WORTH WHILE

F. F. MONTRÉSOR

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'That is the doctrine, simple, ancient, true;
Such is life's trial, as old earth smiles and knows.
If you loved only what were worth your love,
Love were clear gain, and wholly well for you;
Make the low nature better by your throes!
Give earth yourself, go up for gain above.

BROWNING.

WORTH WHILE

BY

F. F. MONTRÉSOR

AUTHOR OF 'INTO THE HIGHWAYS AND HEDGES'
'THE ONE WHO LOOKED ON,' ETC.

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DEDICATION

TO M. H. R. STRACEY.

My dear Mary,

I wish this tiny book to have your name at the beginning, firstly, because I know that you like one of these stories beyond its deserts; secondly, because you alone will recognise the little red-haired girl who has found her way into it.

You say that you think that these unanswered letters are too sad, in spite of the title (which is of your finding) of the story.

Well, then, I will put a letter, which will reach its destination on the first page, and will send you a message which I know will find an answer.

Your affectionate sister,

F. F. MONTRÉSOR.

PREFACE

It has occurred to me that in Miss Dougall's novel *Beggars All* there is a minor incident of a clerk who writes a letter to himself.

I do not think that my small story is guilty of plagiarism, yet I should like to acknowledge here any possible suggestion which may have come to me through a book which I have read with great pleasure.

F. F. M.

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ONE buildeth; and behold
In that strange land
Which yet is nigh to us
His castles stand
With their foundations sure.

II

He giveth; thinking not
To find again.
His empty, eager hands
Are free from stain
To touch what some have missed.

III

He dreameth? Who shall say?
Perchance we dream,
Who walk with earth-bound eyes,
And idle deem
Those things Death handleth not.

* * * *

'I have now related to you everything that has occurred to me since last Sunday.

'Please give my love to all my brothers and sisters.—Your affectionate son,

'SAMUEL GREEN.'

The writer put down his pen with a pleased half-tender smile, when he had written the last words of his letter in a neat, clerkly hand.

'It will be a post later than usual this week,' he said to himself; 'I had so much of importance to tell.'

He folded the sheets carefully, addressed the envelope to

'*Mrs. Green*,

10 *Queensland Avenue, W.*,'

and put it into his pocket unstamped.

It was a long letter. It is probable that few mothers receive so detailed an account of their son's doings as that epistle contained,—an account as faithfully minute as Pepys' diary.

Samuel Green was a middle-aged city clerk. He had lately enjoyed an increase of salary, and now, like Goldsmith's parson, considered himself 'passing rich.'

In a silent, quiet way, he was distinctly proud of his position.

Samuel had been brought up in a workhouse, from whence in due time he had been started in life, with a Bible, a respectable place, and some rather severe

advice, which he had received with stolid propriety. He had been an 'average' boy. 'Average ability,' 'average conduct,' 'average health,' was written in the report against his name. He had been one of the children whom it is difficult to remember among a number.

Apparently he had no distinguishing characteristic.

He had been found in a destitute condition when he was three years old.

He was then a sandy-haired, plain child, with a squat figure, light eyes, and a freckled face. He had settled down in the workhouse without any tears; at sixteen he had left that dreary institution without any regret. He was missed by no one.

Samuel had been dull at lessons, but he had only got into one serious scrape

during his school-days. He had managed to secrete, and had been seen to post, a letter, contrary to regulations. Any letters written by the workhouse school-children were supposed to be overlooked by the authorities.

The master had regarded the boy with distrust from that time forward.

'You have always pretended that you have no friends outside. I am afraid you are sly,' he had remarked.

Samuel had wriggled and giggled awkwardly; no one knew how much he resented the imputation. Unfortunately he was thin-skinned.

His honesty was never questioned after he left the 'Union'; neither did any one interfere again with his weekly letters. They became more manly, and showed more intelligence as time went on.

Samuel ceased to regard grown-up people as his natural enemies. The distrust that he had somehow imbibed with 'charity soup' wore off. He began to take an evident interest in his master's business. He wrote about 'our affairs' and 'our boss.'

He admired and liked 'our boss,' and was very loyal to him. 'Our boss' gave him lessons in book-keeping. Samuel was grateful, though it was only in his Sunday letter that he managed to express his feelings. 'Our boss' had a pretty daughter, who was presently mysteriously alluded to as 'she.'

Samuel was nineteen when 'she' was first mentioned.

The pretty daughter married a linen-draper, and Samuel's letters became despairing and blotted. Then there was

an interval of two months, when he did not write at all; after that he began again and went on more steadily than ever.

His youth passed; he grew rather stout, and his letters became more precise in their wording. He evidently took some pride in his composition and penmanship. His affectionate mother would hardly recognise the sandy-haired child of the workhouse if she were to see him now.

'The quietest and kindest gentleman as ever was,' his landlady said of Mr. Green. The last-named quality had grown, and slowly developed with increasing years. Samuel had always been slow about everything.

On this particular Sunday he went out for his usual stroll when he had finished his letter. He carefully locked his door and took the key with him.

He had not many possessions, but such as they were, he set great store by them.

He was generous, and gave shyly and by stealth from what, to many people, would have been a scanty income; therefore he had seldom a shilling to spare for a present to himself.

But occasionally he bought something,—some china ornament perhaps, or a cheap print to hang on his wall.

These things were to him what an 'old master' might be to a rich collector.

Wealth is, after all, largely symbolic. Samuel Green was by no means a poor man.

He gave the landlady's child a penny on his way out, and gave it with a pleasant little air of patronage. The child looked after him with an expression of admiration and awe.

The squat middle-aged clerk, with the sandy hair and kind, broad face, was a Crœsus in her estimation. He was the only one among her mother's lodgers who ever gave pennies.

Presently Samuel got into a 'bus. It felt comfortably warm after the cold outside. He enjoyed being in a 'bus. He liked to sit in a corner, to listen snugly to bits of conversation, and to watch his fellow-creatures.

He was an observant person, but he differed from some students of humanity, in that he was singularly humble-minded, and not at all given to generalising.

At the corner of Edgware Road the 'bus stopped, and a girl in a round drab cape, and a skimpy drab dress got into it.

She stood holding on to the rail, and Samuel Green observed her with unusual

sympathy, because her clothes bore the unmistakable stamp of 'charity.'

He was always sorry for charity-children.

The girl had bright golden-red hair, that curled wherever the institution scissors allowed it to. Her complexion was brilliant, and the bit of her neck that showed above the uncompromising line of the ugly cape was as white as the petals of a white rose. She had a huge laundry-basket on her arm, and was panting from the effort of lugging it in. She was flustered and embarrassed, for the passengers looked sourly at her when she planted her washing on their feet.

One of her wrists was badly chapped; the sharp frost had made it bleed.

An old woman observed on the fact aloud.

'Your 'and's a sight. You should wrap it up,' she said. The girl having vainly endeavoured to cover the cut with her too short sleeve, plunged her hand into the bosom of her dress (the drab frocks were evidently pocketless) and grew very red over a fruitless search for a handkerchief.

Samuel Green touched her foot with his own, and unobtrusively held out a big cotton bandana. The girl stared doubtfully, then thanked him with a friendly smile.

'I 'll wash it when I get back, and send it home clean, sir,' said she. 'If you 'll kindly tell me where to post it to.'

Her features were irregular, but her face was wonderfully merry when she smiled, and childishly woe-begone when she looked sad.

'Mr. Green, 10 Adela Terrace, Tottenham Court Road,' said Samuel.

He wished to ask her what 'Home' she belonged to, but he refrained. He reflected that the girl had probably been told not to talk to strangers. This little city clerk had the instincts of a gentleman.

The girl seemed to enjoy her drive when she had recovered her composure and breath. Her brown eyes were full of pleasure.

'I should not think that the teacher would find any difficulty in remembering *her* name,' thought Samuel. 'She is evidently full of life and fun. She looks as if she often laughed. Dear me! I don't remember that I ever laughed when I was her age.'

When Oxford Street was reached she picked up her huge basket again, and

with a funny little attempt at a curtsey to Mr. Green, made her way to the end of the 'bus.

'Quick now!' cried the conductor. He helped her down without stopping the 'bus, for the roads were frozen, and the strain on the horses terrible. The next moment there was a shout and a terrified scream. The basket lay overturned on the road. The little charity girl had lost her footing, and had fallen, apparently under the hoofs of a huge dray-horse.

Samuel was out of the 'bus, and was shoving his way through the quickly collected crowd, with a promptness which afterwards surprised himself. Some one had dragged the girl up. Her hat had been crushed, and the red gold of her hair was powdered with frozen snow.

She had fainted from fright and pain. Her left arm had been broken under a wheel, but her face was unscratched.

'Is she dead?' said Samuel.

'Lor' no! She's coming to already. Does she belong to you, sir?' said the man in whose arms the girl lay. 'You'd best take her straight to the hospital.'

'So I will,' said Samuel.

He was a man of few words, and it did not seem necessary to explain, just then, that the girl did *not* belong to him.

It was after this incident that the story, which was the story of his life, began to unfold itself in his weekly letters.

They were all put into pillar-boxes unstamped. They all reached their goal in the dead-letter office. There they lay for a time, like bodies in their graves, and then were destroyed.

That had been the fate of each one of the candid confessions to 'Mrs. Green' from the first, written in childish loneliness from the workhouse, to the very last, but one, of all.

Samuel never (except when he was in France) put his address at the top of the sheet.

He did not wish his tale to be returned.

I suppose that he knew well enough that his 'mother' was a figment, woven of the stuff that ungranted longings are made of. He knew also what was the real fate of his affectionate epistles, for he was no madder than the majority of us.

But he never dwelt on that knowledge when he wrote, any more than we dwell on the physical side of death. After all,

we are most of us, thank Heaven! more or less of Idealists.

The letters show a side of the worthy and respectable clerk's character that few people guessed at. Therefore I give them for what they are worth, just as they were written.

He may seem rather a fool to some of you, but, for my part, I cannot but feel a tender respect for him.

'*Jan.* 14*th*, 1890.

'My dear Mother,—This has been a most eventful week. Mr. Bell has opened his new premises in Tottenham Court Road, and the increase in my salary now makes it possible for me to lay by a matter of fifteen pounds per annum.

'As you know, the possibility of a workhouse in my old age has always

been a bugbear to me. It is quite unreasonable of me to admit such a fear, for there is no prospect that it will be fulfilled.

'I have, however, been unable to forget that it was once proved to me that the majority of the children born and brought up in a workhouse drift back to it sooner or later. The pauper taint seems to cling to them. In my present respected, and I may say highly responsible, position, it would seem absurd of me to feel pained at the recollection of my boyhood.

'You will bid me consider how far I have climbed since the day when the Union gates closed on me. Besides, I was not *born* in the Union. I will not believe that there is any vagrant blood in me. All my instincts are respect-

able. I feel convinced that an entirely unmerited catastrophe forced you to desert me.

'Among the thousands of children brought up by the State, some must come of estimable, though unfortunate, parents.

'I feel a pity for such children, which is almost foolishly strong, and which led me to visit St. Mary's Hospital last visiting day. The girl I went to see had been hurt in an accident, of which I was a witness.

'I cannot but remember how, when I was laid up with a scalded leg in the infirmary, I envied the patients who received letters and visits.

'The remembrance overcame my reluctance to enter a public institution.

'The girl (her name is Letty Colby) was up, and was walking about the ward

with her left arm in a sling. She was naturally surprised to see me, and thought that I had come to recover my handkerchief.

'I felt somewhat shy at first. You know that I never find it easy to talk to people.

'Letty has a frank and open manner, which makes it rather pleasant to converse with her. She is singularly merry, and she seemed very happy.

'Her father was a Frenchman, and a strolling juggler; her mother was an Irish country girl. Letty said that she should be very sorry when her arm got well, for all the nurses were so kind to her, and she found it "great fun" to be allowed to amuse some of the patients.

'She has evidently already made many friends.

'She sat on a low stool by the fire while she talked to me, and rocked a cradle with her foot. There was a miserable wizened little baby in the cradle. It woke up after a time, and when Letty bent over it, it clutched at her short bright hair with its little waxy feeble fingers, and Letty laughed and blushed.

'I have thought of that several times since.'

'*Jan. 21st.*

* * * *

'Letty tells me that she will be discharged from the hospital to-morrow. The matron of the Orphanage will come to fetch her. Her time at the Home has nearly expired. She will be sixteen next week. The matron wishes her to go into service, but Letty herself longs to get an engagement at the Christmas Pantomime.

'I feel reluctant to lose sight of this girl. There is a freshness about her which seems to impart a sort of charm to any place where she is. No doubt they will miss her very much when she leaves the "Home."

'Her smallest action has a curiously unusual interest. I am unable to help watching her when she fetches a chair or unties her apron. It is extremely pretty to see her with a baby. I have never noticed that other people are interesting in the same way. This girl is, in fact, entirely different from any other person, —that is her peculiarity.'

'*Feb. 4th.*

'MY DEAR MOTHER,—I did not write to you last week. There is something unsatisfying in letters. At my age a man

should be bound by human ties; he should have children to cling to him, and a wife to warm his heart. I wish that I could say, "My wife," "My boy," "My little girl." It is all very well to write to an imaginary mother, but I cannot invent a wife.

'Letty has gone into service. She has none of the obstinacy and sullen independence that possessed me when I was a boy.

'She tells me that she "sobbed as if her heart would break" when she said good-bye to the teachers and girls at the Orphanage; yet she has been longing for her time to be up all this year.

'I cannot quite understand this.'

'*March* 1*st.*

* * * *

'Letty has left her place and has got

an engagement at the "Savoy." She says she "could not bear to vex matron," and that therefore she went out as under-housemaid, but that she never intended to stick to that sort of thing.

'She has a very pretty voice, and a very quick ear.

'She is living with a respectable widow, a cousin of my landlady. I persuaded her to go there, for Letty is very young to live by herself. She is always easily persuaded, and I admire her ready bright way of taking a friend's advice.

'In spite of the great difference in age and experience, I think I may say that Letty and I are friends. The only thing that I have to complain of is, that she makes an unnecessary number of friends. *One* is surely enough. That is, if he is thoroughly honest, and steady, with a

sufficient knowledge of the world, and old enough to be a real protection to her.'

'*June* 14*th*.

* * * *

'I have been to pay my usual Sunday visit to Letty. She had on a dark blue dress; it fitted her quite close, in the way that ladies' dresses fit them. Her hair has grown long, and she wears it tied up behind with a black ribbon. She looks quite grown-up now, and she has become slim and tall. It would be difficult for an ordinary acquaintance to recognise her, had he not seen her since she was at the Orphanage.

'Letty talks with her hands as well as with her eyes and her mouth, but *that* she always did, even when she was in the 'bus. I remember that I noticed

it when she thanked me for my handkerchief.

'She had a tea-party to-day, and she made merry jokes and sang songs to us.

'She insisted on giving me the most comfortable chair. She is always very coaxing and gentle in her manner to me. She says that I was so kind to her when she was a child, as if that were a hundred years ago.

'It is right and nice of her to be grateful, but I sometimes wish that she would treat me with less respect; I am not so very old yet.

'Not that I want to be placed on a level with that young ass who was hanging about her this evening. I almost think that I had better give her a word of advice about him. He stares at her offensively. It is absurd to allow him

to come to tea with her every Sunday. Why should he? I have heard too that he fetches her from the theatre. Now that is preposterous! If Letty wants an escort, I can easily manage to go for her myself. There is no occasion to trouble him in the matter.'

'*June* 21*st.*

* * * *

'I spoke to Letty about that young counter-jumper.

'She would not be serious, and I lost my temper. I shall not go to see her next Sunday.

'Letty is getting altogether out of my sphere.'

'*July* 5*th.*

* * * *

'I went to the Savoy last week. It is

impossible to observe any one else when Letty is on the stage. As I remarked long ago, Letty is quite unlike other girls in the way in which she holds one's attention, and enlivens any place in which she happens to be. Now that is clearly not the sort of person who would naturally be a friend of mine.

'There has never been the least spark of originality about *me*. It is very obvious that we had better part and go our different ways. I told Letty this on the Sunday before last.

'I think I will write to her and tell her so again. Perhaps she will not agree. Perhaps she will write in return. If Letty should write in return, it would be something to keep always.

'No girl has ever written to me.'

(Unfortunately Letty did not write to Mr. Green in return. She had other things to think of just then.)

'*Oct. 24th.*

'My dear Mother,—I have not seen Letty since June, but last night I dreamt of her.

'She came beating against the door of my room. I knew that she was there. I wanted to open to her, but I couldn't get up. I knew in my dream that her hands were bleeding, and that horrified me, and filled me with pity. I struggled hard to get to her, and woke myself by throwing myself out of bed. The dream haunts me. What shall I do for this child?—Your affectionate son,

'Samuel Green.'

This letter is written with less precision

than the former ones, and from October 24th I notice a change in the writer.

All the early epistles contained funny little references to brothers and sisters. The boy had revelled in the invention of a family. Later he evidently became ashamed of such childishness, and messages to Frank and Rose and Mildred and Arthur cease. He only (after he enters manhood), sends love to 'brothers and sisters' in a lump.

Then 'Letty' comes into his life, and from that moment his imaginary 'mother' becomes shadowy as smoke. He writes as people write journals; the craving for an answer is lessened. Yet 'Letty' is by no means the whole gist of the letters till we reach October 24th. Before that date there are long passages (which I have cut out) about his business, about other

people, about daily occurrences. Samuel Green was emphatically a man of routine, noted for regularity, taking a pleasant pride and interest in small duties.

'A worthy, practical soul. Stick him in a groove, and he will run to and fro in it till the day he dies,' 'the boss' had once said of him, and Samuel would himself have agreed with the 'boss's' estimate.

After October he writes of Letty only. His other interests seem to have paled and dwindled before his anxiety for her.

'*Oct.* 31*st.*

'My dear Mother,—I have asked the "boss" for a fortnight's holiday, and I have drawn £10 from the bank. I am going to look for Letty. I find that she has left her lodgings, and thrown up her engagement at the Savoy, and no one

knows what has become of her. No one cares so much as I care.

'Letty has no father or mother; I mean, God helping me, to stand for both. She has no brothers, but I will be as good as the best brother that ever had a sister to defend.

'Last night I dreamt of her again. I made a desperate effort and got to the door, and threw it open. It was not Letty who stood outside, but a man with nail-marks on his hands and feet. You know that I am not a religious person. I always detested the Bible-lessons at the workhouse school, and I do not like churches; they remind me of charities.

'Yet in my dream I fell at his feet, for it suddenly struck me that he too went through the world looking for the lost.'

'Rue St. Joseph,
Paris, *Nov.* 14*th.*

'I have discovered that Letty was on the Calais boat two months ago. The captain remembers her. She told him that she had got an engagement at a small hotel in Paris. The pay was extraordinarily good. The captain does not know the name of the hotel, but I shall search till I find it. I have drawn another £10. This depresses me. I do not like spending my savings. I feel as if I were pulling down a wall, which I had slowly built up, between myself and a hungry tide.

'*Those bred in a workhouse generally drift back to it sooner or later.* I shall drift back to it.

'I wake at night and remember that my savings are melting, but I cannot

give her up just yet. One can live on very little in Paris, and I was never a large eater. I may find her to-morrow.

'In fact I *must* find her to-morrow, for my fortnight's leave will then be up, and I cannot afford to be absent longer.'

'*Nov. 28th.*

'Mr. Bell writes that he cannot extend my leave of absence any more. I must positively return at once, or he will be obliged to fill my place.

'He has been extremely kind. He has stretched a point to keep the position open to me.

'He writes of my long service, and of the personal esteem he has for me. I cannot bear to think that some one else

may take my stool in the office. It is my place in the world, that I have won for myself.

'I had no good starting-point; I laboured under a disadvantage. I had only average abilities. Yet I have reached a most respectable and responsible position; it would be clearly absurd to throw it up. People who are born heirs to independence and comfort, with fathers to push their interests, and mothers to cosset them, do not know what it means to have to cut out one's own foot-hold, on pain of slipping down again into the pauperism from which one has risen.

'I cannot afford to slip.

'I must give up this wild-goose chase, and go home to-morrow, whether I have found her or no.'

'*Dec.* 12*th.*

'I am dismissed. Of course I knew I should be. It can't be helped. I am a great fool no doubt, but I have a right to be a fool if I choose.

'Nobody's bread but my own depends on my sanity.

'For my own—a man doesn't live by what he puts into his mouth; one's real life is something deeper than one guesses at first.

'There 's something about that in the Bible, I think, but I do not remember the words.

'I have not eaten any meat this week; but we eat too much as a rule, and I was growing too stout.

'He must be a poor cur who won't risk his own foot-hold in the world in order to save his friend.

'Perhaps she is happy and safe, and does not wish to be found. In that case I shall go quietly home, and I shall never tell any one why I went to Paris.

'That will be my secret. If I have nothing else, I have my own secrets. What a scrape I got into when I was a boy, because I would not tell to whom I had sent your letter. Well, I shall be in a worse hobble now, for my savings are melting so fast, and my place has gone. Nevertheless, I will find Letty.'

'*Dec. 25th.*

'I did not find Letty. She came to the place where I was resting. I woke to see her. That is the extraordinary part of it.

'I have searched for her by day and by night. I have felt giddy with watching the faces on twenty stages. I loathe

pirouetting women with brown eyes, that are bright, but never soft and pleasant like Letty's. I have been taken up by a gendarme, because I forced my way into a house where I heard a girl scream, and, after all, Letty came to me.

'I went into the big church that is called the "Madeleine" this evening. I was tired, and rather faint. The heavy smell of incense was soothing, and it made me less hungry.

'There was a sort of droning music going on, and priests in odd clothes were bobbing about at the far end of the building. French people are all either idolaters or pagans, I believe. I suppose they were worshipping their wax images.

'I wasn't going to join in their mummery, but it was a nice warm place to rest in, and I presently fell fast asleep. I dreamt

that same dream that I 've dreamt a dozen times before. When I woke, Letty was still there.

'The church was lit by lots of little lights, but it was dim in the corners.

'Letty was kneeling by a wooden chair in a corner, with her back to me. I recognised her plaits of red hair at once, but her face was buried in her hands. She was whispering to herself, and her shoulders moved as if she was sobbing.

'I moved from my place and sat down close behind her, but I was in no hurry to disturb her.

'I had been very bold while I was fruitlessly hunting for her, but now I began to say to myself, "What right had I to follow her to France?' It had never occurred to me that I had really no right at all.

'You do not think of rights when a woman comes knocking at the door of your heart, and calls to you to help her; but I could never explain to Letty that that was what she had done.

'Letty was nicely dressed, and had gloves on her hands. She rose from her knees after a time, and sat very still, looking straight before her. I edged my chair a pace or two to the left, so that I could see her side-face.

'She was not starved, anyhow. Her colour was more delicate than it had been, and she was thinner, but she was prettier than before. Yet the expression on her face startled me. It seemed to me that all the childishness had gone out of it.

'I did not speak to her. I just waited for what should come next.

'One struggles and strives, one strains

every muscle to get something, and then there comes a moment when one feels as if another hand were on the reins.

'I cannot at all explain this; but I felt that other hand then, a stronger hand than mine, so I let it guide.

'Suddenly I saw Letty start, and turn quite white. She muttered something, and glanced round as if she were terrified.

'Then she caught up her black shawl and threw it over her head and hair, and slipped quickly behind a pillar. I knew that she was hiding from some one, but she need not have been afraid, for *I* was there to take care of her. Then she moved quickly towards a side-door, and I got up and followed her.

'She was trembling so that she could not push it open. I put my hand above hers and pushed it for her.

'Then we both stood at the top of the white steps looking down on the gay, clean streets, and I caught her arm and said, "Letty!"

'Letty's lips moved as if she would have screamed, but she controlled herself. Her eyes flashed with a half-desperate, half-frightened expression, as if she were some wild animal whom the hunter's hand had closed on. She turned round on me with that look (and I am glad that I have never wronged any woman, for I think it would haunt me always if I had), and then quite suddenly she gave a little sobbing laugh, and clung to me with both her hands. "I don't know what you've been doing, Letty," said I; "but it seems as if Paris hasn't agreed with you. You're frightened to death of something. I've come to take care of you, for I don't think

France is a place for you to be in alone. You are coming with me now, and that's all about it.'

'*January 1st*, 1891.

'A great deal has happened since last January. I can hardly believe that I have known Letty for only a year. She looks much more than a year older. I took her safely back. I sold my watch and chain and my boots (for one can very well walk in slippers), and I found I had just enough money to take us both to London.

'I am naturally inclined to be over-cautious (which, I fear, is a despicable trait in a man), but I did not allow Letty to guess that I had any fears, or that I had spent my last penny. It is well to think of consequences as a rule, but I

thank God every day that I did not let them weigh in the scale when I stayed in Paris.

'I cannot put the whole of Letty's story on paper. Indeed, I do not know the whole of it. What I do know is quite enough. It seemed to turn my blood into fire when I first heard it.

'Letty says that she got into a "silly scrape" after I ceased to come to tea with her on Sundays. The scrape had something to do with the manager of a provincial company. I do not understand all the details. Then she quarrelled with her landlady about the number of visitors she had on Sunday, and that made her very unhappy. Letty is miserable when she quarrels with any one! she cannot bear disapproval. Then she saw an advertisement in a paper, and was seized

with a desire to cut all her difficulties with one stroke, and to go right away.

'She answered the advertisement and went!

'An old woman met her at Calais, and made much of her. No doubt she was delighted with Letty's fresh, robust charm. Letty usually takes easily to strangers, but she hated this woman from the moment she set eyes on her. She believed herself to have accepted the situation of "lady assistant" at a small hotel in Paris. She was to keep the accounts behind the bar.

'They reached Paris; but there was no bar at the house at which they arrived, and it was *not* a hotel.

'Letty has a smattering of French, but she did not understand all that was said to her. From the moment she was under

that roof her mistrust increased. I cannot be thankful enough for that!

'She says she could not and would not eat there, that a sort of horror possessed her, that she was wild to get away again.

'I think the air must have been full of iniquities, and that my girl's purity must have taken fright instinctively. Letty is half French and half Irish. The French blood, no doubt, leads her into trouble; but she is *really* good.

'She discovered, before she had been ten minutes in the house, that her purse was gone. She was convinced that it had been stolen, but she pretended to think that she had left it at the station. Letty is impulsive, but she is also ready-witted. She may walk into a trap, but she is not helpless in an emergency.

'They told her that the loss was "no

matter," for that she could soon get three times the sum she had dropped. She cried and stormed; and at last a man (who was, apparently, the master of the house) said that he would take the little "Anglaise" back to the station to look for her property to content her.

'Letty dried her eyes and went with him, apparently quite reassured. She said, "I talked to him all the way while we walked, and he was very pleased with me," which I can imagine.

'When they got to the station she asked him to explain matters to the guard for her. While he was speaking, she turned suddenly and ran as if for her life!

'She was utterly penniless; she did not know where to go next, or what to do.

'She would have starved, had it not been for the kindness of an English-

woman, who found her under her porch, and who took her in. This English lady is a painter of pictures, and she was attracted by the bright colour of Letty's hair.

'She gave Letty food and lodgings; and Letty stood or sat quite still for her to paint from, nearly all the day long.

'Letty felt safe with Miss Harrenden, but she got miserable and home-sick, and she did not like her hostess as much as she felt she ought to.

'You see Letty has been a good deal petted and admired, and Miss Harrenden does not seem to have taken to her in the way that most of us do.

'Letty stayed some time at the studio, for her colour, and her neck, and arms, and hair, were just exactly what Miss Harrenden wanted for her picture. I do

not like to think of any one making use of my girl's beauty in that way. It makes me feel foolishly angry to think that some one will buy that picture. It ought to be *mine*, or else no one's.

'There was a Monsieur Jules who came often to see Miss Harrenden. Letty says he was good and kind, and though I do not trust any of these foreigners, I have noticed that Letty never likes a bad man.

'Miss Harrenden spoke unkindly to Letty about this gentleman, and Letty, who is very sensitive, said she would not stay any longer.

'She says she felt very forlorn, and more unhappy than she had ever been before.

'She went to the Madeleine to pray, because it was Christmas Day (I had

forgotten it was Christmas Day, but Letty is more devout than I am), and while she was kneeling a great terror came over her. She looked up, and saw the old woman whom she has such a strange horror of come in. Letty said, "She saw me too, though I tried to hide. It came over me that I was all alone, and that she was too strong for me, and that she *would get me in the end.* But when you came between us her power snapped! I wanted to cry for thankfulness."

'Now I do not quite understand all this, but one thing I know, her trust in me is a very wonderful and precious thing.'

And with that this very long letter (the longest Mr. Green ever wrote) ends. One can only hope that 'Letty' was as

grateful as she ought to have been, but I do not think it struck the writer that he had done anything at all remarkable.

One would like to hear more about himself, but 'Letty' is always in the central place now.

He does, however, mention by the way that he rather misses his old room, with all his possessions about it—from which I gather that he can no longer afford to live in his former quarters.

'*January* 18*th*.

'The work I am doing now is not so well paid or so responsible as that which I gave up. I have chosen, and I do not complain. There are some things for which it is more than worth while to throw away everything else, with both hands, if need be.

'Letty has fallen on her feet, and is getting on excellently well, thank God.'

(The next letter is blotted, and very difficult to decipher.)

January 25th.

'To-day is Letty's birthday. It is odd to try to fancy what a different world it would have been had Letty not been born.

'Some day I mean to marry Letty if she will have me, but not yet, because it is quite wrong that the woman should be the breadwinner, and she is earning more than I am at present.

'She is very much altered. She has grown so good and serious. She never flirts now, but when she laughs, her laugh is sweeter than ever. She reads a great deal, and tries to learn all sorts of things

in her spare time. She is more beautiful than ever.'

'*February* 1*st.*

'Letty was received into the Roman Catholic Church this morning. I have had a contempt for Papists, and I am sorry that she has done this, but when she tells me of the joy and peace she feels, I cannot find it in my heart to be angry with her.

'God has made women very good. They understand, naturally, much that only gets knocked into us by hard blows.

'It was not till I had lost Letty, and knew that she was in trouble and danger in a wicked town, it was not till then that I understood that the things I have striven for are not worth a feather, compared to the safety of a hair of her head. But it seems that a woman knows at once,

and by instinct, that the world is lighter than a shadow when it is weighed against love. This struck me when Letty talked to me to-day. We have never talked so seriously before. I thought about my dream, but I did not tell her about it, because that is the sort of thing one cannot tell any one.

'I have had a troublesome cold ever since I left Paris. I really cannot afford to call it an illness.'

'*February 8th.*

'Letty has been here twice. The first time I was delirious, and did not know her.

'It seems so extraordinary that she should have been here, and *I* not have known that it was her! My poor Letty!

'She insisted on sending for a doctor, and lighting a fire. I fear that she must have tipped my landlady, for I have been so attentively waited on to-day. I cannot allow Letty to commit such follies. She tells me that she has a good engagement at present; but she ought to save every penny she can.

'It is absurd of her to spend her money on presents. Besides, it reverses the right order of things! I scolded her for it.

'I have often tried to imagine what it would be like to have some one who would be anxious when one is ill, and who would come often to inquire "How is he to-day?" Imagination is thin compared to to reality.

'I am very fortunate. God bless my darling.'

'*March* 1*st*.

'This day last year I lost Letty! I am very thankful that I went to Paris. Whether I die in a workhouse or not, I am glad.

'An odd thing occurred to-day. I had just written as far as "glad" when Letty came to see me.

'My illness has been long, and has left me weak. This is the first time, since a relapse, that I have been able to write.

'Letty said I ought not to be out of bed.

'"I have something very exciting, and strange, and joyful to tell you, dear Mr. Green," she said.

'She came and leant over the back of my chair, so that I could not see her face, and then I suppose the first line of my letter caught her eye, for she cried out,

"Why, you always told me that you never knew your father or mother!"

'I was much ashamed, but I could not let her think I had told her lies, so I explained.

'"You see I was rather lonely when I was a boy, and the fancy seemed to make things more cheerful," I said.

'"Afterwards, when I grew up, the trick clung to me. I couldn't feel that the week was properly finished, if I didn't write down what happened in it. I don't see that it's much sillier than keeping a diary, anyhow."

'"What do you write about?" said Letty.

'"Oh, I used to write about myself," I said. "And now, of course, I write about you."

'Letty came to the front of my chair,

and looked at me. She grew quite pink, and tears came into her eyes. Now *why*, I wonder.

'"What is the exciting and joyful news?" I asked.

'"I don't think I can tell you now," she said. "I want to go home and think."

'This puzzles me very much, dear mother. I wish that you lived rather nearer than in another world, for, being a woman, *you* might understand why Letty changed her mind—I don't.

'*P.S.*—I had a present this evening. A letter came for me from Letty. It is all full of gratitude and tenderness. Gratitude to *me*, to whom she has always brought so much joy.

'I cannot say how beautiful and wonderful it is.

'I shall write no more letters to you, imaginary shadow of a love of which I have the reality. I am surely more fortunate than any other person in the world. To-morrow I will answer my letter. To-morrow——'

The letter breaks off here. It was never posted. Letty has it still. She had come on the 1st of March to tell her friend of her engagement to the Monsieur Jules who had fallen in love with her in Miss Harrenden's studio in Paris, and who had since followed her to England.

She had never looked upon Mr. Green in the light of a lover, though she was genuinely fond of him.

She did not tell him that 'exciting and joyful news.' She went home in possession of his secret, and she kept her own.

Letty was warm-hearted, and the more she reflected, the less could she make up her mind to write anything that would hurt Mr. Green.

He had so few letters—so few ties—so pathetic a need of them! The world had been a niggardly stepmother to this man. The foolish futile fallacy about the imaginary mother touched something that was womanly and tender in Letty's heart.

She would, and must, write a letter that would please him. He should have one real human acknowledgment of his human kindness.

She wrote it. Being Irish, Letty's warm feelings seldom lacked for words to clothe themselves in. Having written it she half repented, yet finally sent it.

She did not dare to tell Monsieur Jules about it. Some new shyness made her

afraid to go near her old friend again for some days.

When she next made her way to his lodgings, his landlady met her with red eyes.

'Oh, Miss, how ever shall I tell you? It will upset you terrible! for he thought such a deal of your comin' 'ere. Such a good, kind, little gentleman too, and so 'appy as he was. Just the very last evening (he'd been took rather bad in the day, but I didn't know it was serious) he says to me when I goes in to ask if he'd be wanting anything in the night, "No, thanks. I've all I want. More than all I expected. Full measure; overflowing and runnin' over!"

'They was his last words, Miss. In the morning I found him dead—with a letter in his hand.'

LADY JANE

CHAPTER I

FIVE-AND-TWENTY years ago I was engaged to be married to 'Lady Jane.'

I am still a bachelor, though not for her sake, for I was not in love with that little lady. I am thankful that we did not marry, yet the remembrance of her sometimes haunts me like an unfinished tune.

The man who winds my clock has an irritating trick of whistling while he comes up my stairs; I swore at him last week, and to-day he checked himself when he was half way through a bar. The stupid jigging music runs in my head. I wish

that the man had whistled on to a full stop.

I wish that I had had a fuller explanation from Jane!

When I was a small boy my father took a house for the summer in the neighbourhood of Ogland Park.

Lady Jane sometimes came to schoolroom teas with us. My mother pitied her, for there were very queer stories afloat about the Oglands.

I remember how I used to listen in fascinated awe for the sound of Lady Ogland's silk dress rustling up the middle aisle. Sometimes she was late, sometimes she did not come to church at all. I always looked upon the poor lady as an exciting incarnation of worldly wickedness.

I suppose that Jane must have followed

in her wake, but I do not think that Jane interested me so much. Jane was quiet and good.

The Oglands drove to church, and therefore, my Scotch nurse assured me, broke the commandments every Sabbath. Lady Ogland wore rouge and a false front, and was consequently associated in my mind with Jezebel. She was undoubtedly the great lady of the place, and her old name gave a flavour of distinction to her sins.

Little Jane was a very subdued child, and there was a younger sister, who was in the nursery, and whom I do not remember to have seen in those days.

My recollections of childhood are not clear, and I do not fancy that I was an observant boy. I am not writing the story of my own life, but I see now that

I cannot fairly judge of Lady Jane's actions without referring to it.

When I was two-and-twenty a distant relative left me a most unexpected fortune. It was like the gift of a malevolent fairy. At the moment when it came to me I was passionately miserable and bitterly angry. I daresay that if the wheels had not been provided I should have gone to the devil on foot, but I think an ironical fate hastened matters.

The woman for whose sake I had broken with home ties, for whom I had worked early and late, had gone off with another man on the very eve of what was to have been our wedding day.

The announcement of that legacy reached me just too late.

Lucia could not bear poverty! Had my fortune travelled a trifle more speedily,

I should have been a happy bridegroom. Perhaps Lucia would have ended her days as a respectable leader of society. Who knows ?

By the end of three years I had got through a good half of my old cousin's legacy, and the breach between my family and myself had widened.

My mother had died when I was eighteen, and my father and I had quarrelled and parted since, but my sister perseveringly sent me surreptitious letters. Ellen was, I believe, fond of me, though I do not know why! A woman's affection and want of affection seem equally unaccountable. I must own that after I became rich many hands were held out to rescue me from the way of perdition ; but my sister would have clung to me when I was poor if I had let her. I could not,

however, allow Ellen to come to me in London, and my coat was then too threadbare for drawing-rooms.

I think that the hopeful sympathy of a good woman might have been of some value to me in the days of poverty, but unfortunately good women did not find me interesting them. Later they looked on me more charitably.

I was at the Lyceum one night, feeling rather bored, for I have never been able to appreciate Shakespeare, when a voice near me caught my attention, and brought before me a vision of home. For many years home had meant only a scene of recrimination and bitterness, but this vision was of the old schoolroom, of an ink-stained table, of Ellen with her hair in a pig-tail, burning her face while she made toast.

I turned sharply and recognised Lady Jane. She was repeating something one of the actors had said, for Lady Ogland was deaf. Jane spoke in a low voice, but her singularly clear pronunciation made each syllable audible. Her companion was irascible and eager, but Jane's patience was untiring.

I do not think that she cared about the play, but she listened attentively, as if she were learning a lesson. I laughed when Falstaff's remarks fell from Jane's grave lips. I studied her instead of the players. She rather interested me. It did not occur to me that she was pretty, but she reminded me of a fine etching, exquisitely finished.

She was very small, and most daintily neat. She wore her fair hair parted in the middle and brushed smoothly on

either side of her white forehead, where it shone like spun glass. Her eyebrows were quite straight, jet black, and very thin and fine. Her mouth had a sad, almost stern, expression, but her manner was gentle to timidity.

I do not know how it was that Lady Jane managed to look like a Quakeress, for her mother chose and bought her clothes, and Lady Ogland had a loud taste in dress, yet whatever incongruous colour Jane wore, she always gave me the same impression of gentle peace. Just a faint tinge of pink warmed her cheek when I spoke to her at the theatre. I had half expected her to gather her skirts round her and shrink from me, but she seemed, on the contrary, shyly pleased.

We had all called each other by our

Christian names when we were children, and Jane kept the old habit.

She asked after Ellen, and she remembered many things that I had forgotten. Lady Jane had been a neglected child, and I suppose that was why she was so curiously grateful to us.

'I do not think that I shall ever forget how kind your mother was to me,' she said.

She never spoke impulsively, and I knew she meant exactly what she said. Lady Ogland asked me to call, and I got into a way of going to her house.

Lady Ogland was an extraordinary old lady, but she was excellent and most witty company; indeed, I think that she was the wittiest woman I have ever met. There was a scornful raciness in her conversation that was inimitable. She was in many respects more like a man than

a woman. Her remarks were frequently coarse, and generally bitter, but for petty scandal she had, as she said, 'no stomach.' She frightened most women, but her daughter was fond of her. Her big sombre black eyes would light up when she talked, with, I veritably believe, the fire of genius. The palpably false front, and the badly put on rouge, and the crimson and purple silk that she chose to wear, were all forgotten (at least by me) when she began to exert herself.

I laughed at the world, and at myself, with her! I listened to stories that reminded me of Rabelais in an un-Bowdlerised edition! What things she had seen, and with what keen sight she had seen them!

Lady Jane was sent out of the room, like a school-girl, when her mother was

in a talking humour. Lady Jane was nearly twenty-seven, but she never dreamt of insubordination; it seemed to me that she must be rather spiritless, yet I gradually acquired a sort of brotherly affection for her.

Jane was not clever, or amusing, but her cut-and-dried sentences, her soft voice and precise manner, were distinctly restful. I had had quite enough of passionate enthusiasms. I had given the best part of my own energy to a love that had borne bitter fruit, therefore I was determined that my wife should be one who had never even desired to taste of the tree of knowledge.

Nevertheless I do not know that I should have asked Lady Jane to marry me had Lady Ogland not pushed us into each other's arms.

It happened in this wise. I called early

one afternoon, and was announced unexpectedly. I was the unwilling witness of a scene which roused what chivalry I possessed.

I had known (every one knew) that Lady Ogland was frequently the reverse of sober; I had heard that when she was drunk she bullied Jane, but I had certainly not imagined anything so bad as what I saw that day.

Jane caught sight of me first, and her pale face flushed.

'Go away, please, Gerald,' she said; but I did not go.

It was impossible to leave her to the tender mercies of that old mad woman.

'You must come too, then,' I said. 'I will not stir without you; come with me, Jane.'

'I cannot,' said Jane; but the old woman, to all appearance comparatively

sobered, put both her big knotted hands on Jane's shoulders and jerked her towards me.

'Yes, go with him, Jane,' she cried. 'You won't get the chance again.'

The moment that we were clear of the house I asked Jane to marry me. 'That is what I came for to-day,' I said (which was a lie, but the shame in her face at her mother's words justified me). 'I am very lonely, I want to take care of you, Jane. I shouldn't be such a bad lot if you could trust me. You've known me when I was a boy, you are fond of us all. I'd try to make you happy. You do feel a little interest in me, don't you?'

Jane acquiesced gently.

I did not expect too much from her, but she was evidently willing to give me 'a little interest.'

CHAPTER II

My father was delighted by our engagement; Jane became at once a peacemaker in the family.

My father was an old-fashioned country clergyman of a somewhat narrow type. Jane's dutiful attentions won his heart.

At first he slightly distrusted her, feeling, I imagine, that any girl who liked me must have undesirable tastes; but no one could possibly suspect Jane of being fast.

It sometimes seemed to me that Jane preferred my father's society to mine, and was more at ease with him; not that she

was shy with any of us, but her gentle, composed manner had always more life and tenderness when she talked to very old or to very young people.

I was convinced that as a wife Jane would be perfect; as a *fiancée* some men might have found her a trifle dull.

Ellen thought that I was joking when I told her of our engagement.

'Lady Jane! How shocked that dear little old maid would be at the bare idea!' she cried. 'Oh, Gerald, I beg your pardon!' as the truth of my statement dawned on her; 'I didn't dream that you meant it! I am sure she is very good, and of course she is not a bit old, really, but—' (her surprise coming to the front again) '—but she is just the very last person I should have expected you to like.'

'You are not old enough to understand her,' I said loftily. 'When one is young, one does not appreciate the simplicity of such a character; one wants more colour and variety. Jane is not brilliant or impulsive, she has no foolish infatuations, but I am convinced that when she once likes a man she never changes.'

Ellen looked at me oddly. She was very good-tempered and seldom resented a snub, but she was by no means stupid.

'I see,' she said. 'Well, Gerald, when I marry I shall expect my husband to have a few "foolish infatuations" to start with. Poor little Lady Jane!'

We were to be married in the autumn, and all through the season I did my duty by Jane. I met her at balls, I went to

tea with her mother, I escorted both ladies to the theatre.

I don't think that that wicked old woman had the least remembrance of the way in which she had thrown poor Jane at my head. She certainly had no shame.

She was openly pleased when I formally asked her sanction to our engagement. It seemed to strike her as an excellent joke.

'Yes, marry Jane—marry Jane!' she said, 'and let's see what you'll make of her. It was the sons of God who married the daughters of men, wasn't it, Gerald? But this will be the other way round, eh?'

She had a trick of planting her hands on her knees, and rolling slightly from side to side while she talked. She spoke

in a deep thick voice, and her remarks were generally unexpected.

'I 'm glad you are pleased,' I said. 'I will try to make Jane happy.'

'Do!' said Lady Ogland briskly. 'We 've always bullied her, but it 's high time some one should appreciate her. I can't help snubbing Jane, she 's too gentle! All the same, my dear,' she added, 'if it came to a tussle between you, I should back her. She can get her own way, you know, and we none of us care a d—n what people think. That 's always been a family trait.'

'*You* certainly don't care!' I said, laughing. I felt that it was absurd to put Jane in the same category—she was totally unlike an Ogland in every way, save, indeed, that in spite of her small stature, she possessed a great deal of dignity.

All the Oglands could be dignified, and, with the exception of Lady Jane, they were all eccentric.

Lady Jane went everywhere that season. The amount of work a fashionable lady gets through is amazing; no man could stand it.

I often dined at her home, but I never was allowed to take my *fiancée* in to dinner.

'You 'll have quite enough of each other by and by,' Jane's mother would say. So I usually sat opposite to Jane, and I noticed that though she was up late six nights out of seven, she never betrayed any symptoms of weariness.

She was reserved without being the least silent. I could hear her talking society small-talk, in soft, clear tones, during the whole of dinner-time, and

when, dinner being over, I claimed her attention, she would make room for me on the sofa without the least change of manner, or the faintest accession of colour.

One day I found a note from Jane on my breakfast-table.

I did not recognise her handwriting, for she had never written to me before. I could not refrain from smiling at the characteristically unsentimental nature of this first letter from my betrothed.

'Dear Gerald,' she wrote, 'I enclose a card for the regatta ball, to which my mother and myself are invited. Your sister Ellen told me that she was anxious to go to it, and I wish to avail myself of the invitation.

'The journey is too long and fatiguing for my mother, but if you care to go, we

might travel down to your home together.

'Your sister kindly invites me to join your party.—I am, yours very sincerely,

'JANE OGLAND.'

I groaned in spirit. I was sick to death of balls, but I could not well refuse to escort Lady Jane, especially as this was the first request she had ever made. I was more punctilious in paying her all the attention that was due to her, because my conscience at times reproached me on her account.

I could not pretend even to myself that I was madly in love with Jane.

'Love is a phase one is bound to go through, but one doesn't want to go through it again,' I thought.

After all, in spite of Ellen's exclamation, Jane had not such a bad bargain!

I was comparatively rich; I was certainly not stingy; I intended to be a very decent sort of husband. Jane would be in her element when she was receiving stiff calls from country magnates. She could play Lady Bountiful if she liked that *rôle*; she should live either in town or country, whichever pleased her best. I, at any rate, should not ill-treat her, and it did not seem to me that she desired more than I had to offer.

Well, I took her to stay with my family for the regatta ball. The train was full, so there was no chance of a *tête-à-tête*. I knew that I ought to be sorry for that.

'We can't have a carriage to ourselves! what a bore!' I said. Lady Jane raised her delicate eyebrows.

'It is very cold,' she replied, shivering slightly. 'Perhaps, after all, it will be pleasanter to travel in company this bitter day,' and I felt snubbed.

I did not dine at home, for I could not stand seeing my father's and sister's eyes watching me at dinner-time, and noting how I behaved as an engaged man. It somehow happened that I arrived late at the ball-room, and my father looked severely at me.

'When I was a young man,' said he, 'I should not have allowed any one else to claim the first dance from your mother.'

My father had bright blue eyes, that generally rested on me with puzzled disfavour. He was ruddy-complexioned, and remarkably vigorous for his seventy years. His own youth had been irreproachable,

but he was apt to compare it with mine too often. The comparison palled after a time.

'I am not conceited enough to suppose that Jane troubles herself about the exact moment of my arrival, and I am glad she doesn't,' I said.

While I spoke I pictured to myself the conventional little smile that she would accord me, and the way in which she would consult her programme and give me three dances. We always danced three times together, neither more nor less.

The next moment Jane floated past me. She danced beautifully, her tiny feet keeping exquisite time to the music. Her cheek was a little flushed. She looked almost pretty.

'Who is that rough-looking man? and

who is that delicate little lady who reminds one of Dresden china?' I heard some one ask as I was taking Lady Jane to supper.

'Did you hear that?' I said, laughing; but Jane was absent-minded that evening, and she made no reply.

'You are not attending in the least to what is going on round you!' I exclaimed.

'I beg your pardon, Gerald; I will try to attend better,' said Lady Jane gently. 'It is so hot in here! Will you take me outside, please?'

I got a cloak which enveloped her from head to foot. We passed from the heated supper-room to the strip of garden which separated the Assembly Rooms from the road.

Jane walked to the fence, and stood looking over it.

The Assembly Rooms faced the sea, and there were a good many people on the parade and in the road.

It was a fine night, and the town was illuminated in honour of the regatta.

A Punch-and-Judy show was being enacted. The flaring torch that was fastened to the top of the mimic theatre threw flickering lights on the upturned faces of the crowd.

Punch's shrill squeaky voice rose high above the other sounds. A boisterous group of sailors were cracking jokes with the showman. A soldier, with a pale, shabbily dressed girl clinging to his arm, stood just beneath the light. The girl's countenance was transfigured by the rapt admiration with which she was looking up at the man's rather coarse face.

'*Il y a toujours l'un qui baise et l'autre*

qui tend la joue,' I remarked, looking at them, but Jane did not hear.

The smell of abominably bad tobacco and the laughter of rough voices reached us in the garden, but, from the lighted room behind, the scent of flowers, and the dreamy dance-music came in gusts.

'I say, won't you catch cold?' I said, touching her arm.

Lady Jane turned towards me then, and for a second I was rather startled.

Her breath came quickly, her eyes were curiously bright, and it seemed to me that she was on the point of saying something unusual.

Then I told myself that my imagination was playing me a trick, for Lady Jane was never unusual!

'I suppose that there is nothing the matter?' I said.

'Oh, nothing!' said Jane. Then she corrected herself:—

'That is not quite true' (Jane was scrupulously truthful); 'something does disturb me, Gerald. It is rather exciting out here, isn't it? A crowd always is disturbing! I wish I might stand outside! A ball-room always stifles me. I hate that lazy music so. I hate the way it pretends to sadness, and the way we all dance to a mock melancholy waltz, while, outside, people are struggling and dying.'

The passion in her voice amazed me. It gave me an odd throb of pain too. It reminded me of some one else.

'You are talking nonsense, Jane,' I said roughly.

I had not meant to be rough; but I felt that it was not fair that she, of all people, should wake up bitter memories.

Jane turned away again. She rested her arms on the gate. Her gaze wandered beyond the crowd on the parade, beyond the beach where the sails of the fishermen's boats stood up like dim spectres in the moonlight, far away over the grey sea, whose solemnity made me shiver.

There was such a strange look on her face that I could almost have fancied that she was praying.

Then she stood upright, and laughed a rather formal little society laugh.

'Dear me!' she said; 'are they not very particular about tickets here? What shall you do should they refuse to let us pass into the ball-room again? You see they have shut the French windows. We shall be obliged to go round to the front entrance.'

'You don't mean to say that you've

not got your ticket? Why, you'll have to stay out all night!' I said; 'but mine is in my pocket.'

Lady Jane was apparently incapable of seeing a joke.

She asked me gravely to be so kind as to ask my father for her ticket. It was possible that she had left it in his charge.

'Come along! Of course I never meant that seriously. No one will make the least difficulty. Did you suppose that I should leave you to spend the rest of the night under a tree?' I cried; but Jane stuck to her point with that gentle obstinacy which only very quiet people possess in perfection.

I was forced to give way at last, having expostulated, and even lost my temper, in vain. It became evident to me that unless

I fetched that ticket Lady Jane really would remain where she was till the day dawned!

I had a long hunt for my father, who assured me that he had never had Jane's ticket in his possession.

Then I sought Ellen, who declared that Jane had got it in her own purse.

Then, in a worse temper than before, I retraced my steps. Lady Jane must have been waiting for at least half-an-hour, I reflected, but I felt that she was justly rewarded for being so persistently ridiculous. Her idea of propriety was unfathomable.

'Here is this little lady standing all alone in a public garden in an evening dress, because she is shocked at the notion of having to tell the footman that she has lost her ticket!' I said to myself.

The salt breeze blew against my face when I again stepped into the garden.

The crowd had begun to disperse. It was dark and lonely.

I was angry with myself for having been overruled!

I felt suddenly that I ought not to have left her there alone.

'You must be cool enough by this time, Jane,' I called out.

. . . There was no answer. Jane was gone!

I know now what she did, and where she went; at the time, I was filled with blank astonishment.

One might make quite a decent job of one's life if one might have it over again, and yet keep the experiences, which, as things are ordered, one only buys at a price that leaves one bankrupt. I never

wish to live in another phase of existence. I don't want to make fresh bungles or to try new experiments with a bodiless soul! Yet I should rather like to live that night once more, with the knowledge I have now.

The moment after I had left Jane, she must have opened the gate and gone out, away from the sound of the waltz; out into the busy streets. She drew the hood of her cloak over her head and walked swiftly on, her small figure, enveloped in her long wrap, unnoticed in the crowd.

'While, outside, people are dying,' she had said. It was to the dying she was going then.

In a side street, off the harbour, a woman lay in an upper room straining her dim sight, watching and waiting.

Once or twice people moved between

her and the door, but her gaze never faltered; her big black eyes seemed to look through them.

The doctor put brandy between her lips. She tried mechanically to swallow, but she did not turn her head or notice him. A clergyman was kneeling by her side.

'We humbly commend this soul into Thy hands, as into the hands of a faithful Creator and most merciful Saviour,' said he. But the woman only heard his voice as she heard the droning of a blue-bottle on the ceiling. Her soul was waiting for some one else.

It was a noisy house. The voices of two men engaged in a drunken brawl disturbed the clergyman, but they did not disturb her. One voice alone would reach her.

Suddenly a change came over her face. Could she really have heard that light footfall on the stairs, or was it instinct that told her who was near? Some one stood in the doorway. A small figure, hardly discernible in the darkening room, stood still for a second, then came quickly to the bedside.

'Take off that thing—I can't see you in it!' said the woman. 'I must see you, Jane.'

Jane unfastened her cloak and laid it on the floor.

The doctor told me, afterwards, that though he had seen a good many queer sights, he had seldom witnessed anything more incongruous than this girl in a ball dress, with pearls on her neck, and satin shoes on her feet, kneeling there, with her arms round that woman. He began to

say something; the clergyman stumbled to his feet.

'Please will you all go away?' said Lady Jane. 'We want to be alone together. I am her sister.'

CHAPTER III

The emptiness of the garden startled me.

The shock brought back to me a day long past, when another woman (very unlike Jane) had fled and left me.

I glanced at the place where Jane had stood; I half expected to see a tear-stained scrap of paper and a ring lying on the ground.

Then I laughed at my own folly. Jane elope with any one!—Jane, who was propriety personified. Yet the little lady had certainly been unlike her rather prim self that evening.

Could a sudden whim have so possessed her, that she had actually gone outside?

I crossed the road, and searched up and down the sea front. The bandsmen were putting away their instruments, and the Punch-and-Judy man was shouldering his show. Some of the illuminations had already burnt out. The parade was nearly deserted now. Lady Jane was not there.

I went on to the beach, feeling as if I were in an uncomfortable dream. Surely it could not be Lady Jane who had played me such a mad trick?

Then I grew angry. At the best it was an uncommonly bad joke on her part, and she was old enough to know better.

I did not relish the idea of returning alone to the ball-room.

I lit a cigar and walked up and down the sea front, telling myself that there

was no need for anxiety. Jane was so eminently conventional that it was impossible that she should have done anything foolish.

My cigar was finished.

I heard a clock strike twelve. Then I ran quickly up the steps of the Assembly Rooms, and met Ellen in the hall.

'Why, what is the matter, Gerald? How flushed you look!' she exclaimed.

'I must speak to my father; where is he? Lady Jane is——' I began. A gentle voice at my elbow interrupted me.

'I am here. Is it time to go?' said Jane. 'I hope that it is, for I am rather tired.'

My father came up, beaming with delight.

'Hallo, my boy! I've been hunting for you two everywhere,' cried he. 'I

hope you've had enough of each other's society for one evening! So Jane never troubles herself about the moment of your arrival, eh? And you are glad of it, eh? Well, I hope you've got absolution for that speech. And you are not so conceited as to suppose she wants to dance with you? Dear me, no! Of course she doesn't! Where have you and Jane been hidden, eh, Gerald? You won't catch an old bird again with that chaff!'

'Really, Jane, I wish that you had made up your mind sooner to go in without showing your ticket. I told you that it would be all right,' I said crossly, while Jane and I followed my father and sister to the carriage.

Then my glance fell on her shoes; they were stained with mud, though the hotel

garden was gravelled. 'I 'll walk home,' I said shortly. 'Good-night!'

I took Lady Jane's rather unwilling hand in mine, for I was determined to make her look at me. I held it tighter than usual. 'We must discuss this ball to-morrow,' I said. Her fingers felt like ice, but her eyes met mine without shrinking.

'Yes, certainly, if you wish to, Gerald,' said she. 'Good-night.'

My father insisted on walking home with me, and he would talk about Jane.

'Do you know, I fancied at one time that you did not quite appreciate that dear little girl,' he remarked. 'I see I was mistaken; you gave me a fine hunt to-night, my lad.'

He chuckled at the remembrance; he was ridiculously pleased.

'Her gentle ways always touched your

mother's heart,' he said. 'She would have been glad too, Gerald. Somehow when she was alive we got on better, eh? Well! Your Jane brings peace and goodwill with her. Ellen says that she has a great deal of character too—more than most people give her credit for.'

'I beg your pardon,' I said abruptly. 'But I don't want to discuss Lady Jane's disposition.' My father laughed goodnaturedly.

'Too angelic to be talked about, is she?' he said. It was impossible to get an idea out of my father's mind when it had once taken root. 'Well, well! I am glad that you are in love with her at last.'

I was almost surprised to see Lady Jane the next morning. I had fancied that she would be ashamed to meet me.

Yet I think that it was I who looked

like the culprit, when she turned to me as soon as breakfast was finished, and said, 'You wanted to discuss last night's doings with me, did you not?'

I had been a little sorry for her. I had come to the conclusion that there must be another fellow in the case.

'And by Jove she must love him more than I supposed she had it in her to love,' I thought, 'to risk her reputation as she did last night.'

But now her coolness angered me. I spoke in haste.

'I don't know that there is much to say,' I cried bitterly, when we stood alone in the library. 'I suppose that our engagement is at an end? You are free, so far as I am concerned. Your secret, whatever it may be, is safe with me; I don't tell tales.'

'There is no need to assure me of that, Gerald,' she said.

'As a matter of curiosity, I should like to know why you accepted me,' I went on. 'Of course you did not care very much about me! I have always known that; but then I supposed that you did not care unreasonably much about any one. Perhaps I was mistaken.'

'Yes,' said Lady Jane; 'perhaps you were mistaken.'

She sat down in my father's big arm-chair, resting her head on her hand. She looked worn-out and very fragile; her eyes had the strained appearance that comes from sleepless nights. She did not attempt to defend herself. I could almost fancy that her thoughts had wandered quite away from the present situation.

I said to myself that if I waited long

enough she would be forced to speak. But Lady Jane had great capabilities for silence, and I grew impatient and broke the pause :—

'I must say that I think you owe me an explanation.'

Then Jane looked up. 'Do you?' she said.

She considered me for a moment gravely. 'But if our engagement is at an end, I do not see that you have any longer the right to ask for it.' Then she got up wearily. 'I would have explained if you had asked me for the explanation first,' she said, 'but now there is no need for any more words about it. I certainly have no reason to excuse myself to you.

'Probably we may not see each other again,' she went on, 'for I had a letter from my mother this morning. She is

ill, and I am going home at once. Do you think that the dog-cart could take me to the station? I have not much time to spare. I must pack up my clothes now.'

I opened the door for her silently. She hesitated for one moment, and then held out her hand.

'Good-bye, Gerald,' she said.

I had judged her unheard, and she could not condescend to prove to me that I was wrong. The odd part of it was that it had never struck me before that Jane was very proud.

Three weeks later I saw the announcement of Lady Ogland's death in the *Times*.

I had not informed my father of my break with Jane, and he kept begging me to go up to London to comfort her. My

father had no tact. Ellen says that in that point alone I resemble him.

'I cannot bear to think of it,' he exclaimed; 'I simply cannot endure the idea of that poor girl being alone in that desolate house! If you don't go, I shall, Gerald!'

So at last I went. I did not expect that Lady Jane would see me, but to my surprise I was admitted. I sat in the cold, dark drawing-room and waited for her. I wondered whether I should find again the delicate primly old-fashioned little lady with whom this stiff reception-room was associated, or whether I should encounter that new Jane, of whom I had had a brief uncertain glimpse—the Jane whose eyes had kindled when she watched the crowd, and who had longed to go to stand among the people.

When at last she entered the room she looked so small and white in her deep crape that I felt unexpectedly sorry for her.

'I 've just come to ask if I or my father can be of the least use to you,' I said.

'Thank you. That is very kind of you,' said Jane. 'I am glad that you have come, for now I can tell you that my mother has left you the house and land that she bought at N——.'

'I will not have it!' I said hotly; 'she left it to *us*, no doubt, under the impression that we should marry almost immediately.'

'On the contrary,' said Lady Jane, 'I had time to tell her that we should never marry, and she considered that you were badly treated.' After a minute's pause she added softly, 'Mother liked you very

much, you know,' and then, with a catch in her breath, 'I—I wasn't with her when she died.'

I had never known Jane speak irrelevantly before; I had an idea that she was terribly unhappy. I wished that Ellen were there!

'Oh,' I said awkwardly, 'why not?'

I felt I was not appearing in the least sympathetic, but it is impossible to comfort a self-possessed person.

'She did not want me,' said Jane; 'she had always declared that she would prefer to die alone. When she felt the end coming, she insisted on being left. I made them obey her. I think that when my time comes I shall want to be alone to meet Him too.'

'Yes,' I said with sudden conviction; 'you are rather like your mother, Jane!'

I had never noticed the resemblance before. It seemed absurd to compare this gentle fair girl to the imperious old woman who had insisted on going her own way—even on her deathbed. Yet I think I was right.

'You see,' said Jane, 'my mother guessed many things that she did not wish to be formally brought to her knowledge. We never spoke of them.'

'What things?' I asked.

Lady Jane blushed. A sudden wave of colour mounted to the very roots of her hair.

'It is painful to speak of them,' she said, 'but perhaps it is better that you should know, so that you may understand why I do not wish to be hampered with my mother's place in the country.' She meditated on how little she need tell me.

'I had a sister,' she said at last. 'She was more charming and clever and beautiful than any other person whom I have ever met. I mention this because I think that exceptional charm is a sort of temptation in itself.' Her voice shook, and her face softened.

'We dull, plain people are so hard,' she said.

'Oh, Gerald, we are hard till it is too late, and then, when we would give our heart's blood, it seems no longer to be of any use to them to give anything.'

'I doubt if anything is ever of much use anyhow,' I said. But I knew, even while I said it, that Jane thought that she had got hold of something or other that had power to pull the world up to Heaven!

'She ran away,' said Jane. 'I might

not mention her name at home. My mother would not hear it. Latterly she fell into depths of—distress. I was the only person who could ever help her. Sometimes she sent for me. Then I went if it was possible—early or late.'

'You went to her that night when you ran away from me?' I said.

Jane nodded.

'I wanted to tell you. But you see I was so out of the habit of telling things that I—I *couldn't*.'

'And I fancied that you hardly knew what evil meant!' I cried.

I was amazed and shocked. Good Heavens! To think *what* that little girl must have seen and met! I could not readjust my ideas at once. I think now that I spoke brutally, for Jane winced. I

wished long afterwards to tell her that I was sorry!—that I believe, after all, that some souls can go down into hell, and that their garments will yet not smell of the fire.

But I have never told her the things that would please her, only always the things that hurt her.

'And you came back to the dance,' I said slowly. I was trying to take in this odd tale.

'O yes,' said Jane. 'I have been doing that for the last four years. I have come back to dance with the thought of that hopelessness always in my heart.'

She spoke almost in a whisper; then her lips relaxed into a smile that was wonderfully sweet.

'Now that is over!' she said. 'I need

not pretend any more. I will begin my work.'

'I can't in the least understand,' I said. 'But possibly I am dense.'

'I mean that at last I may escape from many things that have been distasteful to me,' said Lady Jane. 'I can live and work, and some day die as I choose. Yet all the same I—I miss her.'

The sense of her loneliness and the pathos in the very restraint of her grief gave me a lump in my throat.

'It's more than she deserved, you know,' I blurted out.

I was thinking of the scene I had unwittingly witnessed on the day when I proposed to Jane. Besides, the whole county knew that Lady Ogland had bullied her daughter.

Lady Jane drew herself up.

'My mother had a great deal to try her,' she said. 'She may sometimes have appeared to you to be not quite kind to me, but we understood each other. Very few people did her justice. It was because she knew what I longed for, that she left me free.'

'What should you have done if you had married me?' said I.

'I should have made you a good wife,' said Jane, and again there was a proud ring in her voice. 'And I should have tried to pay old debts. We owed you more than you knew.'

I burst into a laugh.

'A good wife! You would have given me a microscopic bit of heart, and a still smaller bit of confidence! You would have acted a part all your life, and

would have pretended to be gently content! I think I have never known you, Jane.'

'How much confidence have you given me?' said Jane, and I was silent.

I left her then, and I have never seen her since.

It seemed to me, while I went down the stairs, that a sound followed me, like the sound of a woman sobbing.

I almost went back, but it was so unlike Jane to cry that I concluded I was mistaken. Sometimes I wish I had returned, just to make sure that it was a fancy.

Years later I met Dr. Smith, who had known my quondam *fiancée* from her babyhood. He told me about the sister's death. 'Lady Ogland took to drinking

from the day her favourite daughter went off with that scamp,' he said. 'The girl went on the stage later, and I've heard that at one time she was in Italy with Count D——. She never stuck long to any one. She drifted back to England to die. It was a strange thing! But the Oglands are a mad family—all great sinners or great saints!'

'Count D——!' I cried. 'She wasn't called Lucia Lamorier, was she?'

'Of course she was,' said the doctor, eyeing me with some curiosity. 'What? did you ever meet her as well?'

It is odd, but though when I was engaged to her Jane's presence never greatly excited me, yet after all these years her small delicate face is as vividly clear to my mind's eye as if I had parted from her yesterday.

Is she still struggling to save the unsaveable?

Sometimes I fancy that Jane was more passionate than firm, more proud than humble; but how was I to guess that long ago?

There are one or two things that I should rather like to have explained. If she was crying, it must have been for her mother, I suppose? Ellen used to tell me that I invariably 'supposed wrong' where Lady Jane was concerned.

Well! It 's a stale and unprofitable story, and we parted coldly; yet this I 'm bound to own—the memory of that girl makes me almost believe that there are some women in the world who are genuinely and disinterestedly good.

'Are you still thinking about the fair

and frail Lucia?' the doctor asked me presently.

'O no. I was only thinking about Lady Jane,' I said.

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