeling was one of thankfulness that immediate danger was swerving from her. Things were so shaping themselves that she need not have any fear concerning Leonard. For his own sake he would have to keep silent. If he intended to blackmail her she would have the protection of her aunt's knowledge of the loan, and of her participation in it. The only weapon that remained to him was her own letter to him; and that she would get from him before furnishing the money for the payment of his other debts.

These things cleared out of the way, her thoughts turned to the matter of the greater dread; that of which all along she had feared to think for a moment: Harold!

Harold! and her treatment of him!

The first reception of the idea was positive anguish. From the moment he had left her till now there had been no time when a consideration of the matter was possible. Time pressed, or circumstances had interfered, or her own personal condition had forbidden. Now, when she was alone, the whole awful truth burst on her like an avalanche.

It was with a smothered groan that she, in the darkness, held up her arms with fingers linked in desperate concentration of appeal.

Oh, if she could only take back one hour of her life, well she knew what that hour would be! Even that shameful time with Leonard on the hill-top seemed innocuous beside the degrading remembrance of her conduct to the noble friend of her whole life. In the first, the fault had been

entirely her own; and only herself need suffer. But in the last, whatever she might suffer would be nothing to the pain she had inflicted on Harold. . . . That mute look of suffering in the eyes which had never looked in hers without love and strengthening kindness! Those pale cheeks and ashy lips! . . . That pleading break in the voice, which had always been sweet and tender and strong to her, and for her; the voice which had only a moment before her stormy outbreak quivered with diffident loving speech! What had he done to offend, which would justify her conduct? After all, nothing but what the other had left undone!

Sadly she turned her over in her bed, and with shut eyes put her burning face on the pillow, to hide, as it were, from herself her abject depth of shame.

Oh! for tears now! Oh! that she might weep, if only once, to relieve the agony of her bursting heart!

But tears would not come. She felt as if in all her life she would never be able to weep again.

Stephen's self-abasement was the best guard against the attacks of passion which had from time to time for now some sixty hours so cruelly rent her. In the shadowy rest of the House of Humility the clash of passions sounds as if afar! In the midst of her dry sobbing, Stephen's overwrought feelings veiled her memory. She slept the dreamless sleep which Plato gives as the acme of happiness.

In her case it was so; for she forgot!

Leonard's attitude in his own home that night was to his father most exasperating. Conscious of immediate relief from his troubling debts, and meanly anxious rather to put his father in the wrong than himself in the right, he kept studiously away from the subjects which were of interest to them both.

He lounged through the next morning with what patience he could. At four o'clock he was at the door of Normanstand in his dogcart. This time he had a groom with him and a suitcase packed for a night's use, as he was to go on to

London after his interview with Stephen. He had lost sight altogether of the matter of Stephen's letter, or else he would have been more nervous.

He was taken into the blue drawing-room, where shortly Miss Rowly joined him. He had not expected this, and was uneasy in his mind. His fidgeting was not unobserved by the astute old lady. He was disconcerted; "overwhelmed" would better have described his feelings when she said:

"Miss Norman is sorry she cannot see you to-day as she is making a visit; but she has given me a message for you, or rather a commission to discharge. I am not much in the habit of doing financial business, so you must excuse me if I am awkward in any way. Perhaps you had better sit down at the table; there are writing materials there, and I shall want a receipt of some sort.

In an impulsive way he blurted out:

"Stephen did not say anything about a receipt!" The other smiled sweetly as she said in a calm way:

"But unfortunately Miss Norman is not here; and so I have to do the best I can. I really must have some proof that I have fulfilled my trust. You see, Mr. Everard, though it is what lawyers call a 'friendly' transaction, it is more or less a business act; and I must protect myself."

"Protect yourself! what do you mean?" asked Leonard, amazed.

"Certainly!"—she still smiled. "For instance, let us suppose, Mr. Everard—of course an impossible thing, but let us take it as an illustration—suppose that you were afterwards to repudiate the transaction!"

"How do you mean?" he interrupted. She went on serenely:

"That you should say, for instance, that you never had had the money, what position should I be in? I would be put in a position where even my own honour might be held in question; of not having fulfilled what I had promised. It would, certainly, not be likely that Miss Norman should

ever have such a suspicion, but some one else might. I must therefore have some sort of acknowledgment from you; and I certainly thought"—this was said with considerable stiffness—"that you would have made no hesitation in writing for me what I should wish."

"When will Stephen be back?" asked Leonard with a directness which under the circumstances seemed rude. The old lady's eyes flashed; her precautions were being justified.

"I can hardly tell you," she said. "My niece, Miss Norman, regulates her own movements. She will probably remain the night wherever she is at sundown this evening." Miss Rowly rather prided herself on the verbal quibble in this answer. Then with a little extra stiffness she said:

"Of course if you prefer, Mr. Everard, we can hold this over till Miss Norman is here herself. I should never have wished to take a part in the transaction if she had not asked me. I have not been used to deal with large sums of money, and this seems to me so large that I wish to do all that is right."

"I don't see the necessity of a receipt!" he said again. "I am quite sure Stephen would not wish it!" he said almost brutally. He did not, as he had often said, "take much stock in old women." She rose up, saying:

"Well, perhaps we had better wait. There is certainly no hurry in so far as I am concerned. Miss Norman told me that the matter required haste. . . . Stay!" she added, as if with a light breaking in upon her. "There is a way of avoiding the necessity of such. I can get in one or two of the servants! The presence of some one is all I should require for my part." She continued looking at him with a glad smile as of one released from an embarrassment.

Leonard saw that he was checkmated; and besides, time pressed. He sat down at the table. Taking up a pen and drawing a sheet of paper towards him, he said with what command of his voice he could:

"What am I to write?" The old lady took from her

basket a folded sheet of notepaper, and, putting on her reading-glasses, said as she smoothed it out:

"I think it would be well to say something like this—
'I, Leonard Everard, of Brindehow, in the Parish of Normanstand, in the County of Norcester, hereby'—Why don't you write?"

"I was waiting to hear it!" he answered feebly. Then, seeing her still waiting, and judging from her manner that he had got to go on as she wished, he wrote on; following her sentences as she read and reading them aloud:

"Hereby acknowledge the receipt from Miss Laetitia Rowly of nine hundred pounds sterling lent to me in accordance with my request, the same being to clear me of a pressing debt due by me."

During the writing Leonard stopped at times. He had more than once an impulse to throw down his pen and walk out of the house, whatever might be the result. But two things, one already in his mind and the other suddenly recurring to him, made him hold himself in check. The first was that time was passing, and if he did not get away soon he would miss his train for London. The second was that he had not with him the letter which Stephen had told him to bring. Under the latter circumstances he should have rejoiced at her absence, even when necessitating this humiliating alternative. When he had finished writing the receipt Miss Rowly looked it over, and handing it back to him, said:

"Now sign; and date!" He did so with suppressed anger.

She folded the document carefully and put it in her pocket. Then taking from the little pouch which she wore at her belt a roll of notes, she counted out on the table nine notes of one hundred pounds each. As she put down the last she said:

"Miss Norman asked me to say that a hundred pounds is added to the sum you specified to her, as doubtless the usurers would, since you are actually behind the time

promised for repayment, require something extra as a *solatium* or to avoid legal proceedings already undertaken. In fact that they would 'put more salt on your tail.' The expression, I regret to say, is not mine."

Leonard folded up the notes and put them into his pocket-book and walked away. He did not feel like adding verbal thanks to the document already signed. As he got near the door the thought struck him; turning back he said:

"May I ask if Stephen said anything about getting the document?" He had a double intention in the form of the question, since it would apply either to the paper signed or to Stephen's letter to him. If Miss Rowly was ignorant of the matter her answer would show it. The old lady was still on her guard. She had noted well his want of courtesy in not saying even a conventional word of thanks, and was determined to abate nothing in her stiffness toward him:

"I beg your pardon," she said icily, "did you speak of any one?"

"Miss Norman, I meant!" Miss Rowly's answer to this came so smartly that it left an added sting. Her arrow was fledged with two feathers so that it must shoot true: her distrust of him and his own impotence.

"Oh no! Miss Norman knows nothing of this. She simply asked me to give you the money. This is my own doing entirely. You see, I must exercise my judgment on my dear niece's behalf. Of course it may not be necessary to show her the receipt; but if it should ever be advisable it is always there. Don't you agree with me that it is wise?"

Bowing rather lower than was necessary, he said:

"You are, I am sure, always wise!" Then, as he went out of the door, he said *sotto voce*, between his teeth:

"When my turn comes out you go! Neck and crop! Quick! Normanstand isn't big enough to hold us both!"

CHAPTER XVII

MORE BUSINESS

LEONARD'S visits to town had not of late been many, and such as he had had were not accompanied with a plethora of cash. He now felt that he had earned a holiday; so it was not till the third morning that he returned to Brindehow. His father made no comment whatever on his absences; his only allusion to the subject was:

"Back all right! Any news in town?" There was, however, an unwonted suavity in his manner which made Leonard a little anxious. He was evidently restraining himself until the time for explanation. Leonard busied himself for the balance of the morning in getting together all his unpaid accounts and making a schedule of them. The total at first amazed, almost as much as it frightened him. He feared what Stephen would say. She had already commented unfavourably on the one amount which she had seen. When she was face to face with this she might refuse to pay altogether.

It was in a somewhat chastened mood that he made his appearance at Normanstand later in the afternoon. He was evidently expected, for he was shown into the study without a word. Here Miss Rowly and Stephen joined him. Both were very kind in manner. After the usual greetings and commonplaces Stephen said in a brisk, businesslike way:

"Have you got the papers with you?" He took the bundle of accounts from his pocket and handed them to her. After his previous experience he would have suggested, had he dared, that he should see Stephen alone; but he feared the old lady. He therefore merely said:

"I am afraid you will find the amount very large. But I have put down everything!"

So he had; and more than everything. At the last an idea had struck him that as he was getting so much he might as well have a little more. He therefore added several good-sized amounts which he called "debts of honour." This would, he thought, appeal to the feminine mind. Stephen did not look at the papers at once. She stood up, holding them, and said to Miss Rowly:

"Now, if you will talk to Mr. Everard I will go over these documents quietly by myself. When I have been through them and understand them all I shall come back; and we will see what can be done." She moved gracefully out of the room, closing the door behind her. As is usual with women, she had more than one motive for her action in going away. In the first place, she wished to be alone whilst she went over the schedule of the debts. She feared she might get angry; and in the present state of her mind towards Leonard the expression of any feeling, even contempt, would not be wise. Her best protection from him would be a manifest kindly negation of any special interest. In the second place, she believed that he would have her letter with the other papers, and she did not wish her aunt to see it, lest she should recognise the writing. Besides, the sight of it might cause her some emotion which either of the others might notice. In her boudoir, with a beating heart, she untied the string and looked through the papers.

Her letter was not among them.

For a few seconds she stood stock still, thinking. Then with a sigh, she sat down and began to read the list of debts, turning to the originals now and again for details. As she went on, her wonder and disgust grew; and even a sense of something like fear came into her thoughts. A man who could be so wildly reckless and so selfishly unscrupulous as this was a man to be feared. She knew that his father was a comparatively poor man, who could not possibly meet such

a burden as this. If he were thus to his father, what might he be to her if he got a chance.

She made a few pencil notes on the list; and went back at once to the study. Her mind was made up as to her action.

Whilst she had been away Leonard had had a distinctly uncomfortable time. He tried hard to be airy and *dégagé* in his manner, and to make smalltalk in a becomingly unconcerned way. But the old lady's eyes were upon him all the time: their unremitting gaze was intensified by the glasses which she used remorselessly. Since her last meeting with him she had been thinking: and when an old lady thinks, something has got to arise from it. She replied very aptly and very politely to all his remarks; but her vigilance never relaxed, and he felt himself growing humiliatingly hot under her scrutiny. Stephen's absence seemed unaccountably long, and he chafed inwardly. "Two minutes should have sufficed to read the summary! There was no necessity of her going into all the details! Could she not trust him! . . . If this thing went on much longer, and that infernal old woman kept looking at him with her infernal glasses, he would have to break out! . . . But that infernal letter! She may have expected to find it with the other papers. Everything was infernal to-day! Still, he must keep quiet; he had not yet got the money."

When Stephen returned she was quite businesslike and calm. She did not manifest the slightest disapproval, but seemed to simply accept everything as facts. She asked him a few questions on subjects regarding which she had made notes, such as discounts. These he answered to the best of his ability. Then she held the paper out to him and without any preliminary remark said:

"Will you please put the names to these?"

"How do you mean?" he asked, flushing.

"The names of the persons to whom these sums marked 'debt of honour' are due." His reply came quickly, and was a little aggressive; he thought this might be a good time to make a bluff:

"I do not see that that is necessary. I can settle them when I have the money." Slowly and without either pause or flurry Stephen replied, looking him straight in the eyes as she handed him the whole mass of papers:

"Of course it is not necessary! Few things in the world really are! I only wanted to help you out of your troubles; but if you do not wish me to . . .!" Leonard interrupted in alarm:

"No! no! I only spoke of these items. You see, being 'debts of honour' I ought not to give the names." Looking with a keen glance at her set face he saw she was obdurate; and, recognising his defeat, said as calmly as he could, for he felt raging:

"All right! Give me the paper!" He took it from the hand that was still outstretched, and, bending over the table, wrote very slowly and carefully.

"Now the addresses!"

"Is that necessary?"

"Of course it is! Why, you silly, how is the money to be paid if there are no addresses?"

Leonard felt like a rat in a trap; but he had no alternative. Having done all that as yet had been required of him, he felt that he might now ask a further favour, so he said:

"There is one of those bills which I have promised to pay by Monday?"

"Promised?" said Stephen with wide-opened eyes. "Why, Leonard, I thought you said you were unable to pay any of those debts?"

Again he had put himself in a false position. He could not say that it was to his father he had made the promise; for he had already told Stephen that he had been afraid to tell him of his debts. In his desperation, for Miss Rowly's remorseless glances were full on him, he said:

"I thought I was justified in making the promise after what you said about the pleasure it would be to help me. You remember, that day on the hilltop?"

If he had wished to disconcert her he was mistaken; she

had already in her self-torturing imagination thought over and over again of every form of embarrassment which her unhappy action might bring on her at his hands. She now said sweetly and calmly, so sweetly and so calmly that he, with knowledge of her secret, was alarmed:

"But that was not a promise to pay. If you will remember it was only an offer, which is a very different thing. You did not accept it then!" she was herself somewhat desperate, or she would not have sailed so close to the wind.

"Ah, but I accepted later!" he said quickly, feeling in his satisfaction in an epigrammatic answer a certain measure of victory. Epigrammatic victories do not count for much in real life. Indeed, they generally weaken friendship and inflame opposition. He felt his mistake when she went on calmly:

"Offers like that are not repeated. They are but phantoms, after all. They come at their own choice, when they do come; and they stay but the measure of a breath or two. You cannot summon them!" Leonard fell into the current of the metaphor and answered:

"I don't know that even that is impossible. There are spells which call, and recall, even phantoms!"

"Indeed!" Stephen was anxious to find his purpose in his measured words.

Leonard felt that he was getting on, that he was again acquiring the upper hand; and so he pushed on the metaphor. He felt more and more satisfied with himself:

"And it is wonderful how simple some spells, and these the most powerful, can be. A remembered phrase, the recollection of a pleasant meeting, the smell of a forgotten flower, or the sight of a forgotten letter; any or all of these can, through memory, bring back the past. And it is often in the past that the secret of the future lies!"

Miss Rowly felt that something was going on before her which she could not understand. Anything of this man's saying which she could not fathom must be at least danger-

ous; so she determined to spoil his purpose, whatever it might be.

"Dear me! That is charmingly poetic! Past and future; memory and the smell of flowers; meetings and letters! It is quite philosophy. Do explain it all, Mr. Everard!" Leonard was not prepared to go on under the circumstances. His own mention of "letter," although he had deliberately used it with the intention of frightening Stephen, had frightened himself. It reminded him that he had not brought, had not got, the letter; and that as yet he was not certain of getting the money. Stephen also had noted the word, and determined not to pass the matter by. She said gaily:

"If a letter is a spell, I think you have a spell of mine, which is a spell of my own weaving. You were to show me the letter in which I asked you to come to see me. It was in that, I think you said, that I mentioned your debts; but I don't remember doing so. Show it to me!"

"I have not got it with me!" This was said with a touch of mulish sullenness.

"Why not?"

"I forgot."

"That is a pity! It is always a pity to forget things in a business transaction; as this is. I think, Auntie, we must wait till we have all the documents, before we can complete this transaction!"

Leonard was seriously alarmed. If the matter of the loan were not gone on with at once the jeweller's bill could not be paid by Monday, and the result would be another scene with his father, in which he would get the worst of it. True that he would have a sort of reprisal in showing the receipt from Cavendish and Cecil; but he knew well that there was little to conciliate his father in that. He turned to Stephen and said as charmingly as he could, and he was all in earnest now:

"I'm awfully sorry! But these debts have been so worrying me that they put lots of things out of my head. That

bill to be paid on Monday, when I haven't got a feather to fly with, is enough to drive a fellow off his chump. The moment I lay my hands on the letter I shall keep it with me so that I can't forget it again. Won't you forgive me for this time?"

"Forgive!" she answered, with a laugh. "Why, it's not worth forgiveness! It is not worth a second thought! All right! Leonard, make your mind easy; the bill will be paid on Monday!" Miss Rowly said quietly:

"I have to be in London on Monday afternoon; I can pay it for you." This was a shock to Leonard; he said impulsively:

"Oh, I say! Can't I . . ." His words faded away as the old lady again raised her lorgnon and gazed at him calmly. She went on:

"You know, my dear, it won't be even out of my way, as I have to call at Mr. Malpas's office." Leonard could say nothing. He seemed to be left completely out of it. When Stephen rose up, as a hint to him that it was time for him to go, he said humbly, as he felt:

"Would it be possible that I should have the receipt before Monday evening? I want to show it to my father."

"Certainly!" said the old lady, answering him. "I shall be back by the two o'clock train; and if you happen to be at the railway station at Norcester when I arrive I can give it to you!"

He went away relieved, but vindictive; determined in his own mind that when he had received the money for the rest of the debts he would see Stephen, when the old lady was not present, and have it out with her.

CHAPTER XVIII

A LETTER

ON Monday evening after dinner, when the dessert had been placed on the table and the butler had closed the door, Mr. Everard and his son sat for a while in silence. Leonard, a little flushed and a little nervous of voice, began:

"Have you had any more bills?" He had expected none, and thus hoped to begin by scoring against his father. It was something of a set-down to him when the latter, taking some papers from his breast-pocket, handed them to him, saying:

"Only these!" Leonard took them in silence and looked at them. All were requests for payment of debts due by his son. In each case the full bill was enclosed. He was silent a while; but his father spoke:

"It would almost seem as if all these people had made up their minds that you were of no further use to them. If they ever expected to do any more business with you, they would never risk your custom by sending their dunning letters to me." Then without pausing he said, but in a sharper voice:

"Have you paid the jewellers? This is Monday!"

Without speaking Leonard took leisurely from his pocket a folded paper. This he opened, and, after deliberately smoothing out the folds, handed it to his father. Doubtless something in his manner had already convinced the latter that the debt was paid. He knew his son too well to take his tacit insolence as due to any cause but the conviction of security. He took the paper in as leisurely a way as it had been given, adjusted his spectacles, and read it. Seeing that his

son had scored this time, he covered his chagrin with an appearance of paternal satisfaction.

"Good!" was his only verbal expression of it. All the same, his feelings had not been soothed; his exasperation continued. Neither was his quiver yet empty. He shot his next arrow:

"I am glad you paid off those usurers!" Leonard still in silence, took from his pocket a second paper, which he handed over unfolded. Mr. Everard opened it, read it, and returned it politely.

"Good! 'Those other debts, have you paid them?' With a calm deliberation, which was so full of tacit rudeness that it made his father flush, Leonard answered:

"Not yet, sir! But I shall think of them presently. I don't care to be hustled by them; and I don't mean to!" It was apparent that though he spoke verbally of his creditors, his meaning was with regard to others also.

"When will they be paid?" As his son hesitated, he went on: "I am alluding to those who have written to me. I take it that as my estate is not entailed, and as you have no income except from me, the credit which has been extended to you has been rather on my account than your own. Therefore, as the matter touches my own name, I am entitled to know something of what is going on." His manner as well as his words were so threatening that Leonard was a little afraid. He might imperil his inheritance. He answered quickly:

"Of course, sir, you shall know everything. After all, you know, my affairs are your affairs!"

"I know nothing of the sort. I may of course be annoyed by your affairs, even dishonoured, in a way; by them. But I accept no responsibility whatever in them. As you have made your bed, so must you lie on it!" Leonard got more alarmed; so he said as genially as he could:

"It's all right, sir, I assure you. All my debts, both those you know of and some you don't, I shall settle very shortly."

"How soon?" The question was sternly put.

"In a few days. I dare say a week at furthest will see everything straightened out."

The elder man stood up, saying gravely as he went to the door:

"You will do well to tell me when the last of them is paid. There is something which I shall then want to tell you!" Without waiting for reply he went to his study.

Leonard had expected a satisfactory feeling to himself to be the result of this interview. He left the room with a sense of having been punished already, and of another punishment awaiting him later on.

When Miss Rowly returned from her visit to London the two women held a long consultation over the schedule of Leonard's debts. Neither said a word of disfavour, or even commented on the magnitude. The only remark touching on the subject was made by Miss Rowly:

"We must ask for proper discounts. Oh! the villainy of those tradesmen! I do believe they charge double in the hope of getting half. As to jewellers . . . !" Then she announced her intention of going up to town again on Thursday, at which visit she would arrange for the payment of the various debts. Stephen tried to remonstrate, but she was obdurate.

"Leave it all to me, dear! Leave it all to me! Everything shall be paid as you wish; but leave it to me!"

Stephen acquiesced. This gentle yielding was new in her; it touched the elder lady to the quick, even whilst it pained her. Well she knew that some trouble must have gone to the smoothing of that imperious nature.

After all, trouble is a tool of the Great Fitter whose work it is to fashion the machine called man; and a tool of no mean importance either. With it He rubs off the protrusions on the surfaces of "would" and "must" which have to be brought to exact plane. And it is because it can bite into the metal of our nature, because it is of its nature harder than

the material which it fashions that its work is potent and enduring.

Stephen's inner life in these last few days was so bitterly sad that she kept it apart from all the routine of social existence. The saddening memory was of Harold. And of him the sadness was increased and multiplied by a haunting fear. Since he had walked out of the grove she had not seen him nor heard from him. She was afraid to make any inquiries. Silence was dreadful; but to her there was no alternative. Thought, she felt, would come in time, and with it new pains and new shames, of which as yet she dared not think.

One morning came an envelope directed in Harold's hand. The sight made her almost faint. She rejoiced that she had been on that morning the first down, and had opened the postbag with her own key. She took the letter to her own room and shut herself in, before opening it. Within were a few lines of writing and her own letter to Leonard in its envelope. Her heart beat so hard that she could scarcely see; but gradually the letters of the writing seemed to grow out of the mist:

"The enclosed should be in your hands. It is possible that it may comfort you to know that it is safe. Whatever may come, God love and guard you."

For a moment joy, hot and strong, blazed through her. The last words were ringing through her brain. Then came the cold shock, and the gloom of fear. Harold would never have written thus unless he was going away! It was a farewell!

For a long time she stood motionless, holding the letter in her hand. Then she said, half aloud:

"Comfort! Comfort! Comfort! There is no more comfort in the world for me! Never, never again! Oh, Harold! Harold!"

She sank on her knees beside her bed, and buried her face in her cold hands, sobbing, sobbing, sobbing in all that saddest and bitterest phase of sorrow which can be to a woman's heart; the sorrow that is dry-eyed and without hope.

Not till she was alone in her room that night did Stephen dare to let her thoughts run freely.

But now in the darkness her mind began to work truly, so truly that she began at the first step of logical process: to study facts. And to study them she must question till she found motive.

Why had Harold sent her the letter? His own words said that it should be in her hands. Then, again, he said it might comfort her to know the letter was safe. How could it comfort her?

How did he get possession of the letter?

There she began to understand; her quick intuition and her old knowledge of Harold's character and her new knowledge of Leonard's, helped her to reconstruct causes. In his interview with her he had admitted that Leonard had told him much, all. He would no doubt have refused to believe him, and Leonard would have shown him, as a proof, her letter asking him to meet her. He would have seen then, as she did now, how much the possession of that letter might mean to any one.

Stretching out her arms in the darkness, she whispered pleadingly:

"Forgive me, Harold!"

And Harold, far away where the setting sun was lying red on the rim of the western sea, could not hear her. But perhaps God did.

How she longed to be able to cry. How sweet at that moment would have been the relief of tears. . . .

And Harold's motive? For there could be no doubt as to Harold's earnestness when he had told her that he loved her. . . .

Here Stephen covered her face in one moment of rapture. But the gloom that followed it in her soul was darker than the night. She did not pursue the thought. That would come later when she should understand. . . .

And yet, so little do we poor mortals know the verities of things, so blind are we to things thrust before our eyes, that

she understood more in that moment of ecstasy than in all the reasoning that preceded and followed it.

She had reproached him with coming to her with his suit hotfoot upon his knowledge of her shameful proffer of herself to another man; of her refusal by him. Could he have been so blind as not to have seen, as she did, the shameful aspect of his impulsive act? Surely, if he had thought, he must have seen! . . . And he must have thought; there had been time for it. It was at dinner that he had seen Leonard; it was after breakfast when he had seen her. . . . And if he had seen then . . .

In an instant it all burst upon her; the whole splendid truth. He had held back the expression of his long love for her, waiting for the time when her maturity might enable her to understand truly and judge wisely; waiting till her grief for the loss of her father had become a story of the past; waiting for God knows what a man's mind sees of obstacles when he loves. But he had spoken it out when it was to her benefit. What, then, had been his idea of her benefit? Was it that he wished to meet the desire that she had manifested to have some man to—to love? . . .

One other alternative there was; but it seemed so remote, so far-fetched, so noble, so unlike what a woman would do, that she could only regard it in a shamefaced way. She put the matter to herself questioningly, and with a meekness which had its roots deeper than she knew. And here out of the depths of her humility came a noble thought. A noble thought, which was a noble truth. Through the darkness of the night, through the inky gloom of her own soul came with that thought a ray of truth which, whilst it showed her her own shrivelled unworthiness, made the man whom she had dishonoured with insults worse than death stand out in noble relief. In that instant she guessed at, and realised, Harold's unselfish nobility of purpose, the supreme effort of his constant love. Knowing the humiliation which she must have suffered at Leonard's hands, he had so placed himself that

even her rejection of him might be some solace or balm to her wounded spirit, her pride.

Here at last was truth! She knew it in the very marrow of her bones. Oh, how blind she had been! Even in the darkness of her overwhelming passion, such a light should have shone upon her; on her brain even if it had not pierced through the clouds which had darkened her soul.

This time she did not move. She thought and thought of that noble gentleman who had used for her sake even that pent-up passion which, for her sake also, he had suppressed so long.

In that light, which restored in her eyes and justified so fully the man whom she had always trusted, her own shame and wrongdoing, and the perils which surrounded her, were for the time forgotten.

And its glory seemed to rest upon her whilst she slept.

CHAPTER XIX

CONFIDENCES

MISS ROWLY had already received one bulky letter by the morning's post. The third morning she received another.

That night, when Stephen's maid had left her, there came a gentle tap at her door, and an instant after the door opened. The tap had been a warning, not a request; it had in a measure prepared Stephen, who was not surprised to see her aunt in her dressing-gown, though it was many a long day since she had visited her niece's room at night. She closed the door behind her, saying:

"There is something I want to talk to you about, dearest, and I thought it would be better to do so when there could not be any possible interruption. And besides," here there was a little break in her voice, "I could hardly summon up my courage in the daylight." She stopped, and the stopping told its own story. In an instant Stephen's arms were round her, all the protective instinct in her awake at the distress of the woman she loved. The old lady took comfort from the warmth of the embrace, and held her tight whilst she went on:

"It is about these bills, my dear. Come and sit down and put a candle near me. I want you to read something."

Stephen wheeled an armchair close to a table on which were candles. Then she gently placed her aunt in the chair and seated herself on the great arm of it, leaning affectionately against the shoulder of her companion with her arm round her neck.

"Now go on, Auntie dear," she said gravely. The old lady, after a pause, spoke with a certain timidity:

"They are all paid; at least all that can be. Perhaps I had better read you the letter I have had from my solicitors:

"Dear Madam,—In accordance with your instructions we have paid all the accounts mentioned in Schedule A (enclosed). We have placed for your convenience three columns: (1) the original amount of each account, (2) the amount of discount which we were able to arrange, and (3) the amount paid. We regret that we have been unable to carry out your wishes with regard to the items enumerated in Schedule B (enclosed). We have, we assure you, done all in our power to find the gentlemen whose names and addresses are therein given. These were marked "Debt of honour" in the list which you handed to us. Not having been able to obtain any reply to our letters, we sent one of our clerks first to the addresses in London, and afterwards to Oxford. That clerk, who is well used to such inquiries, could not find any trace of any of the gentlemen, or indeed of their existence. We have, therefore, come to the conclusion, that, either there must be some error with regard to (a) names, (b) addresses, or (c) both; or that no such persons exist. As it would be very unlikely that such errors could occur in *all* the cases, we can only conclude that there have not been any such persons. If we may venture to hazard an opinion: it is possible that, these debts being what young men call "debts of honour," the debtor, or possibly the creditors, may not have wished the names mentioned. In such case fictitious names and addresses may have been substituted for the real ones.

"We have already sent to you the receipted account from each of the creditors as you directed, viz. "Received from Miss Laetitia Rowly in full settlement to date of the account due by Mr. Leonard Everard the sum of," etc. etc. And also, as you further directed, a duplicate receipt of the sum-total due in each case made out as "Received in full settlement to date of account due by," etc. etc.

"With regard to finance we have carried out your orders, etc. etc. etc. etc." She hurried on the reading. "These

sums, together with the amounts of nine hundred pounds sterling, and seven hundred pounds sterling lodged to the account of Miss Stephen Norman in the Norcester branch of the Bank of England as repayment of moneys advanced to you as by your written instructions, have exhausted the sum, etc. etc.'” She folded up the letter with the schedules, laying the bundle of accounts on the table. Stephen paused a while; she felt it necessary to collect herself before speaking.

“Auntie dear, will you let me see that letter? Oh, my dear, dear Auntie, don't think I mistrust you that I ask it. I do so because I love you, and because I want to love you more if it is possible to do so.” Miss Rowly handed her the letter. She rose from the arm of the chair and stood beside the table as though to get better light from the candle than she could get from where she had sat.

As she stood her aunt looked at her lovingly and admiringly. A beautiful picture she made. The flowing lawn of her night-dress fell in delicate folds from her noble young figure, tall and straight as a dart, with the slender lines of youth and the soft swelling curves of budding womanhood. Her glorious red hair, simply tied back with a ribbon of the delicate pink of the blush rose, fell in a thick mass far below her waist. The crown of it, catching the light of the candle, shone like burnished gold. Altogether she seemed, as she stood motionless intent on her reading, like a divine figure of a goddess wrought in ivory and gold by the cunning hand of a greater Praxiteles.

She read slowly and carefully to the end; then she folded up the letter and handed it to her aunt. She came back to her seat on the edge of the chair, and putting her arms round her companion's neck looked her straight in the eyes. The elder woman grew embarrassed under the scrutiny; she coloured up and smiled in a deprecatory way as she said:

“Don't look at me like that, darling; and don't shake your head so. It is all right! I told you I had my reasons, and you said you would trust me. I have only done what I thought best!”

"But, Auntie, you have paid away more than half your little fortune. I know all the figures. Father and Uncle told me everything. Why did you do it? Why did you do it?" The old woman held out her arms as she said:

"Come here, dear one, and sit on my knee as you used to do when you were a child, so that I may have my arms close round you, and I will whisper you." Stephen sprang from her seat and almost threw herself into the loving arms held out to her. For a few seconds the two, clasped tight to each other's heart, rocked gently to and fro. The elder kissed the younger and was kissed impulsively in return. Then she stroked the beautiful bright hair with her wrinkled hand, and said admiringly:

"What lovely hair you have, my dear one!" Stephen held her closer and waited.

"Well, my dear, I did it because I love you!"

"I know that, Auntie; you have never done anything else all my life!"

"That is true, dear one. But it is right that I should do this. Now you must listen to me, and not speak till I have done. Keep your thoughts on my words, so that you may follow my thoughts. You can do your own thinking about them afterwards. And your own talking too; I shall listen as long as you like!"

"Go on, I'll be good!"

"My dear, it is not right that you should appear to have paid the debts of a young man who is no relation to you and who will, I know well, never be any closer to you than he is now." She hurried on, as though fearing an interruption, but Stephen felt that her clasp tightened. "We never can tell what will happen as life goes on. Sometimes the most trivial of things are thrown by circumstances into wicked lights which seem to give them horrible shape. And, as the world is full of scandal, one cannot be too careful not to give the scandalmongers anything to exercise their wicked spite upon. More especially is this true of any one who, like yourself, is an object of envy to many. Why, my dear, your

position in life, your fortune, or your beauty is enough, any one of them, to set a whole countryside of women crazy with envy. I don't trust that young man! He is a bad one all round, or I am very much mistaken. And, my dear, come close to me! I cannot but see that you and he have some secret which he is using to distress you!" She paused, and her clasp grew closer still as Stephen's head sank on her breast. "I know you have done something or said something foolish of which he has a knowledge. And I know, my dear one, that whatever it was, and no matter how foolish it may have been, it was not a wrong thing. God knows, we are all apt to do wrong things as well as foolish ones; the best of us. But such is not for you! Your race, your father and mother, your upbringing, yourself and the truth and purity which are yours—which are your inheritance and your pride—would save you from anything which was in itself wrong. That I know, my dear, as well as I know myself! Ah! better, far better! for the gods did not think it well to dower me as they have dowered you. The God of all the gods has given you the ten talents to guard; and He knows, as I do, that you will be faithful to your trust."

There was a solemn ring in her voice as the words were spoken which went through the young girl's heart. Love and confidence demanded in return that she should have at least the relief of certain acquiescence; there is a possible note of pain in the tensility of every string! Stephen lifted her head proudly and honestly, though her cheeks were scarlet, and looked in the loving eyes which were brimming with emotion, saying with a consciousness of integrity which spoke directly soul to soul:

"You are right, dear! I have done something very foolish; very, very foolish! But it was nothing which any one could call wrong. Do not ask me what it was. I need only tell you this: that it was an outrage on convention. It was so foolish, and based on such foolish misconception; it sprang from such overweening, arrogant self-opinion that it deserves the bitter punishment which will come; which is coming;

which is with me now! It was the cause of something whose blackness I can't yet realise; but of which I will tell you when I can speak of it. But it was not wrong in itself, or in the eyes of God or man!" The old woman said not a word. No word was needed, for had she not already expressed her belief. But Stephen felt her relief in the glad pressure of her finger-tips. In a voice less strained and tense Miss Rowly went on:

"What need have I for money, my dear? Here I have all that any woman, and especially at my age, can need. There is no room even for charity; you are so good to all your people that my help is hardly required. And, my dear one, I know—I know," she emphasised the word as she stroked the beautiful hair, "that when I am gone my own poor, the few that I have looked after all my life, will not suffer when my darling thinks of me!" Stephen would fain have held her more closely, but she feared to exercise her young strength on her aunt's feebler body; but she fairly climbed upon her as she said, looking in the brave old eyes:

"My darling, they shall never want!"

Silence for a time; and then Miss Rowly's voice again:

"Though it would not do for the world to know that a young maiden lady had paid the debts of a vicious young man, it makes no matter if they be paid by an old woman, be the same maid, wife, or widow! And really, my dear, I do not see how any money I might have could be better spent than in keeping harm away from you."

"There need not be any harm at all, Auntie."

"Perhaps not, dear! I hope not with all my heart. But I fear that young man. He is a bitter bad one, I feel. Just fancy him threatening you, and in your own house; in my very presence! Oh! yes, my dear. He meant to threaten, anyhow! Though I could not exactly understand what he was driving at, I could see that he was driving at something. That he was in antagonism with you, though only for a moment, was enough for me. And after all that you were doing

for him, and had done for him! I mean, of course, after all that *I* had done for him, and was doing for him. It is mean enough, surely, for a man to beg, and from a woman; but to threaten afterwards. Ach! It is blackmail, and nothing else! And in all the catalogue of crime, I do not think there is anything more base. But I think, my dear, it is checkmate to him this time. All along the line the only proof that is of there being any friendliness towards him from this house points to me. And moreover, my dear, I have a little plan in my head that will tend to show him up even better, in case he may ever try to annoy us. Look at me when next he is here. I mean to do a little play-acting which will astonish him, I can tell you, if it doesn't frighten him out of the house altogether. But we won't talk of that yet. You will understand when you see it!" Her eyes twinkled and her mouth shut with a loud snap as she spoke. Then for a while she was silent.

After a few minutes of repose, which was like a glimpse of heaven to Stephen's aching heart, she spoke again:

"There was something else that troubled you more than even this. You said you would tell me when you were able to speak of it. . . . Why not speak now? Oh! my dear, our hearts are close together to-night; and in all your life you will never have any one who will listen with greater sympathy than I will, or deal more tenderly with your fault, whatever it may have been. Tell me, dear! Dear!" she whispered after a pause, during which she realised the depth of the girl's emotion by her convulsive struggling to keep herself in check.

All at once the tortured girl seemed to yield herself, and slipped inertly from her grasp till kneeling down she laid her head in the other's lap and sobbed. Miss Rowly kept stroking her hair in silence. Presently the girl looked up, and with a pang the aunt saw that her eyes were dry. In her pain she said:

"You sob like that, my child, and yet you are not crying;

what is it, oh! my dear one? What is it that hurts you so that you cannot cry?"

And then the bitter sobbing broke out again, but still alas! without tears. Crouching low, and still enclosing her aunt's waist with her outstretched arms and hiding her head in her breast, she said:

"Oh! Auntie, I have sent Harold away!"

"What, my dear? What?" said the old lady astonished. "Why, I thought there was no one in the world that you trusted so much as Harold!"

"It is true. There was—there is no one except you whom I trust so much. But I mistook something he said. I was in a blind fury at the time, and I said things that I thought my father's daughter never could have said. And she never thought them, even then! Oh, Auntie, I drove him away with all the horrible things I could say that I thought would wound him most. And all because he acted in a way that I see now was the most noble and knightly in which any man could act. He that my dear father had loved, and honoured, and trusted as another son. He that was a real son to him, and not a mock son like me. I sent him away with such fierce and bitter pain that his poor face was ashen grey, and there was woe in his eyes that shall make woe in mine whenever I shall see them in my mind, waking or sleeping. Which will be always! In the sunshine, and the twilight, and the dark! He, the truest friend . . . the most faithful, the most tender, the most strong, the most unselfish! Oh! Auntie, Auntie, he just turned and bowed and went away. And he couldn't do anything else with the way I spoke to him; and now I shall never see him again!"

The young girl's eyes were still dry, but the old woman's were wet. For a few minutes she kept softly stroking the bowed head till the sobbing grew less and less, and then died away; and the girl lay still, collapsed in the abandonment of dry-eyed grief.

Then she rose, and taking off her dressing-gown, said tenderly:

"Let me stay with you to-night, dear one? Go to sleep in my arms, as you did long ago when there was any grief that you could not bear."

So Stephen lay in those loving arms till her own young breast ceased heaving, and she breathed softly. Till dawn she slept on the bosom of her who loved her so well.

CHAPTER XX.

THE DUTY OF COURTESY

LEONARD was getting very tired of waiting when he received his summons to Normanstand.

But despite his impatience he was ill pleased with the summons which came in the shape of a polite note from Miss Rowly asking him to come that afternoon at tea-time; he had expected to hear from Stephen.

However, he turned up at a little before five o'clock, spruce and dapper and well dressed and groomed as usual. He was shown, as before, into the blue drawing-room. Miss Rowly, who sat there, rose as he entered, and coming across the room, greeted him, as he thought, effusively. He actually winced when she called him "my dear boy" before the butler.

She ordered tea to be served at once, and when it was over she opened a large envelope, and taking from it a number of folios, looked over them carefully. Holding them in her lap, she said quietly:

"You will find writing materials on the table. I am all ready now to hand you over the receipts." His eyes glistened. This was good news at all events; the debts were paid. He was free again! In a rapid flash of thought he came to the conclusion that if the debts were actually paid he need not be civil to the old lady. As it was, however, he could not yet afford to have any unpleasantness. There was still to come that lowering interview with his father; and he could not look towards it satisfactorily until he had the assurance of the actual documents that he was safe. Miss Rowly was, in her own way, reading his mind in his face. Her lorgnon

seemed to follow his every expression like a searchlight. He remembered his former interview with her, and how he had been bested in it; so he made up his mind to acquiesce in time. He went over to the table and sat down. Taking a pen he turned to Miss Rowly and said:

"What shall I write?" She answered calmly:

"Date it, and then say, 'Received from Miss Laetitia Rowly the receipts for the following amounts from the various firms hereunder enumerated.'" She then proceeded to read them out, he writing and repeating them as he wrote. Then she added:

"The same being the total amount of my debts which she has kindly paid for me." He paused here; she asked:

"Why don't you go on?"

"I thought it was Stephen—Miss Norman," he corrected, catching sight of her lorgnon, "who was paying them."

"Good Lord, man," she answered, "what does it matter who has paid them, so long as they are paid?"

"But I didn't ask you to pay them," he went on obstinately. There was a pause, and then the old lady, with a distinctly sarcastic smile, said:

"It seems to me, young man, that you are rather particular as to how things are done for you. If you had begun to be just a little bit as particular in making the debts as you are in the way of having them paid, there would be a little less trouble and expense all around. However, the debts have been paid, and we can't unpay them. But of course you can repay me the money if you like. It amounts in all to four thousand three hundred and seventeen pounds, twelve shillings and sixpence, and I have paid every penny of it out of my own pocket. If you can't pay it yourself, perhaps your father would like to do so."

The last shot told; he went on writing: "'Kindly paid for me,'" she continued in the same even voice:

"'In remembrance of my mother, of whom she was an acquaintance.' Now sign it!" He did so and handed it to her. She read it over carefully, folded it, and put it in her

pocket. She handed him the bundle of receipts, and then stood up. He rose also; and as he moved over to the door—he had not offered to shake hands with her—he said:

“I should like to see Miss Norman.”

“I am afraid you will have to wait.”

“Why?”

“She is over at Heply Regis. She went there for Lady Heply’s ball, and will remain for a few days. Good afternoon!” The tone in which the last two words were spoken seemed in his ears like the crow of the victor after a cock-fight.

As he was going out of the room a thought struck her. She felt he deserved some punishment for his personal rudeness to her. After all, she had paid half her fortune for him, though not on his account; and not only had he given no thanks, but had not even offered the usual courtesy of saying good-bye. She had intended to have been silent on the subject, and to have allowed him to discover it later. Now she said, as if it was an afterthought:

“By the way, I did not pay those items which you put down as ‘debts of honour’; you remember you gave the actual names and addresses.”

“Why not?” the question came from him involuntarily. The persecuting lorgnon rose again:

“Because they were all bogus! Addresses, names, debts, honour! Good afternoon!”

Cock-a-doodle-doo-e-e-o!

He went out flaming; free from debt, money debts; all but one. And some other debts—not financial—whose magnitude was exemplified in the grinding of his teeth.

After breakfast next morning he said to his father:

“By the way, you said you wished to speak to me, sir.” There was something in the tone of his voice which called up antagonism.

“Then you have paid your debts?”

“All!”

“Good! Now there is something which it is necessary I

should call your attention to. Do you remember the day on which I handed you that pleasing epistle from Messrs. Cavendish and Cecil?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Didn't you send a telegram to them?"

"I did."

"You wrote it yourself?"

"Certainly."

"I had a courteous letter from the money-lenders, thanking me for my exertions in securing the settlement of their claim, and saying that in accordance with the request in my telegram they had held over proceedings until the day named. I did not quite remember having sent any telegram to them, or any letter either. So, being at a loss, I went to our excellent postmaster and requested that he would verify the sending of a telegram to London for me. He courteously looked up the file, which was ready for transference to the G. P. O., and showed me the form. It was in your handwriting." He paused so long that Leonard presently said:

"Well!"

"It was signed Jasper Everard. Jasper Everard! my name; and yet it was sent by my son, who was christened, if I remember rightly, Leonard!" Then he went on, but in a cold acrid manner which made his son feel as though a February wind was blowing on his back:

"I think there need not have been much trouble in learning to avoid confusing our names. They are really dissimilar. Have you any explanation to offer of the—the error, let us call it?" A bright thought struck Leonard.

"Why, sir," he said, "I put it in your name as they had written to you. I thought it only courteous." The elder man winced; he had not expected the excuse. He went on speaking in the same calm way, but his tone was even more acrid than before:

"Good! of course! It was only courteous of you! Quite so! But I think it will be well in the future to let me look after my own courtesy; as regards my signature at any rate.

You see, my dear boy, a signature is a queer sort of thing, and judges and juries are apt to take a poor view of courtesy as over against the conventions regarding a man writing his own name. Do you know that there are a whole lot of men in this country sitting in small rooms with short hair—the short hair refers, of course, not to the rooms but to the men—just for looking in a similar way after the courtesy of other people. But that you doubtless know already. What I want to tell you is this, that on seeing that signature I made a new will. You are of course to inherit some day, my dear boy. You are my only son, and it would be hardly—hardly courteous of me not to leave it to you. But I have put a clause in my will to the effect that the trustees are to pay all debts of your accruing which can be proved against you, before handing over to you either the estate itself or the remainder after the settlement of all claims. That's all. Now run away, my boy; I have some important work to do."

Cock-a-doodle-doo-oo-oo!

As Leonard went through the poultry-yard one of the roosters began to crow. He threw a stone at it so savagely that had the aim been correct it would have been killed. It ran a little way off and again began its triumphant song:

"Cock-a-doodle-doo! Cock-a-doodle-doo-oo-oo."

The day after her return from Heply Regis, Stephen was walking in the wood when she thought she heard a slight rustling of leaves some way behind her. She looked round, expecting to see some one; but the leafy path was quite clear. Some one was secretly following her. A very short process of exclusions pointed to the personality of the some one. On the impulse of the moment she turned and walked rapidly in the opposite direction. As this would bring her to the house Leonard had to declare his presence at once or else lose the opportunity of a private interview which he sought. When she saw him she said at once and without any salutation:

"What are you doing there; why are you following me?"

"I wanted to see you alone. I could not get near you on account of that infernal old woman." Stephen's face grew hard.

"On account of whom?" she asked with dangerous politeness.

"Miss Rowley; your aunt."

"Don't you think, Mr. Everard," she said icily, "that it is at least an unpardonable rudeness to speak that way, and to me of the woman I love best in all the world?"

"Sorry!" he said in the offhand way of younger days, "I apologise. Fact is, I was angry that she wouldn't let me see you."

"Not let you see me!" she said as if amazed. "What do you mean?"

"Why, I haven't been able to see you alone ever since I went to meet you on Cæster Hill."

"But why should you see me alone?" she asked as if still in amazement. "Surely you can say anything you have to say before my aunt." This calm effrontery, as he designated it in his own mind, nettled him; with an unwisdom for which an instant later he blamed himself, he blurted out:

"Why, old girl, you yourself did not think her presence necessary when you asked me to meet you on the hill."

"When was that?" She saw that he was angry and wanted to test him; to try how far he would venture to go. He was getting dangerous; she must know the measure of what she had to fear from him.

He fell into the trap at once. His debts being now paid, the fear which was his restraining influence was removed, and all the hectoring side of the man, which was after all based on his masculinity, was aroused. He knew something of the value of a whip with the weaker sex. These last days had made her a more desirable possession in his eyes. The desire of her wealth had grown daily, and it was now the main force in bringing him here to-day. And to this was now added the personal desire which her presence evoked. Stephen, at all times beautiful, had never looked more lovely

than at this moment. There is some subtle inconceivable charm in completed womanhood. The reaction from her terrible fear and depression of the earlier days had come, and her strong brilliant youth was manifesting itself. Her step was springy and her eyes were bright; and the glow of fine health, accentuated by the militant humour of the present moment, seemed to light up her beautiful skin. In herself she was desirable, very desirable; Leonard felt his pulses quicken as he looked at her. Even his prejudice against her red hair had changed to something like a hungry admiration.

And at the moment all the man in him—the natural man who is fierce in his moments of sexual recognition, and strong, and assertive, and dominant, and merciless—asserted itself. It was with half love, as he saw it, and half self-assertion that he answered her question:

“The day you asked me to marry you! Oh! what a fool I was not to leap at such a chance! I should have taken you in my arms then and kissed you till I showed you how much I loved you. But that will all come yet; the kissing is still to come! Oh! Stephen, don’t you see that I love you? Won’t you tell me that you love me still? Darling!” He almost sprang at her, with his arms extended to clasp her.

“Stop!” Her voice rang like a trumpet. She did not mean to submit to physical violence, and in the present state of her feeling, an embrace from him would be a desecration. He was now odious to her; she positively loathed him.

Before her uplifted hand, with the palm turned outward and the fingers spread; before those flashing eyes, he stopped for an instant as one in mid career stricken into stone. In that instant she knew that she was safe; and with a woman’s quickness of apprehension and resolve, made up her mind what course to pursue. In a calm voice she said quietly:

“Mr. Everard, you have followed me in secret, and without my permission. I cannot talk here with you, alone. I absolutely refuse to do so; now or at any other time. If you wish to speak with me, come to my house; and in the

meantime I expect you to behave with the reserve of a gentleman towards a lady whom he respects!"

As usual the baser nature was dominated by the nobler. Leonard knew instinctively from that moment that if he wished to succeed he would have to lay aside the whip. And he did wish to succeed. With every moment, and especially with every moment of denial, his desire towards Stephen grew more and more. He was on the road to something like the intoxication of sex. Stephen instinctively recognised the new trouble. But she knew that denial was in the present state of things not nearly as good a weapon of defence as hope.

"If you have anything especial to say to me you will find me at home at noon to-morrow. Remember, I do not ask you to come. I simply yield to the pressure of your importunity. And remember also that I do not authorise you in any way to resume this conversation. In fact, I forbid it. If you come to my house you must control yourself to my wish!

Then with a stately bow, whose imperious distance inflamed him more than ever, and without once looking back she took her way home, all agitated inwardly and with fast-beating heart.

CHAPTER XXI

FIXING THE BOUNDS

LEONARD came towards Normanstand next forenoon in considerable mental disturbance.

Leonard's love was all of the flesh; and as such had power at present to disturb him, as it would later have power to torture him. Again, he was disturbed by the fear of losing Stephen, or rather of not being able to gain her. At first, ever since she had left him on the path from the hilltop till his interview the next day, he had looked on her possession as an "option," to the acceptance of which circumstances seemed to be compelling him. But ever since then, that asset seemed to have been dwindling; and now he was almost beginning to despair. In addition, there was another cause of concern. Since his father's attitude had almost obliterated his chances of obtaining credit without ultimate loss of his inheritance, the future of his pleasure was unassured. He was essentially a voluptuary. A marriage with Stephen would secure to him a full share of all the world's goods and pleasures; and the benefit of such a marriage was, he felt, slipping away from him. He was altogether cold at heart, and yet highly strung with apprehension, as he was shown into the blue drawing-room, and left to wait the coming of Miss Norman, for whom he had asked.

Stephen came in alone, closing the door behind her. She shook hands with him, and sat down by a writing-table near the window, pointing to him to sit on an ottoman a little distance away. The moment he sat down he realised that he was at a strategic disadvantage; he was not close to her, and he could not get closer without manifesting his inten-



"How are you feeling now? None the worse, I hope, *Harold!*" —
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n of so doing. He must either pull over the heavy ottoman, or rise up and get a chair. He wanted to be closer, and for the purpose of his suit and for his own pleasure; the proximity of Stephen began to multiply his love for her. He thought that to-day she looked better than ever, of a more radiant beauty which touched his senses with unattainable desire. She could not but notice the passion in his eyes, and instinctively her eyes wandered to a silver ring placed on the table well within reach of her hand. The more he glowed, the more icily calm she sat, till the tension between them began to grow oppressive. She waited, determined that he should be the first to speak. He had sought her; had forced her into the position of receiving him. Now she would not help him by a hair's breadth. Recognising in the course of time the helplessness of his silence, he began to speak, huskily as does one whose nervous weakness takes him in the throat:

"I came here to-day in the hope that you would listen to me." Her answer, given with a conventional smile, was not helpful:

"I am listening."

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am that I did not accept your offer. If I had known when I was coming that day that you loved me . . ." She interrupted him, calm of face, and with uplifted hand:

"I never said so, did I? Surely I could not have said such a thing! I certainly don't remember it!" Leonard was puzzled. He had been under the impression that she had pressed him to marry her; and that she had given it as the reason of her importunity that she loved him. Altogether it had been a just enough surmise; and though his memory could not recall the words used, he was fairly sure of the effect of them. Therefore he was aggrieved at what he felt to be her injustice.

"You certainly made me think so. You asked me to marry you, didn't you?" Her answer came calmly, though in a low voice:

"I did."

"Then if you didn't love me, why did you ask me to marry you?" It was his nature to be more or less satisfied when he had put any one opposed to him proportionally in the wrong; and now his exultation at having put a poser manifested itself in his tone. This, however, braced up Stephen to cope with a difficult and painful situation. It was with a calm, seemingly genial frankness, that she answered, smilingly:

"Do you know, that is what has been puzzling me from that moment to this!" Her words appeared to almost stupefy Leonard. This view of the matter had not occurred to him, and now the puzzle of it made him angry.

"Do you mean to say," he asked hotly, "that you asked a man to marry you when you didn't even love him?"

"That is exactly what I do mean! Why I did it is, I assure you, as much a puzzle to me as it is to you. I have come to the conclusion that it must have been from my vanity. I suppose I wanted to dominate somebody; and you were the weakest within range!"

"Thank you!" He was genuinely angry by this time, and, but for a wholesome fear of the consequences, would have used stronger language. The more angry he grew, the more really self-possessed became Stephen. She felt safe now. He had actually entered on the subject which had caused her such bitter shame, and to her surprise the effect did not justify the apprehension. She had spoken, and in speaking had freed her soul. In this new-found sense of liberty, which was by contrast with the past in itself a happiness, she felt strong enough to make Leonard's fall as light as she could.

Quem deus vult perdere prius dementat. At that moment, in his selfish anger and wounded vanity, Leonard said something which turned her pity to gall:

"I don't see that I was the weakest about." Somehow this set her on her guard. She wanted to know more, so she asked:

"Who else?"

"Harold An Wolf! You had him on a string already!"

The name came like a sword through her heart, but the bitter comment braced her to further caution. Her own voice seemed to her to sound as though far away:

"Indeed! And may I ask you how you came to know that?" Her voice seemed so cold and sneering to him that he lost his temper still further.

"Simply because he told me so himself." It pleased him to do an ill turn to Harold. He did not forget that savage clutch at his throat; and he never would. Stephen's senses were all alert. She saw an opportunity of learning something, and went on in the same cold voice:

"And I suppose it was that pleasing confidence which was the cause of your refusal of my offer of marriage; of which circumstance you have so thoughtfully and so courteously reminded me." This, somehow, seemed of good import to Leonard. If he could show her that his intention to marry her was antecedent to Harold's confidence, she might still go back to her old affection for him. He could not believe that it did not still exist; his experience of other women showed him that their love outlived their anger, whether the same had been hot or cold.

"It had nothing in the world to do with it. He never said a word about it till when he threatened to kill me—the great brute!" This was learning something indeed! She went on in the same voice:

"And may I ask you what was the cause of such sanguinary intention?"

"Because he knew that I was going to marry you!" As he spoke he felt that he had betrayed himself; he went on hastily, hoping that it might escape notice:

"Because he knew that I loved you. Oh! Stephen, don't you know it now! Can't you see that I love you; and that I want you for my wife!" The expression of his own feeling seemed to add fuel to the flame of his passion. But whilst he had been speaking Stephen was putting two and two to-

gether; and she had already some result. She had wondered long how Harold had got possession of her letter.

"But did he threaten to kill you out of mere jealousy? Do you still go in fear of your life? Leonard was chagrined at her ignoring of his love-suit, and in his self-engrossment he answered sulkily:

"I'm not afraid of him! And, besides, I believe he has bolted. I called at his house yesterday, and his servant said they hadn't heard a word from him." She said in as steady a voice as she could muster:

"Bolted! Has he gone altogether?"

"Oh, he'll come back all right, in time. He's not going to give up the jolly good living he has here!"

"But why has he bolted? When he threatened to kill you did he give any reason?" There was too much talk about Harold. It made him angry; so he answered in an offhand way:

"Oh, I don't know. And, moreover, I don't care! I suppose he was afraid of getting into some trouble for his presumption!"

"Presumption!" She spoke the word in wonder; he took it for disdain.

"Of course; his presumption in speaking about loving you. I dare say he thought I would tell you, and you might be angry when we were done laughing at it together. I pretty well told him so." He was somewhat reassured now, and felt that he was getting on. He could afford to be light-hearted.

Stephen's anger had had its share of growing too; but it was cold anger, which steadied her nerves. The last allusion to her laughing, with him, over Harold's pain and humiliation was too much for her.

"And now," she said, "what is it that you want to speak to me about?"

Her words fell on Leonard like a cold douche. Here had he been talking about his love for her, and yet she ignored the whole thing, and asked him what he wanted to talk

about. His pride and vanity were both hurt; it was not in a very loving tone that he said:

"What a queer girl you are, Stephen. You don't seem to attend to what a fellow is saying. Here have I been telling you that I love you, and asking you to marry me; and yet you don't seem to have even heard me!" She answered at once, quite sweetly, and with a smile of superiority which maddened him:

"But that subject is barred!"

"How do you mean? Barred!"

"Yes. I told you yesterday!" Now, he felt, was his time to sweep away her girlish objections. Doubtless her pride had been hurt by his refusal at first. But he had since then told her several times that he loved her, and had asked her to marry him. It was not the first time that he had had to overcome a girl's anger, her chagrin, her scruples; and, after all, a girl was a girl. There was nothing like a little good, hot love-making with them! He rose quickly to clasp her in his arms.

"Sit down!" Her voice came with the same imperious force as her command to him yesterday to keep his place, though it was much lower now and controlled with a calm reserve. At the first change in his attitude, which she seemed somehow to expect, her hand had gone out, and was resting on the silver gong. Instinctively he sank back on the ottoman; the dog in him had answered the command of its master. Stephen went on with icy calmness, the set smile still on her face:

"I have told you that subject is barred; for ever."

"But, Stephen," he cried out quickly, all the alarm in him and all the earnestness of which he was capable uniting to his strengthening, "can't you understand that I love you, with all my heart? You are so beautiful; so beautiful!" He felt now in reality what he was saying. Her refusal, her final refusal, had brought out in him such passion as he had. Though it was but animal passion it was still the

power that swayed him; and in his sense of despair came the voice of passion, which is always eloquent.

The torrent of his words left no opening for her objection; it swept all merely verbal obstacles before it. She listened, content in a measure. So long as he sat at the distance which she had arranged before his coming she did not fear for any personal violence. Moreover, it was a satisfaction to her now to hear him, who had refused her, pleading in vain. The more sincere his eloquence, the larger her satisfaction; she had no pity for him now.

"I know I was a fool, Stephen! I had my chance that day on the hilltop; and if I had felt then as I feel now, as I have felt every moment since, I would not have been so cold. I would have taken you in my arms and held you close and kissed you, again, and again, and again. Oh! my darling, you are so beautiful! Your beauty goes through me like fire! Can't you see that I love you? Can't you feel it? Don't you know that I am yours, heart and soul, and mind, and body! Give me some sign of love; some little gleam of hope! I'll undo the past, and make you so feel that my love is yours, that you'll love me in return. Oh, darling! I love you! I love you! I love you!" He held out his arms imploringly. "Won't you love me? Won't ——"

He stopped, paralysed with angry amazement. She was laughing.

He grew purple in the face; his hands were still outstretched. The few seconds seemed like hours.

"Forgive me!" she said in a polite tone, suddenly growing grave. "But really you looked so funny, sitting there so quietly, and speaking in such a way, that I couldn't help it. You really must forgive me! But remember, I told you the subject was barred; and as, knowing that, you went on, you really have no one but yourself to blame!" Leonard was furious, but he managed to say as he dropped his arms:

"But I love you!"

"That may be, now," she went on icily. "But it is too late! I do not love you; and I have never loved you! Of

course, had you accepted my offer of marriage you should never have known that. No matter how great had been my shame and humiliation when I had come to a sense of what I had done, I should have honourably kept my part of the tacit compact entered into when I made that terrible mistake. I cannot tell you how rejoiced and thankful I am that you took my mistake in such a way. Of course, I do not give you any credit for it; you thought only of yourself, and did that which you liked best!"

"That is a nice sort of thing to tell a man!" he interrupted with cynical frankness.

"Oh, I do not want to hurt you unnecessarily; but I wish there to be no possible misconception in the matter. What I say now I am saying once for all. I have no scruples or compunctions in speaking frankly. For, after all, you had your chance, and took it in your own way. You can't eat your cake and keep it, you know. Now that I have discovered my error I am not likely to fall into it again. And I may say that I am so sure of this that I shall not ever again even enter on the subject with you!" Here an idea struck Leonard, and he blurted out:

"But do you not think that something is due me?"

"How do you mean?" Her brows were puckered with real wonder this time.

"For false hopes raised in my mind. If I did not love you before, the very act of proposing to me has made me love you; and now I love you so well that I cannot live without you!" In his genuine agitation he was starting up, when the sight of her hand laid upon the gong arrested him. She laughed as she said:

"I thought that the privilege of changing one's mind was a female prerogative!"

"If a woman does what a man ought to do . . ." He grew scarlet under her quick smile. "What ought to be done by a man, she should be fair enough to let the man do what would be done by a woman!" Her smile was genuine this time.

"That is a good point. You men, with your relentless logic, can now and again put an argument in a way that we helpless women cannot!"

Leonard breathed more freely; had he been a cat he would have purred here.

"But then," she went on with her previous icy calm, "though we women cannot argue, we arrive somewhere at the same conclusion. Our way may be over-quick, and even over shambling; but we get there all the same. Would you be surprised to hear that I had already, long ago, arrived at an idea of the . . . the mercy of the case. I cannot say 'justice,' for the justice of a case where any one, man or woman, had been given a chance and refused it, would be that the matter ended there. I have done already something to make reparation to you for the wrong of . . . of—I may put it fairly, as the suggestion is your own—of not having treated you as a woman!"

"Damn!"

"As you observe so gracefully, it is annoying to have one's own silly words come back at one, boomerang fashion. I made up my mind to do something for you; to pay off your debts." This so exasperated him that he said out brutally:

"No thanks to you for that! As I had to put up with the patronage and the lecturings, and the eyeglass of that infernal old woman, I don't intend . . ."

Stephen stood up, her hand upon the gong:

"Mr. Everard, if you do not remember that you are in my drawing-room, and speaking of my dear and respected aunt, I shall not detain you longer!"

He sat down at once, saying surlily:

"I beg your pardon. I forgot. You make me so wild that—that . . ." He chewed the ends of his moustache angrily. She resumed her seat, taking her hand from the gong. Without further pause she continued:

"Quite right! It has been Miss Rowly who paid your debts. At first I had promised myself the pleasure; but

from something in your speech and manner she thought it better that such an act should not be done by a woman in my position to a man in yours. It might, if made public, have created quite a wrong impression in the minds of many of our friends."

There was something like a snort from Leonard. She ignored it:

"So she paid the money herself out of her own fortune. And, indeed, I must say that you do not seem to have treated her with much gratitude. When an old lady took away the incubus from a young man's life, an incubus which he had himself bound there by his wilful thoughtlessness, and perhaps his wrongdoing; when she set him free from obligations that might later on have crushed him, that would certainly thwart his ambitions, and might possibly ruin him; who preserved, so far as she could, his good name, and all this to the tune of a good many thousands of pounds, well, he ought thenceforth to speak of her with respect. Certainly to her relatives!" Leonard's curiosity was aroused; he wished for future purposes to know exactly where and how he stood in the matter, so he ventured on another question:

"What did I say or do that put you off doing the thing yourself?"

"I had intended to avoid, if possible, giving any reason. But since you have, with your masculine directness, put the question to me, I shall answer it frankly: It was because you manifested, several times, in a manner there was no mistaking, both by words and deeds, an intention of levying blackmail on me by using your knowledge of my ridiculous, unmaidenly act. No one can despise, or deplore, or condemn that act more than I do; so that rather than yield a single point to you, I am, if necessary, ready to face the odium which the public knowledge of it might produce. What I had intended to do for you in the way of compensation for false hopes raised to you by that act has now been done. That it was done by my aunt on my behalf, and not by me,

matters to you no more than it did to your creditors, who, when they received the money, made no complaint of injury to their feelings on that account.

"Now, when you think the whole matter over in quietness, you will, knowing that I am ready at any time to face if necessary the unpleasant publicity, be able to estimate what damage you would do to yourself by any *exposé*. It seems to *me* that you would come out of it pretty badly all round. That, however, is not my affair; it entirely rests with yourself. I think I know how women would regard it. I dare say you best know how men would look at it; and at you!"

Leonard knew already how the only man who knew of it had taken it, and the knowledge did not reassure him!

"You jade! You infernal, devilish, cruel, smooth-tongued jade!" He stood up as he spoke. She stood up too, and stood watching him with her hand on the gong. After a pause of a couple of seconds she said gravely:

"One other thing I should wish to say, and I mean it. Understand me clearly, that I mean it!" Her appearance left no doubt as to that, even if her words or the tone in which they were spoken, left any doubt. Her great black eyes blazed, but with a cold glare, like moonlight over a snow-field. "You must not come again into my grounds without my special permission in each case. I shall not allow my liberty to be taken away, or restricted, by you. If there be need at any time to come to the house, come in ceremonious fashion, by the avenues which are used by others. If you are hunting, and the hunt comes over or near my grounds, you can have the same freedom as the others, so long as you do not abuse it. You see, I have thought the matter over, and have arranged for the contingencies of neighbourly life. You can always speak to me in public, or socially, in the most friendly manner; as I shall hope to be able to speak to you. But you must never transgress the ordinary rules of decorum. If you do, I shall have to take, for my own protection, another course. I know you now! I

am willing to blot out the past; but it must be the whole past that is wiped out!"

She stood facing him; and as he looked at her clear-cut aquiline face, her steady eyes, her resolute mouth, her carriage, masterly in its self-possessed poise, he saw that there was no further hope for him. There was no love and no fear.

"You devil!" he hissed.

She struck the gong; her aunt entered the room.

"Oh, is that you, Auntie? Mr. Everard has finished his business with me!" Then to the servant, who had entered after Miss Rowly:

"Mr. Everard would like his carriage. By the way," she added, turning to him in a friendly way as an afterthought, "will you not stay, Mr. Everard, and take lunch with us? My aunt has been rather moping lately; I am sure your presence would cheer her up."

"Yes, do stay, Mr. Everard!" added Miss Rowly placidly. "It would make a pleasant hour for us all."

Leonard, with a great effort, said with conventional politeness:

"Thanks, awfully! But I promised my father to be home for lunch!" and he withdrew to the door which the servant held open.

He went out filled with anger and despair, and, sad for him, with a fierce, overmastering desire—love he called it—for the clever, proud, imperious beauty who had so out-matched and crushed him.

That beautiful red head, which he had at first so despised, was henceforth to blaze in his dreams.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MAN

ON the *Scoriac* Harold An Wolf, now John Robinson, kept himself aloof from every one, making but few of even the casual acquaintances inevitable on ship board. He sat all day long by himself silent and alone, or else walked up and down the great deck that ran from stem to stern. The first four days of the journey were ideally fine.

Amongst the other passengers were two American families. Cyrus Dodd Watford of Oregon State, called by his friends the "Cattle King," was, with his only daughter Mollie, returning from an extended European tour. Miss Mollie was a bright, charming, impulsive, up-to-date American girl, hitherto heart-whole. But the said heart, now softened by prospects of returning home, began to feel a tender interest in the handsome sad-browed young giant who kept so to himself. All the little friendly girlish overtures which she at first made were received with unfailing courtesy; but as they were not reciprocated she became towards him what in a girl of less ample physical endowments would be sulky, a mood in a pretty girl most dangerous to the peace of mind of any young man unprotected by a previous attachment. But Harold had manifold protection. Not only did Love occupy the citadel, but the flanking towers were held by Misery and Despair. He waited unconsciously the penalty for his obtuseness which Miss Mollie was preparing for him, when the time should have arrived.

The other American family consisted of Andrew Stonehouse, the great ironmaster and contractor, who, with his

wife and little daughter, his only child, was making his way west.

Stonehouse was a remarkable man in his way, a typical product of the Anglo-Saxon under American conditions. By unremitting work he had at thirty achieved a great fortune, which had, however, been up to then entirely invested and involved in his businesses. With, however, the colossal plant at his disposal, and by aid of the fine character which he had won for honesty and good work, he was able within the next ten years to pile up a fortune vast even in a nation where multi-millionaires are scattered about freely. Then he had married, wisely and happily. But no child had come to crown the happiness of the pair who so loved each other till a good many years had come and gone. Naturally the child was idolised by her parents, and thereafter every step taken by either was with an eye to her good. When the rigour of winter and the heat of summer told on the child in a way which the more hardy parents had never felt, she was whirled away to some place with more promising conditions of health and happiness. Palm Beach, the Green Mountains, Los Angeles, Banff—that wonderful plateau in the Canadian Rockies, had been tried, and with good success. When the doctors hinted that an ocean voyage and a winter in Italy would be good, those too were duly undertaken. And now, the child being in perfect health, the family was returning before the weather should get too hot to spend the summer at their chalet amongst the great pines on the slopes of Mount Ranier. Like the others on board, Mr. and Mrs. Stonehouse had proffered travellers' civilities to the sad, lonely young man. As to the others, he had shown thanks for their gracious courtesy; but friendship, as in other cases, did not advance. The Stonehouses were not in any way chagrined; their lives were too happy and too full for them to take needless offence. They respected the young man's manifest desire for privacy; and there, so far as they were concerned, the matter rested.

But this did not suit the child. Pearl was a sweet little

thing, a real blue-eyed, golden-haired little fairy, full of loving-kindness. She insisted on friendship with him; insisted shamelessly, with the natural inclination of innocence which rises high above shame. Even the half-hearted protests of the mother, who loved to see the child happy, did not deter her. When Mrs. Stonehouse would say:

"There, darling! You must be careful not to annoy the gentleman," Pearl would turn a rosy all-commanding face to her and answer:

"But, mother, I want him to play with me. You *must* play with me!" Then, as the mother would look at him, he would say quickly, and with genuine heartiness too:

"Oh please, madam, do let her play with me! Come, Pearl." Then the child would spring on his knee with a cry of delight, and their games began.

The presence of the child and her little loving ways were unutterably sweet to Harold; but his pleasure was always followed by a pain that rent him as he thought of that other little one, now so far away, and of those times that seemed so long since gone by.

In the long hours of the sea voyage the friendship between her and the man grew, and grew. He was the biggest and strongest and therefore most lovely thing on board the ship, and that sufficed her. As for him, the child manifestly loved and trusted him, and that was all-in-all to his weary, desolate heart.

The fifth day out the weather began to change; or perhaps it was that the ship on her journey ran into a different zone of weather. That a storm had been in this belt was evident, for the waves grew more and more mountainous as the day wore on and the ship advanced west. Not even the great bulk and weight of the ship, which ordinarily drove through the seas without pitch or roll, were proof against the waves so gigantic that their moving slopes were as vast and as steep as the fields on a mountain farm. The *Scoriac* rose with them; seemed to top them as they died away under her keel; then as they passed the screws, left exposed in the

empty air, raced till the great ship trembled and the captain had to consider whether he had not better lie by for a while lest his gear should take injury. Then the wind began to roar. Wind at sea, which whistles in the tophammer, can be alarming, but it has its pleasant possibilities; but wind which roars makes a sound of dread. This wind grew fiercer and fiercer, coming in roaring squalls from the south-west. Most of those on board were alarmed, for the great waves were very dreadful to see, and the sound of the wind was a trumpet-call to fear.

The sick stayed down in their cabins; the rest found an interest if not a pleasure on deck. Amongst the latter were the Watford and Stonehouse families, all of whom were old travellers. Even Pearl had already had more sea-voyages than falls to most people in their lives. As for Harold, the storm seemed to come quite naturally to him. Those rough voyages of his forebears amongst northern seas, though they had been a thousand years back, had left traces on his imagination, his blood, his nerves! As the storm increased so his spirits rose. He was tuned to the war-note of the deeps; the old Berserker spirit, which had drowsed through ten peaceful centuries, had waked again. He paced the deck now like a ship-master, and it was only at such times as memory, awakened by some incident of the moment, recalled him to his sadder self that he was lost in his great sorrow.

It was fortunate for the passengers that most of them had at this period of the voyage got their sea legs; otherwise walking on the slippery deck, that seemed to heave as the rolling of the vessel threw its slopes up or down, would have been impossible to them. Pearl was, like most children, pretty sure-footed; holding fast to Harold's hand she managed to move about ceaselessly. She absolutely refused to go with any one else. When her mother said that she had better sit still she answered:

"But, mother, I am quite safe with The Man!" "The Man" was the name which she had given Harold, and by which she always now spoke of him. They had had a good

many turns together, and Harold had, with the captain's permission, taken her up on the bridge and showed her how to look out over the "dodger" without the wind hurting her eyes. Then came the welcome beef-tea hour, and all who had come on deck were cheered and warmed with the hot soup. Pearl went below, and Harold, in the shelter of the charthouse, together with a good many others, looked out over the wild sea. Miss Mollie Watford stood close to him, looking more charming than ever in a scarlet tam-o'-shanter, a safe headgear eminently suited to the occasion as its softness gave way to the wind. She did not, however, speak to Harold, but with a charming pout stood close at hand, ready to be spoken to.

Harold, despite the wild turmoil of winds and seas around him, and which usually lifted his spirits, was sad, feeling lone and wretched; he was suffering from the recoil of his little friend's charming presence. Pearl came on deck again looking for him. He did not see her, and the child, seeing an opening for a new game, avoided both her father and mother, who also stood in the shelter of the charthouse, and ran round behind it on the weather side, calling a loud "Boo!" to attract Harold's attention as she ran.

A few seconds later the *Scoriac* put her nose into a coming wave at just the angle which makes for the full exercise of the opposing forces. The great wave seemed to strike the ship on the port quarter like a giant hammer; and for an instant she stood still, trembling. Then the top of the wave seemed to leap up and deluge her. The wind took the flying water and threw it high in volumes of broken spray, which swept not only the deck but the rigging as high as the top of the funnels. The child saw the mass of water coming, and shrieking flew round the port side of the charthouse. But just as she turned down the open space between it and the funnel the vessel rolled to starboard. At the same moment came a puff of wind of greater violence than ever. The child, calling out, half in simulated and half in real fear, flew down the slope. As she did so the gale took her, and in an instant

whirled her, almost touching her mother, over the rail into the sea.

Mrs. Stonehouse shrieked and sprang forward as though to follow her child. She was held back by the strong arm of her husband. They both slipped on the sloping deck and fell together into the scuppers. There was a chorus of screams from all the women present. Harold, with an instinctive understanding of the dangers yet to be encountered, seized the red cap from Miss Mollie's head, tearing it roughly through the protecting pins till her hair flew wide. With it in his right hand he bounded over the rail into the sea after the child. Miss Mollie, not understanding at the moment his action or his object, cried out as she stamped her foot angrily:

"Brute!"

Her word was drowned in the fearful cry "Man overboard!" and all rushed down to the rail and saw Harold, as he emerged from the water, pull the red cap over his head and then swim desperately towards the child, whose golden hair was spread on the rising wave.

The instant after Pearl's being swept overboard might be seen the splendid discipline of a well-ordered ship. Every man to his post, and every man with a knowledge of his duty which realised instant execution of it. The First Officer, then in command, on hearing the shriek, rushed to the starboard end of the bridge, and seeing the child in the water as the ship flashed through the trough of the wave, called to the Quartermaster at the wheel in a voice which cut through the teeth of the gale like a trumpet:

"Hard a port! Hard!"

The Quartermaster, all alive to the situation, spun his wheel till the spokes seemed to fly. The stern of the great ship swung away to port in time to clear the floating child from the whirling screw, which would have cut her to pieces in an instant. Then the Officer after tearing the engine-room signal to "starboard engine full speed astern," ran for the lifebuoy hanging at the starboard end of the bridge. This he

hurled far into the sea. As it fell the attached rope dragged with it the M'Kirdy signal, which so soon as it reaches water bursts into smoke and flame—signal by day and night. This done, and it had all been done in a couple of seconds, he worked the electric switch of the syren, which screamed out quickly once, twice, thrice. This is the dread sound which means "man overboard," and draws to his post every man on the ship, waking or sleeping.

At the first cry the look-out in the crow's-nest swarmed up the foremast, and from the top kept watch on the floating heads, which were seen as yet, bobbing up and down, specks amid the wake of foam left by the screw.

The Captain was now on the bridge and in command, and the First Officer, freed from his duty there, ran to the emergency boat, swung out on its davits on the port side.

At the sound of the syren the men of the crew came at a run each to his post; the Engineer, knowing that his work was cut out, also keeping his men to their places. The off watch came from their bunks barefoot and in their flannels. At such a call no man pauses. The firemen slipped down the hatches to the engine-room as quickly as rabbits into their holes.

The emergency boat was got ready, her crew in their places and the Boatswain going as an extra.

All this time, though only numbered by seconds, the *Scoriac* was turning hard to starboard, making a great figure of eight; for it is quicker to turn one of these great sea monsters round than to stop her in mid career. The aim of her captain in such cases is to bring her back to the weather side of the floating buoy before launching the boat.

Below, in the engine-room, the chief Engineer M'Keltie was shouting to his men, well knowing that steam power was at present life:

"Hump yourselves, lads! Hump yourselves! It's fire we want now; or it'll be hell-fire for you later! Hump yourselves!" Seeing the old watch tumbling down the iron ladders he added:

"Close doors! Forced draught! There's double crews to stoke!"

And like demons, or rather like men, the brave fellows worked in a heat that scorched; while in front and around them the furnaces roared.

On deck the anguish of the child's parents was pitiable. Close to the rail, with her husband's arms holding her tight to it, the distressed mother leaned out; but always moving so that she was at the nearest point of the ship to her child. As the ship passed on it became more difficult to see the heads. In the greater distance they seemed to be quite close together. All at once, just as a great wave which had hidden them in the farther trough passed on, the mother screamed out:

"She's sinking! she's sinking! Oh, God! Oh, God!" and she fell on her knees, her horrified eyes, set in a face of ashen grey, looking out between the rails.

But at the instant all eyes saw the man's figure rise in the water as he began to dive. There was a hush which seemed deadly; the onlookers feared to draw breath. And then the mother's heart leaped and her cry rang out again as two heads rose together in the waste of sea:

"He has her! He has her! He has her! Oh, thank God! Thank God!" and for a single instant she hid her face in her hands.

Then when the fierce "hurrah" of all on board had been hushed in expectation, the comments broke forth. Most of the passengers had by this time got glasses of one kind or another.

"See! He's putting the cap on the child's head. He's a cool one that. Fancy him thinking of a red cap at such a time!"

"Ay! we could see that cap, when it might be we couldn't see anything else."

"My cap! and I called him a brute. Oh! Daddy, will he ever forgive me?" This from Miss Mollie, with a gulp, as

she turned her streaming eyes on her father who held her close against the rail.

"'Course he will, daughter! He's a man! By God he is!"

"Look!" this from an old sailor standing by his boat, "how he's raisin' in the water. He's keepin' his body between her an' the spindrift till the squall has passed. That would choke them both in a wind like this if he didn't know how to guard against it. He's all right; he is! The little maid is safe wi' him."

"Oh, bless you! Bless you for those words," said the mother, turning towards him. At this moment the Second Officer, who had run down from the bridge, touched Mr. Stonehouse on the shoulder.

"The Captain asked me to tell you, sir, that you and Mrs. Stonehouse had better come to him on the bridge. You'll see better from there."

They both hurried up, and the mother coming to the southern angle of the port side of the bridge, for the ship had by this made her turn and was coming back to her starting-place, again peered out with fixed eyes. The Captain tried to comfort her; laying his strong hand on her shoulder, he said:

"There, there! Take comfort, ma'am. She is in the hands of God! All that mortal man can do is being done. And she is safer with that gallant young giant than she could be with any other man on the ship. Look, how he is protecting her! Why he knows that all that can be done is being done. He is waiting for us to get to him, and is saving himself for it. Any other man who didn't know so much about swimming as he does would try to reach the lifebuoy; and would choke the two of them with the spindrift in the trying. Mind how he took the red cap to help us see them. He's a fine lad that; a gallant lad!"

CHAPTER XXIII

FROM THE DEEPS

As Harold saw the child whirled into the sea he forgot everything in the world except that life was to be saved; and so his wits became acute to that end. How well his mind worked might be gathered from the comments on his acts.

When he rose from the sea and looked towards the vessel's wake he saw the head of Pearl on the edge of the belt of foam some hundred feet away from him. A hundred feet does not seem much on land; but it is a long distance from a child drowning in a heavy sea. He knew that her life lay in the moments till he could reach her, and so he swam with desperation towards her. As yet the air in her clothing sustained her; but every second changed this help into a danger as the clothes became saturated. In that awful sea swimming was heavy work, and as the storm swept the foam in great sheets that choked and blinded, he had now and again to turn his head from it till the stress had passed or the rising mountain of water behind him gave him some shelter from the blast. At length he drew near; and the look of fear and despair on the child's face moved him to more frantic effort. When Pearl saw him a look of joy and hope irradiated her face. He called to her and she heard; but just at that instant the rising wave reached its full height between them. When he looked down the great moving slope, he saw her in the trough, but whirling round as though something below dragged at her. As the coming wave took him he almost hurled himself forward. But as he did so she sank before his eyes. A couple of powerful strokes took him close to the

place, and raising himself out of the water for an instant, as high as he could, he dived after her. She had not gone far down, and with a thankful thought which swept his heart and brain like fire he saw her before him and clutched her dress tight. In a few seconds he had fought his way up to the surface and raised her head out of the water. She was gasping and choking, but still sensible. She clutched him spasmodically with a force which actually made for danger to them both. Fortunate it was that he had already some experience of rescuing the drowning. Knowing what to do he held her off from him till she had been able to breathe freely a couple of times. Then he said as quietly as he could:

"Don't struggle, darling; and don't hold me so tight. Let me hold you." At first she did not comprehend; but as she felt his strength upon her, instinctively the woman in her gave way to the man, and she ceased to struggle. Seeing this, he was able to take steps for her protection. The wave was rising under them and the wind was blowing in a furious puff. Therefore, raising himself a little out of the water, he drew her face against his breast till the flying spindrift had swept over them and once again they were sheltered in the trough of the sea. Each wave that came, whilst the wind was furious, he took in this way, and after a while began to feel almost safe as to the result; he knew now that he could hold on till help from the ship should reach them. When there came a time between the puffs of the gale, when they rose on the wave-top and he looked back, he could see some hundreds of yards away the lifebuoy, whose smoke was whirled along the face of the waves, leaving the flame visible over the grey waste of tossing sea. Far behind, looming large as she pitched, her bow and stern rising alternately, he saw the great ship, broadside on, as she turned to their aid. He said to Pearl in as assured a voice as he could muster:

"The ship is coming back for us, darling. Now put up your hands and pray!"

The little lips moved and the eyes closed in the intensity of her prayer:

"Oh God, bring me—us—safe back to father and mother. Amen!"

"Amen!" added Harold.

Her prayer seemed to sustain the child. The habit of belief was doing its work; she was sure now that God would send help.

Harold dared not let her look back. To such a helpless little one a single breath of that flying deluge of water and foam might mean death. And he denied himself the seeing also, for he felt it a duty to save his strength all he could for the sake of the little one dependent on him.

And indeed there was need for saving. For by this time the clothes of both were so saturated that he had to swim hard to keep both afloat. He dared not let the child go whilst he took off his own clothes, as he would have done had he been alone. He managed to take off his shoes using the other foot as a lever; but that was all he dared do. And his clothes were beginning to encumber him. No one knows till he has experience of it how clothes lengthen in the water. The sleeves draw out till the hands are covered, and the trouser legs lengthen and lengthen till they hamper the movement of the feet.

Harold managed to take off some of the child's clothing, and that eased the weight, but he in his heart prayed that the coming help might not be long delayed. How he deplored now that it had not been possible to reach the lifebuoy, for once in touch with it, weight would become as nothing. And so he waited, saving his strength to the utmost.

On the bridge the Captain handed Mrs. Stonehouse a pair of the ship's binoculars. For an instant she looked through them, and then handed them back and continued gazing out to where the two heads appeared—when they did appear on the crest of the waves, like pin-heads. The Captain said half to himself and half to the father:

"Mother's eyes! Mother's eyes!" and the father understood.

As the ship swept back to the rescue, her furnaces roaring and her funnels sending out huge volumes of smoke which the gale beat down on the sea to leeward, the excitement of all on board grew tenser and tenser. Men dared hardly breathe; women wept and clasped their hands convulsively as they prayed. In the emergency boat the men sat like statues, their oars upright ready for instant use. The Officer stood with the falls in his hand ready to lower away.

When opposite the lifebuoy, and therefore about half a quarter of a mile from Harold and Pearl, the captain gave the engine-room signal "stop," and then a second later: "Full speed astern." With the stop and reversal of the engines the great ship seemed to shake and quiver like a frightened horse. The men in the boats became braced in every nerve, and the Officer, his face set like flint, threw his eyes once again on the falls to see that all was clear. The seconds that elapsed seemed hours, but when a few had passed he said quietly:

"Ready, men! Steady!" Then as the coming wave slipping under the ship began to rise up her side, he freed the falls and the boat sank softly into the lifting sea.

Instantly the oars struck the water, and as the men bent to them a cheer rang out on the deck.

Harold and Pearl heard, and the man turning his head for a moment saw that the ship was close at hand gradually drifting down to the weather side of them so as to afford shelter when the time should come. He raised the child in his arms, saying as he did so:

"Now, Pearl, wave your hand to mother and say, Hurrah!" The child, fired into fresh hope, at once waved her tiny hand and cried "Hurrah! Hurrah!" The sound could not reach the mother's ears; but she saw, and her heart leaped. She too waved her hand, but she uttered no sound; she was speechless with emotion. The sweet high voice of the child crept over the water to the ears of the men in the boat, and seemed to fire their arms with renewed strength.

The oars bent like whips as they tore through the water in sharp jerks; the impact sounded like hammer strokes as they flew back on the rowlocks.

"Give way, men! Give way! Give way!" roared the Officer. "They are weakening. The man's head is going under!" and the boat tore up and down the great slopes of the heaving sea.

A few more strokes brought them close. Harold saw as he raised his head to breathe, and with a last effort raised the child in his arms as the boat drove down on them. The Boatswain leaning over the bow grabbed the child, and with one sweep of his strong arm took her into the boat. The bow oarsman caught Harold by the wrist. The way of the boat took him for a moment under water; but the next man, pulling his oar across the boat, stooped over and caught him by the collar, and clung fast to him. A few seconds more and he was hauled aboard. A wild cheer from all on the *Scoriac* came sweeping down on the wind.

When once the boat's head had been turned towards the ship, and when the oars had bent again to their work, they came soon within her shelter. When they had got close enough ropes were thrown out, caught and made fast; and then came down one of the bowlines which the seamen held ready along the rail of the lower deck. This was seized by the Boatswain, who placed it round him under his armpits. Then, standing up with the child in his arms he made ready to be pulled up. Pearl held out her arms to Harold, crying in fear:

"No, no, let The Man take me! I want to go with The Man!" He said quietly so as not to frighten her:

"No, no, dear! Go with him! He can do this better than I can!" So she clung quietly to the seaman, holding her face pressed close against his shoulder. As the men above pulled at the rope, keeping it as far as possible from the side of the vessel, the Boatswain fended himself off with his feet. In a few seconds he was seized by eager hands and pulled over the rail, tenderly holding and guarding the child all the while.

In an instant she was in the arms of her mother, who had thrown herself upon her knees and pressed her close to her loving heart. The child put her little arms around her neck and clung to her. Then looking up and seeing the grey pallor of her face, which even her great joy could not in a moment efface, she stroked it and said:

"Poor mother! Poor mother! And now I have made you all wet!" Then, feeling her father's hand on her head she turned and leaped into his arms, where he held her close.

Harold was the next to ascend. He came amid a regular tempest of cheers, the seamen joining with the passengers. The officers, led by the Captain waving his cap from the bridge, joined in the pæan. The seamen came up on deck in turn, though unhappily in the furious rush of the sea two of them were injured, one breaking his leg and another having his hand cut open as the boat was driven against the side of the ship and her side stove in. No life, however, was lost.

The broken boat was cast loose. An instant after the engine bells tinkled: "Full speed ahead." The great ship forged on her interrupted course.

Mrs. Stonehouse had no eyes but for her child, except for one other. When Harold jumped down from the rail she rushed at him, all those around instinctively making way for her. She flung her arms around him and kissed him, and then before he could stop her she sank to her knees at his feet, and taking his hand kissed it. The women around burst into fresh weeping and the men turned away. A mother's gratitude is almost as touching as a mother's woe! As for Harold, he was embarrassed beyond all thinking. He tried to take away his hand, but she clung tight to it.

"No, no!" she cried. "You saved my child!"

Harold was a gentleman and a kindly one. He said no word till she had risen, still holding his hand, when he said quietly:

"There! there! Don't cry. I was only too happy to be of service. Any other man on board would have done the same.

I was the nearest, and therefore had to be first. That was all!"

Mr. Stonehouse came to him and said as he grasped Harold's hand so hard that his fingers ached:

"I cannot thank you as I would. But you are a man and will understand. God be good to you as you have been good to my child; and to her mother and myself!" As he turned away Pearl, who had now been holding close by her mother's hand, sprang to him holding up her arms. He raised her up and kissed her. Then he placed her back in her mother's arms.

All at once she broke down as the recollection of danger swept back upon her. "Oh, Mother! Mother!" she cried, with a long, low wail, which touched every one of her hearers to the very heart's core as she hid her face in her mother's breast and shook with emotion.

The approach of the Doctor put an end to the painful scene. He spoke sharply:

"The hot blankets are all ready. Come, there is not a moment to be lost. I'll be with you when I have seen the injured men attended to!"

So the mother, holding her in her arms and steadied by two seamen lest she should slip on the wet and slippery deck, took the child below.

For the remainder of that day a sort of solemn gladness ruled on the *Scoriac*. Things would have probably been of more expressed jubilancy had any of the chief actors or those most interested in the little drama been evident in public. But the Stonehouse family remained in their own suite, content in glad thankfulness to be with Pearl, who lay well covered up on the sofa sleeping off the effects of the excitement and the immersion, and the result of the potation which the Doctor had forced upon her. Harold was simply shy, and objecting to the publicity which he felt to be his fate, remained in his own cabin till the trumpet had blown the dinner call, "Roast beef."

When the ship was well under way the Engineer came to

report to the Captain of the vessel's performance, which he did in characteristic fashion:

"She made seventy, when she turned to come down on the buoy. I didna think the auld betch had it in her!" Said the Captain:

"Well, M'Keltie, we know now what she can do on emergency!"

"Ay, sir!"

"That gang of yours worked well. I ordered them double ration of grog!"

"Ay! They're no bad laddies!"

"That's so! Tell them for me, M'Keltie, that I am pleased with them." The Engineer raised his hands in protest:

"Sakes, mon! Dinna say that to them. They'd never be in hand again!" The Captain laughed and said as he laid his hand kindly on the other's shoulder:

"All right, M'Keltie. Convey it to them in your own way."

"Ay, sir."

The conveyance was thus: at eight bells, when the shift was changing and the men were all present, the Engineer spoke:

"Here, you swabs. The Captain slippit oot that he was no angry wi' ye for the way ye stoked yon time. I'm tellin' ye frae him that ye're no half bad. Weel, ye might be waur! Say, div ony o' ye sons o' betches snuff? I'm thinkin' I'd no dislike to tak a pinch wi' the wheen o' ye!" So saying he held out his great snuffbox, and the men grinning came in line and had a pinch. And on the Atlantic that night there was no more contented engineer and no prouder lot of firemen. Such is the understanding of manhood that the men knew they had been as highly praised as is given to a chief engineer to praise.

When Harold came to dinner, which he did quietly to avoid being talked to, he did not escape Miss Mollie who was waiting. She came to the table where he sat and said to him

in a voice so suspiciously meek that her father who followed her sheepishly, and manifestly under direction, raised his eyebrows:

"Mr. Robinson I want to apologise to you for my conduct to-day!"

Harold rose at once, half in alarm half in concern, and faced her. He looked genuinely puzzled as he said:

"To me! Conduct to me! What do you mean? Upon my honour I don't understand!"

"I called you a brute when you pulled off my cap!" There was an alarming break in her voice which made him answer quietly:

"Why, you dear lady, it is I who ought to beg pardon for such rudeness. I didn't know it was yours. There was not much time. I saw a red cap and pulled at it. I didn't know whose it was; and indeed you must forgive me, for at the moment I didn't care. But you forgive me now, don't you? It gave the wee girl another chance. By the way, what became of it? I saw it on the child's head when she was taken below. I hope it is not spoiled!"

"Spoiled!" this with a choking gulp, followed by a little winning *moue*, which some of the other girls present called a grimace. There were some seconds of awkward silence broken by the harsh voice of Cyrus:

"Guess, Mister, you don't know what my little girl thinks of that cap naow! Spoiled! says you. Why, she thinks it's trimmed with an everlasting halo!"

"Dad, you keep your head shut!" said Miss Mollie as she turned to him with a smile, raising a warning finger. As the father and daughter sought their own seats one of the girls who had been looking on and listening whispered to another:

"That Mollie *has* cheek! She's all on deck anyhow!" The other smiled, whilst with the corner of her eye she glanced over at the handsome young giant.

"Not she! She doesn't know enough to come in out of the rain! If I had had that chance, I'd have kissed him!"

CHAPTER XXIV

A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD

EARLY in the evening Harold went to his own cabin. The gloom of his great sorrow was heavy on him; the reaction from the excitement of the morning had come.

When Sorrow sits on the House of Life its wings are wide-spread and so far-stretching that they outloom the horizon, and no gleam of light may come through. And this gloom lasts whilst Sorrow lasts. For it is Sorrow itself that tires first of the waiting; and when its wings are lifted, Light joins Life again!

He was recalled to himself by a gentle tapping at the door of his stateroom. Unlocking and opening the door he saw Mr. Stonehouse, who said with trouble in his voice:

"I came to you on account of my little child." There he stopped with a break in his voice. Harold, with intent to set his mind at ease and to stave off further expressions of gratitude, replied:

"Oh, pray don't say anything. I am only too glad that I was privileged to be of service. I only trust that the dear little girl is no worse for her—her adventure!"

"That is why I am here," said the father quickly. "My wife and I are loth to trouble you. But the poor little thing has worked herself into a paroxysm of fright and is calling for you. We have tried in vain to comfort or reassure her. But she will not be satisfied without you. She keeps on calling on 'The Man' to come and help her. Ah! sir, you have won, and won nobly, the trust of that dear little one; and I her father pray to God that her Angel who beholds the face of her Heavenly Father may speak to Him the gratitude that

we feel. I am loth to put you to further strain after all you have gone through to-day; but if you would come——” Harold was already in the passage as he spoke:

“I’m coming! She is indeed a very sweet and good child. I shall never forget how she bore herself whilst we waited for the aid to come. Her prayer and her trust in it, were help to us both.”

“You must tell her mother and me all about it,” said the father, much moved.

When they came close to the Stonehouses’ suite of rooms they heard Pearl’s voice rising with a pitiful note of fear:

“Where is The Man? Oh! where is The Man. Why doesn’t he come to me? He can save me! I want to be with The Man!” When the door opened and she saw him she gave a shriek of delight, and springing from the arms of her mother who sat on the sofa berth, she fairly leaped into Harold’s arms which were outstretched to receive her. She clung to him tight round the neck and kissed him again and again, rubbing her little hands all over his face as though to prove to herself that he was real and not a dream. Then with a sigh she laid her head on his breast, the reaction of sleep coming all at once to her. With a gesture of silence Harold sat down, holding the child in his arms. Her mother laid a thick shawl over her and sat down close to Harold. Mr. Stonehouse stood quiet in the doorway with the child’s nurse peering anxiously over his shoulder.

After a little while, when he thought that she was asleep, Harold rose and began to place her gently in the bunk. But the moment he did so she waked with a scream. The fright in her eyes was terrible. She clung to him, moaning and crying out between her sobs:

“Don’t leave me! Don’t leave me! Don’t leave me!” Harold was much moved and held the little thing tight in his strong arms, saying to her:

“No, darling! I shan’t leave you! Look in my eyes, dear, and I will promise you, and then you will be happy. Won’t you?”

She looked quickly up in his face, holding him from her at arm's length as she bent backwards. For a few seconds she gazed at him searchingly, with all the self-protective instinct which is given to the young. Then she kissed him on the mouth lovingly, and resting her head, but not sleepily this time, on his breast said:

"Yes! I'm not afraid now! I'm going to stay with The Man!"

Presently Mrs. Stonehouse, who had been thinking of ways and means, and of the comfort of the strange man who had been so good to her child, said:

"You will sleep with mother to-night, darling. Mr. . . . The Man," she said this with an appealing look of apology to Harold, "The Man will stay by you till you are asleep. . . ." But she interrupted, not fretfully or argumentatively, but with a settled air of content:

"No! I'm going to sleep with The Man!"

"Oh! Miss Pearl, how can you say such a thing!" this from the nurse in the doorway. No one, however, seemed to notice her words.

"But, dear one," the mother expostulated, "The Man will want sleep too."

"All right, mother. He can sleep too. I'll be very good and lie quite quiet; but oh! mother, I can't sleep unless his arms are round me. I'm afraid if they're not the sea will get me!" and she clung closer to Harold, tightening her arms round his neck.

"Oh! Miss Pearl, how can you?" said again the nurse in the doorway, shocked and horrified. Mr. Stonehouse turned suddenly and said to her in a tone that made her shrink back:

"And why not, madam! Don't be a fool!"

"You will not mind?" asked Mrs. Stonehouse timidly to Harold; and, seeing acquiescence in his face, added in a burst of tearful gratitude:

"Oh! you are good to her; to us all!"

"Hush!" Harold said quietly. "It is a small thing to do." Then he said to Pearl, in a cheerful matter-of-fact way

which carried conviction, and consequently satisfaction, to the child's mind:

"Now, darling, it is time for all good little girls to be asleep, especially when they have had an—an interesting day. You wait here till I put my pyjamas on, and then I'll come back for you. And mother and father shall come and see you nicely tucked in!"

"Don't be long!" the child anxiously called after him as he hurried away. Even trust can have its doubts.

In a few minutes Harold was back, in his dressing-gown. Pearl, already wrapped in a warm shawl by her mother, held out her arms to Harold, who lifted her.

The Stonehouses' suite of rooms was close to the top of the companion-way, and as Harold's stateroom was on the saloon deck, the little procession had, much to the man's concern, to run the gauntlet of the throng of passengers whom the bad weather had kept indoors. When he came out of the day cabin carrying the child there was a rush of all the women to make much of the little girl. They were all very kind and not troublesome; their interest was natural enough, and Harold stopped whilst they petted the little thing. Miss Mollie waited till the last, holding on to her father's arm. When her turn came she asked:

"Where are you going, pet? For a little promenade?"

"No! Mollie. I am going to sleep with The Man. He won't let the sea get at me in the night." The girl was much touched. Her eyes were suspiciously bright as she said heartily:

"You darling! You are quite right. The Man will guard you safely and you will sleep well. Won't you kiss me good night?" The girl pouted her rosy little mouth to a kiss, and then said:

"Good night, Mollie, and thank you for lending your cap." The cause of the brightness of the young woman's eyes was apparent now. The girl saw and cried out:

"Don't cry, Mollie. I'm all right. I'm going to sleep with The Man!"

Before Harold had passed on, Mollie said to him in a whisper, with the frankness of a real girl:

"You are a dear! You're as tender as you are brave! God bless you! good night!" She held out her hand; he shook it warmly and passed on his way down the staircase, steadying himself with one hand whilst the other held the child close to him.

When they had all gone and the cabin was dark, save for the gleam from the nightlight which the careful mother had placed out of sight in the basin at the foot of the bunk, Harold lay for a long time motionless. The events of the day were whirling through his brain, in their own sequence and at their own pace. Right under his eye, so close to him that the breath fanned his hair, lay the sweet rosy face of the beautiful child, the child whose life he had saved. The rosebud of a mouth was partly opened as she breathed. If anything could have made for peaceful, holy feeling, one would have thought it would have been this! and yet it seemed to call back to him all the memory of that other face which as a baby of equal age he had seen the first time he came to Normanstand. And with the memory came a sense of unutterable misery; of an unspeakable loss; of so bitter a sense of injustice that he almost writhed under it.

Here he became conscious of a movement of the child in his arms; a shuddering movement, and a sort of smothered groan. The little thing was living over again in sleep the perils and fears of the day. The action of her mind was, however, complete; for instinctively she put up her hands and felt the arms round her. Then with a sigh clasped her arms round his neck, and with a peaceful look laid her head upon his breast. Even through the gates of sleep her instinct had recognised and realised protection.

And then this trust of a little child brought back the man to his nobler self. Once again came back to him that love which he had had, and which he knew now that he had never lost, for the little child that he had seen grow into full wo-

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manhood; and whose image must dwell in his heart of hearts for evermore.

Surely, surely Isaiah's prophecy is entirely spiritual and illustrative. When he said "a little child shall lead them," the wolf and the leopard and the lion were but types of the passions that lurk, and pounce, and smite. But the hand of the little child is eternal. It belongs not only to prophecy and idealisation and illustration, but to those realities where nature reigns; to those gardens where the flowers are virtues and hopes, and where passions and selfish desires are weeds that choke.

As Harold thought, and realised, and knew, the tears welled from his eyes; the bitterness of his desolate heart melted in the living trust of the little one whose Angel beheld the face of the Most High.

As he lay quiet in the dimness of the cabin he became conscious of another presence; like speaks to like in other ways than in words. Turning his head slowly, lest by any quick movement he should wake the child, he saw in the space of the doorway kept open by the hook a face which he presently made out to be that of Mrs. Stonehouse. He whispered to her softly:

"She is sleeping soundly. She is not even dreaming now. Come in and see her!" The mother crept in as softly as a shadow, and kneeling down beside the bunk looked closely at the child. "Thank God!" she whispered as though unconsciously. Harold's hand lay outside the coverlet; she took it in hers and lifting it up kissed it.

The man was disconcerted. He dared not make a movement to draw it away lest he should wake the child, and he knew rather than feared that to wake her would be to wake her to new and multiplied fear. So he said in whispered protest:

"Oh please, please don't. I would really rather you didn't."

The mother made a plea which sounded pitiful in his ears:

"Do let me hold it, for a few moments. It saved my child's life. If you knew how much it is to me to touch it I am sure you would not mind!" He feared she would get hysterical or weep; and so acquiesced in what he thought would arrest such a calamity. He answered as sweetly as he could; after all, she was a mother. He had saved her child, and must expect her gratitude:

"My dear lady, if it comforts you in any way please do as you wish." For a few seconds she held his hand tight and then said before relinquishing it:

"If you have any sorrow, and oh! my dear boy, I can see that you have—I can see it in your eyes—may God so comfort you as you have comforted us. May He in His power and His wisdom turn your sorrow into joy and give you your heart's desire!" Harold was alarmed and spoke quickly:

"Please! I must ask you not to speak to me; not to think of me. I am very definite about this, and I am sure you will observe the only request I make." The lady recognised his earnestness and respected his desire that she should keep the secret which she had surprised. She bowed her head; he knew that it was a delicate promise of silence.

The long night's sleep quite restored Pearl. She woke fairly early and without any recurrence of fear. At first she lay still, fearing she would wake The Man, but finding that he was awake—he had not slept a wink all night—she kissed him and then scrambled out of bed. He guided her with out-stretched arm as she crossed the sloping floor; she climbed on the sofa, from which she could look out through the port on the tossing sea. He feared, naturally, that the sight of it might upset her. But his fears were groundless; she looked out undismayed and reported to him in her own way the state of the weather:

"It is getting fine. These are not nearly so big as *our* waves!" Fear had not left its dreadful impress on the child's mind.

It was still early morning, but early hours rule on ship-land. Harold rang for the steward, and when the man came

he told him to tell Mrs. Stonehouse that the child was awake. In a very few minutes both the father and mother appeared, with the nurse in a dressing-gown of fearful and wonderful pattern bringing up the rear. Their delight when they found the child unfrightened looking out of the port was unbounded. She promised, as she was covered up, wrapped carefully in the warm shawl in her father's arms, to come back to Harold when they should both have had their bath and been dressed for breakfast.

When they met on deck Pearl was full of a secret. Harold saw; but the remembrance of the other wee girl whose secrets were of equally detonating force schooled him to the necessary calm. Pearl, unable to contain herself, gave hints; but to her wonder and secret delight The Man would not understand even that there was such a thing as a secret. The child almost shrieked, she could not contain herself with delight, and it was well that the hour for breakfast was at hand, or further reticence would have been impossible. When the bugle blew she came to him and held out her hand saying demurely:

"Well, good-bye till after breakfast; for of course we shall not meet till then."

The greeting, even the circumstance of it, was unusual, so Harold guessed that the secret had something to do with the coming meal. Therefore, in order to play his part of the game properly, he made no variation of his usual proceeding at meals. When, however, he reached his accustomed place at the Purser's table he saw it already occupied. The Second Steward, who was standing close by, said apologetically:

"I beg pardon, sir, but I had to change your seat. I trust you will excuse me. The—the party that ordered it was very harbitrary and wouldn't take any denial. If you'll allow me to show you, sir, I'll bring you to your new seat!" The man was covertly smiling, so Harold understood all now. Still playing the game he said *sotto voce* to the Steward:

"All right, but I'll pretend to blame you;" then he added aloud and with a fierce scowl, speaking so loudly that his

voice would reach the Captain's table where the Stonehouse family sat:

"But, sir, you shouldn't alter my seat without my permission. I wouldn't let the Captain himself alter my seat. No, not even if he wanted me to be at his own table!" and he walked on scowling horribly. By this time they had approached the top of the centre table. There on the Captain's right was Mrs. Stonehouse as usual, with Pearl next to her. Mr. Stonehouse sat opposite, next to the lady on the Captain's left. The Steward pointed to the vacant seat; Pearl clapped her hands; and the Captain putting up his hands as though asking clemency said:

"You must forgive me, sir! But that young lady, that tyrant there to your left, who seems to have taken command of this ship, gave her orders that you were to be placed next her. She actually wanted to turn *me* out—ME! the lawful captain of the *Scoriac*!" Pearl, who had been simply overwhelmed with delight, turned and hugged her mother as an outlet to her feelings. As the Captain finished she turned round and said to Harold as she opened out his napkin and handed it to him as though he were her property:

"Yes, and he refused. He said he would be very glad himself; but that it would be against the rules of war and the Navy discipline act and the Constitution for the Captain not to take the head of his own table. And so, as I thought he was going to cry, I let him give you that seat instead."

Then the silence gave way to a mighty roar of laughter, in which the Captain joined most heartily of all.

CHAPTER XXV

A NOBLE OFFER

HAROLD's favourite spot for lonely thought was the cable-tank on the top of the aft wheelhouse. In this peaceful corner, with the wind whistling above and around him, and the sea in the foamy track of the vessel's wake seeming to rise level and then to fall away behind him as the waves passed under the ship his thoughts ran freely and in dreadful sympathy with the turmoil of wind and wave.

How unfair it all was! Why had he been singled out for such misery? What gleam of hope or comfort was left to his miserable life since he had heard the words of Stephen; those dreadful words which had shattered in an instant all the cherished hopes of his life. Too well he remembered the tone and look of scorn with which the horrible truths had been conveyed to him.—In his inmost soul he accepted them as truths; Stephen's soul had framed them and Stephen's lips had sent them forth.

From his position crouching behind the screen he did not see the approaching figure of Mr. Stonehouse, and was astonished when he saw his head rising above the edge of the tank as he climbed the straight Jacob's ladder behind the wheelhouse. The elder man paused as he saw him and said in an apologetic way:

"Will you forgive my intruding on your privacy? I wanted to speak to you alone; and as I saw you come here a while ago I thought it would be a good opportunity." Harold was rising as he spoke.

"By all means. No forgiveness is needed; this place is

common property. But all the same I am honoured in your seeking me." The poor fellow wished to be genial; but despite his efforts there was a strange formality in the expression of his words. The elder man understood, and said as he hurried forward and sank beside him:

"Pray don't stir! Why, what a cosy corner this is. I don't believe at this moment there is such peace in the ship!"

Once again the bitterness of Harold's heart broke out in sudden words:

"I hope not! There is no soul on board to whom I could wish such evil!" The old man said as he laid his hand softly on the other's shoulder:

"God help you, my poor boy, if such pain is in your heart! If you feel that I obtrude on you I earnestly ask you to forgive me; but I think that the years between your age and mine as well as my feeling towards the great obligation which I owe you will plead for excuse. There is something I would like to say to you, sir; but I suppose I must not without your permission. May I have it?"

"If you wish, sir. I can at least hear it."

"I thank you. I assure you I am nervous about my self-imposed task and I ask that you will hear me patiently; without comment or objection till I have delivered myself of my task!" He was so manifestly disturbed that all Harold's natural kindness and courtesy rose to his aid:

"Go on, sir. I shall listen patiently; and I shall try to understand, to sympathise from your point of view, if I cannot from my own." The old man bowed and went on:

"I could not but notice that you have some great grief bearing upon you; and from one thing or another, I have come to the conclusion that you are leaving your native land because of it." Here Harold, wakened to amazement by the readiness with which his secret had been divined, said quickly, rather as an exclamation than interrogation:

"How on earth did you know that!"

"Sir, at your age and with your strength life should be a joy; and yet you are sad. Companionship should be a pleasure; and yet you prefer solitude. That you are brave and unselfish I know; I have reason, thank God! to know it. That you are kindly and tolerant is apparent from your bearing to my little child this morning; as well as your goodness of last night, the remembrance of which her mother and I will bear to our graves; and to me now. I have not lived all these years without having had trouble in my own heart; and although the happiness of late years has made it dim, my gratitude to you who are so sad brings it all back to me." He bowed, and Harold, wishing to avoid speaking of his sorrow, said:

"You are quite right so far as I have a sorrow; and it is because of it I have turned my back on home. Let it rest at that!" His companion bowed gravely and went on:

"I take it that you are going to begin life afresh in the new country. In such case I have a proposition to make. I have a large business; a business so large that I am unable to manage it all myself. I was intending that when I arrived at home I would set about finding a partner. The man I want is not an ordinary man. He must have brains and strength and daring." He paused. Harold felt what was coming, but realised, as he jumped at the conclusion, that it would not do for him to take it for granted that *he* was the man sought. He waited; Mr. Stonehouse went on:

"As to brains, I am prepared to take the existence of such on my own judgment. I have been reading men, and in this aspect specially, all my life. The man I have thought of has brains. I am satisfied of that, without proof. I have proof of the other qualities." He paused again; as Harold said nothing he continued in a manner ill at ease:

"My difficulty is to make the proposal to the man I want. It is so difficult to talk business to a man to whom you are under great obligation; to whom you owe everything. He might take a friendly overture ill." There was but one thing to be said, and Harold said it. His heart warmed to the

kindly old man, and he wished to spare him pain; even if he could not accept his proposition:

"He couldn't take it ill; unless he was an awful bounder."

"It was you I thought of!"

"I thought so much, sir!" said Harold after a pause, "and I thank you earnestly and honestly. But it is impossible."

"Oh, my dear sir!" said the other, chagrined as well as surprised. "Think again! It is really worth your while to think of it, no matter what your ultimate decision may be!"

Harold shook his head. There was a long silence. At last he spoke:

"I am very truly and sincerely grateful to you for your trust. But the fact is, I cannot go anywhere amongst people. Of course you understand that I am speaking in confidence; to you alone and to none other?"

"Absolutely!" said Mr. Stonehouse gravely. Harold went on:

"I must be alone. I can only bear to see people on this ship because it is a necessary way to solitude." The old man said, his brows wrinkling in a puzzled way:

"You 'cannot go anywhere amongst people!' Pardon me; but I fail to understand!" The silence grew oppressive. At last in a sort of cold desperation the young man said:

"I cannot meet any one. . . . There is something that happened. . . . Something I did. . . . Nothing can make it right. . . . All I can do is to lose myself in the wildest, grimmest wilderness in the world; and fight my pain . . . my shame. . . .!"

A long silence. Then the old man's voice came clear and sweet, something like music, in the shelter from the storm:

"But perhaps time may mend things!" Harold answered out of the bitterness of his heart:

"Nothing can mend this thing! It is at the farthest point of evil; and there is no going on or coming back. Nothing can wipe out what is done; what is past!"

Again silence, and again the strong, gentle voice:

"God can do much! Oh my dear young friend, you who have been such a friend to me and mine, think of this."

"God Himself can do nothing here! It is done! And that is the end!" He turned away his head and held his body tense; it was all he could do to keep from groaning. The old man's voice vibrated with earnest conviction as he spoke:

"Do not say that! Do not think it! It is not worthy of Him—of you!"

"It is true, sir. There is no way out of the past!"

"True, the past cannot be undone. And yet may it not be that God in His wisdom has a meaning in even that past? He works often with tools that are not perfect, and which are yet adapted to His special ends. God forbid that I should pain you, but oh, sir, just think. In His great scheme are many purposes that we cannot see all at once or in the near perspective. Remember, that the very pain that sent you by this ship in your seeking the wilderness was the means of restoring our dear child to my wife and me. You are too much a man, I know, not to feel some comfort from that; even if it only comes to you in moments of bitter loneliness hereafter. Just think what this day would have been to that poor broken-hearted mother; and to me also. What bitter thoughts would be of our little one dead, swaying in these icy waves . . . her golden hair tossing in the deeps. . . . And it was this brave heart and this strong arm that won her back for us . . . !"

As he spoke he laid his right hand on Harold's breast, and his left on his sleeve. He was so moved and his hands so trembled that Harold could not but feel his heart melted. His head bowed and his shoulders shook with emotion. Once again he felt that inward thrill so poignantly painful—like the agony of thawing frozen flesh, or of coming back to life from the dark confine of death—which he had felt on the previous night when the little child lay dreaming in his arms. The old man saw, and rejoiced. With more confidence than he had heretofore felt he went on:

"You are young and strong and brave! Your heart is noble! You can think quickly in moments of peril; therefore your brain is sound and alert. Now, may I ask you a favour? it is not much. Only that you will listen, without interruption, to what, if I have your permission, I am going to say. Do not ask me anything; do not deny; do not interrupt! Only listen! May I ask this?"

"By all means! It is not much!" He almost felt like smiling as he spoke. Mr. Stonehouse, after a short pause, as if arranging his thoughts, spoke:

"Let me tell you what I am. I began life with nothing but a fair education such as all our American boys get. But from a good mother I got an idea that to be honest was the best of all things; from a strenuous father, who, however, could not do well for himself, I learned application to work and how best to use and exercise such powers as were in me. I found there was a place in the world for such qualities. From the start things prospered with me. Men who knew me trusted me; some of them came with offers to share in my enterprise. Thus I had command of what capital I could use; I was able to undertake great works and to carry them through. Fortune kept growing and growing; for as I got wealthier I found newer and larger and more productive uses for my money. And in all my work I can say before my God I never willingly wronged any man. I am proud to be able to say that my name stands good wherever it has been used. No man will doubt it; no man will oppose it; no man will suspect any poor motive from me. It may seem egotistical that I say such things of myself. It may seem bad taste; but I speak it because I have a motive in so doing. I want you to understand at the outset that in my own country, wherever I am known and in my own work, my name is a strength. It can protect!"

He paused a while. Harold sat still; he knew that such a man would not, could not, speak in such a way without a strong motive. It was with a sense of relief, so great was the tensi-ty, that Harold heard him proceed:

"When you were in the water making what headway you could in that awful sea—when my little child's life hung in the balance, and the anguish of my wife's heart nearly tore my heart in two, I said to myself, 'If we had a son I should wish him to be like that.' I meant it then, and I mean it now! Come to me as you are! Faults, and past, and all. Forget the past! Whatever it was we will together try to wipe it out. Much may be done in restoring where there has been any wrongdoing. Take my name as your own. It will protect you from the result of whatever has been, and give you an opportunity to find your place again. Whatever you have done has not, I am certain, been from base motive. Few of us are spotless as to facts. You and I will show—for we shall confide in none other—that a strong, brave man may win back all that was lost. Let me call you by my name and hold you as the son of my heart; and it will be a joy and pleasure to my declining years."

As he had spoken, Harold's thoughts had at first followed in some wonderment as to what result he might be driving at. But gradually as his noble purpose unfolded itself, based as it was on a misconception as to the misdoing of which he himself had spoken, he had been almost stricken dumb. At the first realisation of what was intended he could not have spoken had he tried; but at the end he had regained his thoughts and his voice. There was still wonderment in it, as realising from the long pause that the old man had completed his suggestion, he spoke:

"If I understand aright you are offering to share your honor with me. With me, whom, if again I understand, you take as having committed some crime?"

"I inferred from what you said and from your sadness, your gloom, your desire to shun your kind, that there was, if not a crime, some fault which needed expiation."

"But your honour, sir; your honour!" There was a proud look in the old man's eyes as he said quietly:

"It was my desire, is my desire, to share with you what I have that is best; and that, I take it, is not the least valuable

of my possessions, such as they are! And why not? You have given to me all that makes life sweet, without which it would be unbearable. That child who came to my wife and me when I was old and she had passed her youth is all in all to us both. Had your strength and courage been for barter in the moments when my child was quivering between life and death, I would have cheerfully purchased them with not half but all! Sir, I should have given my soul! I can say this now, for gratitude is above all barter; and surely it is allowed to a father to show gratitude for the life of his child!"

This great-hearted generosity touched Harold to the quick. He could hardly speak for a few minutes. Then instinctively grasping the old man's hand he said:

CHAPTER XXVI

AGE'S WISDOM

"You have been so good to me, so nobly generous in your wishes that I feel I owe you a certain confidence. But as it concerns not myself alone I will ask that it be kept a secret between us two. Not to be told to any other; not even your wife!"

"I will hold your secret sacred. Even from my wife; the first secret I shall have ever kept from her."

"First, then, let me say, and this is what I know will rejoice you, that I am not leaving home and county because of any crime I have committed; not from any offence against God or man, or law. Thank God! I am free from such. I have always tried to live uprightly. . . ." Here a burst of pain overcame him, and with a dry sob he added: "And that is what makes the terrible unfairness of it all!"

The old man laid a kindly hand on his shoulder and kept it there for a few moments.

"My poor boy! My poor boy!" was all he said. Harold shook himself as if to dislodge the bitter thoughts. Mastering himself he went on:

"There was a lady. . . . Her father was my father's friend. My friend too, God knows; for almost with his dying breath he gave sanction to my marrying his daughter, if it should ever be that she should care for me in that way. But he wished me to wait, and, till she was old enough to choose, to leave her free. All this, you understand, was said in private to me; none other ever knew it.

"I honestly kept to his wishes. No man who loved a wo-

man, honoured her, worshipped her, could have been more scrupulously careful as to leaving her free. What it was to me to so hold myself no one knows; no one ever will know; ever can know now! For I loved her, do love her, . . . I believed we loved and trusted each other. But . . . But then there came a day when I found by chance that a great trouble threatened her. Not from anything wrong that she had done; but from something perhaps foolish, harmlessly foolish except that she did not know. . . ." He stopped suddenly, fearing he might have said overmuch of Stephen's side of the affair. "When I came to her aid, however, meaning the best, and as single-minded as a man can be, she misunderstood my words, my meaning, my very coming; and she said things which cannot be unsaid. Things . . . I had to listen. She said things that I did not believe she could have said to me, to any one. Things that I did not think she could have thought. . . . I suppose I bungled in my desire to be unselfish. What she said came to me in new lights upon what I had done . . . But anyhow her statements were such that I felt I could not, should not, remain. My very presence must have been a trouble to her hereafter. There was nothing for it but to come away. There was no place for me! There is none on this side of the grave! . . . For I love her still, more than ever. I honour and worship her still, and ever will, and ever must! . . . I am content to forego my own happiness; but I feel there is a danger to her from what has been. Worst of all is the thought and the memory that she should have done so; she who . . . she . . ."

He turned away overcome and hid his face in his hands. The old man sat still; he knew that at such a moment silence is the best form of sympathy. But his heart glowed; the wisdom of his years told him that he had heard as yet of no absolute bar to his friend's ultimate happiness. Years and the experience of varied life had taught him that a woman's anger is not always reasonable or well directed, or true in its ultimate purpose. He knew that loud-voiced anger is a relief, rather than a purpose of destruction. Well he knew

too that it is useless to argue with grief. Grief is armoured in the heavy mail of egoism; and through it no shaft of reason may prevail. So he waited. When he saw that his companion was regaining his self-possession he said softly:

"I am rejoiced, my dear boy, at what you tell me of your own conduct. It would have made no difference to me had it been otherwise. But it would have meant, to you, a harder and longer climb back to the place you should hold; to me anxiety. But nothing is so hopeless as you think. Believe me that God who knows both you and her has some high purpose in this doing. Already your sorrow has won one young life back from the grave. So surely as we live, the time will come when you shall see this clearly. 'The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.' This is as true to-day as it was when David's harp sounded in Zion. You are not going to be the exception of this almighty and everlasting truth which was given to the world for the good of man. Oh! believe me, my dear young friend who are now as a son to my heart, that there will be bright days for you yet. . . ." He paused a moment, but mastering himself went on in a quiet voice:

"I think you are wise to go away. In the solitudes and in danger things that are little in reality shall find their true perspective. You will prove yourself, your manhood, your worthiness to love and be loved; to guide that other, if guiding be needed, to the full height of her worthiness also."

"I recognise that we must not keep you from your purpose of fighting out your trouble alone. But, my boy, wherever you go may God be with you and watch over you and lead you in His hand to your heart's desire. If the blessings of such as I am, and of mine, and the prayer of the grateful hearts of a family kept together by your bravery avail at all, you will turn your steps home again in a higher and a more hopeful mood. I shall not, I must not, ask you for any promise; but I trust that if ever you do come back you will make us all glad by seeing you. And remember that what I said of myself holds good so long as I shall live!"

Before Harold could reply he had slipped down the ladder and was gone.

During the rest of the voyage, with the exception of one occasion, he did not allude to the subject again by word or implication, and Harold was grateful to him for it.

On the night before Fire Island should be sighted when Harold was in the bow of the great ship looking out with eyes in which gleamed no hope, he came to him and with him looked down at the ripple of water thrown back by the rushing foam and which flamed with phosphorescence.

"This is the last night we shall be together, and, if I may, there is one thing which I would like to say to you."

"Say all you like, sir," said Harold as heartily as he could, "I am sure it is well meant, at any rate; and for that, at any rate also, I shall be grateful to you."

"You will yet be grateful, I think!" he answered gravely. "When it comes back to you in loneliness and solitude you will, I believe, think it worth being grateful for."

"Young men are apt to think somewhat wrongly of women whom they love and respect. I was young once myself, and what I am saying to you comes out of memory interpreted by the wisdom of age. We are apt to think that such women are of a different clay from ourselves. Nay! that they are not compact of clay at all, but of some faultless, flawless material which the Almighty keeps for such fine work. It is only in middle age that men—except scamps, who learn this bad side of knowledge young—realise that women are human beings like themselves. With the same passions, the same faults, the same weaknesses, the same strengths. It may be, you know, that you may have misjudged this young lady! That you have not made sufficient allowance for her youth, her nature, even the circumstances under which she spoke. You have told me that she was in some deep grief or trouble. May it not have been that this in itself unnerved her, distorted her views, aroused her passion till all within and around was tinged with the jaundice of her concern, her humiliation—whatever it was that destroyed for the time

that normal self which you had known so long. A whole lifetime, be it never so short, cannot be obliterated in a moment. May it not have been that her bitterest memory ever since may be of the speaking of these very words which sent you out into the wide world to hide yourself from men. It will be bitterness to you to think of this; to believe it as I feel you shall in time believe. I have thought, waking and sleeping, of your sad position; and with every hour the conviction has strengthened in me that there is a way out of this hideous situation which sends a man like you into solitude with a heart hopeless and full of pain; and which leaves her perhaps in greater pain, for she has not like you the complete sense of innocence. But at present there is no way out but through time and thought. It rests altogether with you. Whatever may be her ideas or wishes, she is powerless. She does not know your thoughts, no matter how she may guess at them. She does not know where you are, or how to reach you, no matter how complete her penitence may be. And, remember that you are a strong man, and she is a woman. Only a woman in her passion and her weakness after all. Think this all over, my poor boy! It will take you time. You cannot come to a conclusion all at once. You will have time and opportunity where you are going. God help you to judge wisely!" After a pause of a few seconds he said abruptly: "Good night!" and moved quickly away before Harold had time to put the impulse of his heart into words.

When the time for parting came Pearl was inconsolable. Not knowing any reason why The Man should not do as she wished, she was persistent in her petitions to Harold that he should come with her, and to her father and mother that they should induce him to do so. Her father, unable to give any hint without betraying confidence, had to content himself with trying to appease her by vague hopes rather than promises that her friend would join them at some other time.

When the *Scoriac* was warped into the pier Harold hurried

down the gang plank without waiting. Having only hand luggage, for he was to get his equipment in New York, he had cleared and passed the ring of customs officers before the most expeditious of the other passengers had collected their baggage. He had said good-bye to the Stonehouses in their own cabin. Pearl had been so much affected at saying good-bye, and his heart had so warmed to her, that at last he had said impulsively:

"Don't cry, darling. If I am spared I shall come back to you within three years. Perhaps I will write before then; but there are not many post-offices where I am going to!"

Children are easily satisfied. Their trust makes a promise a real thing; and its acceptance is the beginning of satisfaction. But for weeks after the parting she had often fits of deep depression, and at such times her tears always flowed. She took note of the date, and there was never a day that she did not think of and sigh for The Man.

And The Man, away in the wilds of Alaska, was feeling, day by day and hour by hour, the chastening and purifying influences of the wilderness. The towering mountains, the great wooded valleys that vanished in curving distance, the eternal snowfields and the glaciers that mocked at time seemed to dwarf anything that was of man. Fears and hopes and memories and misgivings gave way before the sense of overwhelming vastness. How could the passions or regrets of man seem to hold a discernible place, when man himself was of such manifest insignificance? Hot passions cooled before the breath of the snowfield and the glacier. The moaning of a tortured spirit was lost in the roar of the avalanche and the scream of the cyclone. Pale sorrow and cold despair were warmed and quickened by the fierce sunlight which came suddenly and stayed only long enough to vitalise all nature.

And as the first step to understanding, the man forgot himself.

CHAPTER XXVII

DE LANNOY

Two years!

Not much to look back upon, but a world to look forward to. Nay, more! For looking backward we look on definite fact, hard and without the element of mystery; but looking out we gaze into the unknown.

To Stephen the hours of waiting were longer than the years that were past. There was to her little solace in what had been. She was full of memories of pain; the memories of pleasures past seemed only to mock her!

It was strange that she should so feel; for the time had new and startling incidents for her. Towards Christmas in the second year the Boer war had reached its climax of evil. As the news of disaster after disaster was flashed through the cable she like others felt appalled at the sacrifices that were being exacted by the God of War. In the early days the great losses were not amongst the troops but their leaders; the old British system of fighting when, as a matter of course, officers led on their men had not undergone the change necessitated by a war with a nation of sharpshooters. When the casualty lists appeared in the morning papers Stephen gave them the same sympathy which other British women gave whose own mankind were not named. Many names there were which she knew, for before the war was three months old nearly every great house in the kingdom was in mourning.

She read amongst others in the Deaths column of the *Times* that the Earl de Lannoy had died in his London

mansion, and reading further in the obituary column learned that he had never recovered from the shock of hearing that his two sons and his nephew had been killed in an ambush by Cronje. The paragraph concluded: By his death the title passes to a distant relative. The new Lord de Lannoy is at present in India with his regiment, the 35th or 'Grey' Hussars, of which he is Colonel." She gave the matter a more than passing thought, for it was a sad thing to find a whole family thus wiped out as it were at a blow.

Early in February she received a telegram from her London solicitor saying that he wished to see her at once on an important matter and asking her to fix a time. Her answer was simple: "Come at once;" and at tea-time Mr. Copleston arrived. He was an old friend and she greeted him warmly. She was a little chilled when he answered her with what seemed an unusual deference:

"I thank your Ladyship for your kindness!" She raised her eyebrows but made no comment; she was learning to be silent under surprise. When she had handed the old gentleman his tea she said:

"My aunt has chosen to remain away thinking that you might wish to see me privately. But I take it that there is nothing which she may not share. I have no secrets from her."

He rubbed his hands genially as he replied:

"Not at all; not at all! I should like her to be present. It will, I am sure, be a delight to us all."

In a very short time she was present. Then Mr. Copleston rising up said to Stephen, with a sort of modified pomposity:

"I have to announce your succession to the Earldom de Lannoy!"

Stephen sat quite still.

After a long pause she said quietly:

"Now, won't you tell us all about it? I am in absolute ignorance; and don't even understand how such a thing can be."

Mr. Copleston began at once:

"I had better not burden you, at first, with too many details, which can come later; but give you a rough survey of the situation. A great-aunt of yours——" Here Stephen interrupted him:

"A great-aunt! why, my dear Aunt Laetitia is that! May I ask what year or time you are referring to?"

"To the last year of the reign of his late Majesty, King Henry VIII."

"Oh!" she said as she wheeled her chair next to her aunt's, and bending over held her hand. Mr. Copleston went on:

"I am speaking of your great-aunt Eleanor, the eldest of the three daughters of the sixth Earl de Lannoy who married the third Baron Vermeil. The Earl had no male issue, and at his decease the Earldom fell into abeyance. The abeyance was determined by Letters Patent in favour of his eldest daughter Eleanor. This lady had by her marriage with Baron Vermeil, issue one son, who thus inherited both the Barony and the Earldom. For the Earldom of Lannoy being to Heirs-General, females inherit in default of male issue in the direct line; whereas the Vermeil Barony goes only in male taille. This inheritor, the eighth Earl and fourth Baron, married in due course and had male issue. In the course of the centuries which have elapsed there have always been male inheritors of the Vermeil direct line up to the time of the death of the last Lord de Lannoy. With his demise, however, the direct line from the issue of the third Baron Vermeil and of Eleanor, seventh Countess de Lannoy, became extinct. The separate peerages revert therefore to other branches. They have been so long associated, that the necessary divergence of titles held under different Patents has been lost sight of. It was only when the solicitors to the Vermeil family were preparing their case to submit to the House of Lords for the issue of the new Writ of Summons that they became aware of the Earldom de Lannoy lapsing from the line of Vermeil. The Barony of Vermeil accrues

to the issue of Edward, second son of the second Baron Vermeil. This has been carefully traced, and the present claimant of the title will be acknowledged without trouble. Your own title of Countess de Lannoy comes to you through your ancestor Isobel, third and youngest daughter of the sixth Earl; the line descended from Philippa the second daughter having become extinct in the time of Charles II. There is absolutely no doubt whatever of your claim; and no question ever can possibly be raised. You will petition the Crown, and on reference to the House of Lords the Committee for Privileges will without doubt admit your right. May I offer my congratulations, Lady de Lannoy, my very true and sincere congratulations on your new acquisition? By the way, I may say that all the estates of the Earldom, which have been from the first kept in strict entail, go with the title de Lannoy."

During the recital Stephen, though following Mr. Copleston's speech and expression with all attention, was conscious of another intellectual process going on synchronously; a sort of bitter comment on the tendencies of good fortune.

"Too late! too late!" something seemed to whisper to her "what delight it would have been had Father inherited. . . . If Harold had not gone . . . !" All the natural joy seemed to vanish, as bubbles break into empty air.

To Aunt Laetitia the new title was a source of pride and joy, far greater than would have been the case had it come to herself. Stephen would have in her own right a title which had been well established when good Queen Bess had been a cinderella princess bullied by her half-sister and innocent of the pleasure of new clothes. Miss Rowly was naturally to see the new domain; but kept her feeling concealed during the months that elapsed until Stephen's right had been conceded by the Committee for Privileges. But after that her impatience became manifest to Stephen, who said one day in a teasing, caressing way, as was sometimes her wont:

"Why, Auntie, what a hurry you are in! Lannoy will keep, won't it?"

"Oh, my dear," she replied, shaking her head, "I can understand your own reticence, for you don't want to seem greedy and in a hurry about your new possessions. But when people come to my age there's no time to waste. I have a sort of feeling that I will never see Lannoy; and I feel I would not have complete material for happiness in the World-to-come, if there were not a remembrance of my darling in her new home!" Stephen was much touched; she said impulsively:

"We shall go there to-day, Auntie. You shall not wait an hour that I can help!"

"Not yet! Stephen dear. It would flurry me to start all at once; to-morrow will be time enough."

Before the morrow's sun was high in the heaven Stephen was hurriedly summoned to her aunt's bedside. She lay calm and peaceful; but one side of her face was alive and the other seemingly dead. In the night a paralytic stroke had seized her. With slow, painful effort, she managed to convey to Stephen that she felt that the end was near. Feebly and slowly, she murmured:

"You will find happiness there!" She said no more; but seemed to sleep.

From that sleep she never woke, but faded slowly, softly away.

Stephen was broken-hearted. Now, indeed, she felt alone and desolate. All were gone. Father, uncle, aunt!—And Harold. The kingdoms of the Earth—or what stood for them in her microcosm—which lay at her feet were of no account. One hour of the dead or departed, any of them, back again were worth them all!

Normanstand was now too utterly lonely to be endurable; and so after some weeks of endless monotony Stephen determined to go, for a time at any rate, to Lannoy. She had a growing idea that it would have pleased her aunt to know that she took an interest in her new position and estate.

So, all at once, without giving time for the news to permeate through the neighbourhood, she took her way to Lannoy with a few of her immediate servants.

Lannoy was on the north-eastern coast of Britain, the castle standing back at the base of a wide promontory stretching far into the North Sea. From the coast the land sloped upward to a great rolling ridge. Beyond, far away, rose a range of high heather-clad hills broken here and there by great outcropping ledges of rock and deep gorges faced with precipices. Great woods clothing the western side of the ridge came in flamelike tongues over the crest of the hill and ran down the eastern slopes. For the rest the outlook seaward was over a mighty expanse of green sward, dotted here and there with woods and isolated clumps of trees which grew fewer and smaller as the rigour of the northern sea was borne upon them by the easterly gales.

Far away the line of the coast, broken like the edge of a lace scarf, was shown up by a tiny rim of black rock, stark between green sward and blue sea. Here and there a few dark rocks rose from the sea, never far from shore. Far away at the very point of the headland was a fisher's house the only building, except those of the little port away to the left, looking seaward which seemed from its position at the edge of the high cliff to dominate the cluster of sunken rocks which, only below half-tide, raised their heads above water. For centuries the lords of Lannoy had kept their magnificent prospect to themselves.

From the terrace of the castle only one building, other than the cottage on the headland, could be seen. Far off on the very crest of the ridge was the tower of an old windmill, the skeleton of whose sails looked when the sun shone through them like the ribs of that phantom vessel in which Life-in-Death had moved over the windless sea to the Ancient Mariner.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SILVER LADY

STEPHEN did not wish to see any one just at present. The grief that was on her was a good excuse; and the explanation of her recent bereavement was taken in good part by those who were disappointed as to seeing her. Sometimes, attended only by a groom, she rode long distances north or south along the coast; or up over the ridge behind the castle and far inland along the shaded roads through the woods; or over bleak wind-swept stretches of moorland. Sometimes she would sit for hours on the shore or high up on some little rocky headland where she could enjoy the luxury of solitude. At this time of her life there was an enjoyment in loneliness, so long as the forces of nature were around and apparent to her. That undertone of nature's calling which is compact of myriad existences fulfilling their various destinies. After every such excursion she returned; fairly wearied in body, but with an inward calm and satisfaction which she had begun to fear would never be hers again.

Now and again in her journeyings she made friends, most of them humble ones. The fishermen of the little ports to north and south of her marches came to know her, and to look out gladly for her coming. Their goodwives had for her always a willing curtsy and a ready smile. As for the children, they looked on her with admiration and love, tempered with awe. She was so kindly to them, so gentle with them, so ready to share their pleasures and sorrows and interests that after a while they came to regard her as some strange new embodiment of Fairydom and Dreamland.

Often and often she had looked up at the superannuated windmill on the crest of the ridge and wondered who it was inhabited it; for that some one lived in it, or close by, was shown at times by the spiral or drifting smoke. One day she made up her mind to go and see for herself. By herself she rode up the flint-strewn lane that led along the top of the ridge, and walked her horse slowly and more slowly still as she drew near. The mill itself was picturesque, and the detail of it at closer acquaintance sustained the far-off impression. The skeleton of the once-flying sails still remained silhouetted against the sky as they faced broadly towards the castle; but as they never moved now, had grown grey and mellow with lichen. The white of the body of the tower was blotched and patched with stress of weather, and only bore something of its colour to distant eyes. The mill was on the very top of the ridge which here dipped steeply on both sides. In the hidden nooks of the roofs of the outhouses, and on such slopes as were sheltered, houseleek had become fixed and spread. Grass, green and luxuriant, grew untrodden between the cobble-stones with which the yard was paved. There was a sort of old-world quietude about everything which greatly and at once appealed to Stephen.

When she knocked with her whip handle a low door in the base of the mill tower opened, and a maid appeared, a demure pretty little thing of some sixteen or seventeen years, dressed in a prim strait dress and an old-fashioned Puritan cap.

"Will you kindly tell me who lives here?" asked Stephen. The answer came with some hesitation:

"Sister Ruth."

"And who is Sister Ruth?" The question came instinctively and without premeditation. The maid, embarrassed, held hard to the half-open door and shifted from foot to foot uneasily.

"I don't know!" she said at last. "Only Sister Ruth, I suppose!" Stephen was just about to ask if she might see

Sister Ruth, when behind the maid in the dark of the low passage-way appeared the tall, slim figure of a silver woman. Truly a silver woman! The first flash of Stephen's thought was correct. White-haired, white-faced, white-capped, white-kerchiefed; in a plain-cut dress of light-grey silk, made without adornment of any kind, and with that pleated fulness below the belt which made for decency as well as elegance in the eyes of the women of a past generation. The whole ensemble was as a piece of old silver. The lines of her face were very dignified, very sweet, very beautiful. Stephen felt at once that she was in the presence of no common woman. There was in her manner a gracious gentleness, the outcome of more than a few generations of conscious power, as seeing a young girl alone she came forward. Stephen looked an admiration which all her Quaker garments could not forbid the other to feel. She was not the first to speak; in such a noble presence the dignity of Stephen's youth imperatively demanded silence, if not humility. So she waited. The Silver Lady, for so Stephen ever after held her in her mind, said quietly, but with manifest welcome:

"Didst thou wish to see me? Wilt thou come in?" Stephen answered frankly:

"I should like to come in immensely; if you will not think me rude. The fact is, I was struck when riding by with the beautiful situation of the mill. I thought it was only an old mill till I saw the garden hedges; and I came round to ask if I might go in." The Silver Lady came forward at a pace that even by itself expressed warmth as she said heartily:

"Indeed thou mayest. Stay! it is tea-time. Let us put thy horse in one of the sheds; there is no man here at present to do it. Then the Silver Lady gave her a hand, and they entered the dark passage together.

As she went in silence Stephen was thinking if she ought to begin by telling her name. But the Haroun al Raschid feeling for adventure incognito is an innate principle of the sons of men. It was seldom indeed that her life had afforded

her such an opportunity. When it came she grasped it; holding her conscience back at arm's length till the time should come.

The Silver Lady on her own part also wished for silence, as she looked for the effect on her new companion when the glory of the view should break upon her. When they had climbed the winding stone stair, which led up some twenty feet, there was a low wide landing with the remains of the main shaft of the mill machinery running through it. From one side rose a stone stair curving with the outer wall of the mill tower and guarded by a heavy plain iron rail. A dozen steps there were, and then a landing of a couple of yards square; then a deep doorway cut in the thickness of the wall, round which the winding stair continued.

The Silver Lady, who had led the way, threw open the door, and motioned to her guest to enter. Inside the door Stephen stood for a few moments, surprised as well as delighted, for the room before her was not like anything which she had ever seen or thought of.

It was a section of almost the whole tower, and was of considerable size, for the machinery and even the inner shaft or pillar had been removed. East and south and west the wall had been partially cut away so that great wide windows nearly the full height of the room showed the magnificent panorama. The work had been done carefully; the massive depth of the wall was bevelled away, and angular columns of polished stone with the fine edges inwards so as to make the effect as ærial as possible, supported the vast weight of the superstructure. In the depths of the ample windows were little cloistered nooks where one might with a feeling of super-solitude be away from and above the world.

The room was beautifully furnished with pieces of all ages and countries. Everywhere were flowers, with leaves and sprays and branches where possible. On a little Chippendale table near the centre of the room was a great Queen Anne silver bowl full of magnificent sweet-smelling roses.

Even from where she stood in the doorway Stephen had a bird's-eye view of the whole countryside; not only of the coast, with which she was already familiar, and on which her windows at the castle looked, but to the south and west which the hill rising steep behind the castle and to southward of it shut out.

The Silver Lady could not but notice her guest's genuine admiration.

"Thou likest my room and my view?" Stephen answered with a little gasp:

"I think it is the quaintest and most beautiful place I have ever seen!"

"I am so glad thou likest it. I have lived here for nearly forty years; and they have been years of unutterable peace and all earthly happiness! And now, thou wilt have some tea!"

Stephen left the mill that afternoon with a warmth of heart that she had been a stranger to for many a day. The two women had accepted each other simply. "I am called Ruth," said the Silver Lady. "And I am Stephen," said the Countess de Lannoy in reply. And that was all; neither had any clue to the other's identity. Stephen felt that some story lay behind that calm, sweet personality; much sorrow goes to the making of fearless quietude. The Quaker lady moved so little out of her own environment that she did not even suspect the identity of her visitor.

It was not long before Stephen availed herself of the permission to come again accorded to her at her first visit. This time she made up her mind to tell who she was, lest the concealing of her identity might afterwards lead to any awkwardness. At that meeting friendship became union.

The natures of the two women expanded to each other; and after a very few meetings there was established between them a rare confidence.

The Silver Lady never left the chosen routine of her own life; but it became a habit for Stephen to ride or walk over to the windmill in the dusk of the evening when she

felt especially lonely. On one such occasion her dominant feeling surged up within her painfully. It was the summer time, when all nature's forces are awake and clamant. It was far in the twilight, and there was a stillness over all the world which made in itself a yearning for peace. Well, in the weary months that had gone, had poor Stephen learned to school herself to quietude; but the outward calm could not still the raging incessant desire within. What she desired she knew not. Some such moments they are which make for self-destruction; for the sudden yielding up of self which leaves no opportunity of going back. The ooze of the river and the fast-shut cloister door hold such memories.

She tapped the door lightly. Facing east as it did, the room was darker than when one stood in the open.

With a glad exclamation, which coming through her habitual sedateness showed how much she loved the young girl, Sister Ruth started to her feet. There was something of such truth in the note she had sounded, something so earnest, so genuine, that all the poor lonely girl's heart went out to her in abandoned fullness. She held out her arms; and, as she came close to the other, fell rather than sank at her feet. The older woman made no effort to restrain her; but sinking back into her own seat laid the girl's head in her lap, and held her hands close against her own breast where the other could feel the quickened beating of her heart.

"Tell me," she whispered. "Won't you tell me, dear child, what troubles you? Tell me! dear. It may bring peace!"

Neither of them noticed how in the intensity of her feeling the Quaker form of speech, which though she had exercised it for forty years was not her own, had failed her when her heart went back to the days of its own trouble.

"Oh, I am miserable, miserable, miserable!" moaned Stephen in a low voice whose despair made the other's heart grow cold. The Silver Lady knew that here golden silence was the best of help; holding close the other's hands, she waited. Stephen's breast began to heave; with an impulsive

motion she drew away her hands and put them before her burning face, which she pressed lower still on the other's lap. Sister Ruth knew that the trouble, whatever it was, was about to find a voice, and the emotion with which the feeling came to her almost overcame her. It was her own hands which she pressed now—and pressed hard—upon her breast.

The shadows of the twilight seemed to fall ghost-like, wave after wave; the stone pillars of the windows began to stand out dark and hard-edged. And then came in a low shuddering whisper a voice muffled in the folds of the dress:

"I killed a man!"

In all her life the Silver Lady had never been so startled or so shocked. She had grown so to love the bright, brilliant young girl, and her love had come haloed with such trust, that the whispered confession cut through the silence of the dusk as a shriek of murder does through the silent gloom of night. Her hands flew wide from her breast, and the convulsive shudder which shook her all in an instant woke Stephen through all her own deep emotion to the instinct of protection of the other. The girl looked up, shaking her head, and said with a sadness which stilled all the other's fear:

"Ah! Don't be frightened! It is not murder that I tell you of. Perhaps if it were, the thought would be easier to bear! He would have been hurt less if it had been only his body that I slew. Well I know now that his life would have been freely given if I wished it; if it had been for my good. But it was the best of him that I killed; his very soul. His noble, loving, trusting, unselfish soul. The bravest and truest soul that ever had place in a man's breast! . . ." Her speaking ended with a sob; her body sank lower.

Sister Ruth's heart began to beat more freely. She understood now, and all the womanhood, all the wifehood, motherhood suppressed for a lifetime, awoke to the woman's need. Gently she stroked the beautiful head that lay so meekly on her lap; and as the girl sobbed with but little appearance of abatement, she said to her softly:

"Tell me, dear child. Tell me all about it! See! we are all alone together. Thou and I; and God! In God's dusk; with only the silent land and sea before us! Won't thou trust me, dear one, and speak!" The habitual Quaker speech had returned to her with the consciousness of self-command.

And then, as the shadows fell, and the dusk of the room grew into dark, and far-off lights at sea began to twinkle over the waste of waters, Stephen found a voice and told her without reserve all the secret of her shame and her remorse. And the quick sympathy of her hearer understood what lay behind them both, her love.

At last, when her broken voice had trailed away into gentle catchings of the breath, the older woman, knowing that the time had come for comfort, took her in her strong arms, raised her and laid her on her breast, holding her wet face against her own, their tears mingling.

"Cry on, dear heart!" she said in a sweet whisper as she kissed her. "Cry on! It will do thee good!" She was startled once again as the other seemed for an instant to grow rigid in her arms and raising her hands cried out in a burst of almost hysterical passion:

"Cry! cry! Oh my God! my God!" Then becoming conscious of her wet face she seemed to become in an instant all limp, and sank on her knees again. There was so different a note in her voice that the other's heart leaped as she heard her say:

"God be thanked for these tears! Oh, thank God! Thank God!" Looking up she saw through the gloom the surprise in her companion's eyes and answered their query in words:

"Oh! you don't know! You can't know what it is to me! I have not cried since last I saw him pass from me in the wood!"

That time of confession seemed to have in some way cleared, purified, and satisfied Stephen's soul. Life was now easier to bear. Little things and big took once again

their due perspective in the outlook of her life. She was able to adapt herself, justifiably to the needs of her position; and all around her and dependent on her began to realise that amongst them was a controlling force.

And so in the East the passing of the two years of silence and gloom seemed to be the winning of something brighter to follow.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LESSON OF THE WILDERNESS

IN the West the two years flew. Time seemed to go faster there, because life was more strenuous. Harold, being mainly alone, found endless work always before him; from daylight to dark labour never ceased. In the wilderness labour is not merely mechanical. Every hour of the day is fraught with danger in some new form, and the head has to play its part in the strife against nature. In such a life there is not much time for thinking; certainly for brooding, which is thinking unduly of the past. Privations he had in plenty; and all the fibre of his body and the strength of his resolution and endurance were now and again taxed to their utmost. But with a man of his nature and race the breaking strain is high; and endurance and resolution are qualities which develop with practice. With every day that passed, his self-control grew more. After a time he could postpone thoughts; later on he could, save at rare intervals, forbid them.

Gradually his mind came back to normal level; he had won seemingly through the pain that shadowed him. Without anguish he could now think, remember, look forward. Even at times he would unconsciously begin to build again such hopes as a young man's ardour will create from empty air. Then it was that the kindly wisdom of the American came back to him, and came to stay. He began to examine himself as to his own part of the unhappy transaction; and stray moments of wonderment came as to whether the fault may not, at the very base, have been his own. Well was it

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for him that when this self-questioning came he had been strengthened to a pitch of endurance which was an added gain to his nature; for its bitterness was beyond belief. It was bad enough to have suffered as he had! But if it was his own blundering which had wrought the havoc not only to himself but to Stephen! . . . He began to realise a little that it is insufficient in this strenuous world to watch and wait; to suppress one's self; to put aside, in the wish to benefit others, all the hopes, ambitions, cravings which make for personal gain.

Thus it was that Harold's thoughts, ever circling round the main idea of Stephen, came back with increasing assiduity and insistence to his duty towards her. He often thought, and with a bitter feeling against himself that it came too late, of the dying trust of her father. And then he would remember, most often and most keenly in the dimness of the dusk or through the blackness of the night, the words which had been so burned into his brain in those moments of misery when they waited for Stephen to come to her dying father, that they could never pass from his memory:

"Guard her and cherish her, as if you were indeed my son and she your sister. . . . If it should be that you and Stephen should find that there is another affection between you, remember that I sanction it. But give her time! I trust that to you! She is young, and the world is all before her. Let her choose. . . . And be loyal to her, if it is another! It may be a hard task; but I trust you, Harold!"

Here he would groan, as all the anguish of the past would rush back upon him; and keenest of all would be the fear, suspicion, thought which grew towards belief, that he may have betrayed that trust. . . .

Luck is a strange thing.

Dame Fortune seemed now to change her attitude to him. The fierce frown, nay! Her malignant scowl changed to a smile. Everything seemed now all at once to go right. He grew strong and hardy again. His geological specimens mul-

tiplied, and he began to feel that he was on the trail of fortune. Everywhere he went there were traces of gold, as though by some instinct he was tracking it to its home. He did not value gold for its own sake; but he did for the ardour of the search.

It was hardly any wonder, then, that at last he found himself all alone in the midst of one of the great treasure-places of the world. Only labour was needed to take from the earth riches beyond the dreams of avarice.

It is not purposed to set out here the extraordinary growth of Robinson City, for thus the mining camp which he established soon became. The history of Robinson City has long ago been told for all the world. Already there is a crop of legends of the extraordinary difficulties and dangers of the route; of the vast fortunes achieved by individuals and companies; of the hardships suffered from a cold so intense that the ground could not be opened for alluvial or pocket search till great fires had thawed the soil; of hunger and starvation and danger in the place and on the way to and from it. In the early days when everything had to be organised and protected Harold worked like a giant, and with a system and energy which from the very first established him as a master. But when the second year of his exile was coming to a close, and when Robinson City was teeming with life and commerce, when banks and police and soldiers made life and property comparatively safe, he began to be restless again. This was not the life to which he had set himself. He had gone into the wilderness to be away from cities and from men; and here a city had sprung up around him and men claimed him as their chief. Moreover, with the restless feeling there began to come back to him the old thoughts and the old pain. There was this difference: that now it came accompanied by a new desire for action which was the logical outcome of his long period of strenuous exertion.

He quietly consolidated such outlying interests as he had, placed the management of his great estate in the hands

of a man whom he had learned to trust, and giving out that he was going to San Francisco to arrange some important business, left Robinson City. He had already accumulated such a fortune that the world was before him in any way in which he might in the future choose to take it.

Knowing that at San Francisco, to which he had booked, he would have to again run the gauntlet of certain of his friends and business connections, he made haste to leave the ship quietly at Portland, the first point she touched at on her southern journey. Thence he got on the Canadian Pacific Line and took his way to Montreal.

The life in the wilderness, and then in the dominance and masterdom of enterprise, had hardened and strengthened him into more self-reliant manhood, giving him greater forbearance and a more practical view of things. But in his heart of hearts, he was, with regard to all things relating to Stephen and the past, still a boy; with all a boy's secret, vague hoping; a boy's nervous fears in one matter, and one only: love.

When he took ship in the *Dominion*, a large cargo-boat with some passengers running to London, he had a vague purpose of visiting in secret Norcester, whence he could manage to find out how matters were at Normanstand. He would then, he felt, be in a better position to regulate his further movements. He knew that he had already a sufficient disguise in his great beard. He had nothing to fear from the tracing of him on his journey from Alaska; the width of a whole great continent lay between him and the place of his fame. He was able to take his part freely amongst both the passengers and the officers of the ship. Even amongst the crew he soon came to be known; the men liked his geniality, and instinctively respected his enormous strength and his manifest force of character. Men who work and who know danger soon learn to recognise the forces which overcome both. After some days the fine weather changed; howling winds and growing seas were the environment. Much damage was done to the ship and to the machinery. Bul-

warks were torn away as though they had been compact of paper. Nearly all the boats had been wrecked, broken or torn from their cranes as the great ship rolled heavily in the trough of the giant waves.

At that season she sailed on the far northern course. Driven still farther north by the gales, she came within a short way of the south of Greenland. Then avoiding Merville, which should have been her place of call, she ran down the east of Britain, the wild weather still prevailing.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LIFE-LINE

ON the coast of Angleshire the weather in the early days of September had been stormy. Stephen, whose spirits always rose with high wind, was in a condition of prolonged excitement. She could not keep still. At the end of the week the wind backed to north-east and blew with great violence. For two days it never ceased, always blowing with steady persistence. Then it rose and rose, blowing in fierce gusts which seemed to tear through everything and boomed high overhead as though carrying the sound of great guns far off. On the Tuesday morning the storm was in full sweep, and Stephen was in wild spirits. Nothing would do her but to go out on the tower of the castle where she could walk about, and leaning on the crenellated parapet look over all the coast. The prospect so enchanted her, and the fierce sweep of the wind so suited her exalted mood, that she remained there all the morning. The whole coast was a mass of leaping foam and flying spray, and far away to the horizon white-topped waves rolled endlessly. She made up her mind that she would presently ride down and see its happenings close at hand.

When she had finished dinner she went to her room to dress for her ride. The rush and roar of the storm were in her ears, and she was in wild tumultuous spirits. She was "fey." All her youth seemed to sweep back on her; or perhaps it was that the sickness of the last two years was swept away. Somewhere deep down in Stephen's heart was a desire to be her old self if only for an hour. And to this end externals

were of help. Without weighing the matter in her mind, and acting entirely and unconsciously on impulse, she told her maid to get the red habit which she had not worn for years. When she was dressed she sent round to have out her white Arab; while it was getting ready she went once more to the tower to see the storm-effect in the darkening twilight. As she looked, her heart for an instant stood still, for, after all, she was but a woman. Half-way to the horizon, a great ship, ablaze in the bows, was driving through the waves with all her speed. She was heading towards the little port beyond which the shallows sent up the moving wall of white spray.

Stephen tore down the turret stair, and sent for the steward, to whom she gave hurried directions to have beds prepared in a number of rooms, fires everywhere, and plenty of provisions made ready. She also ordered that carriages should be sent at once to the fishing port with clothing and restoratives, and such matters as his experience or intelligence could suggest. There would, she felt, be need for such help before a time to be measured by minutes should have passed.

In a few seconds she was in the saddle, tearing at full speed down the road that led to the port. The wind was blowing so strongly in her face that only in the lulls between the puffs of wind could she hear the hoof-strokes of the groom's horse galloping behind her.

When she came near to the port the great ship was close at hand. The flames had gained terribly, and it was a race for life and death. There was no time to do more than run her aground if life was to be saved at all. The captain, who in the gaps of the smoke which rose from all the fore part of the vessel, could be seen upon the bridge, knew his work well. As he came near the shoal he ran a little north, and then turned sharply so as to throw the boat's head to the south of the shoal. Thus the wind would drive fire and smoke forward and leave the after part of the vessel free, for a time.

The shock of her striking the sand was terrific, though the tinkle of the bell borne in on the gale showed that the engines had been slowed down. The funnels were shaken down,

and the masts broke off, falling forward. A wild shriek from a hundred throats cleft the roaring of wind and wave. The mast fell, the foremast, with all its cumbering top-hamper on the bridge, which was in an instant blotted out of existence, together with the little band of gallant men who stood on it, true to their last duty. As the wind took the smoke south a man was seen to climb on the wreck of the mast aft and make fast the end of a great coil of rope which he carried. He was a huge man with a full dark beard. Two sailors working with furious haste helped him with the rope. The waves kept raising the ship a little, each time bumping her on the sand with a shock. The people on deck held frantically to the wreckage around them.

Then the bearded man, stripping to his waist and cutting off his trousers above the knee, fastened an end of the rope round his waist. The sailors stood ready one behind the other to pay it out. As a great wave rolled under the ship, he threw himself into the sea.

In the meantime the coastguard had fixed Board of Trade rocket-apparatus, and in a few seconds the prolonged roar of a rocket was heard. It flew straight towards the ship, rising at a high angle so as to fall beyond it. But the force of the wind took it as it rose, and the angle increased so that it rose nearly vertically; and in this position the wind threw it south of its objective, and short of it. Another rocket was got ready at once, and blue lights were burned so that the course of the venturesome swimmer might be noted. He swam strongly; but the great weight of the rope behind him kept pulling him back, and the southern trend of the tide current and the force of the wind kept dragging him away from the pier. Within the bar the waves were much less than without; but they were still so unruly that no boat in the harbour—which was not a lifeboat station—could venture out. Indeed in the teeth of the storm it would have been a physical impossibility to have driven one seaward.

As the gathered crowd saw Stephen approach they made way for her. She had left her horse with the groom, and de-

spite the drenching spray fought a way against the wind out on the pier. As in the glare of the blue light, which brought many things into harsh unnatural perspective, she caught sight of the set face of the swimmer rising and falling with the waves, her heart leaped. This was indeed a man! a brave man; and all the woman in her went out to him. For him, and to aid him and his work, she would have given everything, done anything; and in her heart, which beat in an ecstasy of anxiety, she prayed with that desperate conviction of hope which comes in such moments of exaltation.

But it soon became apparent that no landing could be effected. The force of the current and the wind were taking the man too far southward for him ever to win a way back. Then one of the coastguards took the lead-topped cane which they use for throwing practice, and, after carefully coiling the line attached to it so that it would run free, managed with a desperate effort to fling it far out. The swimmer, to whom it fell close, fought towards it frantically; and as the cord began to run through the water, managed to grasp it. A wild cheer rose from the shore and the ship. A stout line was fastened to the shore end of the cord, and the swimmer drew it out to him. He bent it on the rope which trailed behind him; then, seeing that he was himself a drag on it, with the knife which he drew from the sheath at the back of his waist, he cut himself free. One of the coastguards on the pier, helped by a host of willing hands, began drawing the end of the rope on shore. The swimmer still held the line thrown to him, and several men on the pier began to draw on it. Unhappily the thin cord broke under the strain, and within a few seconds the swimmer had drifted out of possible help. Seeing that only wild rocks lay south of the sea-wall, and that on them the seas beat furiously, he turned and made out for sea. In the dim light beyond the glare he could see vaguely the shore bending away to the west in a deep curve of unbroken foam. There was no hope of landing there. To the south was the headland, perhaps two miles away as the crow flies. Here was the only chance for him. If he could round

the headland, he might find shelter beyond; or somewhere along the farther shore some opening might present itself. Whilst the light from the blue fires still reached him he turned and made for the headland.

In the meantime on ship and on shore men worked desperately. As the men on the pier hauled in the rope, those on the ship bent a strong hawser on to the end of it, and also a second thinner rope; so that before long the end of the hawser was carried round on the high cliff, and pulled as taut as the force at hand could manage, and made fast. Thus it hung clear over the sea; and before many minutes were passed the breeches buoy was passing out to the ship on the double line. Then with a second rope another hawser was passed in; other breeches buoys were improvised; and soon endless ropes were bringing in the passengers and crew as fast as place could be found for them. It became simply a race for time. If the fire, working back against the wind, did not reach the hawser, and if the ship outlasted the furious bumping on the sand-bank which threatened to shake her to pieces each moment, all still on board might yet be saved.

Stephen's concern was now for the swimmer alone. Such a gallant soul should not perish without help, if help could be on this side of heaven. She asked the harbour-master, an old fisherman who knew every inch of the coast for miles, if anything could be done. He shook his head sadly as he answered:

"I fear no, my lady. The lifeboat from Granport is up north, and no boat from here could get outside the harbour. There's never a spot in the bay where he could land, even in a less troubled sea than this. Wi' the wind ashore, there's no hope for ship or man here that cannot round the point. And a stranger is no like to do that."

"Why not?" she asked breathlessly.

"Because, my lady, there's a when o' sunken rocks beyond the Head where the tide runs like a mill-race. No one that didn't know would ever think to keep out beyond them, for

the cliff itself goes down sheer. He's a gallant soul yon; an it's a sore pity he's goin' to his death. But it must be! God can save him if He wishes; but I fear none other!"

Even as he spoke rose to Stephen's mind a memory of an old churchyard with great trees and the scent of many flowers, and a child's voice that sounded harsh through the monotonous hum of bees:

"To be God, and able to do things!"

Oh! to be God, if but an hour; and be able to do things! To do anything to help a brave man! A wild prayer surged up in the girl's heart:

"Oh! God, give me this man's life! Give it to me to atone for the other I destroyed! Let me but help him, and do with me as Thou wilt!"

The passion of her prayer seemed to help her, and her brain cleared. Surely *something* could be done! She would do what she could; but first she must understand the situation. She turned again to the old harbour-master:

"How long would it take him to reach the headland, if he can swim so far?" The answer came with a settled conviction bearing hope with it:

"The wind and tide are wi' him, an' he's a strong swimmer. Perhaps half an hour will take him there. He's all right in himself. He can swim it, sure. But alack! it's when he gets there his trouble will be, when none can warn him. Look how the waves are lashing the cliff; and mark the white water beyond! What voice can sound to him out in those deeps? How could he see if even one were there to warn?"

Here was a hope at any rate. Light and sound were the factors of safety. Some good might be effected if she could get a trumpet; and there were trumpets in the rocket-cart. Light could be had—must be had if all the fences round the headland had to be gathered for a bonfire! There was not a moment to be lost. She ran to the rocket-cart, and got a trumpet from the man in charge. Then she ran to where she had left her horse. She had plenty of escort, for by this time many gentlemen had arrived on horseback from outlying

distances, and all offered their services. She thanked them and said:

"You may be useful here. When all these are ashore send on the rocket-cart, and come yourselves to the headland as quick as you can. Tell the coastguards that all those saved are to be taken to the castle. I have given orders for their housing. In the rocket-cart bring pitch and tar and oil, and anything that will flame. Stay!" she cried to the chief boatman. "Give me some blue lights!" His answer chilled her:

"I'm sorry, my lady, but they are all used. There are the last of them burning now. We have burned them ever since that man began to swim ashore."

"Then hurry on the rocket-cart!" she said as she sprang to the saddle, and swept out on the rough track that ran by the cliffs, following in bold curves the windings of the shore. The white Arab seemed to know that his speed was making for life, and covered the rough road *ventre à terre*. As he swept along, far outdistancing the groom, who followed as quickly as he could, Stephen's heart went out in silent words which seemed to keep time to the gallop:

"Give me this man's life, oh, God! Give me this man's life, to atone for that noble one which I destroyed!"

Faster and faster, over rough road, cattle track, and grassy sward; over rising and falling ground; now and again so close to the edge of the high cliff that the spume swept up the gulleys in the rocks like a snowstorm, the Arab swept round the curve of the bay, and came out on the high headland where stood the fisher's house. On the very brink of the cliff all the fisher folk, men, women and children, stood looking at the far-off burning ship, from which the flames rose in columns. The black smoke, pressed down by the storm, covered the white-topped waves as with a mantle of mourning.

So intent were all on the cliff that they did not notice her coming; as the roar of the wind came from them to her, they could not hear her voice when she spoke from a distance. She had drawn quite close, having dismounted and hung her

rein over the post of the garden paling, when one of the children saw her, and cried out:

"The lady! the lady! an' she's all in red!" The men were so intent on something that they did not seem to hear. They were peering out to the north, and were arguing in dumb show as though on something regarding which they did not agree. She drew closer, and touching the old fisherman on the shoulder, called out at his ear:

"What is it?" He answered without turning, keeping his eyes fixed:

"I say it's a man swimmin'. Joe and Garge here say as it's only a piece o' wood or sea-wrack. But I know I'm right. Would I ha' been a spectioner in the old Greenland days had I no been able to tell a pack o' sea-wrack from a floatin' spar, an' either from a head, be it of seal or walrus or sea-lion, or man! No! No! That's a man swimmin', or my old eyes have lost their power. His words carried conviction; the seed of hope in her beating heart grew on the instant into certainty. The thought calmed her, and she said quietly so as not to disturb him:

"It is a man. I saw him swim off towards here when he had taken the rope on shore. Do not turn round. Keep your eyes on him so that you may not lose sight of him in the darkness!" The old man chuckled.

"This darkness! Hee! Hee! There be no differ to a spectioner between light and dark. But I'll watch him! It's you, my lady! I shan't turn round to do my reverence as you tell me to watch. But, poor soul, it'll not be for long to watch. The Skyres will have him, sure enow!"

"We can warn him!" she said, "when he comes close enough. I have a trumpet here!" He shook his head sorrowfully:

"Ah! my lady, what trumpet could sound against that storm an' from this height. The only trumpet he'll ever hear will be Gabriel's, calling him!" Stephen's heart sank, and she grew cold. But there was still a hope. If the swimmer's ears could not be reached, his eyes might. Eagerly

she looked back for the coming of the rocket-cart. Far off across the deep bay she could see its lamp sway as it passed over the rough ground; but alas! it would never arrive in time. With a note of despair in her voice she asked:

"How long before he reaches the rocks?" Still without turning the old man answered:

"At the rate he's going he will be in the sweep of the current through the rocks within three minutes. If he's to be saved he must turn seaward ere the stream grips him."

"Would there be time to build a bonfire?"

"No, no! my lady. The wood couldn't catch in the time!"

For an instant a black film of despair seemed to fall on her and shut out all nature to her eyes. The surging of the blood in her head made her dizzy, and once again the prayer of the old memory rang in her brain:

"Oh to be God, and to be able to do things!"

On the instant an inspiration flashed through her. She, too, could do things in a humble way. She could do something at any rate. If there was no time to build a fire, there was a fire already built. The house would burn!

The two feet deep of old thatch held down with nets and battened with wreck timber would flare like a beacon. Forthwith she spoke.

"Good people, this noble man who has saved a whole ship-load of others must not die without an effort. There must be light so that he can see our warning to pass beyond the rocks! The only light can be from the house. I buy it of you. It is mine; but I shall pay you for it and build you such another as you never thought of. But it must be fired at once. You have one minute to clear out all you want. In, quick and take all you can. Quick! quick! for God's sake! It is for a brave man's life!"

The men and women without a word rushed into the house. They too knew the danger, and the only hope there was for a life. The assurance of the Countess took the sting from the present loss. Before the minute, which she timed watch in

hand, was over all came forth bearing armloads of their *lares* and *penates*. Stephen held a flaming stick to the northern edge of the thatch. The straw caught in a flash and the flame ran up the slope and along the edge of the roof like a quick match. The squeaking of many rats was heard and their brown bodies streamed over the roof. Before another minute had passed a great mass of flame towered into the sky and shed a red light far out over the waste of sea.

It lit up the wilderness of white water where the sea churned savagely amongst the sunken rocks; and it lit too the white face of a swimmer, now nearly spent, who rising and falling with each wave, drifted in the sea whose current bore him on towards the fatal rocks.

CHAPTER XXXI

"TO BE GOD AND ABLE TO DO THINGS"

WHEN the swimmer saw the light he looked up; even at the distance they could see the lift of his face; but he did not seem to realise that there was any intention in the lighting, or that it was created for his benefit. He was manifestly spent with his tremendous exertions, and with his long heavy swim in the turbulent sea. Stephen's heart went out to him in a wave of infinite pity. She began to shout; but her voice seemed to be taken by the wind and thrown back high over her head. She tried to use the trumpet; but in vain. One of the young men said:

"Let me try it, my lady!" But it was of no avail; even his strong lungs and lusty manhood availed nothing in the teeth of that furious gale. The roof and the whole house was now well alight, and the flame roared and leapt. Stephen began to make gestures bidding the swimmer, in case he might see her and understand, move round the rocks. But he made no change in his direction, and was fast approaching a point in the tide-race whence to avoid the sunken rocks would be an impossibility. The old spectioner, accustomed to use all his wits in times of difficulty, said suddenly:

"How can he understand when we're all atwixt him and the light. We are only black shadows to him; all he can see are waving arms!" His sons caught his meaning and were already dashing towards the burning house. They came back with piles of blazing wood and threw them down on the very edge of the cliff; brought more and piled them up, flinging

heaps of straw on the bonfire and pouring on oil and pitch till the flames rose high. Stephen saw what was necessary and stood out of the way, but close to the old spectioner where the light fell on both of their faces as they looked in the direction of the swimmer. Stephen's red dress stood out like itself a flame. The gale tearing up the front of the cliff had whirled away her hat; in the stress of the wind her hair was torn down from its up-pinning and flew wide, itself like leaping flame.

Her gestures as she swept her right arm round, as though demonstrating the outward curve of a circle, or raising the hand above her head motioned with wide palm and spread fingers "back! back!" seemed to have reached the swimmer's intelligence. He half rose in the water and looked about. As if seeing something that he realised, he sank back again and began to swim frantically out to sea. A great throb of joy made Stephen almost faint. At last she had been able to do something to help this gallant man in such sad straits. In half a minute the man's efforts seemed to tell in his race for life. He drew sufficiently far away from the dangerous current for there to be a hope that he might be saved if he could last out the stress to come.

The fire began to lose its flame, though not its intensity; and in the moderated light Stephen only saw the white face for one more instant ere it faded out of her ken, when, turning, once again, the man looked towards the light and made a gesture which she did not understand. He put for an instant both hands before his face.

Just then there was a wild noise on the cliff. The rocket-cart drawn by sixteen horses, came tearing up the slope, and with it many men on horseback and afoot. Many of the runners were the gentlemen who had given their horses for the good work. Thank God! the rocket-cart never lacks horses. There is no need to use the lawful power to seize any available.

As the coastguards jumped from the cart, and began to get out the rocket stand, the old spectioner pointed out the

direction where the swimmer's head could still be seen by him. Some of the sailors could see it too; though to Stephen and the laymen it was all invisible. The chief boatman shook his head:

"No use throwing a line there! Even if he got it we could never drag him alive through these rocks. He would be pounded to death before twenty fathom!" Stephen's heart grew cold as she listened. Was this the end! Then with a bitter cry she almost wailed out:

"Oh! can nothing be done? Can nothing be done? Can no boat come from the other side of the point? Must such a brave man be lost!" and her tears began to flow.

One of the young men who had just arrived, a neighbouring squire, a proved wastrel but a fine horseman, who had already regarded Stephen at the few occasions of their meeting with eyes of manifest admiration, spoke up:

"Don't cry, Lady de Lannoy. There's a chance for him yet. I'll see what I can do."

"Bless you! oh! bless you!" she cried impulsively as she caught his hand. Then came the chill of doubt. "But what can you do?" she added despairingly.

"Hector and I may be able to do something together!" Turning to one of the fishermen he asked:

"Is there any way down to the water in the shelter of the point?"

"Ay! ay! sir," came the ready answer. "There's the path as we get down by to our boats."

"Come on, then!" he said. "Some of you chaps show us a light on the way down. If Hector can manage the scramble there's a chance. You see," he said, turning again to Stephen, "Hector can swim like a fish. When he was a racer I trained him in the sea so that none of the touts could spy out his form. Many's the swim we've had together; and in rough water too, though in none so wild as this!"

"But it is a desperate chance for you!" said Stephen, womanlike drawing somewhat back from a danger she had herself evoked. The young man laughed lightly:

"What of that! I may do one good thing before I die. That fine fellow's life is worth a hundred of my wasted one! Here! some of you fellows help me with Hector. We must get a girth on him instead of the saddle. We shall want something to hold on to without pulling his head down by using the bridle."

The horse was soon ready. The young squire took him by the mane and he followed eagerly; he had memories of his own. As they passed close to Stephen the Squire said to one of his friends:

"Hold him a minute, Jack!" He ran over to Stephen and looked at her hard:

"Good-bye! Wish me luck; and give us light!" Tears were in her eyes and a flush on her cheek as she took his hand and clasped it hard:

"Oh, you brave gentleman! God bless you!" He stooped suddenly and impulsively kissed her hand and was gone.

The man and horse, surrounded by an eager crowd of helpers, scrambled down the rough zigzag, cut and worn in the very face of the cliff. Pebbles and broken rock fell away under their feet. Alone close to the bonfire stood Stephen; a constant stream of men and women were dragging and hauling all sorts of material for its increase. The head of the swimmer could be seen, rising and falling amid the waves beyond the Skyes.

When about twenty feet from the water-level the path jutted out to one side. The broad rock overhung the water. The squire held up his hand.

"Stop! We can take off this rock, if the water is deep enough. How much is it?"

"Ten fathom sheer."

"Good!" He motioned to them all to keep back. Then threw off his coat and boots. For an instant he patted Hector and then sprang upon his back. Holding him by the mane he urged him forward with a cry. The noble animal knew that grasp of the mane; that cry; that dig of the spurless heels. He sprang forward with wide dilated

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nostrils, and from the edge of the jutting rock jumped far out into the sea. Man and horse disappeared for a few seconds, but rose safely. The man slid from the horse's back; and, holding by the girth with one hand, swam beside him out to sea in the direction the swimmer must come on rounding the sunken rocks.

A wild cheer broke from all! Stephen kept encouraging the men to bring fuel to the bonfire:

"Bring everything you can find; the carts, the palings, the roofs, the corn, the dried fish; anything and everything that will burn. I shall make it all good. But we must have light!

The whole place was a scene of activity. The coastguards were busy rigging up a whip which would be necessary to hoist the men up from the water, if they could ever get close enough.

When Harold turned away from the dazzling blue lights on the pier, and saw the far white line of the cliffs beyond the bay, his heart sank within him. Even his great strength and hardihood had been already taxed in the many days of the battling with the gale; by the frantic struggle of the last hour or two, when the ship ran shoreward at the utmost of her speed; and finally in that grim struggle to draw the life-line shoreward. The cold and then the great heat, and on top of it the chill of the long swim, seemed to have somehow struck at him. He could remember what he had not thought of for many a month: that long waiting in the wigwam till he had recovered from the rheumatic fever. Already the fiery torments of that time were beginning to shoot again in more than memory. Moreover, the constant spray was hurting his eyes. Several time in the grim struggle with the fire he had been so close that the heat and flame had scorched his face. Now the skin seemed full of intolerable pain, as though it were tearing open in cracks or seams. His eyes were smarting. They too had suffered from the scorching heat; and once, when a great mass of flame

had rushed through a partition which the fire within had eaten away, he had feared that all was over with him. However, this had been his last ordeal by fire; and in the wild struggle through the seas with the weight of the rope dragging him back he had forgotten all that had been. He forgot the wound on his head which he had received when the mast fell. Now, however, out alone on the dark sea, he could just see far off the white water which marked the cliff fronts, and on the edge of his horizon the grim moving white wall where the waves broke on the headland. His heart did not fail in all that long swim across the mouth of the bay. The race whence he derived had it not in them to be afraid on sea or land; and though he could not be oblivious to the fact that his strength was beginning to give out, he never faltered in his hope or his efforts. The time seemed endless, and the desolation of the sea extreme.

On and on he toiled. His limbs were becoming more cramped with the cold and the terrible strain of swimming in such waves. His bones were being racked with shooting pains; his face burned as though in torment, and his eyes were full of gnawing agony. But still the brave heart bore him up; and resolutely, sternly he forced himself afresh to the effort before him. He reasoned it out that where there was such a headland standing out so stark into the sea there ought to be some shelter in its lee. If then he could pass it he might find calmer water and even a landing-place beyond. He knew he must not keep too far to the seaward, for the current might bear him further out so far that he might not have strength to win home to the shore.

Here at least was hope. He would try to round the point at any rate. Nothing could be done till that was accomplished; and to that end he set himself sternly to his task. There was hope that he was drawing nearer. Already the current had increased in force, as though it ran in some groove or ravine of the sea floor. On he went, fighting fiercely with all his might to pass the headland before his strength should fail.

Now he drew so close that the great rocks seemed to tower vast above him. He was not yet close enough to feel as though lapped in their shadow; but even the overcast sky seemed full of light above the line of the cliff. There was a strange roaring, rushing sound around him. He thought that it was not merely the waves dashing on the rocks, but that partly it came from his own ears; that his ebbing strength was feeling the frantic struggle which he was making. The end was coming, it might be, he thought; but still he kept valiantly on, set and silent, as is the way with brave men.

Suddenly from the top of the cliff a bright light flashed. He looked at it sideways as he fought his way on, and saw the light rise and fall and flicker as the flames leaped. High over him he saw fantastic figures which seemed to dance on the edge of the cliff. They had evidently noticed him, and were making signals of some sort; but what the motions were he could not see or understand, for they were but dark silhouettes, edged with light, seen against the background of fire. The only thing he could think was that they meant to encourage him, and so he urged himself to further effort. It might be that help was at hand!

Several times as he turned his head sideways as he kept on his way he saw the figures and the light, but not so clearly; it was as though the light was lessening in power. When again he looked he saw a new fire leap out on the edge of the cliff, and some figures to the right of it. They were signalling in some way. So pausing in his swimming, he rose a little from the water, and turning looked at them.

A thrill shot through him, and a paralysing thought that he must have gone mad. With his wet hand he cleared his eyes, though the touching them pained him terribly, and for an instant saw clearly:

There on the edge of the cliff, standing beside some men and waving her arms in a wild sweep as though motioning frantically: “Keep out! keep out!” was a woman. Instinctively he glanced to his left and saw a furious waste of

white water, through which sharp rocks rose like monstrous teeth. On the instant he saw the danger in front of him, and turning made out seaward, swimming frantically to clear the dangerous spot before the current would sweep him upon the rocks.

But the woman! As one remembers the last sight when the lightning has banished sight, so that vision seemed burned into his brain. A woman with a scarlet riding-habit and masses of long red hair blowing in the gale like flame! Could there be two such persons in the world? No! no! It was a vision! A vision of the woman he loved, come to save him in the direst moment of great peril!

His heart beat with new hope; only the blackness of the stormy sea was before him as he strove frantically on.

Presently when he felt the current slacken, for he had been swimming across it and could feel its power, he turned and looked back. As he did so he murmured aloud:

"A dream! A vision! She came to warn me!" For as he looked all had disappeared. Cliff and coastline, dark rocks and leaping seas, blazing fire, and the warning vision of the woman he loved.

Again he looked where the waste of sea churning amongst the sunken rocks had been. But naught could he see. He could hear the roaring of waters, and the thunder of great waves beating on the iron-bound coast; but nothing could he see. He was alone on the wild sea; in the dark.

Then truly the swift shadow of despair fell upon him.

"Blind! Blind!" he moaned, and for the moment, stricken with despair, he sank into the trough of the waves. But the instinctive desire for life recalled him. Once more he fought his way up to the surface, and swam blindly, desperately on. Seeing nothing, he did not know which way he was going. He listened to try if he could distinguish from what direction came the roaring of the sea; but in that wild gale he could tell nothing. He might have heard better had his eyes been able to help his ears; but in the sudden strange darkness all the senses were astray. In the agony of his

mind he could not even feel the pain of his burnt face; the torture of his eyes had passed. But with the instinct of a strong man he kept on swimming blindly, desperately.

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It seemed as if ages of untold agony had gone by, when he heard a voice seemingly beside him:

"Lay hold here! Catch the girth!" The voice came muffled by wind and wave. His strength was now nearly at its last. The shock of his blindness and the agony of the moments that had passed had finished his exhaustion. But a little longer and he must have sunk into his rest. But the voice and the help it promised rallied him for a moment. He had hardly strength to speak, but he managed to gasp out:

"Where? where? Help me! I am blind!" A hand took his and guided it to a tightened girth. Instinctively his fingers closed round it, and he hung on grimly. His senses were going fast. He felt as if it was all a strange dream. A voice here in the sea! A girth! A horse; he could hear its hard breathing. The voice came again.

"Steady! Hold on! My God! he's fainted!" Then all passed into oblivion.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE QUEEN'S ROOM

To Stephen all that now happened seemed like a dream. From the edge of the cliff she could see well; the flame of the bonfire glittered wide over the sea. She saw Hector and his gallant young master go in the direction of the swimmer who, was drifting in towards the sunken rocks. Then she saw the swimmer's head sink under the water; and her heart grew cold, cold. Was this to be the end! Was such a brave man to be lost after such gallant effort, and just at the moment when help was at hand!

The few seconds seemed ages. Instinctively she shut her eyes and prayed,—her earnest prayer seeming to echo in the shrieking gale:

“Oh! God. Give me this man's life that I may atone!”

God seemed to have heard her prayer. Nay, more! He had mercifully allowed her to be the means of averting great danger. She would never, could never, forget the look on the man's face when he saw, by the flame that she had kindled, ahead of him the danger from the sunken rocks. She had exulted at the thought. And now !

She was recalled by a wild cheer beside her. Opening her eyes she saw that the man's head had arisen again from the water. He was swimming furiously, this time seaward. But close at hand were the heads of the swimming horse and man. . . . She saw the young squire seize the man. . . .

And then the rush of her tears blinded her. When she could see, the horse had turned and was making back again to

the shelter of the point. The squire had his arm stretched across the horse's back; he was holding up the sailor's head, which seemed to roll helplessly with every motion of the cumbering sea. For a little she thought he was dead, but the voice of the old spectioner reassured her:

"He was just in time. The poor chap was done!" And so with beating heart and eyes that did not flinch now she watched the slow progress to the shelter of the point. The coastguards and fishermen had made up their minds where the landing could be made, and were ready; on the rocky shelf, whence Hector had jumped, they stood by with lines. When the squire had steered and encouraged the horse, whose snorting could be heard from the sheltered water, till he was just below the rocks, they lowered a noosed rope. This he fastened round the senseless man below his shoulders. One strong, careful pull, and he was safe on land; and very soon he was being borne up the steep zigzag on the shoulders of the willing crowd.

In the meantime other ropes were passed down to the squire. One he placed round his own waist; two others he fastened one on each side of the horse's girth. Then his friend lowered the bridle, and he managed to put it on the horse and attached a rope to it. The fishermen took the lines, and, paying out as they went so as to leave plenty of slack line, got on the rocks just above the little beach whereon, sheltered though it was, the seas broke heavily. There they waited, ready to pull the horse through the surf when he should have come close enough.

Stephen did not see the rescue of the horse; for just then a tall grave man spoke to her:

"Pardon me, Lady de Lannoy, but is the man to be brought up to the Castle? I am told you have given orders that all the rescued shall be taken there." She answered unhesitatingly:

"Certainly! I gave orders before coming out that preparation was to be made for them."

"I am Mr. Hilton. I am staying with Dr. Winter at

Lannoch Port. I rode over on hearing there was a wreck, and followed the rocket-cart. I shall take charge of the man and bring him up. He will doubtless want some special care."

"If you will be so good!" she answered. At that moment the crowd carrying the senseless man began to appear over the cliff, coming up the zigzag. The Doctor hurried towards him; she followed but at a little distance, fearing lest she should hamper him. Under his orders they laid the patient on the weather side of the bonfire so that the smoke would not reach him. The Doctor knelt by his side. An instant after he looked up and said:

"He is alive; his heart is beating, though faintly. He had better be taken away at once. There is no means here of shelter."

"Bring him in the rocket-cart; it is the only conveyance here," cried Stephen. "And bring Mr. Hepburn too. He also will need some care after his gallant service. I shall ride on and advise my household of your coming. And you good people come all to the Castle. You are to be my guests if you will so honour me. No! No! Really I should prefer to ride alone!" She said this impulsively, seeing that several of the gentlemen were running for their horses to accompany her. "I shall not wait to thank that valiant young gentleman. I shall see him at Lannoy."

As she was speaking she had taken the bridle off her horse. One of the young men stooped and held his hand; she bowed, put her foot in it and sprang to the saddle. In an instant she was flying across country at full speed, in the dark. A wild mood was on her, the reaction from the prolonged agony of apprehension. The gale whistled round her and now and again she shouted with pure joy. It seemed as if God Himself had answered her prayer and given her the returning life! The fervour of her joy was so all-embracing, that she felt as if some at least of the bitter past had been wiped out.

By the time she had reached the Castle the wild ride had

done its soothing work. She was calm again, comparatively; and her wits and feelings were her own.

There was plenty to keep her occupied, mind and body, thence on. The train of persons saved from the wreck were arriving, and clothes had to be found for them as well as food and shelter. She felt as though the world were not wide enough for the welcome which she wished to extend. Its exercise was a sort of reward of her exertions; a thank-offering for the response to her prayer. She moved amongst her guests forgetful of herself; of her strange attire. The strangers wondered at first, till they came to understand that she was the Lady Bountiful who had stretched her helpful hands to them. The whole Castle was lit from cellar to tower, and humming like a hive.

In the general disposition of rooms Stephen ordered to be set apart for the rescued swimmer the Royal Chamber where Queen Elizabeth had lain. She had a sort of idea that the stranger was God's guest who was coming to her house; and that nothing could be too good for him. Some great weight seemed to have been removed from her. Her soul was free again!

At last the rocket-cart arrived, coming with a mighty stress of cracking whips and clash and clatter of shifting wheels, of jingling chains, and shouting voices, and a vast following of men, women and children.

The rescued man was still senseless, but that alone did not seem to cause much anxiety to the Doctor, who hurried him at once into the prepared room. When, assisted by some of the other men, he had undressed him, rubbed him down and put him to bed and had seen some of the others who had been rescued from the wreck, he sought out Lady de Lannoy. He told her that his anxiety was for the man's sight; an announcement which blanched his hearer's cheeks. She had so made up her mind as to his perfect safety that the knowledge of any kind of ill which had come upon him came like a cruel shock. She questioned Mr. Hilton closely;

that he thought it well to tell her at once all that he surmised and feared:

"That fine young fellow who swam out with his horse to him, tells me that when he neared him he cried out that he was blind. I have made some inquiries from those on the ship, and they tell me that he was a passenger, name Robinson. But not only was he not blind then, but that he was the strongest and most alert man on the ship. If it be blindness it must have come on during that long swim. It may be that before leaving the ship he received some special injury—indeed he has several cuts and burns and bruises—and that the irritation of the sea-water increased it. I can do nothing till he wakes. At present he is in such a state that nothing, likely to be of service, can be done for him. Later I shall if necessary give him a hypodermic to ensure sleep. In the morning I shall examine him carefully, fully.

I am myself an oculist; that is my department in St. Stephen's Hospital. I have an idea of what is wrong; I may be able to diagnose more exactly when I can use the ophthalmoscope. His words, together with his appearance, and even the firm tone of his voice, gave Stephen confidence, and raised some of the gloom that had fallen upon her. Laying her hand on his arm unconsciously in the extremity of pity she said earnestly:

"Oh do what you can for him. He must be a noble creature; and all that is possible must be done. I shall never rest happily if through any failing on my part he suffers as you fear."

"I shall do all that I can," he said with equal earnestness, touched with her eager pity. "And I shall not trust myself alone, if any other can be of some service. Depend upon it, Lady de Lannoy, that all shall be as you would wish."

There was little sleep in the Castle that night till late. Mr. Hilton slept on a sofa in the Queen's Room after he had administered to his patient a narcotic hypodermically.

As soon as the eastern sky began to quicken, he rode, as

he had arranged during the evening, to Dr. Winter's house at Lannoch Port where he was staying. There he selected from his own impedimenta such instruments and drugs as he required, and hurried back.

It was quite a painful scene for Mr. Hilton when his patient did wake. Fortunately some of the after-effects of the narcotic still remained, for his despair at realising that he was blind was terrible. It was not that he was violent; to be so under his present circumstances would have been foreign to Harold's nature. But there was a despair which was infinitely more sad to witness than any passion. He simply moaned to himself in a soft of far-away whisper:

"Blind! Blind!" and again in every phase of horrified amazement, as though he could not realise the truth: "Blind! Blind!" The Doctor laid his hand on his breast and said very gently:

"My poor fellow, it is a dreadful thing to face, to think of. But as yet I have not been able to come to any conclusion; unable even to examine you. I do not wish to encourage hope that may be false, but there are cases when injury is not vital and perhaps only temporary. In such case your best chance, indeed your only chance, is to keep quiet. I am a surgeon. Hilton is my name; I am the oculist of St. Stephen's of London. I am now about to examine you with the ophthalmoscope. You are a man; none of us who saw your splendid feat last night can doubt your pluck. Now I want you to use some of it to help us both. You, for your recovery if such is possible; me, to help me in my work. Whatever it is you suffer from must have come on quickly. Tell me all you can remember of it."

The Doctor listened attentively whilst Harold told all he could remember of his sufferings. When he spoke of the return of the old rheumatic pains his hearer said involuntarily: "Good!" Harold paused; but went on at once. The Doctor recognised that he had rightly appraised his remark, and by it judged that he was a well-educated man.

Something in the method of speaking struck him, and he said as nonchalantly as he could:

"By the way, which was your University?"

"Cambridge. Trinity." He spoke without thinking, and the instant he had done so stopped. The sense of his blindness rushed back on him. He could not see; and his ears were not yet trained to take the place of his eyes. He must guard himself. Thenceforward he was so cautious in his replies that Mr. Hilton felt convinced that there was some purpose in his reticence. He therefore stopped asking questions, and began to examine him with the ophthalmoscope. He was unable to come to much result; his opinion was shown in his report to Lady de Lannoy:

"I am unable to say anything definite as yet. The case is a most interesting one; quite apart from the splendid fellow who is the subject of it. I have hopes that within a few days I may be able to know more."

When he went back to the patient's room he entered softly, for he thought he might be asleep. The room was according to his instructions quite dark, and as it was unfamiliar to him he felt his way cautiously. Harold, however, heard the small noise he made and said quietly:

"Who is there?"

"It is I; Hilton."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Look round the room and see. Then lock the door and come and talk to me if you will. You will pity a poor blind fellow, I know. The darkness has come down upon me quickly and I am not accustomed to it!" There was a break in his voice which moved the other. He lit a candle, feeling that the doing so would impress his patient, and went round the room; not with catlike movement this time—he wanted the other to hear him. When he had turned the key in the lock, as sharply as he could, he came to the bedside and sat down. Harold spoke again after a short pause:

"Is that candle still lit?"

"Yes! Would you like it put out?"

"If you don't mind! Again I say pity me and pardon me. But I want to ask you something privately, between our two selves; and I will feel more of equality than if you were looking at me, whilst I cannot see you." Mr. Hilton blew out the candle.

"There! We are equal now."

"Thank you!" A long pause; then he went on:

"When a man becomes suddenly blind is there usually, or even occasionally, any sort of odd sight? . . . Does he see anything like a dream, a vision?"

"Not that I know of. I have never heard of such a case. As a rule people struck blind by lightning, which is the most common cause, sometimes remember with extraordinary accuracy the last thing they have seen. Just as though it were photographed on the retina!"

"Thank you! Is such usually the recurrence of any old dream or anything they have much thought of?"

"Not that I know of. It would be unusual!" Harold waited a long time before he spoke again. When he did so it was in a different voice; a constrained voice. The Doctor, accustomed to take enlightenment from trivial details, noted it:

"Now tell me, Mr. Hilton, something about what has happened. Where am I?"

"In Lannoy Castle."

"Where is it?"

"In Angleshire!"

"Who does it belong to?"

"Lady de Lannoy. The Countess de Lannoy; they tell me she is a Countess in her own right."

"It is very good of her to have me here. Is she an old lady?"

"No! A young one. Young and very beautiful." After a pause before his query:

"What's she like? Describe her to me!"

"She is young, a little over twenty. Tall and of a very

fine figure. She has eyes like black diamonds, and hair like a flame!" For a long time Harold remained still. Then he said:

"Tell me all you know or have learned of this whole affair. How was I rescued, and by whom?" So the Doctor proceeded to give him every detail he knew of. When he was quite through, the other again lay still for a long time. The silence was broken by a gentle tap at the door. The Doctor lit a candle. He turned the key softly, so that no one would notice that the door was locked. Something was said in a low whisper. Then the door was gently closed, and the Doctor returning said:

"Lady de Lannoy wants, if it will not disturb you, to ask how you are. Ordinarily I should not let any one see you. But she is not only your hostess, but, as I have just told you, it was to her ride to the headland, where she burned the house to give you light, which was the beginning of your rescue. Still if you think it better not . . .!"

"I hardly like anybody to see me like this!" said Harold, feebly seeking an excuse.

"My dear man," said the other, "you may be easy in your mind, she won't see much of you. You are all bandages and beard. She'll have to wait a while before she sees *you*."

"Didn't she see me last night?"

"Not she! Whilst we were trying to restore you she was rushing back to the Castle to see that all was ready for you, and for the others from the wreck." This vaguely soothed Harold. If his surmise was correct, and if she had not seen him then, it was well that he was bandaged now. He felt that it would not do to refuse to let her see him; it might look suspicious. So after pausing a short while he said in a low voice:

"I suppose she had better come now. We must not keep her waiting!" When the Doctor brought her to his bedside Stephen felt in a measure awed. His bandaged face and head and his great beard, singed in patches, looked to her in the dim light rather awesome. In a very gentle voice she said

kind things to the sick man, who acknowledged them in a feeble whisper. The Doctor, a keen observer, noticed the change in his voice, and determined to understand more. Stephen spoke of his bravery, and of how it was due to him that all on the ship were saved; and as she spoke her emotion moved her so much that her sweet voice shook and quivered. To the ears of the man who had now only sound to guide him, it was music of the sweetest he had ever heard. Fearing lest his voice should betray him, he whispered his own thanks feebly and in few words.

When Stephen went away the Doctor went with her; it was more than an hour before he returned. He found his patient in what he considered a state of suppressed excitement; for, though his thoughts were manifestly collected and his words were calm, he was restless and excited in other ways. He had evidently been thinking of his own condition; for shortly after the Doctor came in he said:

"Are we alone?"

"Quite!"

"I want you to arrange that there shall not be any nurse with me."

"My dear sir! Don't handicap me, and yourself, with such a restriction. It is for your own good that you should have regular and constant attention."

"But I don't wish it. Not for the present at all events. I am not accustomed to a nurse, and shall not feel comfortable. In a few days perhaps . . ." The decided tone of his voice struck the other. Keeping his own thoughts and intentions in abeyance, even to himself, he answered heartily:

"All right! I shall not have any nurse, at present."

CHAPTER XXXIII

WAITING

"BUT remember, my poor fellow, that there is a possibility, more than a possibility, that you may recover your sight if you will submit to what is necessary." As he spoke there was a little break in his voice.

Harold lay still. The whole universe seemed to sway, and then whirl round him in chaotic mass. His ears were full of vague meaningless sound. Through it at length he seemed to hear the calm voice:

"At first I could not be sure of my surmise, for when I used the ophthalmoscope your suffering was too recent to disclose the cause I looked for. Now I am fairly sure of it. What I have since heard from you has convinced me; your having suffered from rheumatic fever, and the recrudescence of the rheumatic pain after your terrible experience of the fire and that long chilling swim. Your disease, as I have diagnosed it, is an obscure one and not common. I have not before been able to study a case. All these things give me great hopes."

"Thank God! Thank God!" the voice from the bed was now a whisper, and was fervent to a degree which moved the other to hear.

"Thank God! say I too. This that you suffer from is an acute form of inflammation of the optic nerve. What we call Retrobulbar Neuritis. It may of course end badly; in permanent loss of sight. But I hope—I believe, that in your case it will not be so. You are young, and you are immensely strong; not merely muscularly, but in constitution.

I can see that you have been an athlete, and no mean one either. All this will stand to you. But it will take time. It will need all your own help; all the calm restraint of your body and your mind. I am doing all that science knows; you must do the rest!" He waited, giving time to the other to realise his ideas. Harold lay still for a long time before he spoke:

"Doctor." The voice was so strangely different that the other was more hopeful at once. He had feared opposition, or conflict of some kind. He answered as cheerily as he could:

"Yes! I am listening."

"You are a good fellow; and I am grateful to you, both for what you have done and what you have told me. I cannot say how grateful just yet; hope unmans me at present. But I think you deserve that I should tell you the truth!" The other nodded; he forgot that the speaker could not see.

"Are we alone; absolutely alone?"

"Absolutely!"

"Have I your solemn promise that anything I may say shall never go beyond yourself?"

"I promise. I can swear, if it will make your mind more easy in the matter."

"I don't want to be seen by any one. I know Lady de Lannoy!"

"What! I should have thought that was a reason for wanting her to see you. She seems not only one of the most beautiful, but the sweetest woman I ever met."

"She is all that! And a thousand times more!"

"Then why—— Pardon me!"

"I cannot tell you all; but you must take it that my need to get away is imperative." After pondering a while Mr. Hilton said suddenly:

"I must ask your pardon again. But are you sure there is no mistake. Lady de Lannoy is not married; has not been. She is Countess in her own right. It is quite a romance. She inherited from some old branch of more than

three hundred years ago." Again Harold smiled; he quite saw what the other meant. He answered gravely:

"I understand. But it does not alter my opinion; my purpose. It is needful—absolutely and imperatively needful that I get away without her recognising me, or knowing who I am."

"She does not know you now. She has not seen you yet."

"That is why I hoped to get away in time; before she should recognise me. If I stay quiet and do all you wish, will you help me?"

"I will! And what then?"

"When I am well, if it should be so, I shall steal away and disappear out of her life without her knowing. She may think it ungrateful that one whom she has treated so well should behave so badly. But that can't be helped. It is the lesser evil of the two."

"And I must abet you? All right! I will do it; though you must forgive me if you should ever hear that I have abused you and said bad things of you. It will have to be all in the day's work if I am not to ultimately give you away. I must take steps at once to keep her from seeing you. I shall have to invent some story; some new kind of dangerous disease, perhaps. I shall stay here and nurse you myself!" Harold spoke in joyful gratitude:

"Oh you *are* good. But can you spare the time? How long will it all take?"

"Some weeks! Perhaps!" He paused as if thinking. "Perhaps in a month's time I shall unbandage your eyes. You will then see; or . . ."

"I understand! I shall be patient!"

In the morning Mr. Hilton in reporting to Lady de Lannoy of his patient told her that he considered it would be necessary to keep him very quiet, both in mind and body. In the course of the conversation he said:

"Anything which might upset him must be studiously avoided. He is not an easy patient to deal with; he doesn't like people to go near him. I think, therefore, it will be

well if even you do not see him. He seems to have an odd distrust of people, especially of women. It may be that he is fretful in his blindness, which is in itself so trying to a strong man. But besides, the treatment is not calculated to have a very buoyant effect. It is apt to make a man fretful to lie in the dark, and know that he has to do so for indefinite weeks. Pilocarpin, and salicylate of soda, and mercury do not tend towards cheerfulness. Nor do blisters on the forehead add to the content of life!"

"I quite understand," said Stephen, "and I will be careful not to go near him till he is well. Please God! it may bring him back his sight. Thank you a thousand times for your determination to stay with him."

So it was that for more than two weeks Harold was kept all alone. No one attended him but the Doctor who slept in the patient's room for the whole of the first week, and never had him out of sight for more than a few minutes at a time. He was then able to leave him alone for longer periods, and settled himself in the bedroom next to him. Every hour or two he would visit him. Occasionally he would be away for half a day, but never for more. Stephen rigidly observed the Doctor's advice herself, and gave strict orders that his instructions were to be obeyed.

Harold himself went through a period of mental suffering. It was agony to him to think of Stephen being so near at hand, and yet not to be able to see her, or even to hear her voice. All the pain of his loss of her affection seemed to crowd back on him, and with it the new need of escaping from her unknown. More than ever he felt that it would not do that she should ever learn of his identity. Her pity for him, and possibly her woman's regard for a man's effort in time of stress, might lead through the gates of her own self-sacrifice to his restoration to his old place in her affections. Nay! it could not be his old place; for at the close of those days she had learned of his love for her.

When there is love, and the knowledge of it, there is no going back!

CHAPTER XXXIV

A CRY

THE third week had nearly elapsed, and as yet no one was allowed to see the patient.

For a time Stephen was inclined to be somewhat chagrined; she had set her mind on making much of this man whom fate and his own bravery had thrown athwart her life. She was convinced in her inmost heart that there could be no adequate reason, on purely medical or surgical grounds, why she should not be allowed to peep into a darkened room, or speak a few words with or even to a suffering man. But in these days Stephen was in some ways a changed and patient woman, and she was so full of gratitude to the great and quick answer which had been given to her prayer that a consequent meekness had become a part of her nature.

Such little attentions to the wounded man as Stephen was permitted were daily bestowed; fresh flowers of her own choosing were sent into the sick-room. As Stephen had always had a taste of her own with regard to floriculture, the effect was hardly soothing to the patient. He recognised ever afresh the presence of those flowers which Stephen loved, and to which all his own youth and young manhood had been accustomed. In their fragrant presence he felt at times as though Stephen herself were in the room.

Every thought of her disturbed him afresh. Willing as he was to sacrifice himself and his feelings in any way for her good, he could not but be conscious that the act of stealing away in secret which he contemplated would bring her fresh

pain. She had done all in her power for an unknown man; and through him her reward would be humiliation and disappointment, where she might have looked for gratitude. . . . And it would come by his hand; his hand, who in addition to all the past, owed her his very life! And yet it was for her good! As the other act had been!

But to Stephen all the mystery seemed to grow out of its first shadowy importance into something real. There was coming to her a vague idea that she would do well not to manifest any concern, any anxiety, any curiosity. Instinct was at work; she was content to trust it, and wait.

One forenoon she received by messenger a letter which interested her much. It was dated that morning from Varilands, a neighbouring estate which marched with Lannoy to the south.

"My dear Madam,—Will you pardon me a great liberty, and allow my little girl and me to come to see you to-day? I shall explain when we meet. When I say that we are Americans and have come seven thousand miles for the purpose, you will I am sure understand that it is no common interest which has brought us, and it will be the excuse for our eagerness. I should write you more fully, but as the matter is a confidential one I thought it would be better to speak. We shall be doubly grateful if you will have the kindness to see us alone. I write as a mother in making this appeal to your kindness; for my child—she is only a little over eight years old—has the matter so deeply in her heart that any disappointment or undue delay would I fear affect her health. We presume to take your kindness for granted and will call a little before twelve o'clock.

"I may perhaps say that my husband purchased some years ago this estate. We were to have come here to live in the early summer, but were kept in the West by some important business of his.

"Believe me, yours sincerely,

ALICE STONEHOUSE."

Stephen had of course no hesitation as to receiving the lady. Even had there been any objection, the curiosity which she had in common with her kind would have swept difficulties aside. She gave orders that when Mrs. Stonehouse arrived with her daughter they were to be shown at once into the Mandarin drawing-room. That they would probably stay for lunch. She would see them alone.

A little before twelve o'clock Mrs. Stonehouse and Pearl arrived, and were shown into the room where Lady de Lannoy awaited them. She was sitting in the great bay-window. The high sun, streaming in from the side, shone on her beautiful hair, making it look like living gold. When the Americans came in they were for an instant entranced by her rich beauty. One glance at Mrs. Stonehouse's sweet sympathetic face was enough to establish her in Stephen's good graces for ever. As for Pearl, she was like one who has unexpectedly seen a fairy or a goddess. She had been keeping guardedly behind her mother, but on the instant she came out fearlessly into the open.

Stephen advanced quickly and shook hands with Mrs. Stonehouse, saying heartily:

"I am so glad you have come. I am honoured in being trusted."

"Thank you so much, Lady de Lannoy. I felt that you would not mind, especially when you know why we came. Indeed I had no choice. Pearl insisted on it; and when Pearl is urgent we who love her have all to give way. This is Pearl!"

In an instant Stephen was on her knees by the beautiful child. The red rosebud of a mouth was raised to her kiss, and the little arms went lovingly round her neck and clung to her. As the mother looked on delighted she thought she had never seen a more beautiful sight. The two faces so different, and yet with so much in common. The red hair and the flaxen, both tints of gold. The fine colour of each heightened to a bright flush in their eagerness. Stephen was so little used to children, and yet she loved them so, that all

the womanhood in her, which is possible motherhood, went out in an instant to the lovely eager child. She felt the keenest of pleasure when the little thing, having rubbed her silk-gloved palms over her face, and then holding her away so that she could see her many beauties, whispered in her ear:

"How pretty you are!"

"You darling!" whispered Stephen in reply. "We must love each other very much, you and I!" She rose up, holding the child in her arms.

When the two ladies had sat down, Stephen still holding Pearl in her lap, Mrs. Stonehouse said:

"I suppose you have wondered, Lady de Lannoy, what has brought us here?"

"Indeed I was very much interested."

"Then I had better tell you all from the beginning so that you may understand." Forthwith she proceeded to give all the details of the meeting with Mr. Robinson on the *Scoriac*. Of how Pearl took to him and insisted on making him her special friend; of the terrible incident of her being swept overboard, and of the gallant rescue. She was very much moved as she spoke; all that fearful time, came back to her so vividly at times that she could hardly speak. Pearl listened too; all eagerness, but without fear. Stephen, too, was greatly moved and held Pearl close to her all the time, as though she was protecting her. When the mother spoke of her own feeling when she saw the brave man struggling up and down the giant waves, and now and again losing sight of him in the trough of the sea, she put out one hand and held the mother's hand with a grasp which vibrated in sympathy whilst the great tears welled over in her eyes and ran down her cheeks. Pearl, watching her keenly, said nothing, but taking her tiny cambric handkerchief from her pocket silently wiped the tears away, and clung all the tighter. It was her turn to protect now!

Pearl's own time for tears came when her mother began to tell this new and sympathetic friend of how she became so

much attached to her rescuer that when she knew he would not be coming to the West with them, but going off to the wildest region of the far North, that her health became impaired; and that it was only when Mr. Robinson promised to come back to see her within three years that she was at all comforted. And how, ever since, she had held the man in her heart and thought of him every day and always; sleeping as well as waking, for he was now and again a factor in her dreams!

Stephen was more than ever moved, for the child's constancy touched her as well as her grief. She strained the little thing in her strong young arms, as though the fervency of her grasp would bring belief and comfort; as it did. She in her turn dried the other's eyes. Then Mrs. Stonehouse went on with her story:

"We were at Banff, high up in the Rockies, when we read in the *Montreal Star* of the burning and wrecking of the *Dominion*. It is, as you know, a Montreal boat of the Allan Line; so that naturally there was a full telegraphic report in all the Canadian papers. When we read of the brave man who swam ashore with the line and who was unable to reach the port but swam out across the bay, Pearl took it for granted that it must have been 'The Man,' as she always called Mr. Robinson. When by the next paper we learned that the man's name *was* Robinson nothing would convince her that it was not *her* Mr. Robinson. My husband, I may tell you, had firmly come to the same conclusion. He had ever since the rescue of our child always looked for any news from Alaska, whither he knew Mr. Robinson had gone. He learned that up away in the very far North a new goldfield had been discovered by a man of the same name; and that a new town, Robinson City, began to grow up in the wilderness where the condition of life from the cold was a new experience to even the most hardy gold miners. Then we began to think that the young hero who had so gallantly saved our darling was meeting some of his reward . . .!"

She stopped for a moment, her voice breaking. Stephen

was in a glow of holy feeling. Gladness, joy, gratitude, enthusiasm; she knew not which. It all seemed like a noble dream which was coming true. Mrs. Stonehouse went on:

"From Californian papers of last month we learned that Robinson of Robinson City had sailed for San Francisco, but had disappeared when the ship touched at Portland; and then the whole chain of his identity seemed complete. Nothing would satisfy Pearl but that we should come at once to England and see 'The Man,' who was wounded and blind, and do what we could for him. Her father could not then come himself; but he is following us and may be here at any time.

"And now, we want you to help us, Lady de Lannoy. We are not sure yet of the identity of Mr. Robinson, but we shall know the instant we see him, or hear his voice. We have learned that he is still here. Do let us see him as soon as ever you can!" There was a pleading tone in her voice which alone would have moved Stephen, even had she not been wrought up already by the glowing fervour of her new friend.

But she paused. She did not know what to say; how to tell them that as yet she herself knew nothing. She, too, in the depths of her own heart knew—*knew*—that it was the same Robinson. And she also knew that both identities were one with another. The beating of her heart and the wild surging of her blood told her all. She was afraid to speak lest her voice should betray her.

She could not even think. She would have to be alone for that.

Mrs. Stonehouse, with the wisdom and power of age, waited. But Pearl was in a fever of anxiety; she could imagine nothing which could keep her away from The Man. But she saw that there was some difficulty, some cause of delay. So she too added her pleading. Putting her mouth close to Lady de Lannoy's ear she whispered very faintly, very caressingly:

"What is your name? Your own name? Your very own name?"

"Stephen, my darling!"

"Oh, won't you let us see The Man, Stephen; dear Stephen! I love him so; and I do so want to see him. It is ages till I see him! Won't you let me? I shall be so good—Stephen!" And she strained her closer in her little arms and kissed her all over the face, cheeks and forehead and eyes and mouth, wooingly. Stephen returned the embrace and the kisses, but remained silent a little longer. Then she found her voice:

"I hardly know what to say. Believe me, I should—I shall, do all I can; but the fact is that I am not in authority. The Doctor has taken him in charge and will not let any one go near him. He will not even have a nurse, but watches and attends to him himself. He says it might be fatal if anything should occur to agitate him. Why, even I am not allowed to see him!"

"Haven't you seen him yet at all; ever, ever, Stephen?" asked Pearl, all her timidity entirely gone. Stephen smiled—a wan smile enough it was—as she answered:

"I saw him in the water, but it was too far away to distinguish. And it was only by firelight."

"Oh yes, I know," said Pearl; "Mother and Daddy to me how you had burned the house down to give him light. Didn't you want to see him more after that? I should! Stephen drew the impulsive child closer as she answered:

"Indeed I did, dear. But I had to think of what was good for him. I went to his room the next day when he was awake, and the Doctor let me come in for only a moment."

"Well! What did you see? Didn't you know him?" She forgot that the other did not know him from her point of view. But the question went through Stephen's heart like a sword. What would she not have given to have known him! What would she not give to know him now! . . . She spoke mechanically:

"The room was quite dark. It is necessary, the Doctor says, that he be kept in the dark. I saw only a big beard, partly burned away by the fire; and a great bandage which covered all his eyes!" Pearl's hold relaxed, she slipped like

and fell to the floor and ran over to her mother. Her new friend was all very well, but no one would do as well as mother when she was in trouble.

"Oh mother, mother! My Robinson had no beard!" Her mother stroked her face comfortingly as she answered:

"But, my dear, it is more than two years since you saw him. Two years and three months, for it was in June that we crossed." How the date thrilled Stephen. It verified her assumption. Mrs. Stonehouse did not notice but went on:

"His beard would have grown. Men wear beards up in the cold place where he was." Pearl kissed her; there was no need for words. Throwing herself again on Stephen's knees she went on with her questioning:

"But didn't you hear him?"

"I heard very little, darling. He was very weak. It was only the morning after the wreck, and he spoke in a whisper!" Then with an instinct of self-preservation she added: "But how could I learn anything by hearing him when he was a stranger to me? I had never even heard of Mr. Robinson!"

As she was speaking she found her own ideas, the proofs of her own conviction, growing. This was surely another link in the chain of proving that all three men were but one. But in such case Harold must know; must have tried to hide his identity!

She feared, with keen eyes upon her, to pursue the thought. But her blood began to grow cold and her brain to swim. . . . With an effort she went on:

"Ever since then I have not been allowed to go near him. Of course I must obey orders. I am waiting as patiently as I can. But we must ask the Doctor if he thinks his patient will see you—will let you see him—though he will not let me." This she added with a touch of what she felt: regret rather than bitterness. There was no room for bitterness in her full heart where Harold was concerned.

"Will you ask the Doctor now?" Pearl did not let grass

grow under her feet. For answer Stephen rang the bell, and when a servant appeared asked:

"Is Mr. Hilton in the house?"

"I think not, your Ladyship. He said he was going over to Port Lannoch. Shall I inquire if he left word at what time he would be back?"

"If you please!" The man returned in a few minutes with the butler, who said:

"Mr. Hilton said, your Ladyship, that he expected to be back by one o'clock at latest."

"Please ask him on his arrival if he will kindly come here at once. Do not let us be disturbed until then." The butler bowed and withdrew.

"Now," said Stephen, "as we have to wait till our tyrant comes, won't you tell me all that went on after The Man had left you?" Pearl brightened up at once. Stephen would have given anything to get away even for a while. Beliefs and hopes and fears were surging up in her heart, in her brain, till she felt choking. But the habit of her life in the last two years, gave her self-control. And so she waited, trying with all her might to follow the child's thoughts and to swing with them. Pearl went on at racing speed, forgetting her impatience and her anxiety in the rush of her narrative:

"Oh! we had such a lot to do. Daddy had a lot of papers written, giving money for all their lives to the men who came out in the boat, and all the others, and I had to sign them. He said it was from me. And he has built a whole big, big house for the sailors' orphans at Liverpool. He said that it was from me too; so I had to sign lots of things. It took me such a long time, because I don't write very easily, you know. And Mollie and her father, that is Mr. Watford you know, were in New York, and one day Mollie asked mother to let me come with her all by our two selves. And we went away in an automobile ever so far from Riverside Drive where our house is. Mollie said it was "down town." I don't know what that means, but Daddy says it is where

some men make their fortunes, and where most of them take the fortunes away from other people. But it was, oh! so full of people, and great tall houses that you couldn't see the tops of unless you leant back so far that you nearly fell down, and tramcars all ringing bells. We went into a great big room where there were a lot of young men in cages like the lions and tigers at the Zoo, and they had piles of money. Mollie showed a card to an Irishman in a uniform at the door, and he took us to one of the cages, and the young man when he saw the card took us into a room where there was a big table and scales, and little shovels and piles of money. And Mollie took the red cap from her pocket that The Man pulled from her head when he jumped into the sea after me. And she said:

"'I want you, sir, to see how many gold eagles will go into that!' And then a lot of other men came round, and some of them were quite old and bald, and the young man got very red. And he took, oh! piles of gold and began to put it in Mollie's red cap with his little shovel, and when it got nearly full two of the other men held it up and then he went on filling it. And Mollie laughed and said: "Jee-ru-salem!" And the tam-o'shanter kept stretching, for it is knitted you know, and there was so much gold in it that they couldn't raise it from the table. And Mollie kept on saying:

"'Let her rip! Put in more!' At last they had to stop because the coins were tumbling out, and the young man was going to put the tumbled ones back in the little sack, but Mollie said:

"'Guess, mister, you must corral them too!' So when they took away the sack they emptied the cap on the table and they began weighing the money in the scales. And, the young man wrote how much it was on a piece of paper. And Mollie took a cheque from her pocket, and it was signed, and she got a pen and wrote on it, and put in some figures, and when I asked her what it was all about she handed it to me and I read on it:

"'A thankoffering to Snug Harbour in memory of a dear

life and a gallant gentleman,' and I knew that she meant all that was the dear life and the gallant gentleman was The Man! And, oh! dear! I do so want to see him!" There was such a suspicious quiver in her lip that Stephen, hoping to keep her thoughts away from her own anxiety, said:

"Go on, dear, tell me all about it. And I hope Mollie will come here some day. I want to know her!" Pearl continued:

"Then one of the other men, he was the very oldest and the very baldest of them all, said that it was a very noble gift that Colonel Watford and his beautiful daughter had made. And Mollie laughed and said:

"'Come off!' And then we all came home; and Mother, and Daddy too, kissed Mollie."

As the narration of this episode had come to an end, Stephen, wishing to keep the child's mind occupied, asked:

"And was there anything more about"—she stopped just in time, for unconsciously she was just going to say "Harold;" but she went on so quietly that the pause was not noticed—"The Man?"

"Oh yes! When we were out in San Raphael Daddy brought home one day from his office in San Francisco a beautiful gold medal, ever so big, and said that it was sent for John Robinson from the Royal Humane Society for his noble deed. And I was to give it to him from them. They had sent it to Daddy because he and Captain Tab—on the *Scoriac*, you know—had written to tell them all about it. We have it with us; Mother has it in her trunk. We didn't bring it to-day because the trunks weren't unpacked. And, oh! I do wish that Doctor would come. I want to see The Man!" She was so restless, marching about the room, that Stephen said:

"Would you like to go out on the balcony, darling; of course if Mother will let you? It is quite safe, I assure you, Mrs. Stonehouse. It is wide and open and is just above the flower borders, with a stone rail. You can see the road from it by which Mr. Hilton comes from Port Lannoch. He

will be riding." Pearl yielded at once to the diversion. It would at any rate be something to do, to watch. Stephen opened the French window and the child ran out on the balcony.

When Stephen came back to her seat Mrs. Stonehouse said quietly:

"I am glad she is away for a few minutes. She has been overwrought, and I am always afraid for her. She is so sensitive. And after all she is only a baby!"

"She is a darling!" said Stephen impulsively; and she meant it. Mrs. Stonehouse smiled gratefully as she went on:

"She really loves Mr. Robinson; as indeed she ought! He has done so much for us that it would be a pride and a privilege for us to show our gratitude. My husband, between ourselves, wanted to make him his partner. He tells me that, quite independent of our feeling towards him, he is just the man he wanted. And if indeed it was he who discovered the Alaskan goldfield and organized and ruled Robinson City, it is a proof that Mr. Stonehouse's judgment was sound. Now he is injured, and blind; and our little Pearl loves him. If indeed he be the man we believe he is, then we may be able to do something which all his millions cannot buy. He will come to us, and be as a son to us, and a brother to Pearl. We will be his eyes; and nothing but love and patience will guide his footsteps!" She paused, her mouth quivering; then she went on:

"If it is not our Mr. Robinson, then it will be our pleasure to do all that is necessary for his comfort. If he is a poor man he will never want. . . . It will be a privilege to save so gallant a man from hardship. . . ." Here she came to a stop.

Stephen too was glad of the pause, for the emotion which the words and the remembrances which they evoked were choking her. Had not Harold been as her own father's son! As her own brother! . . . She turned away, fearing lest her face should betray her.

All at once Mrs. Stonehouse started to her feet, her face suddenly white with fear; for a cry had come to their ears. A cry which even Stephen knew as Pearl's. The mother ran to the window.

The balcony was empty. She came back into the room, and ran to the door.

But on the instant a voice that both women knew was heard from without:

"Help there! Help, I say! The child has fainted. Is there no one there? And I am blind!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

LIGHT

HAROLD had been in a state of increasing restlessness. The month of waiting which Dr. Hilton had laid down for him seemed to wear away with extraordinary slowness; this was increased by the lack of companionship, and further by the cutting off of even the little episodes usual to daily life.

That morning he was additionally disturbed because the Doctor had gone early to Port Lannoch; and as he was the only person with whom he could talk, he clung to him with something of the helpless feeling of a frightened child to its nurse. Darkness has terrors of its own!

The day being full of sunshine the window was open, and only the dark-green blind which crackled and rustled with every passing breeze made the darkness of the room. Harold was dressed and lay on a sofa placed back, where the few rays of light thus entering could not reach him. His eyes and forehead were bandaged as ever. For some days the Doctor, who had his own reasons and his own purpose, had not taken them off; so the feeling of blind helplessness was doubly upon him. He knew he was blind; and he knew also that even if he were not he could not in his present condition see. The desire to tear off the bandages and test himself was at times appalling. Only his deep desire to recover his sight restrained his hands.

At length the cool autumn wind soothed him somewhat; it took his mind back to the snows and the strenuous life of the North, where at least his spiritual pain had been dor-

mant. And in not unhappy day-dreaming his memory faded in light sleep.

All at once he started up awake. His hearing had in the weeks of darkness grown abnormally acute, and some trifling sound had recalled him to himself. It might have been inspiration, but he seemed to be conscious of some presence in the room.

As he rose from the sofa, with the violent motion of a strong man startled into unconscious activity, he sent a shock of fear to the eager child who had strayed into the room through the open window. Had he presented a normal appearance, she probably would not have been frightened. She would have recognized his identity despite the changes, and have sprung to him so impulsively that she would have been in his arms before she had time to think. But now all she saw was a great beard topped with a mass of linen and lint, which obscured all the rest of the face and seemed in the gloom like a gigantic and ominous turban.

In her fright she screamed out. He in turn, forgetful for the moment of his intention of silence, called aloud:

"Who is that?" Pearl, who had been instinctively backing towards the window by which she had entered, and whose thoughts in her fright had gone back to her mother—refuge in time of danger—cried out:

"Mother, Mother! It is him! It is The Man!" She would have run towards him in spite of his forbidding appearance; but the shock had been too much for her. The little knees trembled and gave way; the brain reeled; and with a moan she sank down on the floor in a swoon.

Harold knew the voice the instant she spoke; there was no need for the enlightening words.

"Pearl! Pearl!" he cried. "Come to me, darling!" But as he spoke he heard her moan, and even the soft thud of her little body on the thick carpet. He guessed the truth and groped his way towards where the sound had been, for he feared lest he might trample upon her in too great eagerness. Kneeling by her he touched her little feet, and then

felt his way to her face. . . . Now when some action was required of him he felt in all its acuteness the helplessness of his blindness. In his confusion of mind he lost the direction of the door, and coming to the window pushed forward the flapping blind and went out on the balcony. He knew from the freshness of the air and the distant sounds that he was in the open. This disturbed him, as he wished to find some one who could attend to the fainting child. But as he had lost the way back to the room now, he groped along the wall of the Castle with one hand, whilst he held Pearl securely in the other. As he went he called out for help.

When he came opposite the window of the Mandarin room Mrs. Stonehouse saw him; she ran to him and caught Pearl in her arms. She was so agitated, so lost in concern for the child that she never even thought to speak to the man whom she had come so far to seek. She wailed over the child:

"Pearl! Pearl! What is it, darling? It is Mother!" She laid the girl on the sofa, and taking the flowers out of a glass began to sprinkle water on the child's face. Harold knew her voice and waited in patience. Presently the child sighed; the mother, relieved, thought of other things at last and looked around her.

There was yet another trouble. There on the floor, where she had slipped down, lay Lady de Lannoy in a swoon. She called out instinctively, forgetting for the moment that the man was blind, but feeling all the old confidence which he had won in her heart:

"Oh! Mr. Robinson, help me! Lady de Lannoy has fainted too, and I do not know what to do!" As she spoke she looked up at him and remembered his blindness. But she had no time to alter her words; the instant she had spoken Harold, who had been leaning against the window-sash, and whose mind was calmer since with his acute hearing he too had heard Pearl sigh, seemed to leap into the room.

"Where is she? Where is she? Oh! God, now am I blind indeed!"

It gave her a pang to hear him and to see him turn helplessly with his arms and hands outstretched as though he would feel for her in the air.

Without pause, and under an instinctive and uncontrollable impulse, he tore away the bandages from his eyes. The sun was streaming in. As he met it his eyes blinked and a cry burst from him; a wild cry whose joy and surprise pierced even through the shut portals of the swooning woman's brain. Not for worlds would she ever after have lost the memory of that sound:

"Light! light! Oh, God! Oh, God! I am not blind!"

But he looked round him still in terrified wonder:

"Where is she? Where is she? I cannot see her! Stephen! Stephen! where are you?" Mrs. Stonehouse, bewildered, pointed where Stephen's snow-white face and brilliant hair seemed in the streaming sunlight like ivory and gold:

"There! There!" He caught her arm mechanically, and putting his eyes to her wrist, tried to look along her pointed finger. In an instant he dropped her arm moaning:

"I cannot see her! What is it that is over me? This is worse than to be blind!" He covered his face with his hands and sobbed.

He felt light strong fingers on his forehead and hands; fingers whose touch he would have known had they been laid on him when he were no longer quick. A voice whose music he had heard in his dreams for two long years said softly:

"I am here, Harold! I am here! Oh! do not sob like that; it breaks my heart to hear you!" He took his hands from his face and held hers in them, staring intently at her as though his passionate gaze would win through every obstacle.

That moment he never forgot. Never could forget! He saw the room all rich in yellow. He saw Pearl, pale but glad-eyed, lying on a sofa holding the hand of her mother who stood beside her. He saw the great high window open, the lines of the covered stone balcony without, the stretch

an eel to the floor and ran over to her mother. Her new friend was all very well, but no one would do as well as mother when she was in trouble.

"Oh mother, mother! My Robinson had no beard!" Her mother stroked her face comfortingly as she answered:

"But, my dear, it is more than two years since you saw him. Two years and three months, for it was in June that we crossed." How the date thrilled Stephen. It verified her assumption. Mrs. Stonehouse did not notice but went on:

"His beard would have grown. Men wear beards up in the cold place where he was." Pearl kissed her; there was no need for words. Throwing herself again on Stephen's knees she went on with her questioning:

"But didn't you hear him?"

"I heard very little, darling. He was very weak. It was only the morning after the wreck, and he spoke in a whisper!" Then with an instinct of self-preservation she added: "But how could I learn anything by hearing him when he was a stranger to me? I had never even heard of Mr. Robinson!"

As she was speaking she found her own ideas, the proofs of her own conviction, growing. This was surely another link in the chain of proving that all three men were but one. But in such case Harold must know; must have tried to hide his identity!

She feared, with keen eyes upon her, to pursue the thought. But her blood began to grow cold and her brain to swim. . . . With an effort she went on:

"Ever since then I have not been allowed to go near him. Of course I must obey orders. I am waiting as patiently as I can. But we must ask the Doctor if he thinks his patient will see you—will let you see him—though he will not let me." This she added with a touch of what she felt: regret rather than bitterness. There was no room for bitterness in her full heart where Harold was concerned.

"Will you ask the Doctor now?" Pearl did not let grass

grow under her feet. For answer Stephen rang the bell, and when a servant appeared asked:

"Is Mr. Hilton in the house?"

"I think not, your Ladyship. He said he was going over to Port Lannoch. Shall I inquire if he left word at what time he would be back?"

"If you please!" The man returned in a few minutes with the butler, who said:

"Mr. Hilton said, your Ladyship, that he expected to be back by one o'clock at latest."

"Please ask him on his arrival if he will kindly come here at once. Do not let us be disturbed until then." The butler bowed and withdrew.

"Now," said Stephen, "as we have to wait till our tyrant comes, won't you tell me all that went on after The Man had left you?" Pearl brightened up at once. Stephen would have given anything to get away even for a while. Beliefs and hopes and fears were surging up in her heart, in her brain, till she felt choking. But the habit of her life in the last two years, gave her self-control. And so she waited, trying with all her might to follow the child's thoughts and to swing with them. Pearl went on at racing speed, forgetting her impatience and her anxiety in the rush of her narrative:

"Oh! we had such a lot to do. Daddy had a lot of papers written, giving money for all their lives to the men who came out in the boat, and all the others, and I had to sign them. He said it was from me. And he has built a whole big, big house for the sailors' orphans at Liverpool. He said that it was from me too; so I had to sign lots of things. It took me such a long time, because I don't write very easily, you know. And Mollie and her father, that is Mr. Watford you know, were in New York, and one day Mollie asked mother to let me come with her all by our two selves. And we went away in an automobile ever so far from Riverside Drive where our house is. Mollie said it was "down town." I don't know what that means, but Daddy says it is where

some men make their fortunes, and where most of them take the fortunes away from other people. But it was, oh! so full of people, and great tall houses that you couldn't see the tops of unless you leant back so far that you nearly fell down, and tramcars all ringing bells. We went into a great big room where there were a lot of young men in cages like the lions and tigers at the Zoo, and they had piles of money. Mollie showed a card to an Irishman in a uniform at the door, and he took us to one of the cages, and the young man when he saw the card took us into a room where there was a big table and scales, and little shovels and piles of money. And Mollie took the red cap from her pocket that The Man pulled from her head when he jumped into the sea after me. And she said:

"'I want you, sir, to see how many gold eagles will go into that!'" And then a lot of other men came round, and some of them were quite old and bald, and the young man got very red. And he took, oh! piles of gold and began to put it in Mollie's red cap with his little shovel, and when it got nearly full two of the other men held it up and then he went on filling it. And Mollie laughed and said: "Jee-ru-salem!" And the tam-o'shanter kept stretching, for it is knitted you know, and there was so much gold in it that they couldn't raise it from the table. And Mollie kept on saying:

"'Let her rip! Put in more!'" At last they had to stop because the coins were tumbling out, and the young man was going to put the tumbled ones back in the little sack, but Mollie said:

"'Guess, mister, you must corral them too!'" So when they took away the sack they emptied the cap on the table and they began weighing the money in the scales. And, the young man wrote how much it was on a piece of paper. And Mollie took a cheque from her pocket, and it was signed, and she got a pen and wrote on it, and put in some figures, and when I asked her what it was all about she handed it to me and I read on it:

"'A thankoffering to Snug Harbour in memory of a dear

life and a gallant gentleman,' and I knew that she meant *The Man*. It was the dear life and the gallant gentleman was *The Man*. And, oh! dear! I do so want to see him!" There was such a suspicious quiver in her lip that Stephen, hoping to keep her thoughts away from her own anxiety, said:

"Go on, dear, tell me all about it. And I hope Mollie will come here some day. I want to know her!" Pearl continued:

"Then one of the other men, he was the very oldest and the very baldest of them all, said that it was a very noble gift that Colonel Watford and his beautiful daughter had made. And Mollie laughed and said:

"'Come off!' And then we all came home; and Mother, and Daddy too, kissed Mollie."

As the narration of this episode had come to an end, Stephen, wishing to keep the child's mind occupied, asked:

"And was there anything more about?"—she stopped just in time, for unconsciously she was just going to say "Harold;" but she went on so quietly that the pause was not noticed—"The Man?"

"Oh yes! When we were out in San Raphael Daddy brought home one day from his office in San Francisco a beautiful gold medal, ever so big, and said that it was sent for John Robinson from the Royal Humane Society for his noble deed. And I was to give it to him from them. They had sent it to Daddy because he and Captain Tab—on the *Scoriac*, you know—had written to tell them all about it. We have it with us; Mother has it in her trunk. We didn't bring it to-day because the trunks weren't unpacked. And, oh! I do wish that Doctor would come. I want to see *The Man*!" She was so restless, marching about the room, that Stephen said:

"Would you like to go out on the balcony, darling; of course if Mother will let you? It is quite safe, I assure you, Mrs. Stonehouse. It is wide and open and is just above the flower borders, with a stone rail. You can see the road from it by which Mr. Hilton comes from Port Lannoch. He

be riding." Pearl yielded at once to the diversion. It did at any rate be something to do, to watch. Stephen opened the French window and the child ran out on the lawn.

When Stephen came back to her seat Mrs. Stonehouse said lightly:

"I am glad she is away for a few minutes. She has been brought up, and I am always afraid for her. She is so lively. And after all she is only a baby!"

"He is a darling!" said Stephen impulsively; and she took it. Mrs. Stonehouse smiled gratefully as she went.

She really loves Mr. Robinson; as indeed she ought! He does so much for us that it would be a pride and a privilege for us to show our gratitude. My husband, between lives, wanted to make him his partner. He tells me that, independent of our feeling towards him, he is just the man he wanted. And if indeed it was he who discovered the oil-field and organized and ruled Robinson City, it is proof that Mr. Stonehouse's judgment was sound. Now he is injured, and blind; and our little Pearl loves him. If indeed he be the man we believe he is, then we may be able to do something which all his millions cannot buy. He will be a son to us, and be as a son to us, and a brother to Pearl. He will be his eyes; and nothing but love and patience will follow his footsteps!" She paused, her mouth quivering; she went on:

"If it is not our Mr. Robinson, then it will be our pleasure to do all that is necessary for his comfort. If he is a man he will never want. . . . It will be a privilege to do so gallant a man from hardship. . . ." Here she came to a stop.

Stephen too was glad of the pause, for the emotion which her words and the remembrances which they evoked were doing her. Had not Harold been as her own father's son and her own brother! . . . She turned away, fearing lest her eyes should betray her.

All at once Mrs. Stonehouse started to her feet, her face suddenly white with fear; for a cry had come to their ears. A cry which even Stephen knew as Pearl's. The mother ran to the window.

The balcony was empty. She came back into the room, and ran to the door.

But on the instant a voice that both women knew was heard from without:

"Help there! Help, I say! The child has fainted. Is there no one there? And I am blind!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

LIGHT

HAROLD had been in a state of increasing restlessness. The month of waiting which Dr. Hilton had laid down for him seemed to wear away with extraordinary slowness; this was increased by the lack of companionship, and further by the cutting off of even the little episodes usual to daily life.

That morning he was additionally disturbed because the Doctor had gone early to Port Lannoch; and as he was the only person with whom he could talk, he clung to him with something of the helpless feeling of a frightened child to its nurse. Darkness has terrors of its own!

The day being full of sunshine the window was open, and only the dark-green blind which crackled and rustled with every passing breeze made the darkness of the room. Harold was dressed and lay on a sofa placed back, where the few rays of light thus entering could not reach him. His eyes and forehead were bandaged as ever. For some days the Doctor, who had his own reasons and his own purpose, had not taken them off; so the feeling of blind helplessness was doubly upon him. He knew he was blind; and he knew also that even if he were not he could not in his present condition see. The desire to tear off the bandages and test himself was at times appalling. Only his deep desire to recover his sight restrained his hands.

At length the cool autumn wind soothed him somewhat; it took his mind back to the snows and the strenuous life of the North, where at least his spiritual pain had been dor-

mant. And in not unhappy day-dreaming his memory faded in light sleep.

All at once he started up awake. His hearing had in the weeks of darkness grown abnormally acute, and some trifling sound had recalled him to himself. It might have been inspiration, but he seemed to be conscious of some presence in the room.

As he rose from the sofa, with the violent motion of a strong man startled into unconscious activity, he sent a shock of fear to the eager child who had strayed into the room through the open window. Had he presented a normal appearance, she probably would not have been frightened. She would have recognized his identity despite the changes, and have sprung to him so impulsively that she would have been in his arms before she had time to think. But now all she saw was a great beard topped with a mass of linen and lint, which obscured all the rest of the face and seemed in the gloom like a gigantic and ominous turban.

In her fright she screamed out. He in turn, forgetful for the moment of his intention of silence, called aloud:

"Who is that?" Pearl, who had been instinctively backing towards the window by which she had entered, and whose thoughts in her fright had gone back to her mother—refuge in time of danger—cried out:

"Mother, Mother! It is him! It is The Man!" She would have run towards him in spite of his forbidding appearance; but the shock had been too much for her. The little knees trembled and gave way; the brain reeled; and with a moan she sank down on the floor in a swoon.

Harold knew the voice the instant she spoke; there was no need for the enlightening words.

"Pearl! Pearl!" he cried. "Come to me, darling!" But as he spoke he heard her moan, and even the soft thud of her little body on the thick carpet. He guessed the truth and groped his way towards where the sound had been, for he feared lest he might trample upon her in too great eagerness. Kneeling by her he touched her little feet, and then

felt his way to her face. . . . Now when some action was required of him he felt in all its acuteness the helplessness of his blindness. In his confusion of mind he lost the direction of the door, and coming to the window pushed forward the flapping blind and went out on the balcony. He knew from the freshness of the air and the distant sounds that he was in the open. This disturbed him, as he wished to find some one who could attend to the fainting child. But as he had lost the way back to the room now, he groped along the wall of the Castle with one hand, whilst he held Pearl securely in the other. As he went he called out for help.

When he came opposite the window of the Mandarin room Mrs. Stonehouse saw him; she ran to him and caught Pearl in her arms. She was so agitated, so lost in concern for the child that she never even thought to speak to the man whom she had come so far to seek. She wailed over the child:

"Pearl! Pearl! What is it, darling? It is Mother!" She laid the girl on the sofa, and taking the flowers out of a glass began to sprinkle water on the child's face. Harold knew her voice and waited in patience. Presently the child sighed; the mother, relieved, thought of other things at last and looked around her.

There was yet another trouble. There on the floor, where she had slipped down, lay Lady de Lannoy in a swoon. She called out instinctively, forgetting for the moment that the man was blind, but feeling all the old confidence which he had won in her heart:

"Oh! Mr. Robinson, help me! Lady de Lannoy has fainted too, and I do not know what to do!" As she spoke she looked up at him and remembered his blindness. But she had no time to alter her words; the instant she had spoken Harold, who had been leaning against the window-sash, and whose mind was calmer since with his acute hearing he too had heard Pearl sigh, seemed to leap into the room.

"Where is she? Where is she? Oh! God, now am I blind indeed!"

It gave her a pang to hear him and to see him turn helplessly with his arms and hands outstretched as though he would feel for her in the air.

Without pause, and under an instinctive and uncontrollable impulse, he tore away the bandages from his eyes. The sun was streaming in. As he met it his eyes blinked and a cry burst from him; a wild cry whose joy and surprise pierced even through the shut portals of the swooning woman's brain. Not for worlds would she ever after have lost the memory of that sound:

"Light! light! Oh, God! Oh, God! I am not blind!"

But he looked round him still in terrified wonder:

"Where is she? Where is she? I cannot see her! Stephen! Stephen! where are you?" Mrs. Stonehouse, bewildered, pointed where Stephen's snow-white face and brilliant hair seemed in the streaming sunlight like ivory and gold:

"There! There!" He caught her arm mechanically, and putting his eyes to her wrist, tried to look along her pointed finger. In an instant he dropped her arm moaning:

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He felt light strong fingers on his forehead and hands; fingers whose touch he would have known had they been laid on him when he were no longer quick. A voice whose music he had heard in his dreams for two long years said softly:

"I am here, Harold! I am here! Oh! do not sob like that; it breaks my heart to hear you!" He took his hands from his face and held hers in them, staring intently at her as though his passionate gaze would win through every obstacle.

That moment he never forgot. Never could forget! He saw the room all rich in yellow. He saw Pearl, pale but glad-eyed, lying on a sofa holding the hand of her mother who stood beside her. He saw the great high window open, the lines of the covered stone balcony without, the stretch

of green sward all vivid in the sunshine, and beyond it the blue quivering sea. . . . He saw all but that for which his very soul longed; without to see which sight itself was valueless. . . . But still he looked, and looked; and Stephen saw in his dark eyes, though he could not see her, that which made her own eyes fill and the warm red glow on her face again. . . . Then she raised her eyes again, and the gladness of her beating heart seemed the answer to his own.

For as he looked he saw, as though emerging from a mist whose obscurity melted away with each instant, what was to him the one face in all the world. He did not think then of its beauty—that would come later; and besides no beauty of one born of woman could outmatch the memorised beauty which had so long held his heart. But that he had, so schooled himself in long months of gloomy despair, he would have taken her in his arms there and then; and, heedless of the presence of others, have poured out his full heart to her.

Mrs. Stonehouse saw and understood. So too Pearl, who though a child was a woman-child; softly they rose up to steal away. But Stephen saw them; her own instincts, too, told her that her hour had not come. What she hoped for must come alone! So she called to her guests:

“Don’t go! Don’t go, Mrs. Stonehouse. You know now that Harold and I are old friends, though neither of us knew it till this moment. We were brought up as . . . almost as brother and sister. Pearl, isn’t it lovely to see your friend . . . to see The Man again?”

She was so happy that she could only express herself, with dignity, through the happiness of others.

Pearl actually shrieked with joy as she rushed across the room and flung herself into Harold’s arms as he stooped to her. He raised her; and she kissed him again, and again, and put her little hands all over his face and stroked, very, very gently, his eyes, and said:

“Oh, I am so glad! And so glad your poor eyes are unblind again! May I call you Harold, too?”

"You darling!" was all he could say as he kissed her, and holding her in one arm went across and shook hands with Mrs. Stonehouse, who wrung his hand hard.

There was a little awkwardness in the group, for none of them knew what would be best to do next. In the midst of it there came a light knock at the door, and Mr. Hilton entered saying:

"They told me you wished to see me at once—Hulloa!" He rushed across the room and took Harold by the shoulders, turning his face to the light. He looked in his eyes long and earnestly, the others holding their breaths. Presently he said, without relaxing his gaze:

"Did you see mistily at first?"

"Yes!"

"Seeing at the periphery; but the centre being opaque?"

"Yes! How did you know? Why, I couldn't see—see"—pointing to Stephen—"Lady de Lannoy; though her face was right in front of me!"

Dr. Hilton took his hands from his patient's shoulders and shook him warmly by both hands:

"I am glad, old fellow! It was worth waiting for, wasn't it? But I say, it was a dangerous thing to take off those bandages before I permitted. However, it has done no harm! But it was lucky that I mistrusted your patience and put the time for the experiment a week later than I thought necessary. . . . What is it?" He turned from one to the other questioning; there was a look on Harold's face that he did not quite comprehend.

"H-s-h!" said the latter warningly. "I'll tell you all about it . . . some time!"

The awkward pause was broken by Pearl, who came to the Doctor and said:

"I must kiss you, you know. It was you who saved The Man's eyes. Stephen has told me how you watched him!" The Doctor was somewhat taken aback; as yet he was ignorant of Pearl's existence. However, he raised the child *in his arms* and kissed her, saying:

"Thank you, my dear! I did all I could. But he helped much himself; except at the very last. Don't you ever go and take off bandages, if you should ever have the misfortune to have them on, without the doctor's permission!" Pearl nodded her head wisely and then wriggled out of his arms and came again to Harold, looking up at him protectingly and saying in an old-fashioned way:

"How are you feeling now? None the worse, I hope, *Harold!*"

The man lifted her up and kissed her again. When he set her down she came over to Lady de Lannoy and held up her arms to be lifted:

"And I must kiss you again too, Stephen!" If Lady de Lannoy hadn't loved the sweet little thing already she would have loved her for that!

The door was opened, and the butler announced:

"Luncheon is served, your Ladyship."

After a few days when Mr. Stonehouse had arrived, Harold went over to Varilands to stay for a while. The elder never betrayed by word or sign that he recognised the identity of the other person of the drama of whom he had told him and who had come so accidentally into his life; and the younger was grateful to him for it. Harold went almost every day to Lannoy and sometimes the Stonehouses went with him; at other times Stephen paid flying visits to Varilands. She did not make any effort to detain Harold; she would not for worlds have made a sign which might influence him. She was full now of that diffidence which is to every woman who loves. She felt that she must wait; must wait even if the waiting lasted to her grave. She felt, as every woman does who really loves, that she had found her Master. She acknowledged it to herself, as every true brave woman does.

And Harold, to whom something of the same diffidence was an old story, got the idea that her reticence was a part of the same feelings whose violent phase and expression had

sent him out hopeless into the wilderness. And with the thought came the idea of his duty, implied in her father's dying trust: "Give her time! . . . Let her choose!" For him the clock seemed to have stopped for two whole years, and he was back at the time when the guardianship of his boy life was beginning to yield to the larger and more selfish guardianship of manhood.

Stephen, noticing that he did not come near her, as closely as she felt he might, and not realising his true reason—for when did love ever realise the true reason of the bashfulness of love?—felt a chillness which in turn reacted on her own manner.

And so these two ardent souls, who yearned for each other's love and the full expression of it, seemed as if they might end after all in drifting apart. Each thought that their secret was concealed. But both secrets were already known to Mrs. Stonehouse, who knew nothing; and to Mr. Stonehouse, who knew everything. Even Pearl had her own ideas, as was once shown in a confidence when they were alone in Stephen's bedroom after helping her to finish her dressing. After some coy leading up to the subject of pretty dresses, the child putting her little mouth to the other's ear whispered:

"May I be your bridesmaid, Stephen?" The woman was taken aback; but she had to speak at once, for the child's eyes were on her:

"Of course you will, darling. But I—I may never be married."

"You! You must! I know some one who will make you!" Stephen's heart beat hard and rapidly. The child's talk, though sweet and dear, was more than embarrassing. With, however, the desire to play with fire, which is a part of the nature of all women, she answered:

"You have some queer ideas, little one, in that pretty knowledge-box of yours."

"Oh! he never told me. But I know it all the same! And you know it too, Stephen!" This was getting too

close to be without danger; so she tried to divert the thought from herself:

"My darling, you may guess about other people, though I don't say you ought; but you must not guess about me!"

"All right!" then she held up her arms to be lifted on the other's knee and said:

"I want to whisper to you!" Her voice and manner were so full of feeling that somehow the other was moved. She bent her head down, and Pearl, taking her neck in her little palms in the way which is so dear to every woman's heart, said:

"I thought, oh! long ago, that I would marry him myself. But you knew him first. . . . And he only saved me. . . . But you saved him!" . . . And then she laid her head down on the throbbing bosom, and sobbed. . . .

And Stephen sobbed too.

Before they left the room, Stephen said to her, very gravely, for the issue might be one of great concern:

"Of course, Pearl dear, our secrets are all between ourselves!" Pearl crossed her two forefingers and kissed them. But she said nothing; she had sworn! Stephen went on:

"And, darling, you will remember too that one must never speak or even think if they can help it about any one's marrying any one else till they say so themselves! What is it, dear, that you are smiling at?"

"I know, Stephen! I mustn't take off the bandage till the Doctor says so!"

Stephen smiled and kissed her. Hand in hand, Pearl chattering merrily, they went down together to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XXXVI

GOLDEN SILENCE

EACH day that passed seemed to add to the trouble in the heart of each of these young people; to widen the growing difficulty of expressing themselves. To Stephen, who had accepted the new condition of things and whose whole nature had bloomed again under the sunshine of hope, it was the less intolerable; she had set herself to wait. But Harold felt the growth, and began to think that he would be unable to go through with it. There was over him, increasing with the growth of its own ravages, a sort of moral jaundice. That bitter hour, when the whole of creation was for him turned upside down, was having its after effect. But this is again of the very essence of tragedy. There are times when a single minute of militant common sense would turn sorrow into joy; and yet that minute, our own natures being the opposing forces, will not be allowed to pass freely.

Mrs. Stonehouse took their trouble so much to heart that she spoke to her husband about it, seriously advising that one or other of them should make an effort to bring things in the right way for their happiness. The woman was right sure of the woman's feeling. It is from men, not women, that women are able to hide their love. By side-glances and the unthinking moments women note and learn. The man knew already, from his own lips, of the man's passion; but his lips were sealed by his loyalty. He said earnestly:

"My dear, we must not interfere; we might cause them great trouble. I am as sure as you are that they really love each other. But they must win happiness by themselves and

through themselves alone. Otherwise it would never be to them what it ought to be; what it might be; what it will be!"

So these friends were silent, and the little tragedy developed. Harold's patience began to give way under the constant strain of self-suppression. Stephen tried to hide her love and fear under the mask of a gracious calm. This the other took for indifference.

At last there came an hour which was full of new, hopeless agony to Stephen. She heard Harold, in a fragment of conversation, speak to Mr. Stonehouse of the need of his returning to Alaska. That sounded like a word of doom. In her inmost heart she knew that Harold loved her; and had she been free she would have herself spoken the words which would have drawn the full truth to them both. But how could she do so, having the remembrance of that other episode; when, without the reality of love, she had declared herself. . . . Oh! the shame of it. . . . The folly! . . . The . . . And Harold knew it all! How could he ever believe that it was real this time! . . .

Again and again came back the remembrance of that bitter regret of her Aunt Laetitia, which no happiness nor no pain of her own had ever been able to efface from her mind:

"To love; and be helpless! To wait, and wait, and wait; with heart all aflame! To hope, and hope; till time seemed to have passed away, and all the world to stand still on your hopeless misery! To know that a word might open up Heaven; and yet to have to remain mute! To keep back the glances that could enlighten, to modulate the tones that might betray! To see all you hoped for passing away. . . .!"

At last, at last she seemed to understand the true force of pride; which has in it a thousand forces of its own, positive, negative, restrainful. Oh! how blind she had been! How little she had learned from the miseries that the other woman whom she loved had suffered! How unsympathetic she had been; how self-engrossed; how callous to the sensibilities of

others! And now to her, in her turn, had come the same suffering; the same galling of the iron! Must it be that the very salt of youth must lose its savour, before the joys of youth could be won! What, after all, was youth if out of its own inherent power it must work its own destruction! If youth was so, why not then trust the wisdom of age? If youth could not act for its own redemption . . .”

Here the very rudiment of a thought struck her and changed the current of her galling reason. A thought so winged with hope that she dared not even try to complete it! . . . She thought, and thought till the long autumn shadows fell round her. But the misty purpose had become real.

After dinner she went up alone to the mill. It was late for a visit, for the Silver Lady kept early hours. But she found her friend as usual in her room whose windows swept the course of the sun. Seeing that her visitor was in a state of mental disturbance such as she had once before exhibited, the hostess blew out the candles and took the same seat in the eastern window as she had occupied on the night which they both so well remembered. Stephen understood both acts, and was grateful afresh. The darkness would be a help to her in what she had to say; and the resumption of the old seat and attitude did away with the awkwardness of new confidence. Sufficient of the fast waning twilight remained to understand such looks as might help spoken words. During the weeks that had passed Stephen had kept her friend informed of the rescue and progress of the injured man. Since the discovery of Harold's identity she had allowed her to infer her feeling towards him. Shyly she had conveyed her hopes that all the bitter part of the past might be wiped out. To the woman who already knew of the love that had always been, but had only awakened to consciousness in the absence of its object, a hint was sufficient to build upon. As she put her arms round the girl she said softly; not in the whisper which implies doubt of some kind, but in the soft voice which conveys sympathy and trust:

"Tell me, dear child!"

Then in a half-conscious way, in words that came so shrinkingly through the darkness that they hardly reached the ear bent low to catch them, came Stephen's murmured thought:

"Oh if he only knew! And I can't tell him; I can't! I dare not! I must not! How could I dishonour him by bearing myself towards him as to that other . . . worthless . . . ! Oh! the happy, happy girls, who have mothers . . . !" All the muscles of her body seemed to shrink and collapse, till she sank an inert mass at the Silver Lady's feet.

But the other understood! There is this about age and suffering: at least they teach to understand! She still said no word; but her silence, and her quick breathing, and the loving clasping of her arms and the pressure of each individual finger-tip, brought understanding and comfort to the stricken girl at her feet. . . .

After a long, long pause; when Stephen's sobbing had quite died away; when each muscle of her body had become rigid on its returning way to normal calm; the Silver Lady began to talk of other matters and conversation became normal. Stephen's courage seemed somehow to be restored, and she talked brightly.

Before they parted the Silver Lady made a request. She said in her natural voice:

"Couldst thou bring that gallant man who saved so many lives, and to whom the Lord was so good in the restoration of his sight, to see me? Thou knowest I have made a resolution not to go forth from this calm place whilst I may remain. But I should like to see him before he returns to that far North where he has done such wonders. He is evidently a man of kind heart; perhaps he will not mind coming to see a lonely woman who is no longer young. There is much I should like to ask him of that land of which nothing was known in my own youth. Perhaps he will not mind seeing me alone." Stephen's heart beat furiously. She felt suffoca-

ting with new hope, for what could be but good from Harold's meeting with that sweet woman who had already brought so much comfort into her own life? She was abashed, and yet radiant; she seemed to tread on air as she stood beside her friend saying farewell. She did not wish to speak. So the two women kissed and parted.

Stephen took her way in the darkness back to Lannoy Castle like a woman in a dream.

It had been arranged that two days hence the Stonehouses and Harold were to again spend the day at Lannoy, coming before lunch and staying the night. Stephen was quiescent all the intervening time. How she could exist in such a negative state was a wonder to herself; but women have wonderful moments and wonderful powers.

When the Varilands' party arrived, Stephen told them of Sister Ruth's wish to see Harold. Pearl at once proffered a request that she also should be taken at some other time to see the Silver Lady. Harold acquiesced heartily; and it was agreed that some time in the late afternoon he should pay the visit. Stephen would bring him.

Strangely enough, she felt no awkwardness, no trepidation, as they rode up the steep road to the Mill.

When the introduction had been effected, and half an hour had been consumed in conventional small talk, Stephen, in obedience to a look from the Silver Lady, rose up. She said in the most natural way she could:

"Now, Sister Ruth, I will leave you two alone, if you do not mind. Harold can tell you all you want to know about Alaska; and perhaps, if you are very good, he will tell you some of his adventures! Good afternoon, dear. I wish you were to be with us to-night; but I know your rule. I go for my ride. Sultan has had no exercise for five days; and he looked at me quite reproachfully when we met this morning. *Au revoir*, Harold. We shall meet at dinner!"

When she had gone Harold came back from the door, and stood in the window looking east. The Silver Lady came and stood beside him. She did not seem to notice his face,

but in the mysterious way of women she watched him keenly. She wished to satisfy her own mind before she undertook her self-appointed task.

His eyes were turned towards the headland towards which Stephen on her white Arab was galloping at breakneck speed. He was too good a horseman himself, and he knew her prowess on horseback too well to have any anxiety regarding such a rider as Stephen. It was not fear, then, that made his face so white, and his eyes to have such an illimitable sadness.

The Silver Lady made up her mind. She knew this man; all her instincts were to trust him. She recognised a noble nature, with which truth would be her surest force.

"Come," she said, "sit here, friend; where another friend has often sat with me. From this you can see all the coastline, and all that thou wilt!" Harold put a chair beside the one she pointed out; and when she was seated he sat also. She began at once with a desperate courage:

"I have wanted much to see thee. I have heard much of thee, before thy coming." There was something in the tone of her voice which arrested his attention, and he looked keenly at her. Here, in the full light, her face looked sadly white; and he noticed that her lips trembled. He said with all the kindliness of his nature, for from the first moment he had seen her he had taken to her, her purity and earnestness and sweetness appealing to some aspiration within him:

"You are pale! I fear you are not well! May I call your maid? Can I do anything for you?" She waved her hand gently:

"Nay! It is nothing. It is but the result of a sleepless night and much thought."

"Oh! I wish I had known! I could have put off my visit; and I could have come any other time to suit you." She smiled gently:

"I fear that would have availed but little. It was of thy coming that I was concerned." Seeing his look of

amazement she went on quickly, her voice becoming more steady as she lost sight of herself in her task:

"Be patient a little with me, I pray thee. I am an old woman; and until recently it has been many and many years since the calm which I sought here has been ruffled. I had come to believe that for me earthly troubles were no more. But there has come into my life a new concern. I have heard so much of thee, and before thy coming." The recurrence of the phrase struck him. He would have asked how such could be, but he deemed it better to wait. She went on:

"I have been wishful to ask thy advice. But why should not I tell thee outright that which troubles me? I am not used, at least for these many years, to dissemble. I can but trust thee in all; and lean on thy man's mercy to understand, and to aid me!"

"I shall do all in my power, believe me!" said Harold simply. "Speak freely!" She pointed out of the window, where Stephen's white horse seemed on the mighty sweep of green sward like a little dot.

"It is of her that I would speak to thee!" Harold's heart began to beat hard; he felt that something was coming. The Silver Lady went on:

"Why thinkest thou that she rideth at such speed? It is her habit!" He waited. She continued:

"Doth it not seem to thee that such reckless movement is the result of much trouble; that she seeketh forgetfulness?" He knew that she was speaking truly; and somehow the conviction was borne upon him that she knew his secret heart, and was appealing to it. If it was about Stephen! If her disquiet was about her; then God bless her! He would be patient and grateful. The Quaker's voice seemed to come through his thought, as though she had continued speaking whilst he had paused:

"We have all our own secrets. I have had mine; and I doubt not that thou hast had, may still have, thine own. Stephen hath hers! May I speak to thee of her?"

"I shall be proud! Oh! madam, I thank you with all my

heart for your sweet kindness to her. I cannot say what I feel; for she has always been very dear to me!" In the pause before she spoke again the beating of his own heart seemed to re-echo the quick sounds of Stephen's galloping horse. He was surprised at the method of her speech when it did come; for she forgot her Quaker idiom, and spoke in the phrasing of her youth:

"Do you love her still?"

"With all my soul! More than ever!"

"Then, God be thanked; for it is in your power to do much good. To rescue a poor, human, grieving soul from despair!" Her words conveyed joy greater than she knew. Harold did not himself know why the air seemed filled with sounds that seemed to answer every doubt of his life. He felt, understood, with that understanding which is quicker than thought. The Silver Lady went on now with a rush:

"See, I have trusted you indeed! I have given away another woman's secret; but I do it without fear. I can see that you also are troubled; and when I look back on my own life and remember the trouble that sent me out of the world, a lonely recluse here in this spot far from the stress of life, I rejoice that any act of mine can save such another tragedy as my own. I see that I need not go into detail. You know that I am speaking truth. It was before you came so heroically on this new scene that she told me her secret. At a time when nothing was known of you except that you had disappeared. When she laid bare her poor bleeding heart to me, she did it in such wise that for an instant I feared that it was a murder which she had committed. Indeed, she called it so! You understand that I know all your secret; all her part in it at least. And I know that you understand what loving duty lies before you. I see it in your eyes; your brave, true eyes! Go! and the Lord be with thee!" Her accustomed idiom had returned with prayer. She turned her head away, and, standing up, leaned against the window. Bending over, he took her hand and said simply:

"God bless you! I shall come back to thank you either to-night or to-morrow; and I hope that she will be with me."

He went quickly out of the room. The woman stood for long looking out of the window, and following with tear-dimmed eyes the movement of his great black horse as he swept across country straight as the crow flies, towards the headland whither Stephen had gone.

Stephen passed over the wide expanse without thought; certainly without memory of it. Never in her after-life could she recall any thought that had passed through her mind from the time she left the open gate of the windmill yard till she pulled up her smoking, panting horse beside the ruin of the fisher's house. All the mechanical part of her brain worked, of course, as usual; and her horse knew, as ever, her guiding hand in her mad gallop, and went fearlessly, as though his rider and he were one.

There are such times in the lives of passionate natures, though they come but seldom. *Lacunæ* in the scrip of Time; when the individual is obliterated; when the Unseen Power holds the scales of happiness. To have passed such an epoch is to have lived, and not in vain. It is a baptism to the higher thought; the subjugation of self; the acknowledgment of the mystery of life. Such an epoch crowns sex; and, for good or ill, places man or woman in the true perspective of Eden.

Stephen was not unhappy! She was not happy in any conscious form. She was satisfied rather than dissatisfied. She was a woman! A woman who waited the coming of a man!

For a while she stood at the edge of the cliff, and looked at the turmoil of the tide churning on the rocks below. Her heart went out in a great burst of thankfulness that it was her hand which had been privileged to aid in rescuing so dear a life. Then she looked around her. Ostensibly it was to survey the ruined house; but in reality to search, even

then under her lashes, the whole green expanse sloping up to the windmill for some moving figure. She saw that which made her throat swell and her ears to hear celestial music. But she would not allow herself to think, of that at all events. She was all woman now; all-patient, and all-submissive. She waited the man; and the man was coming!

For a few minutes she walked round the house as though looking at it critically for some after-purpose. We are all hypocrites! The Lord in His wisdom has so ordained it; and perhaps, after all, the truest and most frequent of our prayers are the thoughts which we breathe with full intent, even whilst we are simulating with our bodies some purpose which we do not feel.

Then she went to the edge of the cliff, and went down the zigzag by which the man and horse had gone to their gallant task. At the edge of the flat rock she sat down and thought, and thought.

And through all her thoughts passed the rider who even now was thundering over the green sward on his way to her. In her fancy at first, and later in her ears, she could hear the sound of his sweeping gallop.

It was thus that a man should come to a woman!

She had no doubts now. Her quietude was a hymn of grateful praise!

The sound stopped. With all her ears she listened, her heart now beginning to beat furiously. The sea before her, all lines and furrows with the passing tide, was dark under the shadow of the cliff; and the edge of the shadow was marked with the golden hue of sunset.

And then she saw suddenly a pillar of shadow beyond the line of the cliff. It rested but a moment, moved swiftly along the edge, and then was lost to her eyes.

But to another sense there was greater comfort: she heard the clatter of rolling pebbles and the scramble of eager feet. Harold was hastening down the zigzag.

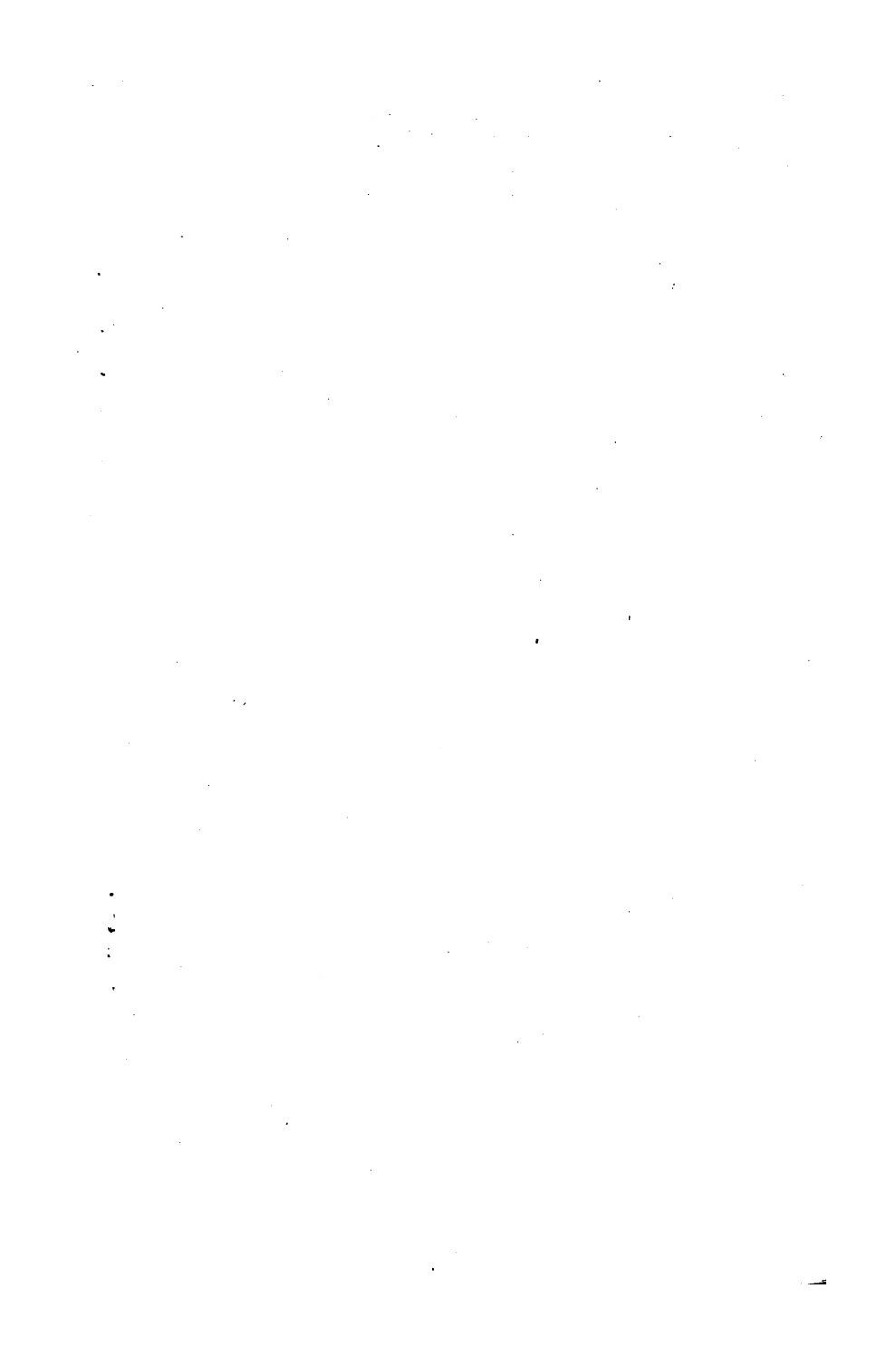
Oh! the music of that sound! It woke all the finer instincts of the woman. All the dross and thought of self

passed away. Nature, sweet and simple and true, reigned alone. Instinctively she rose and came towards him. In the simple nobility of her self-surrender and her purpose, which were at one with the grandeur of nature around her, to be negative was to be false.

Since he had spoken with the Silver Lady Harold had swept through the air; the rush of his foaming horse over the sward had been but a slow physical progress, which mocked the onswEEP of his mind. In his rapid ride he too had been finding himself. By the reading of his own soul he knew now that love needs a voice; that a man's love, to be welcomed to the full, should be dominant and self-believing.

When the two saw each other's eyes there was no need for words. He came close, opening wide his arms. She flew to them.

In that divine moment, when their mouths met, both knew that their souls were one.



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*M. G.
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