



NOBODY'S FAULT

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First published in 1896 ebook by www.saptarshee.in India in 10.10.2023

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Typeset/Printed by Krutika Printers, mangalwedha

PART I

CHAPTER I

THIRTEEN or fourteen years before the afternoon when Bridget Ruan's novel was discussed in Mrs. Trelawney's sitting-room, she and Bridget were school-girls at Eastchester.

Saturday was a holiday at Myrtle Lodge,—Miss Brownrigg's boarding-house for the Eastchester High School girls,—and tennis was in full swing in the school-garden behind the house.

"Play!" "Forty-love!" "Vantage all!" came shrilly from the tennis court. On a side grass-plot, whose trampled, badly kept turf bore witness to the violence of the game, rounders was being played by the little ones, who screamed themselves hoarse, and danced madly in a frenzy of excitement as one small figure after another flew round the course, and avoided the savagely aimed ball.

Several of the older girls strolled quietly along the gravel paths, with arms interlaced, whispering together in the peculiarly confidential "penny-mystery" fashion of school-girls.

"Where's Bridget? Where's Bridget Ruan?" one of the tennis-players called suddenly. "We're making up a new set, and we want her!"

"Bid! Bid! Bridget, where are you?" two or three of them began to call.

Bridget shook her hair over her ears to deaden the sound, and went on writing.

She sat in a little dilapidated arbor in a far corner of the garden. It contained a rickety, dusty table, on which papers and books were untidily scattered. The arbor was surrounded by long rank grass, uncut since the spring, and drenched with the recent rains. The path she had made for herself through it was plainly visible in the trampled, broken-down stalks which extended up to the door.

The summer-house was screened from the rest of the garden by a clump of lime-trees, and in spite of frequent impatient calls, Bridget had been in possession the whole of the afternoon.

"Bid! Bridget!" the cries grew louder and more urgent.

"Bother!" whispered the girl, stamping her foot impatiently and writing faster.

"Bridget! Miss Ruggles wants you. Where are you?"

The girl uttered a smothered, furious exclamation, but otherwise paid no attention.

"She's never in the summer-house, through all this awfully wet grass!" she heard a nearer voice exclaim. "Run and see, Dulcie; your frocks are short!"

There was a rustling in the grass outside, and in a moment a small child stood examining her damp stockings on the threshold.

Bridget raised her head with an impatient jerk, and confronted her visitor with an angry, "*Well?*"

Heavy masses of curling, copper-colored hair hung round her face to her shoulders. It was a small, delicately tinted face, with a dainty, pointed chin, and a pair of big gray eyes. They were singularly bright and restless eyes, and when she was angry they blazed royally.

She was angry now, and the small child shrank back.

"I—I—Alice sent me. Miss Ruggles wants you," she stammered.

"*Confound!*" Bridget exclaimed with frank emphasis, snatching up her papers and bundling them into a book.

She rushed out of the arbor like a whirlwind, and the child cowered against the door as she passed. Half way through the long grass she recalled the frightened action, and turned impetuously back.

"All right, Dulcie! I'm not angry with *you*," she said, bending over the little girl.

Dulcie flung her arms round her, and kissed her rapturously, tears of fright still in her eyes.

"You may carry up my books for prep. to-night, and bring me the biscuits at supper," Bridget whispered consolingly, disengaging herself with a hasty kiss.

Miss Ruggles was upstairs in the bedroom, stooping over an open drawer, as the girl entered, panting and frowning.

"*Look* at this drawer again, Bridget!" she cried angrily. "What do you come to school for, I should like to know?"

"To be bothered from morning till night," was the prompt, unreflecting reply.

Miss Ruggles stopped in her work of tidying, and stared hopelessly at her for a moment.

"You will be reported, of course," she said at last, in a voice which indicated that she knew the uselessness of the punishment, but was compelled to inflict it for want of another more efficacious. She began to expostulate and argue in querulous, futile fashion, turning over the contents of the drawer with an air of impotent exasperation. She had just laid her hand on a large, untidy bundle of papers, when, with a swift movement, Bridget swooped upon it, and tucked it under her arm.

"These are *private*," she announced breathlessly, shot an annihilating glance at Miss Ruggles, and dashed unceremoniously out of the room.

Down below in the garden Helen Mansfield, her special friend, was sitting alone on the grass near the house reading.

Bridget swept up to her. "Come along! Come into the arbor! Let us talk!" she cried imperiously.

Helen rose and followed her.

"Well! what did she want you for?" she inquired, when the arbor was reached.

"Oh!" Bridget shrugged her shoulders contemptuously. "Another row! Bedroom untidy or something. I'm reported again; so I thought it was waste of time to

listen to all Miss Ruggles' talk, as well as Miss Brownrigg's, this evening, and I came away in the middle."

"Bid!"

"Well, you'd have thought I'd broken all the Ten Commandments, instead of leaving my brush and comb out of the bag! What idiots teachers are! They mix up all the big things with the little ones, as though they were all crimes equally. Oh! a boarding-school's a beast of an institution! Worry, worry, worry, about trifles from morning till night. And Miss Brownrigg calls this 'preparation for life.' Does life mean tidy wardrobes, and words underlined with red ink without any smudges, and sums all worked the way of the book or else they're not right even when the answers are the same? If so, I don't think it's worth preparing for."

"Miss Ruggles isn't worth exciting one's self about," returned the other girl, calmly.

"Not for *you*, of course. You haven't any temper. But I'm not made like that. I go *mad*. I wish I didn't." She flung herself down on the seat beside her friend, and there was silence for a moment.

The sunshine filtered through the chinks in the pine-log roof of the summer-house, and fell in little pools and splashes of light on the table, and on the girls' summer dresses. Shadows of the lime-trees outside danced lightly, and flickered on the rough walls, and brought a sense of dainty stir and flutter into the arbor.

Presently Bridget moved, and broke into a laugh.

"What a *duffer* Miss Ruggles is!" she exclaimed, her eyes dancing. "I'm so *furios* when rows are going on that I don't notice the absurd things she says; but they come upon me afterwards. Just now, for instance, she said it was 'my duty to keep my linen-drawer tidy, because *Christ might come at any moment*.' I must put *that* in."

"In? Where?"

Bridget started, and her color rose. "Oh! never mind!" she began.

"What's in that parcel?" her friend asked, her eyes falling for the first time on the packet Bridget had thrown beside her.

She did not reply for a moment; then she said desperately, "Well, that's *it*. My story, you know. I've put every one nearly in,—Miss Ruggles and Mademoiselle and Miss Jones, and a good many of the girls. Not *exactly*, of course, but something like. It's very stupid," she added perfunctorily. Then, with a quick change of voice, "No, it's silly to say that, just because *I* wrote it. I *don't* think it's stupid; but I daresay you wouldn't care for it."

"Let me see."

"I'll—I'll read it to you, if you like." She blushed again. "Will you tell me what you think of it, Helen? What you *really* think of it?" she repeated anxiously.

"Yes," Helen returned.

Bridget began to read, her nervousness betraying itself in the breathless gallop at which she rushed through the first page,—a pace which steadily diminished, however, as she grew accustomed to the sound of her own voice. Then she began to do her work justice by intonation and emphasis, encouraged by an occasional spontaneous laugh from her friend.

It was a crude enough little story of school life; badly constructed, of course, though not without a certain redeeming vigor of its own. The characters, although inclining towards caricatures of their originals, were boldly drawn, with a touch of daring humor. The whole thing was curiously realistic. The girl had indulged in no flights of imagination or rhetoric. She had observed keenly, portrayed faithfully, if somewhat mercilessly, after the manner of the young. There was about it an indication of power rather remarkable in a school-girl effusion.

“Well?” said Bridget, looking up as she dropped the last sheet. “Well?” It was uttered a little breathlessly, and she leant forward in her eagerness, propping her chin on her hands, her elbows resting on the table.

“Yes,” returned her friend, slowly, “I like it. You have made the people seem real, but—” She paused.

“*But*,” repeated Bridget, impatiently. “Do go on, Helen!”

“I’m trying to think what my father would say.”

Bridget’s face darkened; she began to fidget impatiently with the paper in front of her; but Helen was looking at the sunlit leaves.

“I think he would say the *style* was bad,—might be improved,” she said, unconsciously substituting a phrase of the professor’s for her own.

“Style?” Bridget repeated. “What do you mean? What *is* style?”

“I don’t know quite; it’s difficult to explain. Father would tell you. It’s a *way* of saying things, I think.”

“But you said I had made them *real* people!” Bridget protested.

“So you have.”

“Well! what does it matter how I put the words, as long as I’ve done that?”

“I don’t know, but it *does*. Father says it is very important. Cultivated people—
,,

“But I’m not a cultivated person, you see!” Bridget returned fiercely, her face flushing. “I don’t belong to cultivated people, and I don’t know how to finick, and be mincing, and awfully refined in writing, any more than in talking. If *that’s* what style means, I’d rather be without it, and say straight out what I mean, and what I see. I should hate to be such a *young lady*”—there was an accent of fierce contempt in the words—“as—as—”

“As *I* am, for instance,” put in Helen, quietly. “But I thought we were talking about style. I don’t know why people can’t write down what they see, and yet have good style.”

But Bridget was not attending. She had flung out her arms across the table, and, with her head buried in them, was sobbing convulsively.

Helen paused a moment; then she bent over the girl and kissed her hair.

At her touch Bridget sprang up.

"Oh! I'm a beast—a *beast!*" she cried incoherently. "I'm always being so hateful to you; and it isn't your fault.... Only, Helen, I can't help it, I'm so jealous, so horribly jealous!" She paused, sobbing uncontrollably.

"But why, Bid, dear?"

"Oh! it is hateful, I know," Bridget whispered; "but if you only knew how I envy you your sort of home, your kind of father. *You* always live with people who are ladies and gentlemen. They talk about interesting things,—books and pictures; and they are—the word you used—they are *cultivated* people. Sometimes—O Helen, I can't help it—I almost *hate* you, for knowing all you do, so easily. It all comes so naturally to you. And *I* want it too!" she exclaimed passionately. "What I said just now wasn't true. You knew it wasn't true. I *should* like to have style—and—and—all the rest. I want to know the sort of people *you* know. I shall *never* care for any others. And I never can," she added bitterly, "just because,—oh! it's awful, just as though it *were* a crime!"

"But, Bridget," protested her friend, soothingly, "you are so clever! When you are grown up, you will write books. People will *want* to know you then. Even the stupid people, who— Besides," she continued hastily, leaving the sentence unfinished, "you *are* a lady. Nothing can alter that; any one can see it. Why, even that wretched Lena Mildmay—"

"Ah!" cried Bridget, unheeding, "and there again is a worse trouble. I *hate* myself, Helen; it seems so mean to say anything, even to *you*, that seems—that seems—" She hesitated, her lips trembling. There was silence for a moment. "Oh! you *know* I love my mother, Helen," she whispered brokenly; "but—"

"Yes, yes, Bid, darling!" Helen interposed, in a voice that was already womanly in its tenderness.

There was another short silence, and then Bridget jumped up.

"That's enough of the dumps!" she said, with a vivid gesture. "You are an angel; and what are my eyes like? Dare I meet the others? or will that little duffer, Mary Molton, say, 'What's the matter, Bridget? Have you been *crying*?' Come along; let's play tennis! My style's good enough *there*, anyway," she added mischievously, with a flashing backward glance at Helen, who was picking her way through the wet grass.

It was four years since Miss Brownrigg, departing from her "usual rule," took a tradesman's daughter as a boarder at Myrtle House. Times were hard in the educational as well as the outside world, and tradesmen had this saving grace,—they usually paid promptly. Besides, Bridget's home was a distant one, and, as Miss Brownrigg remarked to her sister, it was very unlikely the other girls would ever

know,—“unless, of course,” she added with a sigh, folding up a check for entrance fees paid in advance,—“unless the child is very uncouth, which is unfortunately to be expected.”

Miss Brownrigg’s expectations were, however, falsified in both particulars.

In the first place, Bridget was not uncouth. In the second, she speedily left no doubt in the minds of her school-fellows as to the nature of her social position. It was with considerable relief that Miss Brownrigg saw a slender, graceful little girl emerge from the cab which brought her to the door on the first day of term.

“My dear Eliza,” she observed, “the child is not merely presentable,—she is *pretty*; she has style. She is even dressed well,—simply, I’m glad to say, but *well*. We sha’n’t have much trouble.”

This was when the drawing-room door had closed upon Bridget after the first interview, and she was following the maid upstairs to her bedroom,—a dejected little figure, with bent head and trembling lips.

And, in the particular way she expected, Miss Brownrigg was right.

The one or two hardly noticeable peculiarities of phrase and pronunciation—which to a very close observer indicated that her home was not on the same level of refinement as the rest of her school-fellows’—the child corrected herself before she had been in the house a month. She never made a mistake twice. The English teacher, who was observant, noticed that she was at first morbidly sensitive on the subject.

Her mental character, as disclosed in the monthly conclave of teachers, was rather distractingly diverse. She was a dunce, incorrigibly idle, and a genius, according to varying accounts; but they all with one accord lifted up their voices and denounced her iniquities.

With the girls her popularity was undeniable, and the public disclosure of her social status notwithstanding, she retained it during the whole of her school life.

At the beginning of her second term at Myrtle House, a child about her own age came to school for the first time. Bridget always made much of the new girls, flying in the face of the time-honored tradition that they were to be treated as interlopers, and not allowed to display any “cheek” for several weeks.

“The stupidest idea I ever heard,” she declared, “just when they feel loneliest, and most miserable, to treat them badly, in case they should have *cheek*! Is it likely they’d feel cheeky the first fortnight, poor things? Did *you* feel cheeky? You cried for nights and nights. You *know* you did. So did I.”

Essie Langford—who had been petted and dosed with chocolates whenever she was discovered with her head in her locker, dissolved in tears, like a miserable little ostrich—naturally lost her heart to Bridget, and abandoned the idea of suicide.

“Will you let me be your friend?” she whispered one day, creeping up to her. Bridget sat in her favorite attitude, curled up on the floor, with her book on the sofa.

“Of course,” she returned, raising abstracted eyes for a second from the open page.

"Well, now let us tell each other what our fathers are," said Essie, confidentially, lowering her voice, and glancing apprehensively round. "Mine has a *sort* of business, you know,—not a *shop*, of course," she added hastily, "because there are wire blinds up at the windows, but—"

"I don't want to know what your *father* is," Bridget replied scornfully, forgetting her book. "What does it matter? I don't know him. I know *you*, not your father."

The girls were assembling for preparation of home lessons. They gradually drifted, as they generally did, over to Bridget's side of the room.

"What does Bridget say, the darlint?" one of them inquired.

"She says it doesn't matter what your father is," Essie replied in a low voice, blushing furiously.

"Doesn't matter?" echoed one of the elder girls. "Of *course* it matters."

"Why?" Bridget broke out, wheeling round and facing her.

"Why? Oh, well—because— Well, it decides whether *you* are a lady."

"How can your *father* decide that?" asked Bridget, hotly. "He is not *you*. You are *yourself*. You decide that. What do you mean by a lady?"

"Some one whose father is a gentleman," replied Lena, obstinately. "And you can always tell who *is* the daughter of a gentleman. *You're* a lady, Bid, of course. If your father had been a butcher or baker or candlestick-maker, you'd have been quite different. Your face would have been different; you'd have ugly broad hands, instead of nice thin little ones, like yours." She took one of them with a caress, and tried to draw the girl down beside her on the sofa, but Bridget drew back. "You would dress horribly,—in bad taste, like those Higginses in church, the grocer people, you know. But *your* frocks are *sweet*," she went on, stroking Bridget's pink cotton skirt admiringly.

"Oh! and then you'd have a horrid uneducated voice. And altogether,—any one can tell a lady. It's nonsense to say it doesn't matter who your father is. Why, nobody knows a person whose father is not a gentleman."

"Of course not!" some of the girls echoed. Others were discreetly silent. One or two remembered reassuringly that mamma always spoke of "your father's office," and added, "Of course not!" a little late, but very emphatically.

"Well, then, listen!" cried Bridget, her voice ringing imperatively. "I don't care who hears! Listen! and see how *stupid* you all are! I suppose you don't call a man who keeps a public house a gentleman. Well, I'm the daughter of a man who keeps a public house."

There was dead silence. A sort of undefinable flutter of surprise and consternation was in the air. Unconsciously the girls fell back a pace or two. Bridget noticed it, and threw up her head defiantly.

"And you've all known me, and made a fuss over me, for a year, and *thought I was a lady*," she said mockingly, looking round at them with slow scorn. "You can't

even discover a lady for yourselves. You have to wait to be told that she isn't one. But half of you," she cried, glancing at them one after another contemptuously, "will be like that as long as you live. You'll always *belong* to some one. You'll be afraid to be *yourselves*. There! now you know who my father is, and you may do just as you like about 'knowing' me, as you call it. Half of you *I* shouldn't care to know if I wasn't obliged; not because of what your fathers are, but because of what *you* are,—a set of silly, tame sheep, who *daren't* think for yourselves!"

She paused breathless and shaking, her eyes blazing. There was a moment's awkward silence, and then Helen Mansfield, the head girl, moved from the door which she had entered just as the discussion began, and came forward.

"Bid," she said carelessly, in her usual self-possessed voice, as though nothing had happened, "will you come and help me see to the lockers? It's my week, and there's such a lot to do."

She put her arm round the girl's waist, not effusively, but in ordinary school-girl fashion, and they left the room together.

Helen Mansfield had a certain vogue at Myrtle House. On points of etiquette she set the fashion. She was "awfully good style."

The set of the tide was immediately discernible. Lena Mildmay, indeed, went off with her special satellite, murmuring scornfully that "it was coming to something when you never knew who you might be associating with," and she should "write home about it;" but the others failed to respond.

Throughout the whole of preparation, surreptitious notes, which caused Bridget to writhe, continued to be passed to her, as she sat doggedly working sums, her curly hair hiding her face.

"Darling Bid, will you walk to church with me on Sunday?"

"My dearest Bridget, *I'm* not a sheep, am I? I'm sure your father must be a very nice gentleman. Here are some chocolate almonds; but eat them quietly, because they *scrunch*, and old Ruggles hears quickly."

"My darling Bid, don't tell any one. My father is a wine-merchant,—something like yours, you see; only, of course, it's *wine*. But still, you see, I couldn't mind much about *your* father. Besides,—you'll never tell, will you?—my uncle is a socialist, and mother says it's a disgrace."

"Oh, Helen! Helen!" Bridget whispered between her sobs, kneeling beside her friend's bed that night when the lights were out, "what *fools* they all are. But I love *you*. I shall love you for ever and ever."

The fact that, in spite of her promulgation, Bridget Ruan still led the school, was strikingly apparent when, two or three months later, the girls at Myrtle Lodge were converted.

A revivalist preacher passing through Eastchester was invited to address them, with the result that more than half the school was stricken with conversion. The preacher was, as usually happens in such cases, a man of powerful personality. He

spoke fluently, with a certain oratorical effect which appealed strongly to Bridget's emotional nature. Most of the girls cried copiously. Bridget sat tearless, but white to the lips, as the man prayed, almost suffocated by the violent beating of her heart. Left to themselves, most of the girls would have forgotten the service in a week, but Bridget could not forget. She fanned the wavering flame of ardor in her school-fellows. She, the leader in every game, bitterly denounced hare and hounds, and branded rounders with ignominy. She went about with fixed gaze and unsmiling lips, meditating upon the Second Coming.

She no longer rushed into the dining-room just as the door was being closed for prayers, nor came up flushed and panting when the tail of the two-and-two procession daily formed to walk from the boarding-house to the High School was about to disappear round the corner.

Bridget, in fact, exhibited every sign of that changed heart whose outward manifestation, according to school ethics, consists in a subordination to rules and an immaculate condition of drawers and lockers,—which, from the teachers' point of view, makes a school conversion a blessed and memorable event.

As an outcome of her fiery zeal, Myrtle Lodge became characterized by a stern, unbending morality. There were no more whispered conversations in the bedrooms when the lights were out and talking prohibited. Self-imposed bad marks became the order of the day. Even the games took on a quiet, well-conducted, ecclesiastical tone. Bridget invented them. One, which she called *Scripture Clocks*, consisted in finding texts for every hour in the day, and printing them on to a cardboard time-piece, manufactured for the purpose. She organized, too, a Saturday afternoon prayer-meeting in the cloak-room on the ground floor, and this meeting it was which, in accordance with the irony of fate, was her undoing. She had been implored to take the lead, and offer up prayer herself, but remembering that the fruit of the Spirit is meekness, she had reluctantly declined, giving up her place to an elder girl.

During the prayers she used to kneel beside one of the stained wooden forms, her face enveloped in a waterproof which hung straight and limp from its peg above her head.

She had adopted this attitude, because merely shutting her eyes was not a sufficient safeguard against the seduction of the sunlit leaves round the window, with their background of blue sky. Concentrating her attention thus severely on the prayer, Bridget at first listened devoutly, then less devoutly, and finally began to criticise, and that was fatal.

"How she stammers and hesitates, and says the same things over and over again," she thought, shaking her hair about her ears in growing irritation. "Why didn't I pray when they asked me?" She began to compose impassioned addresses, modelled unconsciously on the soul-stirring exhortations of the preacher who had so roused her nature. By degrees she ceased to listen to the halting words of the girl, wrapping the cloak round her head so that her own imaginary prayer might be

delivered to a sobbing audience with greater effect, unhindered by the feeble murmurs of her school-fellow. This state of affairs lasted through one or two of the meetings, and then the innings of the Adversary began.

“How ridiculous it is! How absurd you are, making up grand speeches to say to God! How silly it is to be kneeling in this stuffy, dusty room, telling God things that He knows already! How *disgusting* this waterproof smells!”

She jerked it off with an impatient movement, and it fell upon the head of the girl who knelt next to her, enveloping her in its voluminous folds. She struggled wildly to free herself, “like a cat with its head in a jug,” as Bridget afterwards described the episode, and she began to laugh, softly at first; then the desperate struggles of the girl redoubled themselves so uncontrollably that the form shook, and Essie Langford, who knelt at her left, raised her head sharply, with a sigh of relief when she discovered the cause. Essie’s conversion at the best of times hardly deserved the skin-deep description. Bridget had insisted upon it, as a matter of fact, and now her shallow, pleasure-loving little soul rejoiced, foreseeing the end.

Mary Morton, who was praying, began the first words of the Lord’s Prayer; and when the murmur of response was at its fullest, Essie seized her opportunity.

“*Bridget!*” Bridget had controlled her laughter, and there was no reply to the whisper.

“*Bid!*” urged Essie.

“‘Thy will be done’— *What?*” answered Bridget. The last word was jerked out impatiently, as if in spite of herself.

“The little ones are playing rounders, awfully badly.”

“Be quiet! I know it. Let me think!” she whispered back fiercely; “‘and lead us not into temptation,’” she added, mechanically following the voice of the praying girl.

The *Amen* was followed by the silence of private prayer, broken suddenly by a quick, decided movement from Bridget, who all at once sprang to her feet. Every head was raised curiously, and in a moment or two every girl had risen from her knees.

“Wait a minute!” Bridget cried, “*I* began these meetings, so I ought to tell you I’m not coming to any more of them. I’m tired of them. I don’t believe it interests God a bit to see us all kneeling down in this horrid dusty room; and He can hear much better prayers in church.”

There was a horrified murmur of “*Bridget!*”

“Well, so He can, if He likes prayers. *I* don’t believe He does, because He *never* answers any.... Anyway, it’s fine weather. I vote we have rounders after tea.”

There was a large assembly at rounders that evening, and Miss Ruggles, shutting her bedroom window with a bang, remarked to Miss Shuttleworth, the drawing-mistress, that conversion and peace were practically at an end.

The fact that Bridget’s mind had been seriously turned to spiritual matters, however, was not without permanent result. She had been unnaturally quiet

throughout a Scripture lesson one Sunday, a month or two after Myrtle Lodge had resumed its normal tone. Just as the lesson was finished she said suddenly, fixing her eyes earnestly on Miss Ruggles,—

“But *this* is what I want to know,—how do you know there *is* a God?”

There was an electric silence.

“And you can read your Bible, Bridget, and ask me *that!*” Miss Ruggles replied in an awed tone.

“But that is just why I *do* ask. Is there a way of proving that the Bible is *true*?”

“Yes, there is the way of *faith*,” Miss Ruggles returned with impressive solemnity, if defective logic.

“But that isn’t a *proof*; it’s a *feeling*.”

“A feeling which you must try to cultivate, Bridget. These very foolish ideas spring from your rebellious nature and defiance of all rules,—your habit of questioning the authority of any one who is set over you. It will lead you into great sin unless you guard against it watchfully and with prayer.”

“When I grow up,” said Bridget, abstractedly, as though following her own train of thought, “I will find out about these things; but I sha’n’t believe or disbelieve them yet. There’s no good in it that I can see.”

CHAPTER II

RILCHESTER, Bridget's home, was a fair-sized, bustling market-town.

At the corner of the High Street stood *The Golden Plume*, Mr. Ruan's property, a large, prosperous-looking public house, with an adjoining private dwelling.

On the day Bridget left school, Mrs. Ruan sat in the drawing-room, with her sister, Mrs. Wainright, a plump, middle-aged woman, who had married a small farmer and lived at Sidford, a town some twenty miles distant from Rilchester.

The room in which the two women were seated was of the uncompromising square description, with two flat sash-windows overlooking the High Street. It was furnished in the style that was fashionable when Mrs. Ruan was married; but in its accessories, leanings towards æstheticism, as understood in Rilchester, were observable. These took the form of Liberty antimacassars tied over the backs of the gilt chairs, flights of Japanese fans (partly concealing the somewhat florid wall paper, with its design of yellow roses and butterflies), and sundry painted tambourines, tied with bunches of colored ribbons, depending from the walls or perched jauntily on screens.

The room was incongruous enough, but it did not lack in detail certain deft, dainty touches, which indicated that its possessor gave the rein to her artistic sense as far as, and on the lines on which it had been developed.

This was best exemplified in the appearance of Mrs. Ruan herself and her immediate surroundings. She was a slightly faded but young-looking woman, with blond hair curling a little stiffly above a pretty, somewhat lined and care-worn face. She dressed well. There was no hint of vulgarity or display, but a considerable amount of grace in the simple silk dress she wore, and the soft folds of the gauze fichu knotted at the breast.

The little tea-table drawn up to the fire was dainty too. It was covered by a simple linen cloth trimmed with lace, and the doily that lay in the cake-basket was fine in texture and white as snow.

"You go in for *afternoon* tea, I see," said her sister, with the faintest touch of sarcasm in her voice. "Quite fashionable." She put her cup to her lips, and drank off its contents at one gulp, as she spoke, as a sort of protest.

"Yes, I like it. I think it's a pretty fashion. Why shouldn't I have it, if I want to? Of course 'Enry says it's a 'lot of tomfoolery,' but that don't matter to me."

Mrs. Ruan occasionally dropped an *h*, but her voice was clear and musical like her daughter's.

"Besides, with Bridget coming home and all, I want to have things nice for her. She'll look for it."

"When do you expect 'er?"

"In about an hour," Mrs. Ruan said, glancing at the clock, her face brightening. "There! I 'ave been looking forward to her coming home. I've missed 'er

dreadfully,—that I 'ave; but of course I *had* to think of her education. 'Enry was *always* against this school, you know,—grumbled at the expense an' all; but I was *determined* she should go and have good schooling."

Mrs. Wainright grunted a little.

"I don't know that 'Enry wasn't right," she said. "I always thought it was a mistake myself."

"A *mistake*," her sister echoed indignantly. Her face flushed. "But there, Jinny, you never *did* have a spark of ambition for your children. Now, I *have*, and it's harder for me than for you, p'rhaps," she added wistfully. "Of course I wouldn't own it to any one else, but a sister's different. There's no doubt about it, a public house *is* looked down on. It's a fine paying thing, of course, an' I can't say a word against it; that's where all the bread and butter has come from. But people don't like it. And if I hadn't always 'eld my head up, we should never have known the people we do. We should have had to be content with the Browns—you know—that greengrocer lot, and the Witleys—the tobacconists, and that kind. But I never *would* know them, and now we *do* go to the Jenkinses sometimes, and the Wilbys, and the Walkers. Not that, between you and me, I think the Jenkinses are any superior to us. Old Jenkins isn't a bit refined, to my taste, but they've got a nice genteel business, and they're well thought of in the town, and of course that makes a difference."

"Well, you know your own affairs, I s'pose," returned her sister; "but *my* opinion ain't altered. The girl will come 'ome with 'er 'ed choke full of 'igh and mighty ideas, an' you won't find she's goin' to be satisfied with the Jenkinses—*nor* the Wilbys, for that matter, neither. Unfitting a girl for 'er station in life, I call all this education. My Bessie and Janey shall never 'ave it—I'll see to that."

"Ah!" broke in Mrs. Ruan eagerly, ignoring the latter part of the speech; "but I look higher for Bid than the Wilbys or Jenkinses even. She'll meet *their* friends of course, and be *fit* to meet them now after being at school all these years. Why, young Spiller, that young fellow in Bailey's Bank, and Downs, he's a clerk in Hobson's office, and Danby, they all visit the Jenkinses. I daresay they laugh at them behind their back," she continued, as though stating an obvious possibility, "but they *go*. Bid will marry one of them, I expect, and then she'll be out of trade altogether."

"Much better if she stopped in," Mrs. Wainright said with a sniff. "She'd get a chance of a comfortable 'ome with a nice young publican. Don't talk to me about yer tuppenny-'apenny clerks."

Mrs. Ruan drew herself up. "That was always like you, Jinny, always looking out for the main chance. As for me, I'd sooner 'ave my girl married to a man with a nice genteel occupation than have so much money. Besides, all these young fellers have expectations," she added inconsequently.

"Well, mark my words, you'll 'ave a time with 'er," replied Mrs. Wainright. "The child's been away from you all these years, except fer the 'olidays;

and *then* you've generally sent 'er into the country because of 'er 'ealth, or something. Why, you hardly know 'er. You don't know what she's like to live with."

"Bid's all right," her mother said confidently. "A more affectionate child you wouldn't meet with in a day's march. I own she's a bit queer sometimes," she went on slowly, after a moment's pause, "and she's got a temper—that's not to be denied. She's got mother's temper, as well as her looks," she added, "and 'er sharp tongue too."

"Ave you got that old picture of mother as a girl?" asked Mrs. Wainright presently. "I 'aven't seen it for years."

"Yes, here." Mrs. Ruan rose and went to a desk under the gilt-legged table at the other end of the room. She unlocked it, and, searching among the papers, presently took out something with which she returned to the fire. "I'll light the gas," she said; "it's quite dusk—you can't see."

The gas-jet flared up, and Mrs. Wainright turned the sketch to the light.

It was the head of a fisher girl. A gray kerchief was tied over her curling hair, and a coarse gray peasant's frock, open carelessly at the neck, was just indicated. The girl's face was beautiful; there was a touch of dignity about it that was even more arresting than its beauty. On the back of the sketch was scribbled, "Bridget O'Hea," and a few almost illegible words in French.

"What does that mean?" she asked her sister.

"I don't know. Father saw it in one of those artist-men's sketch-books, and wanted to buy it, I've heard mother say; but 'e gave it to him—said he had plenty more of her."

"Bridget's the very image of her, isn't she?"

"Yes—might be 'er daughter. She don't favor either you or 'Enry a bit," Mrs. Wainright declared.

"Do you remember when we were little, running about barefoot on the shore at Dara's Bay?" asked her sister presently in a low voice, glancing over her shoulder to see that the door was shut; "and mother telling us stories over the peat fire in the evenings—an' singing. What queer outlandish things she told us, do you remember?—and the things she sung. Sometimes I 'ave the air running in my head for days now, and I can see her great big eyes when she told the stories to us children—just like Bid's. Do you remember the painter-folk that hung about the cottage? Mother used to wear a scarlet shawl, and sit on that bit of old wall by the sea—didn't she?—and knit. Can't you see her now? And the artists that used to come and talk to her? She always made them laugh, I mind me."

"Yes. Who'd think, to see us sittin' in our drawing-rooms now, we'd come out of that little wood shanty?" Mrs. Wainright replied. "But I don't know that we weren't 'appy enough."

"Bridget came across this picture one day, when she was a little thing," Mrs. Ruan resumed after a pause, locking the sketch away in the desk again, "and she

asked who it was, and I told 'er it was her grandmother, but she was never to tell a word about 'er being only a fisher girl. And what do you think she said?—that's what I mean by Bridget being *queer*. She said she'd much rather be a fisher girl and live in a hut by the sea than keep a public house. I smacked her for it—silly little thing.—She ought to be here by this time.

"Oh, here's father!" Mr. Ruan was a thick-set, rather powerfully built man, with a somewhat florid complexion, and a taciturn manner.

"Room's very 'ot," he remarked, shaking hands with his sister-in-law. "Bridget not come yet?"

"No, she'll be here in a few minutes. I didn't go to meet her because Jinny came in. There! that's the cab, isn't it?"

She ran to the top of the stairs, but Bridget was already half way up.

"Well, mother!" she cried gayly, flinging herself into her arms. "Here I am!—the train was awfully late. How are you, father? oh! and Aunt Jinny."

She entered the room with her arm round her mother's waist, kissing her between the words, over and over again. The maid came in with fresh tea, and she sank into a low chair by the fire, pulling off her gloves, and chattering.

Mrs. Ruan glanced triumphantly at her sister, and then back again at Bridget.

"Child! how you've grown!" she exclaimed, with a glance at the girl's slight, erect figure and bright eyes.

"So I ought," Bridget cried. "I'm eighteen. *Eighteen!* Aunt Jinny, what do you think of that? Lovely tea, mother—oh! and hot cakes!—*delicious!*"

Presently Mrs. Wainright rose to go. Mr. Ruan accompanied her to the front door, and his wife left the room to give an order to the maid about the luggage.

Bridget was left alone for a few minutes.

She glanced round the room, and the light went out of her eyes. She heard her father's gruff voice in the passage downstairs. "Tell that idiot of a maid of yours to take these boxes out of the way!" he shouted irritably.

The color flamed in the girl's cheeks. She rose from her seat, and went slowly to the fire, and knelt before it. She saw the red glow of the coals through a blinding haze of tears.

In a flash, as it seemed, the full significance of her home-coming was revealed to her.

"Oh!" she whispered, "what a wicked girl I am! I'm glad to see mother, but—I—*don't want to come home*. I didn't know it would be as bad as this.—What shall I do? What *shall* I do?"

"An invitation for the Jenkinses—for the 14th," Mrs. Ruan said, triumphantly, coming into the dining-room one morning.

Bridget sat at the table writing. She had been home about three months. Mr. Ruan, who had not yet gone to business, lay back in his arm-chair before the fire, with

the paper. His coat hung over the back of the chair; he usually preferred to sit in his shirt-sleeves when he was off duty.

Bridget looked up. She frowned a little, began to speak, and was silent, biting the end of her pen.

"Well, what is it?" Mrs. Ruan's voice changed at once into an irritable, complaining key. "You don't want to go, I suppose?"

"Don't want to go?—why not?" exclaimed Mr. Ruan, looking up from his paper. "Aren't the Jenkinses good enough for her? You don't seem to 'ave made so many friends at school, my girl; so if you're not invited away to stay with swells, you must put up with the people 'ere, or go without."

"I didn't say I didn't want to go," Bridget replied, turning away her head.

"Didn't *say*. Of course not; it's your *manner*," retorted her mother. "I thought you'd come back more fit to ornament society, *that* I did," she said bitterly. "Instead of which you seem to care for no gayeties like other girls—nothing but those everlasting books. I'm sure—"

"That 'ull do, mother," her husband broke in, raising his voice. "She'll go—that's all about it—and take some music, can't you?" he added angrily, turning to Bridget, "and let them see you can play. Hang it all! I expect old Joe Jenkins is laughing in his sleeve, to think of all the money I've spent on you. A 'undred and twenty a year! and what's the good of it?"

Bridget sprang to her feet, and with reckless haste began sweeping all her papers together.

"*Do* let's talk about something else!" she cried, with sudden passion.

"Why haven't any of your school-fellows asked you to their homes?" inquired her mother, querulously. "I daresay you were stupid enough to tell them who we are, and *that's* why."

"That is just the reason!" Bridget exclaimed, closing her lips tightly.

"Well!—of all—"

But Bridget had reached the open door. She ran upstairs to her room, and shut herself in.

Mrs. Ruan waited till she heard the bedroom door shut, and then broke into helpless tears.

CHAPTER III

THE Jenkins party was at its height. The plush-covered chairs were all pushed back against the wall, leaving a sea of crimson carpet exposed, in the midst of which, like a solitary black island, stood a tall hat, into which Mr. Jenkins was endeavoring to throw cards. On the marble-topped chiffonier, in front of a glass-covered statuette of a fat little girl with an emaciated lamb, and a little boy in a white parian sailor suit

teaching a dog to beg, there were plates of nuts, half oranges, and apples cut into quarters.

The light from the glass chandelier, with all its dangling irresponsible pendants, streamed down upon the kneeling form of Mr. Jenkins, and brilliantly illuminated the scene. A group of young men, among whom were a few girls in a chronic state of giggle, stood behind their host, applauding his skill, or making rash boasts about the brilliance shortly to be observed in their own performances, when he should have resigned his place. The rest of the company sat round the room on the plush-covered chairs. Most of the young men had congregated on one side, and the girls on the other.

Only two or three of the men were in evening dress. The girls for the most part wore much starched summer muslins, high at the neck and long in the sleeves. Some of them had put on their winter best gowns, and attempted to give the “evening” touch by bows of heliotrope or pink chiffon, light gloves, and hair bound with a colored ribbon.

Mrs. Jenkins, a fat comfortable lady in black silk, with an écreu lace cap, sat in an arm-chair, alternately beaming upon the young people and applauding “papa’s” lucky shots.

“Carrie, dear, won’t you give us a song?” she begged presently. “That pretty new one of yours—what is it? I never *can* remember.”

“Oh, lor, ma! How many times am I to tell you it’s as old as the hills! She means ‘Queen of my Heart,’” said Carrie, turning to the girl next her. “Every one’s sick and tired of it, of course, but pa likes it.”

“Never mind, dear, it’s always *sweet*. I love it. It reminds me of that darling Haydn Coffin. Isn’t he a dear? Isn’t he *handsome*? My! Susie and I did make fools of ourselves over him the first time we saw him. Do sing it, Carrie. I’ll shut my eyes and *dream* of him,” she cried in a tone of chastened sorrow, though her smile was cheerful. She was a plump girl, with green plush sleeves, and a Swiss belt covered with coffee lace.

Carrie rose to look for her music.

“Allow *me*,” said one of the young men, crossing the room in a great hurry. Mr. Spiller was tall and pale, with a facetious expression and sandy hair. He was a great wit, and whenever he said, “Allow *me*,” or “May I offer you any refreshment?” the girls giggled.

“Mr. Spiller, how absurd you are! You’re killing,” Carrie murmured, with laughter.

“Not at all,” observed Mr. Spiller, with truth. “Always delighted to wait on the ladies, I’m sure. Little dears! we all love them.”

“Rude man,” said Carrie, shaking out her skirts, and pushing the music-stool backwards and forwards.

Mr. Spiller’s gallantry did not carry him far enough to turn over the leaves of the song. He presently strolled away, and walked leisurely in front of the rank of

chairs on the girls' side of the room, with his hands in his pockets. Some of them nudged each other as he passed, and giggled.

"Doesn't he fancy himself—just," observed Mary Wilby. "But he's handsome, don't you think so?"

"Yes, isn't he divine!" whispered her friend. "I b'lieve he's going to talk to Miss Ruan. Yes," with a sigh, "he is."

"*She* fancies herself, if you like. I believe she's *awfully* stuck-up—really; despises us, I shouldn't wonder, for all she's pleasant enough when you meet her."

"Stuck up! what's she got to be stuck-up about? Why, her father's only a publican. I must say I wonder at Mrs. Jenkins knowing the Ruans. Nice shop and all as they've got, and so well up as you might say they are. I hate public-house people myself. It's such a *low* business. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, but she doesn't look much as though she belonged to one, does she? Queer-looking girl. Do you think she's pretty?"

"No—much too strange-looking for my taste. I suppose we're not good enough for her after her boarding-school people. She's never made any friends since she came home. I don't know her at all—don't want to either; but Nellie Clarke says she went in there one day, and couldn't get on with her a bit. She was polite enough, but Nellie says she couldn't understand her; she didn't seem to care for anything—not the church even, nor Mr. Millar, and he's the best-looking of the curates. Anyway, Nellie couldn't do with her at all."

"Look at her," urged Mary, nudging her friend again. "She's hardly answering Charley Downs. Don't you hate that way she has of looking on the carpet?—so indifferent; though I shouldn't wonder if it wasn't to show off her eyelashes. I believe she can hardly keep a sneer off her face."

"She wouldn't surely have the cheek to sneer at Charley Downs. Surely *he's* good enough for her. Why, he's in Bailey's Bank, you know."

"Oh, bless you, she wants a duke! What a dress, too. I think it's downright affectation to come in a dress as plain as that. Just to make herself look different from us. She knew all the girls would likely wear their summer muslins."

"It's awfully well made, though; and that bit of lace is good, you can see."

"So it ought to be. They've plenty of money—must have, or her dad couldn't have sent her to a swell school."

The conversation, to which "Queen of my Heart" had made an excellent accompaniment, was broken off by the inevitable high note with which all of Carrie's songs ended.

"*Thank* you, dear!" both girls exclaimed, in haste and simultaneously. "We *have* enjoyed it so."

"Carrie, my girl, let's have something to eat," shouted Mr. Jenkins, who had persistently aimed cards at the hat throughout the song, accompanied by loud exclamations at intervals of "Got 'im!" "Boss shot!" "Try another!"

"Here, you young folks! Can't enjoy yourselves on an empty stomach, you know. All nonsense."

"*Pa!*" exclaimed Carrie, with annoyance. "How stupid you are!"

"Stupid, my dear, I may be; faint, I *am*. When's supper, mother? Oh my! look at 'em frowning! Said something I oughtn't to, 'ave I? Can't help it. Food's the main thing in life, eh? What do you say, all of you?"

Mr. Jenkins trotted about with a plate of ginger-nuts in one hand, and one of quartered apples in the other, talking cheerfully to the company at large.

"Now, young men, make yourselves useful. Wait on the ladies."

Thus admonished, the youths dashed at the chiffonier, where they jostled one another for the green dessert plates.

"Have a nut, Miss Ruan," implored Mr. Spiller, returning to her side. "So sustaining. Not one? Won't you share one with me now?" he whispered facetiously, bending towards her.

The girl drew back proudly. There was no mistaking the gesture.

"That girl of Ruan's is too big for her boots, as the saying is," whispered Mrs. Jenkins to a friend.

"Is she? She's quiet, I noticed, but she's pleasant mannered enough, I thought."

"Look at 'er with young Spiller. I don't call *that* pleasant."

"Perhaps he's offended her," Mrs. Walker returned comfortably. "Young men nowadays are very free, I fancy. When I was young—"

"Nonsense. Why, most girls like a bit of chaff. I've no patience with stuck-up rubbish like that."

"Now, you girls and boys," called Mr. Jenkins's voice, drowning the buzz of talk and laughter, and clatter of plates, "what do you say to *kiss-in-the-ring*! There'll be just time for a good game before supper, eh, missus?"

Some of the girls furtively tossed their heads. "So common," one or two murmured.

"We're delighted, sir, of course," drawled Mr. Spiller, superciliously, "but what about the fair sex? Kiss-in-the-ring is a little out of date, don't you think?"

"All nonsense, my boy!" answered Mr. Jenkins, cheerfully, bustling people about to form the ring. "Kissing ain't out of fashion, whatever else is, I'll be bound; and the girls like it right enough, for all their screaming and *don't*-ing. A very good game. I like it myself, at *my* age. Don't let the missus 'ear that, though," he added in a stage whisper, with a wink. "Now, Miss Ruan, my dear, come along. There's a young gentleman at your right hand that's anxious to begin, *I* know. Headache? Nonsense! it'll take it away. Won't you, really?"

"There! she won't play," announced Mrs. Jenkins, as Bridget passed her to find a seat on the opposite side of the room, out of the way of the ring. "Not proper, I suppose."

Mrs. Walker followed the girl with her eyes. "Beautiful girl, I call her. How well she moves!" she said.

"I'd rather have your Louisa or my Carrie," Mrs. Jenkins returned with asperity. "An outlandish looking girl, I say—and proud as Lucifer, I'll be bound. What for, I should like to know? My 'usband always *would* know Tom Ruan; he's a very old friend, else, as far as I'm concerned, I draw the line at publicans. One must draw it *somewhere*."

"It's her schooling," replied Mrs. Walker. "I've heard she's clever. I daresay she'd put my Louie or Lizzie in the shade at her books," she added, laughing comfortably.

"Well, what if she can?" Mrs. Jenkins returned. "What's the good of it? A girl doesn't get married any sooner for so much book-learning. The men don't care about it, my dear. What they want's a girl that can keep house and cook a bit, and make the children's clothes. If she's pretty, so much the better. Men will be men, of course." Mrs. Jenkins laughed leniently, and shook her cap roguishly at Mrs. Walker, so that all the sequins on it clattered.

"There's Carrie gone to talk to her," she went on. "I suppose she thinks she looks out of it. Well, and it's 'er own fault if she does. Her mother was always a stuck-up madam. There she is, over there. Looks young still, doesn't she?"

Bridget sat on a blue plush sofa, working her heel savagely into the carpet. Her heart was still beating angrily in spite of a desire to laugh, which was inextricably mingled with a sense of shame.

"You came—you shouldn't have come if you can't have the decency not to 'behave superior,'" she found herself repeating monotonously.

With an effort, she pulled herself together, and turned smiling to Carrie, moving her skirt a little to make room for her.

"You don't care for kiss-in-the-ring, ducky?" Carrie began effusively. "No more do I. I think it's *common*, don't you? I think a girl oughtn't to let herself be kissed by anybody—only her beau. Have you got a beau?" she inquired confidentially.

"A bow?" asked Bridget, with a momentary puzzled frown. "Oh I see! No, I haven't."

"Why don't you set your cap at one of the gentlemen here?" Carrie whispered. "Mr. Spiller, now. He's good-looking, isn't he? and I'm sure he's awfully gone on you. You've mashed him awfully."

Bridget involuntarily drew her dress a little closer to her, and straightened herself. Then she resolutely turned to the girl again.

"Oh! I don't know," she answered vaguely, laughing a little.

"Now, missus, I ain't goin' to wait a minute longer for my supper. Come along, you young folks. Take your ladies, young gentlemen, and follow me."

Mr. Jenkins seized the plump girl with the green sleeves, tucked her hand under his arm, and pranced out of the room into the oil-cloth covered landing. There was much confusion and a babel of tongues, as the couples filed after him. Bridget saw Mr. Spiller coming towards her, and shrank hopelessly in her corner.

"There! I told you so, ducky," whispered Carrie, as she took the arm of her acknowledged beau. "He's awfully gone."

"Are you engaged, Miss Ruan. Pardon me—I did not mean *permanently*—though for *my* sake I hope not. But may I?—will you favor me?—supper?"

Bridget set her teeth, and rose in silence.

Supper was spread in the breakfast-room next to the kitchen. The somewhat dark narrow staircase which led to it afforded an opportunity for a good deal of whispering and giggling before the last step was reached. Bridget had dropped the young man's arm almost immediately, on pretence of gathering up her dress, and her left hand hung at her side. Mr. Spiller's hand crept towards it. They had just reached the bottom step. Bridget turned her head, and gave him a lightning-swift glance, and his hand dropped instantly as though it had been stung. He flushed, and stumbled in the narrow passage before the door was reached.

They were the last couple, and as they entered the room Bridget saw with relief that there was only room for the ladies at the table. The men stood behind their partners' chairs, unscrewing bottles of ale and stout, or handing plates of chicken. One or two of them paused a moment with a vague sense of admiration as the girl walked up the room, head erect, to where Carrie was energetically patting a chair next to her own.

"Come here, dear. I've kept a place for you. Mr. Spiller, give Miss Ruan some bottled ale, and look after her, you naughty man!"

"By Jove! she's a stunner," whispered Wilby junior to young Jenkins. "What eyes she's got, eh? and hair! I'm a bit spoony, Jim. Let's try and cut Spiller out."

"Done," returned Jenkins, with emphasis. "I'll have first go. Give me that plate of tongue."

"Let me give you some tongue, Miss Ruan," he implored, elbowing Spiller aside, as he stood sulkily in the background.

"Look here," he whispered, as he put the plate down in front of her. "Spiller's had too long innings by a good bit. Give some other feller a chance, won't you, Miss Ruan? We're goin' to have dancin' after supper. May I have the first valse? Come now."

"Thank you. I don't dance," murmured Bridget, untruthfully.

"Oh, come now, that's playin' it too low down upon a chap," Jenkins returned, ruefully retreating.

"Have some jelly, Miss Ruan?" said Wilby junior's voice at her ear, through the babel of laughter and clattering of plates. "You'll have some to please *me* now, won't you?" he murmured in wheedling tones.

"Harry's quite a lady's man, isn't he, ducky?" said Carrie, in an audible whisper on the other side. "You've mashed him too, I declare."

"She's quite right, though she needn't shout so loud," Mr. Wilby murmured, reluctantly removing the plate of jelly. "I shall *take* the first waltz after supper," he added fiercely, with a Corsair-like change of tone.

"Now, my dear," said Mr. Jenkins heartily, bustling round to Bridget. "You're eating nothin', *I* can see. Bless these young fellers, they ain't 'arf up to the mark, not a patch on the young men forty years ago. *They'd* 'ave looked after you fast enough. You've got some footin' on the light fantastic before you, remember, and young girls ain't kep' up on nothing, though they *do* try to make us believe it, eh?

"No puddin'? Nonsense!" He cut a huge slice of tipsy cake, and bundled it unceremoniously on to her plate. "There! you won't taste anythin' much better nor that in a 'urry. My missus's make. Ain't it, missus?"

The Ruans' cab came at twelve o'clock. Bridget followed her mother downstairs with a white fleecy shawl over her head. She looked pale and tired.

Mr. Jenkins was in the passage leading to the front door, shaking hands heartily with the departing guests, and shouting last words to them as they drove away.

"Good-night, Mary, my dear," he cried, pinching Mary's red cheek. "When are you goin' to git married, eh? Must look sharp about it, you know. Keep the young men up to the mark. They're cautious nowadays,—they're cautious," he repeated gleefully, rubbing his hands. "'Ullo, Ruan! You off? Glad to have seen you, old boy, and your missus, and the young lady," he added, with a mock serious bow to Bridget. "She's a bit quiet, Tom. Ain't you, miss?—but none the worse for that, p'raps. You know what they say about the quiet ones, my dear? Ha! ha! Eh, Tom? Eh? You'll have her flying away from the nest before you know where you are, p'raps, eh?"

Mrs. Jenkins shook hands a little stiffly with the mother and daughter, but Carrie made up for her lack of cordiality by kissing Bridget effusively on both cheeks.

"Good-bye, ducky, you *don't* mind giving me the pattern of that lace collar, do you?"—"I call her *lovely*!" she exclaimed with honest admiration as the cab drove off.

"And *I* call her a stuck-up little minx," her mother said sharply.

"And why you couldn't have made yourself agreeable to that young Spiller passes my comprehension," Mrs. Ruan said in an irritable voice half an hour later. Her husband had risen to go upstairs to bed, but he paused at the door to listen to her words. Bridget lay back wearily in her chair. Her cheeks were flushed with annoyance, her eyes big and bright with tears. In the light of the gas burner overhead her hair glittered like threads of gold. The sight of the girl's beauty, as she glanced at her, angered her mother still further. "She'll throw away all her chances in spite of it," she thought resentfully.

"Mother, I *couldn't*," she answered with fierce emphasis. "The man's not a gentleman. I—"

"Not a gentleman!" interrupted her father. "Not a *gentleman*, indeed! And pray what do you call a gentleman? And you a publican's daughter. P'raps you've forgotten it. 'E *hasn't*, you may take your oath. Don't talk to me. You make me *sick* with your nonsense."

"I don't *want* to talk, I never want to talk about it, but you drag me into these discussions," Bridget cried hopelessly. "I'm not talking about social position,—that isn't what I mean." She paused, and then moved restlessly in her chair.

"Mother," she said, turning to her appealingly, "don't let us discuss these things so much. We *never* understand one another, and it leads to so much unhappiness." Her voice trembled.

"Unhappiness! Yes, you may very well say so," repeated Mrs. Ruan, sobbing.

"It's all very well for you to sit there and cry," broke in her husband furiously. "Who badgered me from morning till night about this girl's education, eh? If only you'd listened to me, we wouldn't 'ave had any of this 'umbug. I suppose she's got some new-fangled ideas into 'er 'ed, that it isn't necessary or becoming nowadays to please the men. But I'll tell yer what it is, my girl," he continued, turning to Bridget, "unless you want to be a miserable old maid you'll 'ave to brisk up, and not be so stand-off. What men like is a nice bright girl that'll listen to 'em with a smilin' face, that can rattle off a bit of lively music to cheer them up when they're dull. I don't mean the sort of rubbish *you* play, but—"

"Father, I've told you often that I learnt quite a different sort of music at school. I can't help it that Mr. Jenkins doesn't like classical music. You sent me to school, and now you're vexed because—"

Her angry voice broke again miserably, as she recognized the utter futility of arguing the question.

"Yes, I did, and a fool I was for my pains. Precious little good it's done you. There you sat like a stick the 'ole evening, till I was *ashamed* of you, and—" Mr. Ruan left the room, banging the door, without completing the sentence.

"And such a nice party as it was, and every one ready to be agreeable to you; that Mr. Spiller, and young Wilby, and all," her mother said between her tears.

Bridget rose abruptly. "Oh, yes. I was rude and hateful, I know," she began wildly, "but—there! Why do we talk about it? Good-night, mother." She bent towards her, but the elder woman put out a hand to keep her away.

"I don't want you to kiss me. If you think yourself above the Spillers and the Jenkinses, *I'm* not good enough for you. Me and your father are common, of course. I wonder you're not too much of a fine lady to live with us."

"I wish to Heaven I didn't!" cried the girl in a half strangled voice. She gathered her cloak over her arm, and left the room hurriedly, choking a sob.

She stumbled on the shiny oil-cloth covered stairs, blinded by her tears. A glimmer of gas lighted the narrow landing at the top of the second flight. Bridget pushed open the door on the right, and entered her own room. Her hand trembled as

she raised it to turn the gas higher. She sank down on a chair before the dressing-table, and, burying her face in her hands, sobbed aloud. Presently she rose, impatiently, and began to pace the room, clenching her hands angrily, her tears drying on her flushed cheeks.

“Why should I care,” she thought incoherently. “It’s as unjust as it can be. They first send me to live with ladies, and then expect me to tolerate the Spillers and the Jenkinses of their acquaintance. To have no friends but people like these! no talk but their talk, about their sweethearts, and ‘divine men,’ and their Sunday hats! To submit to be ‘spooned with’ by these abominable young men—to *marry* one of them perhaps! Oh, I can’t, I *can’t* wear out my life like this!” she whispered in a sort of frenzy of despair. “Such a long life—” She sat down on the edge of her little white bed, her hands tightly clasped in her lap. In fancy the long gray years passed over her in endless procession, bringing the ever recurring household routine, the same profitless heart-breaking scenes with her parents, the same listless dressing for hateful parties, and preparations for still more hateful ones at home. A shudder shook her from head to foot; she rose swiftly in horror, and began to undress.

“No, no,” she whispered, “it *can’t* be like that. I won’t have it. It’s *my* life. I’ll make something better of it than that. There are people I should like—people who would like me—somewhere. I will find them. I will go. *Somehow* I will get away. I will teach. Some day”—she threw up her head determinedly—“I will write—but first I must have life—experience. Oh! I know that it will take a long time, but I will do it! The thing is to get away. I must think, I must plan.” She had taken the hair-pins out of her hair, and pushed the brushes and trays aside to make room for her elbows on the dressing-table. Her eyes were dry, and bright with hope and excitement. She thrust her slender fingers through the thick hair that fell round her face and neck, while her thoughts whirled. “There will be a row with father, of course, but I shall get my way. I will go to London. Helen will help me to get work, and in my spare time I can write.” Brilliant, intangible ideas for stories began to take shape and float through her brain. Why, even this evening’s experience, remembered in London, would be glorious—as copy. She smiled a little, and then began to laugh softly. A phrase or two which indicated Mr. Spiller’s facetiously tender side-glance, and Mr. Wilby’s struggles with an aspirate, rose to her lips. “How splendid they would be—in a story!” The word brought her suddenly, with a shock, to actualities. “Yes, but I live amongst them,” she cried, as though to some listener. “To outsiders, to people who belong to the upper classes, they are funny, they are types,—they speak of them with amusement, as though they were curious animals, whose habits and customs they had been clever enough to observe. But I *live* with them, I belong to them. What right have I to satirize them? It’s an impertinence, disloyal—they are my people. I belong to them. Why, mother thinks they are above me!”

The thought of her mother, of her angry reproachful words half an hour ago, brought back her misery in a flood. She always shrank from allowing herself to analyze her feeling for her father; but for her mother—that was different.

Her eyes wandered over the little room. She looked at the frilled curtains her mother had hemmed, at the valance round her bed, at the lace-edged covers on the dressing-table and chest of drawers, at the numberless trifles about the room, all of them dainty and pretty. Mrs. Ruan had the feminine graceful touch commonly supposed to be the peculiar monopoly of women of a higher class. She glanced from one thing to another, and as she looked her eyes filled again with tears. Her mother had spent so many hours making her room pretty before she came home from school! A portrait of her stood on one side of the dressing-table. Bridget took it up, and looked long at it. Even in the photograph, the querulous lines round the pretty, weak mouth were strongly indicated. But Bridget only saw her *mother's* face. As she gazed, hundreds of little nursery scenes flashed through her mind. She remembered coming in from a walk once, long ago, crying with cold. She saw her mother running towards her with pitying, caressing exclamations. "*Mother's poor little girl! Was she cold and miserable? Let mother warm her!*" She felt once more the delicious sense of warmth and protection as she lay cuddled in her lap, her little bare feet wrapped in the warm flannel apron. She remembered her mother's heart-broken tears the first time she went to school.

"But she'll come home such a little lady, won't she, father?" she had said with a pitiful smile and trembling lips, as Bridget had clung to her, crying too.

She turned the photograph over, and read with tear-dimmed eyes the words on the back, "*Mother's love to her dear little Bid.*" It was the photograph she had sent her the first term at school.

Bridget threw it down with a sob.

"Poor mother! poor mother!" she wailed. She rose impulsively and opened her door. The light downstairs was out. All was darkness opposite, where her mother slept, and she closed the door, with the added misery of being in some way again repulsed. She undressed mechanically, her tears falling all the time. "Poor mother! She must be so disappointed! It's all so different from what she expected. I understand how she feels. And yet how can I help it? We haven't a thought or a pleasure in common; but we love one another, and that makes it so difficult, so impossible to go, so unbearable to stay. And it's nobody's fault—that's the worst of it. Oh, if we were only not fond of each other, how much simpler it would be!" She turned out the gas, crept shivering into bed, and buried her face in the pillow, sobbing miserably. In the opposite room her mother lay, crying quietly lest her husband should wake, but not less bitterly.

CHAPTER IV

A FEW days later, Bridget found a letter for her on the breakfast table. It was from Helen Mansfield, and as she read it her eyes brightened.

"Mother," she cried rapturously, "Helen wants me to go and stay with her—next week. How lovely!"

Mrs. Ruan paused in the act of pouring out a cup of tea. Her face brightened too.

"Well, what about your dresses, will they do? They're grand folks, I suppose, plenty of money, 'aven't they? Pa, Bid will want a few things. You'd better give 'er some money."

Mr. Ruan emerged from behind his paper.

"She'll 'ave to make a five-pun note do, then. 'Ard times, nowadays," he mumbled, with his mouth full of buttered toast.

"Oh! but the Mansfields are quite poor people, I know," said Bridget. "They live very quietly. I sha'n't want a lot of grand frocks."

Her mother's face clouded. She pushed Bridget's cup of tea irritably towards her.

"I never in my life met such a girl as you!" she said. "You go to an expensive school enough, Heaven knows, and the only friends you make are a miserable, poverty-stricken crew that are no good to you. You'll never get a 'usband as long as you live, and serves you right. You've got no more gumption than a baby. I'm sick and tired of it all."

Bridget's face flushed.

"A *husband*!" she echoed scornfully. "Do you think that I'm always thinking and scheming for *that*, like that awful Wilby girl? It's *disgusting*, I consider."

"That awful Wilby girl 'ud get married five times over, before you!" retorted her mother, angrily. "*She* knows how to make herself agreeable, an' that's what the men like."

"I don't care twopence what 'the men' like," Bridget broke out fiercely. "I don't like 'the men,' and that's what matters to me. Did I come into the world to consider the taste of Mr. Jenkins or Mr. Wilby, do you think?"

"You came into the world to make me wretched, that's all I know," replied Mrs. Ruan, scraping her chair back from the table, and rising as she spoke.

"Sit down, mother, an' don't trouble your 'ed about that fool of a girl," Mr. Ruan exclaimed, dashing down his paper into the butter-dish. "These 'igh-falutin' ways don't suit your mother or I,—so now I tell yer," he continued, turning angrily to Bridget, "'usband or no 'usband, if you can't make yourself pleasant at 'ome, you'd better clear out of it. Go an' be an old maid somewhere else, that's my advice to you."

Bridget stood up slowly, trembling from head to foot. She clenched her hands, and she spoke with a great effort, forcing herself to utter the words quietly.

"Very well," she said, her great eyes blazing, "I'll take you at your word. I *will* go."

She moved proudly from her seat to the door and closed it behind her.

Mrs. Ruan burst into tears.

"'Enry, she *will*!" she exclaimed wildly.

"Let 'er!" shouted Mr. Ruan. "*Damn* the girl. I'm sick of this. Who's *she*, I should like to know? If we ain't good enough for 'er, let 'er go and find them that is. Bring me my boots, Mary, an' look sharp about it. Confound the women, say I. A man might 'ave a decently comfortable life without 'em. As it is, I'm glad to get out of the 'ouse."

Professor Mansfield's little flat was in the neighborhood of the British Museum.

The drawing-room, overlooking a formal square, was filled with the scent of violets the evening Bridget arrived. She sat after dinner in a low chair, in the rosy glow of the fire, deliciously conscious of the subtle flower-scents, of the play of light and shade on the books lining the low shelves round the walls, of the flash of orange or dainty pink out of the shadows, as the light glanced on a curtain or a rose-filled bowl.

Helen was at the piano, playing softly. On the opposite side of the fire the Professor lay back in his reading-chair, gently tapping the tips of his long fingers together in time to the melody. At his side his sister sat, with a mass of soft white wool in her lap, her wooden knitting needles clicking softly now and again. The Professor and his sister were both somewhat elderly people. Dr. Mansfield was forty before he married the young wife who died at Helen's birth, and Miss Mansfield, who was two or three years his senior, had lived with him since Helen was a baby. Bridget glanced at them both every now and again. She noticed the Professor's broad forehead, the masses of whitening hair above it, his keen eyes, and thin, humorous mouth.

A picture of her father's face as he sat, pipe in hand, with a sporting paper in one hand and a glass of grog at his elbow, rose to her mind for a second in vivid contrast.

She hurriedly put it from her, with a sudden shamed, disloyal feeling that translated itself in a frown and an involuntary gesture of repudiation. The Professor's quick eyes noted the movement, and his thoughts wandered from the music to speculate upon its cause.

Helen rose from the piano a minute later, and came forward into the firelight.

"The room has one of its pretty moods to-day, hasn't it, father?" she said, glancing about her, as she settled herself on the low curb before the hearth, close to the Professor's chair.

"Don't you notice that rooms have their pretty days just as people do, Bid?" she asked.

"I believe every day is a pretty day for this room," Bridget returned, with a contented sigh. "It's sweet. Oh, and the *books*!"

Her lap was full of volumes, which she turned over with eager fingers, as she spoke.

"What is this? Keats! how delicious!—in this dear little volume, I mean. They have such a hideous edition at the Free Library. Oh, Helen! and this charming Herrick with the dainty green and gold cover! And what's this? George Meredith—Oh! a poem? Well, I tried to read *Richard Feverel*—that's his, isn't it?—the other day, but I didn't like it much. I couldn't understand what he was talking about,—what he *meant*, you know."

The Professor laughed a little.

"How old are you, Miss Bridget?" he asked, with an amused smile. "Eighteen? Well—read 'Richard Feverel' again when you are five-and-twenty."

"Yes," said Bridget, earnestly, raising her eyes. They were big and bright with excitement. "I'll remember; but perhaps I shan't care for novels then. I shall be so awfully old."

The Professor laughed again. "What a delicious thing it is to be so awfully young!" he said. "Helen, light the lamps, my dear. Miss Bridget can't see our slender stock of books properly by this light."

"Oh, do you *mind* my turning them over so?" she asked, deprecatingly. "It's such a treat to see so *many*. I feel excited at just looking at their covers." There was a little tremor in her voice as she laughed.

"I see you touch them as a miser touches gold," he returned. "Rilchester is not a good place for books, then?"

"It's not a good place for anything," Bridget began, impetuously, and checked herself. "No, I can't get many books," she added, in a studiedly quiet tone.

There was a pause. Bridget fluttered the leaves of the book of verse she held, and smoothed the cover gently, with a caressing touch, before she put it down.

Miss Mansfield had left the room a moment or two before to give an order to the servant, and Helen was busy with the lamps.

"May I look at the books on the shelves?" Bridget said, rising as she spoke.

"Certainly, you insatiable young woman," returned the Professor.

He watched her with an amused, critical air, as she moved lightly from one shelf to the other, reading titles, opening a volume here and there to glance at the frontispiece, stopping to read half a page now and again.

"Like a half-starved child in a pastry-cook's shop," he thought, as he followed her movements.

"What have you found there?" he asked at last. The girl was bending over one of the books longer than usual, and he caught a glimpse of her absorbed face from where he sat.

"It's an essay,—about Christ; whether he was God," she said, glancing at him brightly.

"Ah,—h'm!" observed the Professor, with an incipient smile of amusement. "That's not a book for the young person."

"But I'm not a young person, and this is just the sort of book I want," Bridget replied eagerly.

"But the Bible tells you so," objected the Professor, mildly.

She turned, looked at him fixedly a moment, and then laughed. Bridget was charming when she laughed. The Professor involuntarily joined her.

"What I say is quite correct, nevertheless," he added.

"Of course; but I want to know why I should believe what the Bible says."

"Curiouser and curiouser," he murmured, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "Where do the young people of the present day get their ideas, I wonder?"

"Well, chiefly from books like yours, I think," she returned demurely. "I read your '*Veritas*' a year ago."

"Verily my sin has found me out!" he exclaimed. "Well, and at what conclusion have you arrived?"

"I think," she said slowly, "that it's impossible to tell whether there is or is not a God. If there is, I'm sure of one thing, He's not the *Bible* God."

"Why, may I ask?"

"Well, for many reasons, but chiefly because it's so unjust to call people into the world without asking if they want to come, and then by way of adding insult to injury to tell them, directly they get here, that if they don't believe that a man who lived thousands of years ago was God, they shall go to hell."

"Bid!" said Helen, deprecatingly.

"But that is exactly what Christians are invited to believe," she returned.

The Professor was silent. He looked at Bridget attentively, without speaking for some moments.

"Where did you learn that? Who has talked to you about these things?" he said at last.

"No one," Bridget answered; "I thought them myself, after the Scripture lessons at school."

"Happy and successful teachers!" he murmured ironically. "That being the case, Miss Bid, may I presume to inquire what is your philosophy of life?"

There was a touch of earnestness under the lightness of his tone, to which the girl immediately responded.

"Oh! I don't know," she replied with a deep breath.

She crossed the room slowly, as if in thought, and came and stood gravely before the fire, holding out her hands mechanically to the blaze.

"I don't know," she repeated. "It's so puzzling. If it could be so, I think—as we're only *sure* of this life—that we ought to make the best of it. Use it in the way our

natures prompt us to use it, don't you? I mean we oughtn't to be afraid to be *ourselves*, not to let people and opinions hinder us. That's what *ought* to be. But it *can't* be, often," she added bitterly. "We have affections, we love people who have nothing in common with us. It's a great bother, but it is so. Often I wish I didn't, that I might *take* my own way, lead my own life, be myself. But one can't, one can't. It wouldn't be *you*, after all, if you trampled other people under foot, and yet how they hinder you, how they—" she paused, trembling a little, and flushing.

"Ibsen has surely not arrived at the Rilchester Free Library, has he?" the Professor inquired.

"Ibsen?" she repeated. "Who is Ibsen? I never heard of him."

"You will," he said. "Seven years hence, you will probably be in the thick of a fight that has already begun, Miss Bridget. But to return to our muttons. What do you want to do? What would you do if you could? Is it Girton? Newnham? Medical student, or hospital nurse?"

"Neither of those things, I think. Certainly not Girton or Newnham. I don't know why, but I'm not drawn to that idea. I want—*life*;—to know how things go on in the world amongst men and women. I want the *whole* world, not the set of High School girls to whom life means the mathematical tripos. I want to know the men and women who travel, who write books, who think things, who are interesting—"

"To be in the movement, in fact?" said the Professor.

"Yes," she responded with an eager gesture; "that's what I mean, but I didn't know how to say it."

There was a short silence. The flames sang a quick, murmuring little song, leaping round the coals as they whispered together. The warm, scented room was full of firelight and dancing shadows. Bridget stood in her soft gray gown, with one little foot on the fender, resting the tips of her fingers on the high white mantel-shelf. Ruddy lights and wavering shadows chased one another over her slender figure from head to foot, and played in her thick, curling hair, and lighted up her big, serious eyes.

Helen opened the door suddenly, and re-entered the room, followed by a tall man.

"Here's Mr. Stevens, father," she said.

The Professor rose hastily. "Stevens! Really you? Delighted!" he exclaimed with cordiality. Then after a word or two, "Let me present you to Miss Ruan."

Bridget put out her hand, blushing a little nervously.

"Here's a man who would be deeply grateful if half the people who at present 'think things,' and write books about the things they've thought, would refrain. He protests by holding them up to public scorn in the papers, you know," he said.

Stevens laughed, and Bridget raised her eyes and gave him a quick, searching look, full of curiosity and interest. The two men fell into talk, in which the girls did not join, but the editor was conscious that they had an absorbed listener in one of them, as she sat quietly in her low chair before the fire opposite.

Helen took her friend off to her own room half an hour later. "We sha'n't come back, father," she said, as she passed him. "We're going to try on frocks, and that will take us till bedtime. Good-night."

"That's a striking-looking girl," said Stevens, when the door closed. "She'll be beautiful, if I'm not mistaken, when she's older."

"Yes, and the poor child has brains, moreover, which makes things ten times worse,—complicates the case."

"Worse?" he repeated.

"She's one of the curious developments for which this very remarkable end of the century is responsible. Would you have conceived it possible that that girl should be the daughter of a publican, for instance? A man who does all the roaring trade there is to do, in a god-forsaken place like Rilchester. But she *is*. Moreover, she's a lady in tastes and instincts, down to the tips of her fingers. She's an individualist by nature,—not the spurious, second-hand article manufactured out of badly digested Ibsen. She's refreshingly ignorant of books at present; but she has *thought*, at *her* age."

"And she walks like a princess already, and has imperial eyes," Stevens added, smiling. "Curious."

"Oh, she represents a large class," the Professor returned, "though she happens to be a striking example."

"Poor child! I'm sorry for her. Did it ever occur to you, Stevens, what a girl like that must suffer? Our class barriers are but imperfectly broken down after all. She stands between two hostile classes,—by education and by nature she belongs to one, by birth and social position to the other. She has strong sympathies with both, but belongs wholly to neither. Her parents, poor souls, have probably denied themselves and striven strenuously to give her a 'splendid education,' thinking that in some mysterious fashion it will be good for her. When she returns to them, there is a great gulf fixed. Her tastes, her sympathies, her ideals, are not theirs, never can be theirs. *They* are hurt, *she* is hurt. It is inevitable. It is that saddest, most hopeless thing in life, 'nobody's fault.' The girl is made to feel a traitor, disloyal, supercilious, at every turn, because things in the home life jar,—are distasteful to her. She hates herself, yet chafes at the hindrances in her path. The parents look on, uncomprehending, irritated and irritating,—disappointed, of course. And it is all inevitable, irrevocable, part of the movement."

"This girl's life is a case in point, you think?"

"Yes. She has revealed a good deal of it to me this evening. Oh! unconsciously. She's as proud as Lucifer, of course. But I read between the lines, and Helen has talked to me about her sometimes. They were at school together."

"You think it would have been a happier thing for her if she'd gone to some academy at Rilchester for a few years, with the other tradespeople's children, and subsequently been given in marriage to a first-class grocer, who kept his provision-cart?"

"No, not in this girl's case," Dr. Mansfield replied decidedly. "She's too clever. She would have carved her own path eventually in spite of everything. She would have been fretted to death by the petty routine of a third-class day-school, and that would have been an additional burden.

"No, she's had a start in life, of course, though a very little one. She'll go through great tribulation—she's just the sort. But, nevertheless, the trivial round, the common task was always out of the question for Bridget Ruan, so she must take what the gods send her, and if I'm not mistaken, she'll take it unflinchingly."

"She interests you, evidently," Stevens said.

"Yes, I own it. Perhaps she'll interest you too, one day, professionally. Helen says she writes stories. I wonder what they're like. I imagine them crude to the last degree, and almost as clever."

"I should like to look at them."

"Well, ask her. She'll be overcome with shyness, but she'll let you see them. She wants to stop in London. I must see what I can do for her."

There was a pause. "By the way," the Professor asked suddenly, "what of that article of yours on bimetallism? I saw some account of it in the *Chronicle* to-day." Stevens replied, and the conversation drifted into other channels.

Bridget returned to Rilchester at the end of a fortnight, full of hope and vague, tremulous excitement. To Dr. Mansfield she had confided her intention of fitting herself to earn her own living. She had finally decided to prepare herself for teaching in a public school; and the Professor, on mentally reviewing the possible occupations open to women, had decided that she had probably chosen the most human of them.

"And I wouldn't say that to every one," he remarked with a smile. "I've met one or two High School teachers in my time," he paused. "But I don't think you'll easily become an Instruction-machine, my dear; and as far as I can judge, human beings *ought* to be more inspiring than an office table, and long envelopes and halfpenny stamps.

"But you have a climb before you," he added, glancing a little pitifully at the girl; "and it must be a steady one,—no spurts, you know; and—well, the view from the mountain top may not be so very inspiring after all. What do you say?"

"I say, that I can't *breathe* in the valley!" Bridget replied.

The Professor looked at her a moment in silence.

"Well, try it," he said. "At least you will be better able to 'possess your soul;' that is something."

"It is *everything*," she returned eagerly.

The Professor smiled.

"Leave to possess your soul will seem a very tame affair in a year or two, I fear," he said, his smile fading a little sadly. "But, who knows? Don't let the writing go to the wall."

Bridget gave a little low, excited laugh.

"No, *no*. How *can* I, now? If Mr. Stevens is only right!—but I can't depend on that, of course. I must learn to earn my living in some other way, in *case*—" She paused, as though unwilling to finish the sentence.

On the evening of the day Bridget left the Mansfields the Professor sat silent for some time, looking into the fire.

"That child is rather on my mind, Charlotte," he said at last. "Have I done right, I wonder? One shudders when one realizes the frightful isolation that a life like the one she is bent upon means for a girl."

His sister looked up from her work placidly.

"That's so like you, James, with your theories about *lives* and *careers*, and so on. How can you possibly know anything about the sort of life that's in store for Bridget Ruan?"

"One observes, my dear," returned her brother, mildly. "The High School mistress lives in lodgings—often alone. She is obliged to live in lodgings, because she must be within reasonable distance of the school in which she teaches, and possibly there's no boarding-house, or 'family desirous of meeting with an amiable young lady,' near enough to make any other mode of life practicable. She is often compelled to live alone, either because the other mistresses in the school have already paired off, or, as may very well happen, because she doesn't care sufficiently for any of them to be willing to share a room or rooms with them."

"Bridget ought not to be allowed to live alone," Miss Mansfield said decidedly. "She's too pretty, too attractive altogether."

"My dear Charlotte, one does not say to the New Woman, thou shalt not. It's too late in the day. She holds the reins."

"And drives a great deal too fast," observed his sister, dryly, "downhill, too, I'm afraid."

"That may be; but you and I sit too far back to put on the brake, even if we felt alarmed at the pace. For my own part, I'm not alarmed. I have faith in the driver. In any case, we needn't shake our heads over the recklessness of the young woman teacher who lives in furnished apartments. Poor soul! she doesn't impress me with the idea that she knows much of the *joie de vivre*. Do you remember Alice Evans?"

"But, my dear James, Alice Evans was thirty-five if she was an hour. You can't compare her case with Bridget Ruan's."

"Yet she was young once. She'd been teaching, and had lived in furnished apartments twelve years before we knew her, if you recollect. Poor woman! And she looked as though all the grayness of those twelve years had slowly gathered in her face."

There was silence, while the Professor bent forward and stirred the fire into a blaze.

"Bridget," he said, leaning back in his arm-chair again, "Bridget will live in lodgings. Girls of her class are unaccustomed to the British chaperon. It will not occur

to her mother that a chaperon is required. I wonder if it will occur to her to give the girl such instruction as may fit her for leading an independent, solitary life? I doubt it. I imagine her a poor, feckless body. But you will see to that, Charlotte?"

"My dear James, she's got all her examinations to pass yet, and then there's a school to be found—no easy matter nowadays, I should imagine. It will be two years before these preliminaries are over. The girl may never come to live in London at all. She'll probably get sick and tired of studying alone, and she'll marry or something. Why trouble about it?"

"She'll write in time; of that there's very little doubt," said the Professor, musingly. "Stevens was very much impressed with the few things she showed him. But she'll have to go through the mill, I think. Hers will be no cheap success; and then success is a strange, elusive thing. At all events, *if* she comes we can look after her a little, Charlotte. If Helen is as devoted then as now, there won't be much difficulty about *that*," he added.

But two years later, when Bridget was teaching at the Fairfax School near Hackney, the little flat in College Street was closed. The Mansfields were abroad. Helen was delicate, and the physicians had advised a year's travel. They had been to Egypt, and were then in the south of France.

CHAPTER V

It was Saturday morning. Bridget was awakened by the sound of the rain beating heavily against the windows of her room. From where she lay she could see a neglected slip of back-garden, which seemed to exist solely for the purpose of providing a convenient area for an avenue of clothes-pros, terminating ineffectively at the point where the steeply-sloping roofs of the opposite buildings touched the top of the garden wall.

Streams of water poured continuously over the roofs, and ran in dirty streaks down the whitewashed wall. The quick falling drops made a dreary splashing on the tiles of the yard below the bedroom window. Bridget surveyed the inspiring prospect miserably. Her half awakened thoughts connected it with her yesterday's geography lesson to the Second Form. "Look at the streams of water running down a roof, the next time it rains," she found herself repeating; and then she stirred restlessly. "I'm in the groove already. Lessons on the brain!"

She turned her eyes resolutely from the window, and they began to wander over the dull lodging-house bedroom.

There was a high mahogany chest of drawers opposite the bed, its top concealed by a crocheted cover in coarse cotton, of doubtful whiteness. Above it hung a picture of a lady with a crinoline, a pink tarlatan dress, and long ringlets, her head drooping at the appropriate angle for stroking the inevitable dove.

Curtains of cretonne, with a hopeless design in crimson on a drab ground, hung in a corner of the room over a row of dress pegs. In the fireplace there was a paper screen, representing a sylvan landscape ornamented with swans.

The dressing-table was adorned by several woolly mats of a violent green shade; and on the mantel-piece there was a row of mourning cards with chaste designs of silver urns, willows, and weeping angels. Bridget gazed at them all with weary indifference. "What am I to do with this day, and to-morrow, and Monday? Three whole days to be passed between this room and the next, if it rains like this all the time,—and it probably will. At least there are the children on working days. I wish there were *no* holidays. When you're working you can't think. The sole use of Saturday and Sunday, as far as I can see, is to make one glad of Monday. It seems an expensive way of forcing one to recognize the blessings of employment."

She rose listlessly from her little narrow bed.

"I must begin the day some time, I suppose," she said, half aloud, as she twisted up her loosened hair before the glass, "though why, I don't know. There's absolutely no point in it."

All the time she was dressing the monotonous drip, drip, drip of the rain made a tearful accompaniment to her gray thoughts.

When she was ready, she opened her bedroom door, and entered the room next to it facing the stairs. She rang the bell, and sat down in the bow window to wait for breakfast.

The cloth was already laid on a round table in the middle of the room. It was much too long, and touched the floor all round. A plated cruets, with most of the plate worn off, stood in the middle of the table. There was a cracked teapot-stand near the edge, behind which a thick glass sugar basin and one white cup and saucer stood sentinel. A crooked knife and one yellow fork were disposed at opposite angles at some little distance from the solitary teacup.

Bridget glanced drearily at these appetizing preparations for breakfast, then at the empty grate, and shivered. It was early autumn, and Mrs. Fowler hadn't begun fires yet. A paper fan covered with bunches of aggressively yellow primroses stood in the fender.

The sound of panting on the stairs, and a sharp blow on the door, caused by its violent contact with the bacon dish, announced the approach of Matilda, the grimy little "general." She came in, holding a plate surmounted by a rattling dish-cover in one hand, and in the other a tarnished teapot. These she set on the table, incidentally spilling most of the bacon fat as she did so. She then shambled towards the door, where she stood looking back over her shoulder.

"Anythin' more yer want, Miss?"

"Bread, please, Matilda, and mustard. Oh! and you've forgotten the butter again," Bridget said, a trifle huskily, coming to the table.

"Oh, if you please, Missus says there ain't no more butter. You 'ad the last with yer tea last night."

"Why didn't Mrs. Fowler tell me before? But it doesn't matter," Bridget added hastily, beginning to pour out the tea. She bent a little lower over the teapot than was altogether necessary. Matilda closed the door by means of the primitively ingenious fashion of dragging it after her with one foot, the process requiring such a curve of leg as to reveal the gaping holes in her stockings.

Bridget poured some milk out of the cracked jug into her tea, with a shaking hand, and raised the cup half way to her lips. Then she put it down with a sudden rattle into the saucer. Her tears choked her. She pushed away her plate, with the dried-up piece of bacon upon it, rested her elbows on the corner of the table, and covered her face with both hands. For a minute or two her tears fell fast, then she raised herself with a hasty movement, and pushed her hair back from her face impatiently. "What a fool you are to cry like a baby, at your age, because you are dull!" she said to herself. "Did you suppose you were going to have a wildly exciting time as a teacher? You *wanted* to teach,—at least, you wanted to be independent. Well, you have what you wanted; this *is* being independent."

She glanced round the room, at the gilt looking-glass, supported by corpulent cupids, at the marble-topped sideboard, at the rickety table in the corner, draped by a

magenta cloth, on which at regular intervals the “Pilgrim’s Progress,” “Fox’s Book of Martyrs,” and Miss Braddon’s “Vixen” were disposed, and then she broke into a short, bitter laugh.

She drank her tea, and kept her eyes discreetly on her plate, when Matilda re-entered with the bread.

As soon as the table was cleared after her solitary meal she dragged a great pile of exercise-books from the cupboard under the sideboard, and began to correct them, trying to make her mind work with machine-like precision as she erased or underscored words with a red pencil.

By eleven o’clock the last book was finished. Twelve—one—two—still three hours before dinner.

“Ah, the butter!” It still poured steadily; but after a moment’s hesitation she decided to go and fetch it. Anything was better than sitting alone, in the chilly parlor, listening to the drip of the rain.

There would be people in the streets. The mere thought of speaking to the grocer’s young man was a relief. Half an hour afterwards, she returned wet through, with the butter and the least dirty of the novels from a dingy circulating library she had discovered. Her landlady, a thin-lipped, bony woman, with a high color and a dirty cap, came out into the narrow, oil-clothed passage at the sound of the opening door, and eyed her wet waterproof resentfully. “Stand on the mat, please, Miss, and take it off carefully. I’ve just scrubbed this passage. You ’adn’t any call to go out sech weather. I’d ’ave sent Matilda if you’d only waited patiently,” she observed in a high-pitched, irritable voice. She seized the shiny mackintosh, down which sundry streams meandered, and bore it off to the kitchen, grumbling in an undertone. “Please to take off your boots ’ere, Miss. I don’t want the stairs cluttered up,” she turned at the door to say.

Bridget meekly obeyed, and crept softly upstairs, feeling like a criminal. Her bedroom, which she entered to take off her hat, struck a dreary pang to her heart, as though she saw its sordid ugliness for the first time. She hastened out of it into the sitting-room, which at least was lighter, and first wrapping herself in the crocheted wool coverlet from the sofa, after a shivering glance at the vernal decoration in the fireplace, she resolutely opened her book. It was *Wuthering Heights*. The weird, uncanny atmosphere of the story oppressed her with a painful fascination. The strange inhuman characters lived and moved for her. Catherine’s wailing cry outside in the storm rang in her ears, and made her tremble with fear and pity. At the same time she never lost vivid consciousness of her own surroundings,—of the cold, gloomy parlor, and the dripping of the rain on the window sill.

She put the book aside when Matilda came in with her dinner, feeling completely exhausted. The blackened mutton-chop was taken out again half an hour later by the silent little maid, almost untasted; and now there remained the afternoon and evening.

Bridget drew the slippery horse-hair arm-chair up to the window, and leant her head against the window frame. The little street on to which she looked had the suburban air characteristic of thousands of London streets. It was respectable, and absolutely featureless. She shut her eyes and her thoughts wandered back over the past two years. She remembered all the opposition she had encountered, and conquered,—her father's grudging consent to her plans, her mother's tears and reproaches. She thought of all her hours of lonely, unaided study and preparation for her work, of her days of despair, and moments of exultation. Well, that was all over and done with now. She had reached the goal for which she had striven: she was a High School teacher, earning eighty pounds a year, living in furnished apartments in Wentworth Street, Hackney. Bridget opened her eyes, and looked all round the room. The impassive, hideous furniture, the pictures that looked down on her from the walls, filled her with a kind of unreasoning, impotent frenzy of despair. She sprang from her seat and began to walk wildly from end to end of the narrow room.

"All for this—for *this*," she whispered hoarsely. In the wave of misery that engulfed her for the moment, everything was black, hateful, out of proportion. She forgot the real pleasure her work gave her; the fact that she was free from the daily, hourly friction of her home life no longer seemed important,—worth anything. Her loneliness, the blankness of the social side of her life, was all her mind had room for. Her whole nature cried out against it in hopeless, passionate protest. She longed, desperately, childishly, for the warm cosiness of the sitting-room at home, for her mother's face, for the feel of her dress. She felt that to sit over the fire with her and discuss Mary Wilby's chances of catching Charlie Downs, would be bliss, even with the prospect of the inevitable misunderstanding at the end of half an hour. She stopped in her hurried pacing of the room to take her mother's last letter out of her pocket, and to read it for the twentieth time with blinding tears.

"I am, my dearest little Bid, your loving old mother," the letter ended, and Bridget put the paper impetuously to her lips.

"And I hoped so much; I thought, somehow, life would be so different," she whispered to herself. "Oh, it's all *wrong*,—hateful, unjust!" She stopped once before the glass, and looked at herself wistfully.

"What is the use of being pretty?" she cried, and turned away with a hasty gesture.

"And my writing; I can't get on with it! How could any one in this cramped, unnatural life?" She pulled open a drawer, and flung a heap of papers upon the table, glancing over a sheet here and there.

Presently she thrust them back in disgust.

"I believe it's all bad, foolish, aimless; and I hoped once—"

She flung herself back in the arm-chair, and her face grew rigid. "Well, there's nothing to be done but to go on living—till I die!" she thought, with the hopeless finality of youth.

Some twenty minutes later she was startled by a voice in the passage below, and then by the sound of a footstep on the stairs.

There was a knock at her door, and she sprang up.

"Come in," she called.—"Oh, Miss Miles, it's *you*. How nice of you to come!" She ran to her, and seized her two hands impulsively. "Do sit down. Here's the least uncomfortable chair, and here's a cushion for your head. Oh, there isn't a footstool. I'm so sorry! You left your waterproof downstairs, I suppose. Was Mrs. Fowler *furiously*? I'm so *glad* to see you."

Miss Miles sank into the arm-chair a trifle bewildered. She hardly understood the warmth of her greeting. A lady not remarkable for her imaginative qualities, she would have been surprised and puzzled at the suggestion that Bridget's many hours of loneliness in any way accounted for its fervor.

"I *had* to go out to get some Cambridge examination papers I ordered," she began, "and as I was passing I thought you might like to see the new time-table; there are some changes in it." She began to unfold a document on foolscap, as she spoke.

"Oh, thank you, never mind," Bridget returned with haste. "Let us talk. I feel like sitting up and beginning to play, now you've come," she said gayly. "Oh, it's been ten thousand ages since yesterday morning. What have *you* been doing? *I've* been bored to death. Two minutes ago I was wondering whether a fall from this window would be fatal, but I decided not to try *that* form, because the rain might take my hair out of curl, and that is so unbecoming, you know."

She spoke in a laughing, tremulous tone, from which tears were not far removed. Miss Miles looked at her blankly.

"I can't stop long," she said. "I haven't finished my Euclid lesson for Tuesday, and—"

"Oh, you *must* stop. *Do* stop and have tea with me, and never mind your conscience. You should really make an effort to get rid of that conscience of yours, Miss Miles; it must be awfully in your way!" Bridget said with an air of concern.

Miss Miles regarded her with a puzzled frown.

She was a dumpy little woman, with a broad round face, near-sighted eyes, and a pursed-up mouth. She wore square-toed boots, which her rather short skirt displayed to great advantage. There was no collar band on her somewhat infantile gathered bodice. It was finished at the neck by a turned-over piece of white lace, which revealed too much of a thick-set neck to be quite becoming.

"But a conscience is a great safeguard," she began, in a tentative, uncertain fashion.

"What is there to be saved from?" inquired Bridget, recklessly, with a shrug of the shoulders. "There isn't much chance for the devil in *our* lives, I'm afraid. I wish there was. It would at least be exciting to yield to temptation! Did I say *yield*? I meant, of course, to *resist*. How stupid of me! Resist,—yes, *resist*, that's the right word; but the two things are so much alike, that one confuses the words sometimes."

Miss Miles seemed a little dazed.

"I don't understand," she urged. "How can to *resist* temptation be like yielding?"

"The same thing by a different name, you know! One's a short cut to the other; but I don't know which," Bridget said. "And now let us talk of something else," she added hastily.

"But we haven't *talked* at all yet," Miss Miles protested, still preserving her earnest, serious expression.

"You're just like the Hatter," Bridget observed; she sat nonchalantly on the arm of the sofa, and tapped the floor with one foot. "'Have some wine?'" said the Hatter. 'I don't see any wine,' Alice replied. 'There isn't any,' said the Hatter."

Miss Miles half rose from her seat.

"I don't know what you mean. What Hatter?"

Bridget laughed.

"Now you look like the March Hare. *What* Hatter, indeed? Where have you been educated? I thought Scripture was taught in every school."

Miss Miles managed to reach her feet; but Bridget sprang up and threw herself upon her.

"No, no, you mustn't go," she cried earnestly, through her laughter. "I'll be serious; I will indeed. I'll even talk about the Ethical Society if you'll *only* stay. I'll ring for tea. By ordering it at three, we shall get it at four; and that is really quick work for Matilda."

Miss Miles allowed herself to be placed once more in the arm-chair. She made a great effort to collect her somewhat disturbed thoughts, watching Bridget with a sort of dull, uncomprehending admiration, as she moved about the room, putting exercise-books away, and pushing all the ugliest ornaments out of sight.

Presently she drew a chair near her visitor, and sat down at the table, propping her chin in the hollow of both hands.

"Tell me," she said suddenly, leaning forward, "is life here *always* like this? Does one pass one's time forever between the school and lodgings"—she swept the room with her swift glance,—“like these?”

Miss Miles started a little, and stared at the girl blankly.

"Yes. I—I think so," she stammered. "I go to lectures sometimes, and to the Ethical Society. There's the theatre, of course, when one can afford it."

"How long have you been here?" Bridget asked.

"Six years."

"*Six years!*" she echoed, with a long breath. "Six years of *this*. How have you borne it? What have you done with yourself?"

"I have worked. What does the Council engage us for, but to work?"

Bridget shrank, as though from a blow. "Worked," she repeated. "Yes, of course, but—but life isn't—can't be all work," she urged pitifully. "Surely—"

"When you have to get different classes through the Cambridge junior and senior, the Board examination, and the matriculation in one year, you will find there isn't much time for anything else."

Bridget looked at her a moment in silence.

"Have you never had a good time?" she asked at last, softly. "What have you done all your life? Ah, you won't think me rude, will you?" she added hastily. She bent over and touched her hand gently as she spoke.

"Oh, no! I don't mind being interviewed," said Miss Miles, with an attempt at sprightliness.

"I went to a high school, and got a scholarship to Girton, and then I went to a training college, and then I came here."

Bridget was silent.

"And that has been your life?" she said gently, after a moment or two. "And have you enjoyed it?" she asked, fixing her eyes on Miss Miles's face intently.

"Enjoyed it?" she echoed. "I—I don't know. I've always worked hard, but I've been rewarded, of course. I've had several scholarships, and I'm a successful teacher." Miss Miles flushed a little, and moved nervously.

"It is very clever of you," Bridget murmured.

Miss Miles glanced at her sharply; but she was gazing thoughtfully out of the window.

"We had relaxation, of course, at Girton. We often had great fun," pursued Miss Miles.

"Educational fun; I know it. 'Women only admitted,'" Bridget said drearily.

"Well, we didn't *want* men, I'm sure. We enjoyed ourselves quite as well without them," returned Miss Miles, with some show of spirit. "Don't you admit the equality of women with men, then? Look at Miss Fawcett. Look at—"

"I don't want to look at any of them," replied Bridget, flippantly. "I've looked at enough women in the two months I've been here to last me my natural life. I wish with all my heart an epidemic of men would break out!"

"Miss Ruan!" cried Miss Miles, deprecatingly, with a nervous smile.

"I know nothing of life either," Bridget said absently. "We've been alike in that respect. But I've always wanted it—*madly*. You haven't, it seems?"

"I don't understand. What do you mean by *life*?"

"Oh!" Bridget answered with a deep breath, rising restlessly as she spoke. "I don't know. People, experience, opportunities,—love, perhaps."

The elder woman started and reddened. She glanced apprehensively at Bridget.

"There! you are shocked because I even mention the word *love*, and yet, is it a *bad* thing? Why shouldn't I want it? I *do* want it!" she cried.

"There's nothing like *work* for making one forget all that sort of thing," Miss Miles began.

"But why should I forget it?" Bridget turned swiftly and faced her. "You don't understand. I like my work; but it isn't all my life. There's room for more than that. If one had a *life*—a real life outside, with joys and sorrows of one's own, one— Because I'm a teacher, am I to cease to be a woman?" she broke off passionately.

"You will not be likely to get what you want, as a teacher," Miss Miles said slowly, "unless you know outsiders. Why don't you join the Ethical Society?" she asked after a moment. "I think you want a *motive*—a purpose—in your life. You would get to know people too, and—"

Bridget made a swift gesture of dissent.

"No, it's not *that* set I want," she replied with a little smile. "They exasperate me. Oh, I know they are very good. I daresay they are nice, but they are so depressing. They all look as though they have been shipwrecked, and are clinging desperately to their last raft. No, no! I'd rather plunge into the sea at once, and be done with it. Besides, I always want to say awful things to them," she added, with a change of tone and a laugh. "They look deliciously shockable, and they *all* have sad, reproachful eyes."

The entrance of Matilda with the tea-tray interrupted Miss Miles's serious challenge of the last assertion, and Bridget steadily refused to return again to the subject.

They talked of time-tables, of the iniquities of the Third Form, and of the chances of the Examinations, during tea.

"What are you going to do on Monday?" Miss Miles said, as she rose to go. Monday was a holiday in the schools. "Won't you come to an extension lecture with me in the evening?"

"Thank you. I've saved half-a-crown, and I'm going to the Wagner concert," Bridget answered smiling, as she shook hands. "Good-bye. Thank you so much for stopping." She went down to the front door, and waved a farewell to her from the doorstep. Then she slowly mounted the stairs again, and re-entered the sitting-room. The little glow of excitement had faded from her eyes.

She crossed over to the mantel-piece, and stood leaning against it for some time, her head buried on her arm. "What a fool I was to say anything to her!" she thought bitterly. "The need of speaking to *some one* makes me *abject*. Oh, it's awful—*awful*, to live like this. I feel as though some one had wrapped me round in a damp, gray veil." She shuddered. After a moment she roused herself, lighted the lamp, and fetched some needlework from the bedroom. With this she resolutely employed herself till ten o'clock, her usual bedtime.

CHAPTER VI

SUNDAY was another pouring day. Bridget spent it in solitude. By the time evening came, she was desperate enough to put on her waterproof, and go to the nearest church for the sake of seeing some human beings. It was a Presbyterian church, dimly lighted, and filled with reeking fog. The woman who sat on her right, sniffed violently throughout the lessons, and sang the hymns in a loud voice with a pronounced cockney accent.

“The strine uprise, of joy and prise: Alleluia!” Bridget repeated the words after her to herself over and over again, repressing an hysterical desire to laugh as she did so. The man who preached had a monotonous, dreary voice, and his face looked blurred and indistinct in the heavy atmosphere. She gathered that the sermon was on the subject of the Last Judgment. As she left the pew when the service was over, her cloak brushed the hymn-book of her right-hand neighbor from the bench in front. She stooped at once to pick it up; but the woman had already pounced upon it. She turned a sour, disagreeable face towards the girl, and ignored her murmured apology. The stupid little incident seemed to Bridget the last drop in her cup of misery. She left the church struggling with her rising tears, trembling from head to foot. She was wet through by the time she reached the house; but she went straight to her bedroom. The day had been long enough.

When she awoke, the sun was shining, and she suddenly determined to spend her holiday in town. With this resolve, she hurried over breakfast, and by half-past ten, was on the top of an omnibus, riding towards the West End. The air was warm and balmy as spring, and the sunshine filled her with joy. Her spirits rose, as the omnibus turned into less dreary roads, and Oxford Street was at last reached. Everything amused and interested her,—the crowded pavements, the hurried glimpses of shops, the hoardings with flaring posters, the chaff of the cab-drivers and bus conductors.

“Wot yer witin’ for, Jim?” called the driver to a friend, who, though his bus was full, continued to sit stolidly, reins in hand. “Got yer number, ain’t yer? Want one on the whip, I s’pose!”

Bridget laughed aloud, and the driver turned round to her with a grin of delight. They passed a small ragged boy presently, sitting on the edge of the pavement. He turned an impudent little face up towards the man, who bent down, and struck at him playfully with his whip. The child sprang up with a whoop of mingled excitement and terror, the huge shoe he wore slipping off his dirty little foot as he moved.

“Frightened ’is boot off!” exclaimed the jubilant driver with a chuckle, and a glance over his shoulder at his appreciative listener.

Bridget got down at the Circus, and wandered along Regent Street, stopping to gaze at nearly every shop. Liberty's window was in the key of blue. She stood a long time before it, entranced, her eyes wandering from one delicious dreamy shade to another.

The flower-shop she came to soon, was another ecstasy of color. In imagination she touched the leaves of the heavy pink roses caressingly, and smelt the purple violets. Feathery chrysanthemums—tawny, pink, and white—made a bower of delight, like the entrance to an enchanted garden, leading oddly enough out of the bustling street.

She lunched frugally, at an ærated bread shop, off a scone and a cup of coffee; and then, because she was tired with walking, took another omnibus towards the city.

The roar of the Strand fell pleasantly on her ears, and filled her with an indefinable excitement. It was wonderful to be in the midst of all this teeming life. London was no longer the cruel, heartless, indifferent city it had seemed last night. It was alive, full of human pulsation; she was part of its life—in the heart of things.

From Ludgate Hill she walked past St. Paul's, where, before the railed-in churchyard, she stopped a moment to watch the children playing amongst heaps of yellowing leaves. She noticed a flash of white wings against the sky, as the pigeons wheeled overhead, then settled, some on the path, some on the grass under the trees, close to the feet of the children. The little green oasis in the heart of the city gave her a thrill of pleasure. She walked on, and turned into Cheapside, threading her way along the crowded pavement. The many faces, the roar of the streets, the jostling crowd, bewildered her, but it was long before she felt that she was tired. Then, at last, she slowly retraced her steps, till she once more reached St. Paul's churchyard. It was striking a quarter to four as she passed the great door of the cathedral. A few people were going up the steps and entering the building. Bridget followed them into the gloom of the church. She walked wearily up the nave, and sank with a sigh into one of the lines of chairs placed under the dome. The clear amber gleam from the long rows of lamps in the choir, mingled strangely with the dying fire of the sunset streaming in through the west windows. The chancel, thus lighted, had the effect of a great white flower mystically illumined by an inner radiance of its own. Bridget lay back in her chair, too tired to think, dreamily conscious of its beauty. The white-robed choristers entered presently, and she sat still with closed eyes listening to their thrilling voices. There was a sweet-faced hospital nurse beside her. Bridget noticed the ebony cross on her breast, and supposed she was High Church. She watched her serious, rapt face during the lessons with a sudden pang of envy.

"I haven't even the consolation of religion to help me through," she thought; and her desolate mood surged once more around her, and all the gladness of the morning was gone.

She followed the stream of departing worshippers after the service, feeling too tired and dispirited to care much for the thought of the concert, yet unwilling to return to her rooms and face the long evening alone.

A cup of tea, which she got at a pastry-cook's, took away her headache, however, and she made her way soon after to Piccadilly. It was very early; but St. James's Hall would do to rest in, and she had nowhere else to go. She paid her half-crown, and climbed the narrow stone staircase into the orchestra, which was almost empty. She went right up to the top row, where there was a wall to lean against, and sat down with a sigh to wait. The hall gradually filled. All the seats in the rows below Bridget were speedily taken. She watched each fresh comer with interest,—strange-faced men, with long hair and spectacles carrying the *score*; women with lank hair and strange gowns, and intense expressions. One man turned the corner at the head of the staircase, and stood there a moment, scanning the well-filled lines with bright, alert eyes. Bridget watched him a little curiously. She liked his tall, lithe figure and air of genial determination. After a moment's pause, he began to mount the giant steps between the rows of seats, making straight for the place at the back his quick eyes had discovered to be still vacant. She watched the quiet deliberateness of his ascent, with amusement, and noticed that every one made way for him without demur. The woman next to her moved closer to her girl friend, as she saw him making for the last row, and a seat was thus left, next to Bridget. He took it quietly, putting his hat down on the floor at his feet, and Bridget resumed her watching of the new-comers. The orchestra was on the platform by this time, and the air was full of the vibration of strings, as the men tuned their instruments. The sound, and the buzz of talk, and the sight of the great lighted hall, with its swaying sea of faces, excited her. Her weariness had gone. She sat with eyes alight, and clasped hands, in breathless expectancy. Presently a burst of clapping rose from the stalls, and was taken up by the galleries and orchestra, till it spread from end to end of the hall in a great wave of sound. Herr Richter stood bowing, first towards the body of the hall, then in the direction of the orchestra. There was a lull, the sharp click of the baton, a sudden pause; and then the rocking, breathless rush and swing of the *Walkürenritt*. Bridget sat motionless, her color coming and going, her heart beating wildly. It was wonderful, thrilling, almost terrible. She found herself praying for it to cease, yet dreading to hear the last note. The magnetism of the vast silent audience seized her, and set all her pulses vibrating. It was over. She drew a deep breath as the storm of applause swept the hall, and leaned back exhausted, her color fading.

"Here is the programme, if you care to see it," the man at her elbow said.

He gave it to her, and she put out a trembling hand for it. "Thank you," she said, in a low tone, bending over it. The man glanced at her swiftly. He had been watching her through the *Walkürenritt*.

"You are a Wagnerite, I see," he said, as she returned the programme.

"I never heard any of his music before," Bridget answered. Her voice was not firm yet.

"But you like it?"

"I never imagined anything so wonderful, so *awful*."

"Wait till you hear the *Siegfried Idyll* for beauty. It comes next. We are too close, really; but I came here because I wanted to see Richter conduct. Ah, *now*!" Once more the breathless hush fell on the swaying crowd, and the long, low wail of the violins broke the silence.

Carey glanced at the girl once, and saw that the tears were dropping down her cheeks. He turned his head sharply away. When the applause died, he turned to her.

"You look very tired," he said gently. "Are you alone? Perhaps you ought not to have come."

Bridget made a great effort for self-control.

"I'm—oh!—I'm quite well, thank you. It's so stupid of me," she said in a shamefaced voice. "I didn't know Wagner was like *this*, or I wouldn't have come when I was tired. I've been walking rather far, and—"

"And existing on buns and tea all day, no doubt," Carey thought, mentally concluding the sentence.

During the remaining part of the concert Bridget sat silent, and outwardly composed, though she was very pale. When it was over, and she rose to go, Carey put out his hand to help her down the steep steps. As they went down the stone staircase together in silence, he noticed that she rested her hand against the wall now and again, to steady herself.

The light from a lamp in the street outside fell on her face as they reached the outer door.

Carey hesitated.

"You will let me put you into a cab, won't you?" he said. "You ought to get home as quickly as possible."

"Oh no, no!" Bridget forced herself to say. "The—the air is so strong, it made me feel giddy for a moment; but it will be good for me. I will go home by train."

The idea of a cab all the way to Wentworth Street was out of the question—ruinous; but she felt so shaken that she dreaded the long, jolting omnibus ride. It would perhaps be quicker by train.

“But you will have to walk—to Charing Cross, is it?—and you don’t look fit to do that.” He paused a moment. “If you really won’t have a cab, may I walk with you a little way? I’m going towards Charing Cross, and you oughtn’t to be alone.”

Bridget glanced at him; he met her look gravely. There was nothing in his face but solicitude for her, and she felt too ill and tired to argue the question.

“Thank you,” she said, moving from the door; “but you mustn’t go out of your way for me.”

“Take my arm,” he said gently, looking down at her white face.

Bridget put up her hand, and laid it on his arm at once. It was shaking, he felt.

“This comes of a long day’s shopping, and no lunch!” said Carey, as they turned into Waterloo Place.

“How do you know?” She looked up at him a moment, and smiled. “Oh, it’s so *stupid* of me! I never felt like this before!” she cried.

“You won’t make me believe you never went without your lunch before. All women do when they are left to their own devices; they think it’s so economical.”

“There’s no denying that it *is*,” Bridget replied. The fresh air had revived her already, and the miserable feeling of faintness was passing off.

“Oh, until the doctor’s bill comes in, no doubt. For my part, I’d rather spend half-a-crown on a glass of claret, and a decent sized cutlet in the middle of the day, than fourpence in an ærated bread shop, and a guinea subsequently on tonics. But though I spake with the tongue of men and of angels, I shouldn’t hope to convince a woman on this point. I know it’s hopeless.”

Bridget smiled faintly. She wondered for how long eighty pounds a year would stand half-a-crown lunches.

“It might have been advisable to bring a mother, to-night, don’t you think?” he went on after a moment. “I know a chaperon is a thing of the past, but employed judiciously and in moderation she is not without her use—in her proper place, of course.”

He spoke in a tone of half laughing raillery, but Bridget’s smile faded.

Involuntarily she withdrew her hand from his arm.

“I’m not the sort of girl who requires a chaperon,” she replied coldly. “I’m a High School teacher. The High School teacher is used to going about alone. If she wasn’t she would die of loneliness in her lodgings,” she added; “and life is sweet even to a teacher.”

There was a ring of bitterness in her voice which startled him.

"I'm sorry," he began. "It was the stupidest joke. I didn't mean to be rude; please believe me," he urged. He was conscious of feeling ridiculously eager to put himself right with her.

"You will forgive me, won't you? But you look so young." His voice had completely lost the slight tinge of mockery she had resented.

Bridget's anger died.

"I don't feel young," she said, shaking her head. "I feel as though I'd lived a long time."

"You don't live alone, do you?" he asked. "Yes?—poor child!" the last words were almost involuntary.

"And you have no friends in town?"

"No, not yet. My friends are abroad. I daresay it will be better when they come back; but I don't know when they are coming," she said.

"What a cruel, inhospitable city it is!" he exclaimed musingly.

"It's too big; it's rather frightening sometimes."

"But—there are other teachers, aren't there?" he asked after a moment, turning to her.

"Oh, yes; they are kind enough, and I like teaching," she said hastily. "But—"

"Yes, I know." Bridget glanced at him; his eyes met hers with a flash of sympathy, and her heart beat a little quicker.

"You liked the music to-night, in spite of being tired?"

"Oh!" she drew a long breath. "It has made me alive again."

"Well, on the whole, it is good to be alive. Why not come to next Monday's concert? You'll hear *Tristan und Isolde* then. Magnificent."

"I oughtn't to; I shall have piles of books to correct next Monday, but I *will*."

"Do. I shall look out for you. I'm going to the orchestra again. I shall have to lay in a stock of Wagner sensations varied enough to last me some time. While I cross the desert, and drop leisurely down the Nile, and afterwards, when I'm in the mysterious East, which, however, reckons not of Wagner."

"You are going to travel?" Bridget asked. His words had called up vague pictures of dazzling skies, of white roofs clear cut against the blue, of wide horizons, and the glitter of strange streams. She seemed to look out upon it all from prison bars.

"Yes, I start for Algiers to-morrow week. It will be a year or two before I see this city of dreadful night again, most probably."

They were in the Strand now. Bridget was silent as they turned into the station yard. She was too tired, too oddly dispirited to reply.

He went with her past one of the swing doors, up to the booking office, when they reached the station.

Then she started, as though roused from a dream. She put out her hand a little shyly.

“Thank you so much,” she said. “You have been so kind. Perhaps, then, I shall see you next Monday?”

“I shall look out for you,” he returned, with a smile. He turned back at the door to see the last of her. She had taken her ticket, and he caught a glimpse of her face as she left the window. The pose of her head was peculiarly graceful, he thought. He stood and watched her a moment till she moved out of sight towards one of the platforms.

Bridget lay awake long that night. She was possessed by an unaccountable restlessness and excitement. The music still surged in her brain. It had aroused emotions, vague desires to which she could give no name. It filled her with gladness to have discovered something outside herself which responded to, and expressed some of her wild, chaotic moods.

The thought of the man who had spoken to her was inextricably woven with her remembrance of the music. The idea that there was anything unusual in her walk with him did not once occur to her. It had happened so; he had been very kind when he saw she was ill. She liked his face, and his voice,—his voice especially. There was so much self-confidence about it that it made one trust him implicitly. Then he had “understood.”

“I didn’t know a man *could* understand so easily,” she thought, with a little thrill. “Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday,—six days before next Monday. Suppose he isn’t there?” a blank, desolate feeling followed the thought. “And he’s going away next day.”

CHAPTER VII

ON the following Monday, Bridget woke with something of the delightful childish feeling that there was a treat in store. All the time she was dressing, she sang to herself softly, and during the History lesson in her own form, she found her mind wandering frequently from James the First to St. James's Hall.

It seemed natural that there should be several offerings of flowers on her desk that morning. It was a gala day for her. One of the children came in late, after the names had been called; she walked up to the desk with a bunch of violets in her hand.

"I'm late, Miss Ruan," she said calmly, presenting them; "but they hadn't any flowers at the corner, so I had to go back."

Bridget reproved her somewhat perfunctorily, and fastened the violets in the front of her dress, whereupon Gladys went to her seat, smiling happily, and gave in her "late, please," with cheerful emphasis.

The room was full when she went into the little study set apart for the mistresses, at lunch time. Two or three of the teachers looked up as she entered.

"Flowers again, Miss Ruan!" one of them exclaimed. "You get a great many more than your share."

"Oh, Miss Ruan!" exclaimed Miss Yarvis, apologetically. She was a middle-aged lady, with a worried expression, and spectacles. "I was *obliged* to give an order mark in your form this morning. Beatrice Mandy was so excessively tiresome that she left me no alternative. I'm extremely sorry."

"You speak as though you'd signed a death-warrant!" said Bridget lightly. "I suppose she forgot her pencil, or something?"

"Oh, my dear Miss Ruan! Beatrice Mandy? She's the trial of my life," Miss Harding broke in, volubly. "She's a *dreadful* child! I'm worn out with her,—worn *out*! Corporal punishment is the only thing for children like that, in spite of all the nonsense that—"

"It's moral *influence* that is required, Miss Harding," interrupted one of the teachers, looking up from the pile of exercise-books she was correcting at the middle table.

Miss Harding and Miss Brown did not love one another, and Miss Brown's tone sufficiently indicated the fact. Miss Harding reddened angrily, and an animated argument on the subject of personal chastisement *versus* the ameliorating influence of the True Teacher (Miss Harding, by implication, not answering to that description) was soon in full swing.

"Miss Ruan, have you begun the History for the Cambridge yet?—because I haven't; and how the Third will ever get through it, I don't know," sighed Miss Miles resignedly. "They know absolutely nothing of the Tudor Period, and as to the Stuarts—"

Bridget had heard precisely similar remarks at lunch time for the past three months. To-day they seemed to her more than ordinarily trivial and unmeaning. "I wonder if it's like this in the real world?" she thought, as she re-entered her classroom. "All this fuss over trifles; and the real things—the vital things—always, always untouched!"

At half-past seven, she was climbing the stairs leading to the orchestra.

"I don't believe he'll be there," she repeated to herself at each step. Her eyes sought the top row of seats, directly she turned the corner, and brightened instantly.

He met her look, and rose, indicating a seat next to him, with a smile.

They shook hands.

"Well," he began, as Bridget sat down, glancing at her; "you've had lunch to-day, I see."

"I not only had lunch, I had an egg for tea!" she replied, laughing. "Mrs. Fowler, my landlady, was much surprised, and a little indignant; but I insisted."

"But this surpasses my wildest, most daring dreams of success!" he exclaimed. "I shall begin to believe that my proper *rôle* after all, is to turn missionary to the girls of England, on the great Food Question."

"What are they going to play to-night?" Bridget asked, turning to him. She had loosened the gray fur at her throat; it fell round her shoulders, and showed a glimpse of her white, slender throat above the dark gown she wore. There was color in her cheeks, and her eyes were big and bright with excitement.

"The *Meistersinger* and *Tristan und Isolde*," Carey said, looking at the little waving curls that fell against her forehead as she bent over the programme.

He wondered what color her hair was by daylight. It was red gold where the light caught it at the upturned edges.

"It seems rather ridiculous that I don't know your name yet," he remarked after a moment.

She raised her head, with the quick movement he had observed was a trick of hers.

"Yes; so it is!" she said, laughing a little; "and I don't know yours either. My name is Bridget Ruan."

"Irish?" he asked. "Of course—I see you are! Oh, I'm forgetting my part of it. My name's Carey."

"*Bridget* was my grandmother's name," she said. "She was Irish, but she married an Englishman. They say I'm like her, but I never saw her; she died before I was born.... And so you're starting to-morrow for all the wonderful, beautiful places in the world? Ah," with a long breath, "how I envy you! You will just pass on from one lovely country to another. It will be like a royal progress, with all the bother of royalty left out."

He smiled. "I shall put in a little work at intervals, I hope; just to accentuate the joy of the progress."

"Work?" she repeated, knitting her brows a little. "What work?"

"Oh!—writing."

Bridget turned to him with sudden interest. "You write?" she said eagerly. "Where? What sort of things?—do tell me! Novels?"

"No, I never perpetrated a novel. Verses sometimes, articles, various things. They are signed 'L. C.,'" he added.

"Oh," her face flushed with eagerness, "then I know them! I've read several of them!" She paused, there was a thrill of excitement in her voice. The articles, she remembered, had charmed her. She had read them many times. There was about them a rather intoxicating breath of vitality, a somewhat incongruous, but wholly charming play of fancy, which had delighted her. It seemed to her the most intensely interesting and exciting thing in her experience, to be actually talking to the man who wrote them.

"I read *The Other Country* a week or two ago," she began. "I thought it wonderful," she added after a moment, looking full at Carey.

There was such evident sincerity in her words and gesture that his face lit up with sudden pleasure.

"I'm glad it pleased you," he said, simply.

There was a pause. Bridget's face clouded, and saddened.

The man bent slightly towards her.

"May I know what you are thinking?" he asked gently,—“or is the question an impertinent one?"

She started, and blushed a little. "How did you know? I wish I had the sort of face that contradicts what one feels! I was thinking how hard things are for women. I mean, it takes such a lot of struggling and fighting before we can get to the point at which men—or most of them—begin. For instance, I want to write—I *shall* write some day, I think," with a determined lift of the head; "but oh, if you only knew!"—she checked herself. "It has been, and will be, for me, one ceaseless fight with circumstances," she went on in a low tone, as though impelled to speak. "It seems that all one's best strength is wasted in raising a little platform for oneself—just room to stand on and breathe, but quite bare and empty, when one has at last reached it," she added bitterly. "Oh, I know there *are* women who start fair; they *can* have life, be in the stream, if they wish,—if they want to badly enough, and have the courage to defy a few prejudices which are every day getting fewer and fewer—but it's maddening to think that even *this* depends on all sorts of things outside oneself—the accident of birth, social position, money—" she paused. "How egotistical you must think me; and you are bored, of course," she exclaimed, apologetically, with a quick change of tone. "But—it's so long, *such* a long time since I talked to any one!"

"I am not bored," he said gravely. "I understand."

She turned her face, and looked up with gratitude that touched him.

“That is nice! I wanted to say—if I may really grumble and not bore you—that it’s hard for other people to realize what the life of a woman who works for a bare living is like—to some one who wants—oh, *everything* almost! I mean, of course, for one like me, who has no independent social life; and there are hundreds, hundreds like me!” she went on. “One sees them, and they grow old, and faded, and uninteresting. I watch them, and shudder, and think—‘A few years, and *you* will be like that, past everything,—past sensations, emotions, experience! You won’t ever remember how you once longed for these things; even your work, which interests you now, will have grown stale, because it—’ When these thoughts come, in the night sometimes, I feel that I shall go mad.” She spoke in a low, vibrating tone. The last words were the expression of months of pent-up restlessness and lonely misery.

Carey was startled by their passionate, despairing ring.

“I know, I understand,” he began. “But see! I don’t think it will be like this with you for long. Will you believe me, seriously? I’m going to prophesy; but I will do it, presently, as we go home,” he added.

Bridget smiled. In some mysterious fashion, she felt that what he said was true. Her heart began to beat exultantly. It was absurd, she told herself, the way he had of inspiring confidence.

Was it merely his voice? she wondered. She glanced at him to see if the explanation was to be found in his appearance. She liked the look of strength about his square jaw, and the air of life, of strong vitality, which his bright, deep-set gray eyes gave to his face. A clever face, she thought gladly.

They talked on indifferent subjects for the ten minutes or so before the music began, and then not at all, till the last notes of the *Liebestod*, with which the concert ended, died away.

Bridget rose with a long sigh, her eyes still dreamy with the music.

It was raining fast, as they found when they reached the open air, and she uttered an exclamation of dismay, at the discovery. “I didn’t even bring an umbrella!” she exclaimed tragically.

“We’ll have a cab,” Carey said. “Wait in the doorway till I get one. I’ll come back for you.”

He was gone before she could protest.

“I was going towards Hackney,” he assured her, with an unvarnished smile, holding his umbrella over her, as they went down the narrow alley towards the hansom. He helped her in, gave the address she resignedly told him to the cabman; and after the preliminary plunging and backing, they started.

“You shouldn’t!” she began, reproachfully.

“You obviously couldn’t go home without an umbrella,” he returned calmly; “and the spirit of prophecy doesn’t descend upon a man more than once or twice in a lifetime. When it does, he should *always* take a hansom.”

“How comfortable!” Bridget exclaimed, settling herself against the padded back of the cab. “I’ve never been in a hansom before! Ah, how beautiful the lights are! See that long line of lamps reflected in the wet pavement!” She never forgot this drive,—from Piccadilly to Wentworth Street. In dreams, sometimes, she saw long, dark roads, outlined in points of flame, white smoke rising from the reeking flanks of the horse, as the lamplight for a moment streamed full across its path,—shining, wet pavements, reflecting yellow gleams: all seen through rain-dimmed glass. In dreams, too, the sound of Carey’s voice had, as an accompaniment, the ring of hoofs on the road, and the jingle of harness.... They talked nearly all the way, freely, without reserve. Until they reached a street in the neighborhood of her lodgings, a street familiar to Bridget, she had forgotten that he was going, that this was probably their last meeting. She realized it then all at once, with painful suddenness. It was like a dreaded parting with some one dear to her. Carey looked down at her. She was silent, leaning back against the cushions, her chin a little lifted. The lighted lamp overhead threw out her profile in strong relief against the dark background of the cab. His eyes rested on her face. It was pale, and there was a pathetic, tired droop about her mouth. Her waving hair fell in bewildering little rings on her white forehead.

He put out his hand with a sudden, impulsive movement, and withdrew it as hastily.

She did not see the gesture, but the slight movement made her turn her face towards him.

“You will send me the stories, then,” he said a little hurriedly. “You won’t forget—to-morrow? I shall get them in time. You have the address?”

“Yes,” she returned, and then added, “it is so good of you.”

“Why, to be curious?” he asked lightly. “I *want* to see them.”

“I hope you won’t be disappointed; it’s so difficult to judge one’s own work, isn’t it?”

She felt she was speaking mechanically, for the sake of saying something. The cab had turned into Wentworth Street. She could see the lamp-post just opposite Mrs. Fowler’s house.

“Good-night,” she said, “and good-bye, and,—thank you very much.” She put out her hand, as the cab drew up with a flourish before number twenty-five. “I hope you will have a delightful time,” she murmured.

“I have *had* a delightful time,” Carey answered, still holding her hand. “I ought to thank *you* for it.” He hesitated, took her other hand as well for a moment, and then released them both. “I shall not forget it,” he said, as he helped her to alight.

She did not ring the bell till the hansom had turned, and was on its way down the street.

Mrs. Fowler, cross and sleepy, opened the door, and closed it again with unnecessary vehemence. “I s’pose you won’t want any supper, Miss!” she said, as Bridget entered with a weary step.

PART II

CHAPTER VIII

"FIVE years ago since I saw Piccadilly!"

"Good Heavens! it must be—seems hardly possible!" exclaimed Carey's friend, Trelawney.

The two men were in a hansom on their way to Mrs. Edgbaston Smith's party.

"I can't think how ever you came to stop away so long, old man! I should have gone mad; but then I'm like poor old Ortheris when I've been out of London six months,—'sick fer the sounds of 'er, and the sights of 'er, and the stinks of 'er—orange peel, and hasphalte, an' gas, and all!'" He laughed.

"Oh! I don't know," said Carey, with a shrug. "I meant to come home before, of course," he went on after a moment, "and then, when the poor old man died I felt I never wanted to see the place again. So I moved on, kept moving, went to the other end of nowhere. I've seen most things now, that's why I'm back again."

"Well! it's time you *were* back, steadily turning your copy to account. Your book's been boomed a bit, you've caught on, I think. Perhaps after the solitude of the desert you won't object to find pretty women bowing the knee before you to-night? Mrs. Edgbaston Smith's excitement when I offered to bring you this evening was a sight for the gods!"

"What the devil does one do when they bow the knee? I've been out of the civilized world too long, it seems— Ah! St. James's Hall!" Carey leaned forward a moment, and watched the crowd on the pavement before the lighted entrance. "I wonder if there's a Wagner concert on!" he said, leaning back with a smile.

There was a moment's pause.

"The last time I passed that place," he remarked, with a backward nod in the direction of the Hall, "I was in a hansom with the most beautiful girl I ever saw in my life. It seems like yesterday."

"Sounds as though you were hard hit, old man! Her image in your heart for five long years. She ought to have 'loved another,' to make the thing complete. Did she?"

"Not to my knowledge, and I'd hardly time to be hard hit. I met her only once before that drive, and I sailed next day. We drove from here to Hackney, to be sure, which is like saying till the crack of doom."

"Oh! I understand. Not the blushing *ingénue*. I don't know why, but I imagined she was."

"Not the blushing sort, certainly, but nevertheless you don't understand. It was not the ordinary episode by any means. She was clever, very clever. I wonder what has become of her. If she's emerged—"

"Emerged? A woman emerges in so many ways. She may be married, or on the County Council."

"Or both, but I meant as a writer. She sent me some stories to read, I remember, and I was struck with them. I sent them to Goddard, and I had a pretty little note from her at Port Said to say he'd taken them. Oh, tell me about the people to-night, Trelawney. Remember I'm out of it. What's the set?"

"Well, there'll be the usual lot, no doubt,—Blandford, Eversleigh, Archie Morefield, and that young ass Trilling, I suppose."

"Don't know any of them. What do they do?"

"Tell them you never heard of them! Trilling will say, 'How exquisitely subtle!' or if it's Eversleigh, 'How symbolic!'"

"Of what?"

"Oh! anything, nothing. Ask them that too, and they'll hurl paradoxes and epigrams at you till you'll begin to doubt your own sanity. You'll soon see how it's done; you may even learn to do it yourself. It's not difficult. Merely remember what a normal man says when he's asked a plain question, invert it, season to taste with a few passion-colored adjectives, and serve up as languidly as possible."

"Ah! a few passion-colored adjectives may be useful, I imagine, if that's the set. Well, go on."

"Goldfield will be there, I suppose. Oh! and Travers and his wife."

"Paul Travers? I've seen his name now and again. He used to be promising."

"Yes, he's brilliant in a way,—the thin, sketchy way that's in vogue just now. He's by way of being the high priest of the elect, you know. He's got plenty of money, only writes when he feels like it. I suspect him of being a brute, a cynical brute. I'm sorry for his wife. I think you'll be struck with her. She— Ah! here we are." He threw away his cigar as the hansom drew up before a big house in a gloomy square.

Carey was greeted effusively by his hostess, a tall, bony woman, with a nervous, flustered manner, and was speedily and impressively introduced right and left.

The crowded drawing-room, with its lights and flowers and babel of conversation, struck him as somewhat bewildering. He found it hard to fix his attention upon the lank-haired youth before him who had begged an introduction, apparently for the purpose of anathematizing the prudery of the British public, which by the hand of its publishers persisted in refusing his distinguished, if somewhat erotic poems.

Carey glanced round the room with interest. He had been out of drawing-room life so long that it had almost the glamour of novelty for him. He was pleased with the bright, sheeny folds of the women's dresses, with the gleam of diamonds on the white neck of a pretty girl who stood near him, talking vivaciously; with the star-like effect of the candles between the flowers about the room.

He vaguely wondered how many times since his absence these same men and women had met and talked, and been bored, and had concealed or revealed the fact,

according to their several natures. He felt it was marvellous that they kept up appearances so well. Five years of it! and Heaven knew how many before that. There was a little stir and flutter about the door at the moment, as a fresh arrival was announced.

"There's Travers—and his wife. Lovely woman, isn't she?" he heard some one remark at his elbow.

A tall, high-shouldered man, with a narrow, clean-shaven face, was shaking hands with people near the door. Mrs. Travers was talking to her hostess. Carey could not see her face just for a moment, till Mrs. Edgbaston Smith moved aside to greet new-comers.

She came forward then, smiling, and shaking hands. Two or three men hurried to meet her, and she was soon the centre of a little circle.

"She has altered!" was Carey's first conscious thought, after the momentary shock of surprise. "She is beautiful, but she's changed!"

She was exquisitely dressed, he noticed, in white, with a great deal of filmy lace about the gown. She moved with the same grace he remembered, and he even recalled the quick turn of her head as she talked. She did not look much older at first sight. It was difficult to tell what constituted the great change in her appearance; he puzzled over it a moment, and thought it lay in the expression of her eyes. He did not know whether he liked the change. Her face was more interesting. "She has lived some of the life she wanted so much, I expect," he thought as he watched her. Until this evening he had not thought of the girl for years; now almost every word of their five years' old conversation came back to him. "Bridget Ruan! Bridget Travers now, of course," he added, correcting himself.

He had no opportunity of speaking to her for some time; the room was very full, and he saw she had not yet recognized him. Once he found himself standing at the back of her chair. A young man with long hair, and very loose-jointed about the knees, was lounging on the corner of a divan next to her. Carey caught snatches of their conversation.

"Yes, but they are blind to the exquisite snake-like charm, to the subtle glamour of sin, which is the perfect flower of a well-spent life," the man peevishly complained.

"You are too hard on them, Mr. Trilling. You expect too much. They are thoroughly inartistic, remember. They cleave to goodness and the Nonconformist conscience, poor deluded souls! There is a great field before you. Go out and show them the beauty of sinfulness; it used to be holiness, you know—but what's in a name?"

She spoke in a languid, even tone, leaning back in her low chair, and holding a large white fan of feathers, which she moved slowly as she spoke.

"She has picked up the tone, knows all the catch-words and the patter, I suppose. I wonder why I hardly expected it of her?" Carey asked himself. She was sitting under the light of a tall standard lamp. Her waving hair was touched here and

there with gleams of dull gold. He remembered that he had never decided on the true color of her eyes or hair, and then he resolutely gave his mind to the confidences of Miss Yorke-Woodville, who was confiding to him her burning desire to write a novel.

Half an hour later, as he was entering the inner drawing-room, he came face to face with Mrs. Travers. She glanced at him hastily, in a startled fashion, then put out her hand, and smiled. Her color rose a little.

"Then you haven't forgotten me?" Carey said.

"I should be very ungrateful if I *had*," she replied softly. "So you have come back from the Wonderlands? But of course you came back long ago?"

"No, I landed on Monday."

They moved towards some vacant seats near a door opening into the conservatory.

"What have *you* been doing these five years?" Carey asked, sinking into a low seat beside her.

"I? Oh!—" she laughed a little. "I have married."

"So I heard."

"You know my husband?" she said quickly.

"Only through his books,—that is, his earlier sketches and stories. I've been out of things five years, remember. I thought his work had great distinction even then, when he was quite a young writer."

"Yes, it is brilliant," Carey glanced at her. The words were evidently uttered in all sincerity, but there was something about her manner that struck him oddly.

"But you?" he asked. "I'm so anxious to hear about your work. It was such a pleasure to me to know that Goddard thought well of the stories you sent me. You know—if you haven't forgotten—*my* opinion of them," he added, smiling.

"I haven't forgotten," she returned slowly. "One doesn't forget criticism of that kind, and sympathy. The stories were published in the *Coterie*," she continued, indifferently. "They attracted a little attention at the time." She paused, waving her fan with the graceful mechanical action he had observed before.

"And what have you done since?"

"Nothing. I don't write now; at least, I don't publish."

"But—" he began, protestingly.

"One can't do two things at once," she interrupted, laughing a little. "Nowadays, marriage is looked upon as a *vocation*, remember, and one throws one's whole heart and soul into such a dignified thing as a vocation! At least, one should." She turned to Carey, and raised her eyes to his, still laughing. She was a little flushed, and her eyes were very large and bright.

He did not reply for a moment. "Well! some of my prophecy has been fulfilled at any rate, hasn't it?"

"Oh, yes! I've had my share of the fruit of the Tree. There's so much of it—one grows a little tired of fruit, don't you think so?"

"You think the blossoms are best, after all? Ah, but suppose I had tried to persuade you of that, five years ago?"

"I should have turned and rent you, of course," she said, smiling. "But then no children believe they wouldn't like fruit if they could get it. You must let them make themselves ill with it before they believe *that*. Oh, but some of it was very nice," she added hastily, with a change of voice.

"My friends the Mansfields came home about nine months after you went, and they were delighted about my little success, of course. I was invited to a great many different houses. Oh! I had a lovely time. Everything was fresh and new and interesting, you understand? I met my husband at one of these houses," she added. "We have been married three years."

"Mansfield?—my friend Trelawney is engaged to Professor Mansfield's daughter. Is—"

"Is Mr. Trelawney a friend of yours?" Bridget said, animatedly. "How strange! Yes, he and Helen are engaged. She is a great friend of mine. There she is!" She pointed out a tall girl in black, with coils of soft fair hair. "But of course Mr. Trelawney has introduced you?"

"Yes. I've been talking to Miss Mansfield. She is charming."

Bridget smiled at him approvingly. She was very much like the young girl of five years ago as she did so; the slight, almost imperceptible hardness in her voice melted, he noticed, when she spoke of her friend.

"And you?" she said after a moment. "You have done great things. You have given me no opportunity of forgetting you," she added, smiling. "I've read all your articles, and your book. The book was beautiful."

The sudden seriousness in her shining eyes gave him the sense of having received a great compliment. He remembered that he had felt flattered when she had expressed her admiration for his work years ago as a mere slip of a girl.

They talked for some time. Carey forgot that he had thought her changed. Her languid manner had vanished; she was eager and responsive as he remembered her. She had the same pretty attitude of attention too, the same vivacious gesture of agreement or dissent.

He was telling her of some experience of his in Benares, when he noticed her husband leisurely making his way towards them. He came and stood before Bridget.

"I'm exceedingly sorry—" he began, and glanced at Carey, who rose and moved back a step.

Something in the man's voice made his attitude a little stiff.

"The carriage is here?" she asked, rising. Carey made a slight involuntary movement—he hardly knew why—as she spoke.

"Good-night," she said, turning to him. She gave him her hand with a smile. For a second she hesitated, then turned away. Carey thought she blushed a little.

She had not introduced him to her husband, nor had she asked him to call. He thought of this as he watched her, followed by her husband, threading her way towards Mrs. Edgbaston Smith, with a smile, and a gracious little bow here and there.

He reflected that he would probably meet her at the Mansfields.

CHAPTER IX

It was striking twelve when Bridget and her husband reached home. She pushed open a door on the left of the hall, and touched the button of the electric light. The fire was still smouldering on the hearth. She moved towards it, shivering a little, as she wrapped her cloak closer round her, and drew up an easy chair, into which she sank wearily. Her husband came in a moment later. "Why doesn't Smithers leave a decent fire?" he asked irritably, kicking the logs together with his heel, till he had stirred them into a blaze.

There was silence. Travers took some whiskey from the spirit stand on the table, and half filled a glass with it.

"Beastly dull evening!" he remarked, taking his cigar-case out of his pocket, and examining its contents.

"I wasn't bored," Bridget said, shortly.

"No? You haven't lost the faculty, my dear,—deliciously fresh, if a trifle *bourgeois*,—of swearing eternal friendship on an evening's acquaintance. There is something very *piquant* about you, Bridget. In the midst of this jaded, effete civilization, you often remind me of the rustic beauty,—the Miller's, or the Village Innkeeper's lovely daughter!"

He cut off the end of his cigar with great deliberation as he spoke.

Bridget watched with interest the sharp, direct thrust of the pen-knife. He glanced furtively at her, but her face was apparently unmoved. He could not decide whether the momentary curl of the lip which he fancied he detected was a trick of the firelight.

"This *is* the first time you have met that man, Carey, of course?" he observed after a moment, in the same lazy, mocking voice.

"No, it is not the first time."

He raised his eyebrows. "Indeed? He only landed on Monday, or so I was informed to the point of exhaustion to-night. It seemed to be generally understood that the fact was interesting. I'm sorry it failed to thrill me. Yet you have met him, you say?"

"I knew him five years ago, before he left England."

"Really? This interests me," he turned his face towards her. "I always understood that your distinguished friends in those days were not numerous. Were you at Rilchester? Ah! I see. Yet I should hardly have thought that a man like Carey—Still—when the daughter is pretty—" He paused, smiling with half closed eyes.

Bridget flushed. The slow color began to mount in her cheeks; it spread to her neck. The man watched her carefully. His smile became a little more pronounced.

"I met Mr. Carey at a concert," she said, and rose as she spoke, resting her elbow on the mantel-piece, and facing him. Her voice was still perfectly cool.

"And dispensed with the ceremony of an introduction?" He tapped the tips of his fingers together languidly in applause. "Charming! so idyllic, so *natural*. What a pity it is that so also do even the costers. Well? and then? Please go on, I'm really not in the least bored. That was not the extent of your acquaintance, of course?"

"No, I met him again," she went on quietly, fixing her eyes on her husband's face.

"By request, of course?"

"Yes, by request. It was through Mr. Carey that my stories were published." She paused—"and through him therefore, indirectly, that I met you."

He glanced sharply at her. "I owe Mr. Carey a thousand thanks," he said, ironically. "To him, then, I—and the world—owe a great pleasure; I can't conscientiously say a great *literary* pleasure, for from what I remember of them the stories were entirely free from any taint of literary quality whatever; but they were described, I think, as *powerful* and *vital*, full of human interest, weren't they? It sounds a little exhausting. Power and vitality always strike me as exhausting, but then the masses have so much energy. It is Mr. Carey I must thank, then, for my wife? I have no adequate words to express my indebtedness."

Bridget was silent. She stood absolutely motionless. Her face was like a mask.

"Then, if it is not an impertinent question to put to one's wife, I gather that you and Carey were great friends?—and the rest possibly?"

Bridget broke into a short, scornful laugh.

"Since you ask me, I think the question *is* a little impertinent!" she said, lightly.

The man's face darkened. "Why?" he asked.

"Well! I have long since ceased to inquire what is the relationship between you and *your* many friends."

"You recognize no difference in our relative positions, then?"

"Not the slightest. Why should I?" she returned, calmly.

"Then you refuse to answer my question?"

[152]"Absolutely."

"There can be only one interpretation to put on your silence."

"I know, of course, the interpretation you will put upon it. But that it would be the same one whether I speak or am silent, I am equally convinced."

"You flatter me!" Travers exclaimed. He flung away the end of his cigar, and rose. "There's a fire in the smoking room, I suppose?"

"Yes,—one moment, before you go," Bridget said. She was very pale.

"I should like to go home to-morrow," she began.

He shrugged his shoulders. "My dear, I'm perfectly willing. Why consult me about such a trifle? Indeed, if I must choose between having my mother-in-law here, or your departure, ungallant though it seems, I prefer the latter evil. Though my acquaintance with Mrs. Ruan has been very limited,—I met her twice at lunch, I think,

the last time she paid us a visit,—I have already exhausted her as a type. I'm afraid I can get nothing further out of her."

"I should like to go home to-morrow," Bridget repeated, mechanically, "and I shall not come back."

There was a moment's pause. The clock ticked loud and insistently in the silence.

Travers slowly raised his eyes to his wife's^[153] face, and looked her deliberately up and down before he laughed.

"Carey doesn't waste his time, evidently," he said.

Bridget moved back a step abruptly. She locked her hands tightly together before she spoke.

"That," she replied, in a low distinct voice, "is a cowardly insinuation, and you know it to be a false one. Will you deny that I have spoken of this to you before? that I have urged it upon you as best for both of us? The fact that you have always treated the matter contemptuously doesn't alter the case at all. I have lived this life too long," she went on. "I see, I realize every day, every hour, that I've been weak and cowardly not to have insisted upon my freedom before! But—but—" her low passionate voice broke a little—"I *dreaded* to do it, for mother chiefly, and I always thought, hoped I was to blame, that I hadn't tried enough, that—" she paused. "Heaven *knows* I have tried!" she cried, with a change of voice, raising her head, and looking him full in the face. "Paul! speak honestly. If you can, for one moment, lay aside that sneering, cynical, *hateful* trick of speech of yours; speak like a human being for once, and say if there is in your heart one spark of love or affection for me any more!"

^[154]He quailed for one moment before her brilliant eyes. Then he recovered himself.

"Love? My dear child, you are remarkably young! You are a very beautiful woman, Bridget," he said critically, turning his head languidly on one side, with an impartial air. "It's a pity you waste yourself upon Adelphi melodrama. Why not try Ibsen even? Ibsen is dull, but not altogether meretricious."

"You have answered my question,—in your own way, of course, but you have answered it," she said, slowly. "You have no love for me, yet you are unwilling to let me go. Because people say—because some people praise my looks, it pleases you to think of me as your property,—*yours*, exclusively. You have taken care to try to crush everything that is best in me,—everything that makes me an *individual*, a *person*, my work, my hopes, my ideals. It is my beauty only you want to keep! That is your side of the matter. As for me—" she stopped. "I have only one active feeling left towards you."

He bent a little towards her.

"And that is?"

"Contempt!" she answered swiftly, with a deep breath. "You will admit, I think (except of course that the case admits of an excellent opportunity for a paradox), that

with these as the predominant feelings on either side, our marriage [155] can hardly be described as a success! I never realized so terribly as to-night," she went on, after a moment, the scorn in her voice giving place to intense earnestness, "how terribly, how irrevocably, we two people have drifted apart. Why, I scarcely notice your insults now! I hardly noticed them to-night. I am indifferent. Words which, three years ago, I think I should have *died* to hear from your lips, don't touch me, don't affect me. Oh, I feel degraded, hateful in my own sight, to have lived with you, as your wife, so long! I'm no better than any poor woman in the street out there!" she cried with a gesture. "Better? I'm worse—*worse!* Perhaps they don't always despise and hate the men who— But I will be vile no longer. I can't breathe in this life." Her hand went swiftly to her throat, as though she felt physical suffocation. "For the sake of this cowardly keeping up of appearances, I've filled the house with people I dislike, I've had to listen to and learn their empty, meaningless, surface-clever talk—to lead their artificial, unnatural life. I'm tired of it—weary of it all—already; and here I am,"—she flung out her hands with a quick, vivid gesture,—“young and strong, with years and years before me perhaps. I will not waste my life like this! I too am an individual! I too have my art to think of—you and your friends, with that word forever[156] on your lips, till one sickens at the sound of it, cannot reasonably deny my right to its expression. But I must have freedom—real, natural life. I must touch what is vital, enduring, again.”

She paused, shaken and trembling, resting her hand against the mantel-piece to steady herself.

“I'm really sorry to interrupt you; for though it's a style I don't admire, you do it well—excellently well. Still, there are a few practical points to be considered when you descend from the rarefied atmosphere, which seems already to have affected your breathing.” He regarded her with an air of mild curiosity as he spoke, adjusting his eye-glasses with precision.

“In the first place, is it a legal separation you require? Secondly, how do you propose to live? You will return to your parents possibly? At Rilchester you will, of course, get what you require in the way of natural life,” he continued impartially. “There is something very vital and enduring about beer, for instance.” He paused, took off his eye-glasses and wiped them carefully before he held them up to the light.

“I shall go home first,” Bridget said. Her voice was quiet and steady again. “Possibly afterwards I shall stop with the Mansfields for a time, and try to get some teaching. In any case, I shall write. I am not afraid that I shall be[157] unable to earn a living—enough for me, at least,” she added with calmness.

“And—suppose I object?”

“It is too late for you to object,” she replied quickly. “I am determined. I will not live with you. If you had any love for me, any love whatever,” she repeated, “I would stay. I would try to make you love me more. I would do *anything* for you,” she

said brokenly. "But, as it is, all that is left to me is to get back my self-respect. From this moment I mean that we shall be strangers to each other."

She drew her cloak, with its fleecy white fur, round her shoulders, and turned from the fire as though to leave the room.

The man rose and swiftly caught her hands.

"Really?" he whispered. "I *don't*. You're much too beautiful to part with easily, Bridget!"

He grasped both her hands roughly in one of his, and with the other drew her to him. His face was close to hers. Bridget's eyes met his glittering ones, as she raised them, startled and incredulous.

She tore herself free with all the strength of her slender arms, and stood confronting him, her eyes blazing, her breath coming in quick, panting sighs. "I think I am the most miserable fool alive!" she whispered, with fierce self-scorn. "I once mistook you for a *gentleman*, at least. I [158] can't forgive myself! Stay where you are!" she cried sharply, raising her voice. "You will not *dare* to touch me. I'm going to leave this house now, at once, since you are not to be trusted."

She gathered her cloak over her gleaming dress, still keeping her eyes on his face, and crossed the room, closing the door behind her.

Travers stood where she had left him. He heard the sharp imperative whistle for a cab. The jingle of harness followed almost immediately; there was a dance at the opposite house in the Square—he remembered seeing the row of hansoms waiting, as they drove up. A moment later, he stood, his head thrust forward, listening mechanically to the beat of horses' hoofs on the frosty road.

CHAPTER X

THE Mansfields' little flat in College Street had great attraction for Carey. There was an air of restful quiet about its daintily furnished drawing-room, which appealed strongly to some of his restless moods. He liked the old man's clever, easy talk, and Helen's quiet presence. For Helen he began very soon to have an almost affectionate regard. Reserved, far from brilliant, as she was, there was about her whole personality an air of silent strength which he was quick to feel. He liked her tall, graceful figure, (she was considered too thin by most people,) her clear pale face lighted by very softly shining, steady blue eyes, and her coils of flaxen hair. She was almost immediately at home with Carey; and before long an easy natural intimacy had sprung up between them, rather to Trelawney's amusement. "Helen's approval is about the best testimonial you'll ever get, old man," he said once, with a laugh. "Make the most of it! Such a dainty, *noli me tangere* young woman[160] as Helen doesn't exist! Strangely enough, too," he added, confidentially, "for she's anything but a prude—doesn't go in at all for shrinking ignorance, you understand. She knows good and evil. I'm a little surprised at some of the people she admires and likes—sometimes—they're not by any means in Mrs. Grundy's good books."

"I didn't know that Mrs. Grundy was a judge of character," Carey remarked.

"Well, no—but a *woman*, you know."

"My dear Jim, you're still sojourning in the tents of the Philistines," said Carey, with a laugh. "Remember that the former things are passed away—this is the age of the New Woman!"

"Has one ever a chance of forgetting it? Helen's not one of the sisterhood, though, thank Heaven!"

"She is, and a particularly engaging member," Carey replied, calmly.

He had called one afternoon, rather late, after a hard day's work. Helen rose from a low couch drawn close to the fire, as he entered, and came across the room to meet him.

"Mr. Carey! I'm so glad to see you," she said, in her gentle fashion, with a touch of cordiality in her voice which she reserved for welcome guests.

"Father is out—lecturing, poor dear man![161] Aunt Charlotte is away for the day too; so I'm all alone."

Carey sank into one of the deep chairs with a sigh of pleasure.

"How is it your room is always so charming?" he said, with an appreciative glance right and left. "It's like an oasis in the desert."

Helen laughed softly. "Are things as bad as that? I should hardly have described London as a desert,—a rather thickly populated one, isn't it?"

"Oh! I don't know," he replied with a slight, rather weary movement. "It's a howling wilderness to me. I hate it. I've got the wander-fever in my blood, I think. I want to be off again, back to 'them spicy garlic smells, and the sunshine, and the palm trees.' I hear the East a-calling too imperiously sometimes, Miss Mansfield."

"I expect you are over-working," Helen said, looking at him with a little half maternal air of concern.

There were tired lines about his eyes, though they were bright and alert as ever.

"Well! I've got rather a stiff job at present," he admitted, "but I'm going to take a holiday in a week or two. Jim's out of town, I hear?"

"Yes. He's in Yorkshire. He has an important case on."

[162]"Won't you play me something?" Carey asked, after a moment. "I've been thirsting for music all day."

Helen went to the piano, and he sat absently gazing into the glowing heart of the fire. The lamps were not yet brought in, and the room was nearly dark. The firelight fell full upon his face as he sat and pondered; the lines on his forehead deepened into a frown. From her seat at the piano, in the gloom, Helen glanced at him now and again, a little curiously, while her hands stole dreamily over the keys. There was in his face something that was new to her, something vaguely dissatisfied. She had an odd fancy that he was experiencing a sensation new to him also—that he resented it—was unwilling to admit to himself its existence. She found herself speculating upon its nature before her thoughts slid into another and sadder channel. The nocturne she was playing, one of Chopin's, died away lingeringly, pathetically, and she rose with a scarcely suppressed sigh.

The door opened at the moment, and the maid came in with the lamps; she went out again and immediately re-entered with a letter.

Helen took it quickly from the tray.

"You will forgive me one moment?" she said, with a glance at Carey. She opened the letter hastily, still standing at the piano, and looked[163] at its contents. Then she came forward slowly, the letter in her hand, and sat down by the fire. Her face was grave.

"It is from Bridget," she said, turning to him. He raised his head with a quick movement.

"Yes?" he replied, and waited. There was something about the tone in which Helen made the announcement which indicated that she wished to speak of her friend.

“Mr. Carey,” she said, after a moment, during which she had sat with averted head, “you were Bridget’s friend.” There was a note of half interrogation in the words. He stirred a little. “She told me,” Helen hastened to say. “She tells me everything,” she added with a smile. Carey looked relieved.

“You know that she has been here?—that she came here the other night?”

“Yes, I heard so. Jim told me.”

“Ah!” she replied quickly, turning appealingly to him. “I want to tell you about Bridget. Jim and I don’t agree in this matter. But he has been good,” she added, with a faint smile. “We have settled not to talk of it. I have known Bridget all my life,” she went on, and there was a touch of pride in her voice. She lifted her head. “I entirely approve of the step she has taken. I rejoice that she had the courage to do it when, and in the manner, she^[164] did.” Helen’s pale cheeks flushed a little as she spoke. She fixed her blue eyes earnestly on Carey’s face.

“And I too, Miss Mansfield,” Carey said quickly.

She flashed a grateful glance at him.

“I am glad,” she said. “Bridget will want all her friends.”

There was a short silence. Helen sat with clasped hands resting on her lap, looking musingly into the fire.

“You don’t know Mr. Travers, I think?” she asked at last.

“Fortunately—no.”

“Oh, I am glad—I am *glad* Bridget is free!” Helen broke out all at once. Her quiet voice was broken and agitated. She rose hurriedly, and stood leaning against the mantel-piece, clasping and unclasping her hands nervously. “I distrusted him always—*always!*” she went on; “yet I don’t wonder that she married him. People have wondered; but I knew—I understood. No one knows Bridget as I do; no one understands all the circumstances—” She stopped abruptly.

“I haven’t known you very long,” she began, with a little deprecatory smile. “I can’t think why I am telling you this; but I feel that though you know so little of her, you are a good friend^[165] of Bridget’s; besides, her life has been influenced through you—through the stories you helped her to publish.”

“I am proud to hear anything you choose to tell me,” Carey said gravely. “I—Mrs. Travers has always interested me greatly. I foretold for her a brilliant future.”

“Yes, *yes*—and now perhaps she will have her opportunity,” Helen broke in eagerly. “We have been friends since we were children at school. Bridget used to write then—school-girl writing, you know; but oh! alive and clever and vivid, even then—like herself! Her home life was terrible—unendurable almost. You know she became a

teacher? Father and I were away about the time she first came to town. We left London before it was settled she was to live here. We did what we could about asking people to look after her, but we haven't many acquaintances—and you know how careless people are; so she had no friends, and was terribly lonely.”

“I know,” Carey assented.

“Ah, yes! she said how good you were!” Helen paused to say, gratefully. “Well, we came home at last, just as her first story was published. People talked about it—some of them met Bridget at our house, and of course they were charmed with her. She began to[166] be asked to different houses: presently she met Mr. Travers and his set. They all raved about her—thought her lovely; and so she was, and is. But you should have seen her those few months! Her social success came all at once, following close upon the lonely lodging-house life she had led for a year. She was *radiantly* happy. Everything was fresh, of course—everything was charming. She gave even those decadent people a new sensation—I believe she galvanized some of them back to life! Mr. Travers made love to her from the first, and Bridget thought she cared for him. It was so natural under the circumstances. You see—” She stopped a moment. “Bridget’s home life,” she began hesitatingly.

“Yes; I know the circumstances of her home life,” Carey said.

“Well, then, you can understand, perhaps. Mr. Travers was brilliant, talked well, his manner was charming. He was to all appearances a gentleman. Bridget”—she paused a moment—“Bridget naturally had met very few gentlemen in her life. Nothing seems to me more natural, in looking back upon it, than that she should believe she loved him. They were married after only a few months’ engagement.”

Helen left off speaking a moment, and sat[167] down again in her low chair, bending thoughtfully a little forward, towards the fire.

Carey waited in silence.

“I really know scarcely anything definitely about their married life,” she said at last, slowly. “She has said very little, even to me; but I have been miserable at the change in her. I could read between the lines. I knew. She grew hard and cynical and brilliant, like the people she mixed with. Never to me,” she added, turning her head swiftly to hide the tears in her eyes. “It was in self-defence. She suffered terribly—*terribly*. I could read it in her face.”

Carey’s hand tightened its hold on the arm of the chair.

“The man never loved her,” she went on. “He was incapable of love, or of any other human emotion, I believe. It was her beauty—nothing else—that attracted him. It even made him tolerate her social position. Bridget told him at once, before they were engaged; but he taunted her with it after their marriage,” she added bitterly. “I learnt more than I ever knew before, that dreadful night she came here, when she left his

house," she continued, in a low tone. "She was more like her old self than she had been all the three years of her married life. I cried for thankfulness. If you^[168] knew how it hurt me to see her so changed, so cold, so indifferent, so self-controlled. It was so unnatural! The Bridget I remembered was fearless and outspoken, with a fiery Irish temper. You ought to have seen her at school, in a royal rage; her eyes used to *blaze*—just like stars on a frosty night!" Helen laughed unsteadily.

There was silence. "Thank you for telling me all this," Carey said presently, very gently.

"I wanted you to know—somehow," she replied, turning to him.

"She is at home now?" he asked.

"Yes, she would go home, to tell her mother herself. Poor Bid!" she sighed, and glanced at the letter on her lap.

"What is she going to do? She will write, of course. She must write," Carey said.

"She talked of teaching again, if possible; but she means to write. Yes! I believe she will do great things now she is free!" There was exultation in Helen's soft voice. "Her work has been at a standstill for three years,—he hated it, you know, or pretended to. He is one of those men who can't endure women to have brains. He says, quite openly and seriously, they should be purely ornamental. I think he was jealous of Bridget. Poor Bid! Poor Bid!" she repeated, tenderly.

^[169]There was another pause.

"They are to be separated—legally, I think?" Carey asked.

"Yes. Ah, here's father!" she exclaimed, as the door opened, and Dr. Mansfield came in with outstretched, welcoming hands.

"You're tired, father. I shall tell Evans to send you in a cup of tea," Helen said, going to the door.

^[170]

CHAPTER XI

A TELEGRAM, the day after Bridget left her husband's house, prepared Mrs. Ruan for her daughter's arrival. She sat waiting for her in the drawing-room in the afternoon, in a flutter of pleasurable excitement. Bridget's somewhat infrequent visits were the bright patches of color in her existence. To go to church with her on Sunday, to hear

the excited whisperings from the Wilbys' pew just at the back, to see all eyes fixed on them as they walked up the aisle, to know that Bridget's picture hats, her well-cut gowns and dainty shoes were being eagerly scanned, and would serve as food for voluble, envious criticism on the homeward walk from the members of every family in Rilchester, was to her the breath of life. The greetings after church were only less pleasurable. They generally walked home with the Jenkins family; and it was with hardly concealed joy that Mrs. Ruan observed the silent awe with which Mr. Jenkins, usually jovial to the point[171] of fatigue, from time to time regarded her child—the Bridget he used to patronize.

The drawing-room was very little changed; there were a few more terra-cotta plates on the wall; the tambourines were tied with heliotrope instead of red ribbons, and there was fresh pampas grass in the big vases on the mantel-piece—otherwise it was not materially altered in appearance in seven years. Neither was Mrs. Ruan. She was a little grayer, perhaps; there were a few more wrinkles round her eyes. She was daintily dressed, as usual, and her little tea-table was pretty and spotless as ever.

She put down her cross-stitch embroidery, and ran to the door, almost as quickly as at Bridget's home-coming seven years ago, when at last the welcome sound of wheels reached her ears.

But Bridget did not run upstairs. She did not see her mother at first, and Mrs. Ruan was struck with the slow, tired way in which she moved.

"My dear child, are you ill?" she cried, anxiously, clasping and kissing her. "Yes, you are!" she exclaimed, drawing her into the light. "Bid, how dreadfully white and thin you've grown, my dear girl!"

She pushed her gently into a seat by the fire, and took off her thick gloves and cloak, with little soft flurried exclamations.

[172]Bridget's lips quivered. She bowed her face suddenly on her mother's shoulder, and broke into low sobbing.

"My dear! my dear!" repeated Mrs. Ruan, in a frightened voice; then all at once her face cleared. She looked at her daughter with hopeful, questioning eyes. Bridget caught her look, and flushed, drawing herself a little away. Her tears ceased.

"Give me some tea, mother," she begged. "We will talk afterwards."

When the maid had taken out the tea-things Bridget drew her chair close to her mother's. She sat stroking her hand, but looking away from her into the fire.

"How long can you stay, Bid?" asked Mrs. Ruan, anxiously.

Bridget did not reply at once. Then she slowly turned her head.

"Mother," she said, below her breath, "I came to tell you—I have left my husband."

Mrs. Ruan pushed her chair back, and gazed incredulously at her daughter.

“Left—*what* did you say, Bridget?”

“I’ve left him—forever,” Bridget repeated more firmly. Mrs. Ruan looked at her a moment longer, and burst into tears.

“Was there ever such a girl!” she sobbed. “You’ve always been a trouble to me—*always*! [173] and now, just when you’re settled and comfortable, and us so glad and thankful—and your beautiful house, and the carriage, and all those servants!—and the disgrace of it! What will every one say? How those Wilbys will talk, and how glad they’ll be. I can never hold up my head again—*never*. And your father—Bridget, you’re *mad*. You can’t know what you’re talking about!”

Bridget sat with lips tightly closed, and a white face.

“Not a word about *me*!” she broke out at last, bitterly. “Do you suppose I’m doing this without a cause? Do you think that if my life hadn’t been unendurable, I—? As it is, I’ve stayed with him and borne it for three years, for *you*, because I couldn’t bear to hurt you! Oh, mother! mother!” The last word was a cry of appeal.

Mrs. Ruan was not deaf to it, even in the midst of her selfish grief.

“Tell me what it’s all about,” she cried, turning to the girl. “You always *were* too ’asty, Bridget. Even if there’s another woman, it’s no good flying in the face of Providence. What a woman’s got to do is to humor a man till he comes round to ’er again. I’ve been through it all with your father, Bid; so I know. It doesn’t do to be too hard on men; at any [174] rate, it’s no *use*. They’re all alike. Women have all got to bear it, and you’ll ’ave to bear it too. There *is* another woman, I suppose?”

“Oh! as to that—” Bridget gave a little scornful laugh, and left the sentence unfinished.

“But, mother, you *loved* father!” she said, turning eagerly to her. “You love him!”

“Yes, of course; ’Enry and I always got on very well together, on the whole. He’s got ’is faults, of course; we all ’ave. He’s a violent-tempered man, as you know, but—”

“Well, but I *don’t* love my husband. I—I—*despise* him. He doesn’t love me. That is why I have decided to leave him—isn’t that reason enough?”

“Reason?” repeated Mrs. Ruan, beginning to cry again. “You have no reason in you, Bridget. Suppose every one was to leave their husbands just because they didn’t love them, as you call it.”

“The world would be a much cleaner place,” said Bridget, in a tense voice.

“I must say I have no patience with these new-fangled, high-flown ideas, as your father would say,” Mrs. Ruan exclaimed. “No one ever thought of such things in my young days. We should have thought it wicked and immodest. And so it is!” she went

on, suddenly recollecting that she had entirely forgotten a powerful[175] argument. "It's sinful. What does the Bible say?"

"I'm sure I don't know," returned Bridget, sighing wearily.

"Well, the Prayer-Book, at any rate, says, 'till death us do part,'—it's God's will."

"Mother, how is it you never think of God except to allude to Him as a sort of fetish to be dreaded when one wants to do what is morally right?" Bridget exclaimed, in her old, passionate way.

"And now," cried her mother, "I'm told by my own child that I never think of God!—when I say my prayers night after night, and always 'ave done since I was a girl. And if you'd said more, Bid, perhaps—"

"Oh, mother!" Bridget interrupted, in a tired, broken voice, "don't let us argue; what is the use of it? Won't you be a little sorry for me? If I only cared for him ever so little, or he for me, I could forgive many things. I would stay, and try to make things right; but as it is—if you knew how I feel—how I hate and loathe my life—myself—*everything*. And—I'm so tired," she added, pitifully.

The look of suffering in the girl's face softened the elder woman, in spite of herself. She smoothed back her hair, crying all the time, and Bridget clung to her in passionate gratitude.

[176]"And I, hoping—" began her mother, presently. But a sudden movement from Bridget made her leave the sentence unfinished.

"Thank God, no!" she exclaimed. "If so, I should be a wretched woman, indeed! As it is, I feel too dazed, too sorry for hurting *you*, to take pleasure in my freedom yet. But some day, perhaps, I may be happy again, when I can be *myself* once more."

Mrs. Ruan sighed. "Are you going to get a divorce?" she asked, anxiously, after a moment.

"No. It's not a question of divorce at all. I only want to live alone. There is to be a separation. That will be arranged, I suppose."

"Ow I'm to tell your father, and what he'll say, I don't know," her mother continued, sobbing.

"I'll tell him—but to-morrow. May I go to bed soon, mother dear? You can tell him I'm not well," Bridget said, rising. "Let us talk to-morrow. I—I can't to-night."

"But what are you going to do?" persisted her mother. "You'll 'ave a good allowance, of course?"

"No; I won't touch a penny, even if it's offered to me," Bridget said hotly, turning at the door, and facing her mother. "Would *you* take money from a man who has never lost an opportunity of insulting you—your relations?[177] That's why I thank Heaven

I have no child. One never knows what one may be tempted to do for the sake of one's child. As it is, I can work. I worked before I was married. I can work now."

Mrs. Ruan did not reply, except by a melancholy shake of the head. She followed her daughter from the room, wiping her eyes and sighing deeply as she went.

[178]

CHAPTER XII

BRIDGET arrived at the flat in College Street one evening, a week after her visit to Rilchester. She was pale and thin, Helen noticed, as she helped her lay aside her wraps in her bedroom upstairs. All the evening she was very silent. She said little just then about her home visit; but Helen gathered that there had been a painful scene when she explained its purport to her father.

The next day she began to make inquiries about work with feverish eagerness. Partly through her influence at the Hackney school, partly as a result of Dr. Mansfield's exertions on her behalf, it was not long before she was able to get enough to satisfy her for the immediate present, at all events.

"I never knew such a girl!" Helen exclaimed one morning, looking at her critically as she stood tying on her veil before the glass. There was color in her cheeks, her eyes were bright and happy, as she caught up her gloves and her books in haste to start. "I believe you love being worked to death. You look radiant!" Bridget turned to her swiftly.

[179]"Wait till you've passed three years of wretched, enforced idleness," she said, catching her breath, "and then tell me if it isn't *bliss* to work."

She had returned one day rather late from an afternoon class, to find the drawing-room deserted. Tea was laid on a low table before a brightly burning fire, and she drew her chair towards it with a sigh, half weariness, half content. For a long time she sat holding her cup and saucer in her lap, gazing steadily into the fire. She was startled from her musing by the sound of a ring. A moment later the maid opened the drawing-room door, followed by Carey.

Bridget rose hastily, putting down her cup, and gave him her hand, smiling.

“Helen is out,” she said, “shopping with Miss Mansfield, you know. It’s perfectly delightful to see Helen excited over her frocks,” she went on, confidentially, with a little laugh, as Carey took the chair opposite to her. “In the old days, before Jim, she always reminded me of the lilies of the field, in her serene toil not attitude towards her clothes. Now, chiffon is a vital question; she doesn’t consider it a matter for jesting, and I’m considered flippant because I don’t approach the subject with sufficient reverence.” She laughed again.

[180]“Are you held to be unworthy to officiate in these solemn rites, then?” Carey asked.

“Oh, no! I should have gone shopping also, with a solemnity befitting the occasion, but I have a class at Forest Hill on Tuesdays, you know. I’ve only just come in. Let me implore you not to go away with the idea that I despise chiffrons!” she added, earnestly. “I love them—I always have; and if any one at my baptism promised in my name to renounce them, it was like his impertinence.”

She was pouring out tea as she talked. Carey absently watched her white, slender fingers touching the dainty pink china as she moved the cups on the tray. She wore a perfectly plain dark serge dress. As he crossed to the tea-table to take the cup she held out to him, she raised her face. Her bright eyes were filled with amusement; there was a smile on her lips. She looked much as she did when he first met her. His impression of her as a brilliant, self-contained woman of the world seemed curiously incongruous in the presence of her newly recovered girlishness.

“You are teaching, then?—and writing too, I hope?” Carey asked. “You like teaching, don’t you?”

“Children, yes; grown-ups, no,” she returned. “Children are charming, simply charming, when[181] they’re listening intently to the words of wisdom that fall from one’s lips. It’s necessary to make the words fall in somewhat eccentric positions, by the way, or else this admirable intentness is not observable to any great extent. But when one *does* get the whole attention of a class of little children, there’s nothing quite like it, for pure pleasure. Their serious eyes are so pretty, and their characteristic attitudes of attention are sweet too. By which remark you will have discovered that I’m no formal disciplinarian. When I was at school they *clicked* at us with a miserable little wooden apparatus. One click meant *hands in laps*; two clicks, *sit bolt upright*; three, *attention!*—which, being interpreted, signified, take every atom of individuality out of your personal appearance, and become as much like a little automaton as circumstances will permit. Oh, if I could have ground that clicker to pieces!” They both laughed.

“It doesn’t seem to have been a complete success in your case,” he said. “The figure would not work, in fact.”

“No; but then I never conformed to anything. I suppose I never have. There are some people who are born to kick against the pricks—foolish, no doubt; it wears one’s shoes out, and if they are pretty shoes it seems a pity;[182] but—” She gave her shoulders a little shrug, and paused.

“Better are shabby shoes and freedom therewith,” returned Carey, looking up with a smile; and then he too paused abruptly. It struck him, suddenly, that he had trenched unintentionally upon delicate ground.

Bridget flushed a little.

“I’m so anxious for your book to come out, Mr. Carey,” she said, rather hastily. “Everything you write has the sunshine lying right across it,—real hot sunshine! I like the way you have of bringing Eastern scenes before one’s mind by a single word, sometimes. I always think, if you hadn’t written you would have painted; you would have been a great colorist,” she added, with the quick, pretty smile which always conveyed to Carey a sense of flattery more subtle than her frank words.

“Well, my poor old grandfather, at any rate, would have blessed you for that remark. He brought me up, you know; he was a painter himself. It was a great blow to the dear old boy that I didn’t take to his trade. That reminds me,” he added suddenly, putting his cup down, and looking across curiously at Bridget. “I’ve been haunted ever since I knew you by your likeness to some one. You know what a tantalizing, maddening thing a likeness you can’t fix[183] is. Now I know! You are exactly like a sketch of his—one he made when he was a young man, somewhere in the north of Ireland. It’s the head of a girl—”

“A fisher girl?” Bridget cried, eagerly. She rose and went to a writing-table. “Not this? I brought it down to show Helen yesterday,” she said, coming towards him. She put the sketch into his hands.

Carey half rose from his seat. “Bridget O’Hea! This is his writing—this is the Bridget he mentioned once. Who is she?” he demanded.

“My grandmother,” she answered, smiling. “She was just a fisher girl at Dara’s Bay in Galway.”

Their eyes met. “My grandfather said she was the loyalest and best, as well as the loveliest woman in Ireland,” he returned. “You are like her. Very like her,” he added, glancing from the sketch to Bridget.

“Thank you!” Her color rose a little; her face wore a softened, grateful look. “I’m glad to hear that, though I don’t remember her,” she said. “I have always been interested in this grandmother of mine.”

Carey leant back in his chair, and gazed musingly at the sketch. "How strange!" he said. "There was a romance, you know," he went[184] on slowly, after a moment. "My grandfather loved her—he never forgot her, I believe."

"And she?" Bridget asked, breathlessly, with parted lips.

"I don't know. She was a married woman, with two or three children, when he met her; and as loyal a one as ever breathed, he said, the only time he spoke of her; but whether she cared for him—"

"Ah! she did—she did, I'm sure," Bridget answered swiftly, bending over the picture. "You poor little grandmother!" she added softly. She rose, and silently replaced the sketch, laying it gently, almost reverently, he noticed, in the drawer.

When she came back to her seat she was silent a moment, fingering the tassels of the work-bag in her lap absently, with a trace of nervousness. This discovery seemed to have brought them in some peculiar fashion suddenly near to one another. Bridget felt all at once unaccountably shy.

"It is so strange," she said quietly at last, breaking a somewhat awkward silence, "that it was all so long ago. Yet how young she looks! I remember I spoke of her the first time I ever saw you—" She stopped.

"At the Wagner concert," Carey said, finishing the sentence. "I remember, when you told[185] me your name was Bridget, I said to myself, quite involuntarily, *Bridget O'Hea*, and the thought of the sketch flashed through my mind. That was a delightful evening. Can't we go to another Wagner concert together, Mrs. Travers, for auld lang syne?"

He waited, with a touch of eagerness in his look, for her answer.

"We will make up a party. Helen wants to go to the next one; and Jim will tolerate Wagner, for the sake of Helen, for one evening," she said, unconcernedly.

"Let us consider it an arrangement, then, if the others agree," Carey replied, in the same tone.

Bridget did not speak at once. She put her head back against her chair, a trifle wearily; her color had faded; she looked pale and tired.

Carey rose and fetched a cushion from the sofa.

"Sit up a moment; let me put this for your head," he said, with the air of gentle authority she had noticed once or twice in his voice. It sent her thoughts back to the night she was so tired, so dreadfully tired, after the concert, when he had taken care of her.

She didn't want the cushion; but it was nice to be taken care of. She raised her head, as he told her, with a smile, and he arranged the pillow with deft, capable hands. She

had[186] always liked the decided way he touched things; it was a sort of translation of his voice, she thought.

“You are tired. You are working too hard, I believe,” he said, going back to his seat.

“Only a little tired. I suppose I *am* working hard; but I like it, thank you.”

“You teach all day, and write all night,” he went on, looking at her deliberately and critically. “You will always wear yourself out—it is your nature, I suppose. The first time I ever saw you—”

“You told me it was my duty to have a sort of Lord Mayor’s luncheon every day,” she interrupted, laughing. “Oh! I’m not working too hard. I certainly don’t write all night; though sometimes, I own, it’s a little late when I happen to look at the time,” she added, with an air of great candor. “I’ve been lucky enough to get work on the *Tide*, thanks to Dr. Mansfield, you know; so a great deal of it is writing that must be done.”

“And the rest?”

“Oh!—experiments—attempts at the impossible, I’m afraid. I’ve got back my old longing for experience—always experience. Directly one begins to write one is conscious how little one knows—*really* knows, I mean. I should like to have lived the life of every one of my[187] characters—I ought to have lived it, to write about them.”

“That would make existence a somewhat long drawn out affair. Even the theosophists have more mercy; they draw a veil of oblivion between the lives in most cases, don’t they? Besides, where does imagination come in?”

“Imagination is useful, certainly. Intuition is better—much better; but an ounce of experience is worth either of them six times over!” she declared. “It’s rather a demoralizing occupation—writing, I mean; don’t you think so?” she went on presently. “You begin, in time, to feel like a moral kaleidoscope, constantly shifting from one set of emotions to another, till you don’t know which is the real you—or if you’ve got a *you*.”

Carey laughed a little. “I think there’s a very decided *you* at the back of the kaleidoscope,” he said, rising as he spoke. “It colors all the little pieces of glass. I’m dining at Lady Vernon’s to-night,” he added, glancing at the clock. “Is it really half-past six.”

She gave him her hand. “Good-bye,” she said, looking frankly at him. She wondered vaguely why his appearance always suggested to her so much strength and reliability. He was rather gracefully than strongly built—far from being a physically powerful man; yet she had[188] always thought that if she were ever in an accident—a fire, or a railway smash, for instance—she would prefer to obey Carey’s directions to any man’s she knew. Something told her he would be absolutely calm and self-possessed.

He held her hand a moment in his firm clasp.

“You mustn’t work too hard,” he said, looking down at her; “but I’m glad you’re working.”

Ten minutes later Helen came in, followed by Miss Mansfield.

“Bid! all alone? How long have you been in?” Helen said, crossing the room towards Bridget’s chair.

She knelt down before the fire, and, pulling off her gloves, held her hands to the blaze.

“The silk matches to perfection!” Miss Mansfield announced triumphantly. “Helen, you’ll get chilblains. I’m going straight upstairs to change my dress before I sit down.”

Helen laid one hand caressingly on her friend’s lap.

“Tired and lonesome, Bid?” she asked.

“No; Mr. Carey has been here, and we’ve been talking.”

“What about?”

“Oh, most things. We’ve discovered that our respective grandparents were in love with[189]one another. Isn’t that thrilling?” She gave a rapid little sketch of the discovery.

Helen looked gravely into the fire, and was silent.

Bridget laughed. “I know what you’re thinking,” she said, with a malicious flash of her eyes.

“What?”

“That history repeats itself, and that I shall fall in love with Mr. Carey.”

Helen looked a trifle disconcerted. “You are a trying person, Bid,” she returned, after a moment. “You always were an *enfant terrible*. You’ve preserved most of your aggravating school-girl habits, and added to them grown-up ones which are ten times worse. Do you always say just what comes into your head, if it happens to be true?”

“No, very seldom,” Bridget returned, calmly. “For the last few years I’ve said everything that came into my head that happened to be false. It was required of me, and I soon learnt the trick. Ah, no, you needn’t be afraid. I am sick of love!” She made a hasty gesture with her hands, as of flinging something from her. There was a pause.

“I saw him to-day, as I came across the park,” she said presently, very quietly. “He was with that woman—Mrs. Gefferson. You know who I mean. They didn’t see me.”

[190]Helen turned her head. "You poor child," she said gently. "London isn't big enough, after all."

"Oh, I don't mind," Bridget returned, in a colorless voice. "Perhaps it's dreadful that I have so little feeling left. I looked at him to-day as though he were a stranger. I couldn't realize that I had lived with him for three years. Do you remember," she went on, after a moment, "the night we saw the 'Doll's House,' there was a derisive laugh when Nora says, 'I can't stay in the house with a strange man'? How little imagination people have! That's how *I* feel. He is a strange man; I have nothing to do with him. Thank Heaven, the first shameful feeling of it has all gone. I'm quite indifferent now. *Love?*" She gave a short, scornful laugh.

Helen winced. "You have never loved yet, Bridget," she said, gravely.

Bridget turned to her with a swift movement.

"Ah, I'm a brute to speak so," she exclaimed softly. "You and Jim—yes, that is different. I'm so glad it's different." She rose impulsively, and put her arms round her friend.

Helen still looked troubled. "Bid, you puzzle me. Shall I ever know such a mass of contradictions, I wonder? Why did you laugh about—about—? I should never have said that I [191] feared it for you," she went on, desperately; "but, Bid, it is not an impossibility that some day—and then I should be so afraid!" She dropped her voice, and hurried over the last sentence.

"Dear, I laughed—why did I laugh? Just out of mischief, because I can so easily tell your thoughts. I wasn't thinking of the importance of what I said—just because that sort of thing seems so far from me—so impossible. I don't want it!" she added vehemently. "I won't have it. You said I had never loved. I believe you are right. I think I never did. I was dazzled; and what I took for the sun was just very poor electric light, that had a trick of going out suddenly. I don't want the experience twice over," she went on, shuddering. "I pray Heaven I may never have it. I've been talking to Mr. Carey about wanting every experience life has to offer," she said, speaking slowly, "and yet I'm praying Heaven not to send me the supreme, the most tremendous of all possible experiences. Strange, isn't it?"

She raised her eyes to Helen's, and saw they were full of tears.

"You said once, when you were a precocious little girl, that Heaven never by any chance answered prayers," Helen said, trying to speak lightly. Her voice was not steady, however.

CHAPTER XIII

THE winter wore on, and Bridget remained with the Mansfields. Every attempt on her side to urge that she ought to take rooms was met by determined opposition on the part of her friends. Finally, it was settled, that she should stay at any rate, till after Helen's marriage, which was arranged for the middle of May. Helen never forgot the evenings of that winter, when the curtains were drawn, and the shaded lamps and the firelight made their little drawing-room glow like a warmly tinted jewel. Nearly every night two or three people came in after dinner, in informal fashion. Her father would sit in his huge arm-chair on one side of the fire, talking with the eagerness of a boy of the last new poem, or the extraordinary promise of this or that young painter. Bridget, sometimes in a fantastic, sometimes a whimsical, less often in a serious mood, moved about the room, talking and laughing in her eager, vivid fashion. She was a girl again then, Helen said to herself with a thrill of pleasure—the Bridget of three years ago—quick, impulsive, with as many moods[193] as there were hours in the day, sometimes in the highest heaven of delight, sometimes the uttermost depths of dejection. She never spoke of her husband. By tacit consent, his name was rarely mentioned between them. "I want to tear out that chapter, and burn it," she said once. "It will have to be destroyed in a slow fire; but in the end it will perish utterly."

Imperceptibly, however, as the months went on, Helen noticed a change in her. A growing restlessness possessed her. "Bid, you're getting too thin," she said, one morning, looking at her critically, as she sat down to breakfast. "Also your eyes are too big."

"The better to see you with, my dear," Bridget replied, helping herself to sugar. She laughed a little nervously as she spoke.

"You rush about too much. I think you've undertaken far too much work," Helen went on, in a dissatisfied tone. "I never see you all day now; you tear from one place to another like one possessed! Your writing will suffer. I don't believe you've put pen to paper for weeks. Why don't you?"

"I don't know—there isn't time," Bridget said vaguely. "I can't write now," she went on, with a touch of desperation in her tone. "I don't know what's the matter with me!" She moved restlessly in her chair.

[194]"I can tell you—over-work; isn't it, Aunt Charlotte?"

"That's what Mr. Carey always says about Bridget," Miss Mansfield said, placidly sipping her tea. "By the way, he doesn't come in so often now; he hasn't been here for quite a fortnight. James was only remarking upon it yesterday. Ah!" as her brother

entered the room at the moment. "James, we were just saying that Mr. Carey has deserted us."

"Busy, I expect, seeing his book through," the Professor said, taking his seat at the table. "Bridget, my dear, you're not off, are you?"

"Yes, dear sir, if you will excuse me. I'm due at Hampstead at ten o'clock." She waved a smiling farewell to him, and hurried from the room.

"That child doesn't look strong," Dr. Mansfield observed meditatively, taking his cup of coffee from his sister.

"She isn't; she's working herself to death for no reason whatever," Helen exclaimed.

"Ah!" he returned, raising his eyes a moment to Bridget's empty place. He was very silent throughout the meal. She was unusually gay that evening. Her color was so brilliant that at first sight the hollowness of her cheeks was hardly observable. Dr. Mansfield watched her as she talked. The men who stood round her laughed a good deal; their admiration was almost[195] as plainly perceptible as their amusement. Once, when the door opened, he saw her quick eyes glance in the direction; he noticed the little half-expectant turn of her head, though she did not cease speaking. She crossed the room towards him a moment afterwards, followed by the young man with whom she was talking, to make some laughing appeal for his decision in an argument. The Professor experienced a sudden pang as he looked at her smiling face. Her eyes were bright with what he fancied were unshed tears; the look in them haunted him for the rest of the evening.

"Well," Helen said, as they parted at Bridget's bedroom door, "I'm glad to-morrow is Sunday. You'll be obliged to rest. Do try to moderate the size of those eyes, child; they frighten me."

"Any one would think I was made of priceless china, to hear the way this family talks," Bridget returned, with a laugh and a shrug of her shoulders as she kissed her.

Her smile faded when she closed the door of her room. The fire sparkled on the hearth. Drawn up beside it was a little writing-table, at which she worked. She moved towards it, and stood absently fingering the scattered papers. On the shelf above were some framed photographs. She put up her hand mechanically,[196] and took one of them from its place. It was the reproduction of a photograph of Carey, cut from one of the illustrated papers. She held it where the firelight shone upon it, and looked at it steadily for a moment. All at once, with a hurried movement, she rose and thrust it out of sight in one of the drawers of her dressing-table. She did not sit down again, but instead, began to walk up and down the room, feverishly clasping and unclasping her hands. Presently she turned the light higher, and went to her writing-table. She resolutely gathered up the loose papers, sorting and arranging them. Her lips were tightly closed, and her hands moved restlessly from one leaf to another. She took up a

pen and bent over the sheets, pushing her hair from her face with a gesture familiar to her from childhood. She wrote a line or two—then paused; two or three words followed; then all at once she thrust the paper violently from her, and buried her face in her hands with a groan. “Oh, I can’t—I *can’t* bear it!” she half whispered, incoherently. “I didn’t know it was like this. Why doesn’t he come?—at least—at least he might come. I should see him;—I shouldn’t be so starved.” She rose, and flung herself beside the bed, and buried her face in the pillow.

[197]

CHAPTER XIV

SPRING was early, and very gracious, the year of Helen’s marriage. Day after day warm sunshine lighted up the little square where the lilacs and hawthorns were budding, and the crocuses blazed with purple and golden flames in the grass borders.

“We’ll go into the country, all of us, one day before I’m married,” Helen declared. “I want to pick primroses—don’t you want to pick primroses, Bid? It shall be *my* day. I will take father and you and Aunt Charlotte—and Jim, if he’s good—and Mr. Carey, if he’ll come, because he’s Jim’s friend; also because I like him. When shall we go? Next Saturday, shall we?—because it’s Bid’s holiday!”

The Professor and Miss Mansfield fell in with her whim, and the little party was arranged for the following week. Trelawney undertook to discover a place at Bushberry—their proposed destination—where they could get lunch and tea. Helen stipulated for a farmhouse.

[198]They met Carey at Victoria, the following Saturday. He came up just as the train was starting, and was execrated and dragged into the carriage unceremoniously by Trelawney. There was a babel of laughter and greetings as the train moved out of the station.

“I expected to see Jim got up like Corydon, with a smock frock and a crook, and an oaten pipe in his waistcoat pocket,” Carey declared. “It was entirely owing to my hesitation about my own apparel for this Arcadian festival that I was late. This is a delicious idea of yours, Miss Mansfield,” he said, turning to her. “I haven’t been into an English wood in spring for years.”

“He’s relying exclusively on this experience to provide him with lyrics for the next twelve months,” Trelawney explained. “He looks upon this day from a purely pecuniary standpoint, believe me. Helen, it’s an idyllic farmhouse; there is

surrounding it an aura of butter and cream and new-laid eggs. And you get your tea for ninepence a-head."

Bridget struck in with a laughing comment. At the sound of her voice Carey turned to her for the first time.

"It is ages since we met, Mrs. Travers," he remarked.

"Is it?" she returned. "We have both been[199] busy, I suppose. One doesn't notice how the time goes when one is busy."

She leant back, and watched the green fields they were whirling through, abstractedly. "We seem to have left the streets behind very quickly," she said, presently. "How delicious the color of that grass is!—and see, the trees are in full leaf, almost!"

Carey was conscious of a coldness, a certain constraint, in her manner he had never noticed before. It had all at once become difficult to talk to her. The realization of this fell blankly, depressingly, upon him.

The impression did not wear off when they reached the little country station, and began to climb the hill, between white hedgerows, towards the farmhouse.

Helen and Trelawney walked on a little ahead. Bridget and he followed with the Professor and Miss Mansfield, and the conversation was general; yet through it all he intuitively felt the new distance in her manner towards him. Her words were gay enough. She stopped, every now and then, with a delighted exclamation, before a hawthorn bush, veiled in bridal white, and he cut blossom-laden branches for her till her arms were full.

"They'll die, Bridget," Miss Mansfield expostulated. "What is the use of picking them now?"

[200]She declared that they would adorn the luncheon-table most appropriately, and, when the farmhouse was reached, busied herself in putting the dazzling white boughs in great brown jars on the table.

Lunch was served in the farmhouse parlor, with the lattice windows open to the sweet spring air, and the sunlight lying in checkered squares across the coarse white tablecloth and on the flagged floor.

Bridget sat opposite to Carey at the table, with the faint blue sky for background behind her dusky hair. He had not seen her for several weeks, and the change in her was very noticeable. He was struck by the thin outline of her cheek when he caught her face in profile. He wondered vaguely whether she was ill, or overworked.

When lunch was over, they started for the woods. Their way led through level meadows, starred with pale cuckoo flowers. Here and there cowslips lifted their delicate green stalks and dainty yellow blossoms. From the woods, covered by a misty veil of green, the cuckoo's note rang clear and dainty sweet.

“Cuckoo! cuckoo!” Bridget repeated. She stopped every now and then to snap a cowslip from its stalk.

“They break so crisply, it’s a delight to pick^[201] them!” she exclaimed, and tucked the bunch she had gathered into the front of her gown.

“I can’t be altruistic about flowers. I *want* them. I must have them!” She put her lips down to those on her breast and caressed them.

“Isn’t it delicious—*delicious* to be in the country in the spring?” she said, raising shining eyes to the Professor. She took his arm, with a little affectionate movement. The smiling glance they exchanged was full of mutual understanding and sympathy. In the wide, sunny meadow Bridget seemed to Carey to be herself again; though she spoke very little to him directly, the intangible barrier between them was, he felt, in some way broken down.

A stile separated the fields from the woods they were to pass through in the walk they had planned.

A winding, mossy path, across which gnarled roots of trees made easy steps, led slightly upwards. The trees were not yet in full leaf; the sycamores still held some of their dainty rose-pink sheaths, from which the brilliant translucent green was breaking. The larches, enveloped in a mysterious filmy green mist, wavered in the sunshine. All the underwood was in full leaf. It sprang from a carpet of russet and yellow,—the leaves of yester year;^[202] nestling between them were clumps of primroses. Their pure pale yellow stars burnt softly above their dark bed. Here and there the ground was white with frail anemones.

Bridget dived into the thicket with a rapturous exclamation, and began to fill her basket, heedless of Carey’s laughing assurances of open spaces farther on.

The rest of the party walked on more soberly. When they emerged—Bridget with loosened hair where the sweeping branches had caught it, but triumphant, with half filled basket—they were out of sight. She sent a swift glance up the empty, sun-flecked path.

“The road is quite easy to follow,” Carey hastened to say. “It leads in a half-circle back again to the farm, though it’s a good long walk. We shall find our way, though they seem to have deserted us.” They walked in silence for a moment—a silence which Bridget broke with a question about some book.

Carey replied with an eagerness somewhat out of proportion to the subject; but the conversation, once started, did not flag.

He did not look at her as they walked, but kept his eyes fixed on the winding wood-path. He spoke fluently, as usual, but to Bridget his talk was mechanical. Her thoughts wandered; it seemed to her impossible to keep up the strain^[203] of even conversation

much longer. Her heart began to beat, at first with slow, heavy throbs, then faster and faster, as she struggled to keep her voice steady. In spite of herself, her hands shook. Two or three of the flowers on the top of her basket were scattered on the path.

Carey stooped for them. As he put them into the basket his hand touched hers.

He drew it back quickly, as though he had been stung; and at the moment their eyes met.

Bridget's face was white.

"You are tired," he said quickly, with an effort. "You are not looking well. Let us sit down and rest a little. I've walked too fast for you. What a brute I am!"

Bridget sank down upon one of the great roots across the path. She could not trust herself to reply. An awful fear possessed her that if he spoke to her again she should burst into tears. She was fighting desperately, despairingly, for self-control.

There was silence. Carey watched the sunlight strike along the shining ivy leaves that trailed towards the edge of the path. The words of an exquisite spring song came involuntarily to his mind as he looked at them:—

"Now on some twisted ivy-net,

Now by some twinkling rivulet."

[204]How did it end?

"A man had given all other bliss,

And all his worldly worth for this,

To waste his whole heart in one kiss

Upon her perfect lips."

He turned to her abruptly. "I've made up my mind to go abroad again," he said. "I start in a week or two."

For one second she gazed at him with wide eyes and parted lips; then, with a half-stifled cry, she put out both hands as though to ward off a blow. Almost at the same moment she rose wildly to her feet. Carey rose, too, and caught her hands, with a startled, incredulous exclamation.

"Bridget!" he whispered hoarsely. "What do you mean? Say it,—*say it!*" he implored. His face was close to hers, his eyes blazing.

She cowered, and hesitated for one moment. Then she turned and faced him.

“Say your part first,” she said, looking at him with a long, steady gaze.

He drew himself up. “I love you!” he said. “And you?”

“I love you!” she repeated, in a low, vibrating voice. The color rushed into her face as she said the words.

Carey’s arms closed round her, and she lifted[205] her lips to his. She freed herself presently. She was trembling from head to foot, but she smiled radiantly, meeting his eager eyes. At the sight of her face he groaned. “Bridget,” he began, “what have I done—?”

“You have dared to tell the truth. You have made me the happiest woman in the world!” she replied simply. “But why didn’t you tell me before? I—I believe I’ve got quite thin.” She pulled the sleeve of her dress away from her wrist, and held it out to him with a little laugh, which held tears.

He seized both her slender hands, and put them passionately to his lips.

“My love!—Bridget—I didn’t guess,” he began, incoherently. In the midst of her tremulous joy she was startled to see him so moved, so almost terribly shaken. His imperturbable coolness had been one of the qualities she had first noticed as peculiar to him; it had always filled her with something between admiration and amusement. His vehemence almost frightened her.

“I thought the suffering was all on my side,” he said. “Bridget, I’ve endured the torture of the damned these last few months!” He tightened his grasp on her hands till it hurt her. “I kept away; how I did it, I don’t know; but I kept away from you because I couldn’t trust[206] myself. I was afraid you would know it, and it would worry you. Poor child!—and you have trouble enough already.” His voice suddenly dropped into infinite tenderness for her.

The tears sprang to Bridget’s eyes. With a sudden movement she laid her cheek caressingly against his hand.

“My darling!” he whispered, holding her close. “You know what it means? Bridget, you poor little girl, have you thought?”

She drew herself away.

“No,” she said, with downcast eyes. “I know there’s a battle coming. We shall have to decide—I know that; but, Larry, I *can’t* think of it now. There’s no room in my heart for anything but joy! Dear, let us have our moment! We shall have plenty of time to think,—plenty of time!” she repeated sadly.

He knelt beside her, murmuring her name in a half-incredulous voice. “This day, at least, is ours,” he said triumphantly, defiantly. “Nothing can take it from us!”

[207]

CHAPTER XV

THE Trelawneys spent their honeymoon in Paris; and since June, they had been stopping at a little village on the coast of Normandy, which several of Jim's artist friends had also chosen as headquarters.

Bridget was spending her holiday with them. A fortnight of it had passed already, when she and Helen spent one brilliant morning on the cliffs. The August sun blazed royally in a hot blue sky.

On a hill, above the coast, the little gray church of St. Marguerite overlooked the sea. Below it, clothing the hillside with a sheet of rose-pink and purple blossoms, a field of clover swept downwards towards a narrow cleft in the chalk cliffs, by which the shore was reached.

The sides of the gully were dazzling white in the hot sunshine. A line of scarlet poppies made a vivid fringe of color along its lip. From out its white walls great tufts of lavender-colored scabious sprang, and trails of lady's-slipper flamed yellow in the sunlight. A drowsy hum[208] of innumerable bees amongst the clover filled the hot, still air, mingled with the shrill whirr of grasshoppers. Down far below the blue sea broke, sparkling and dimpling into millions of flashing gems.

Bridget had thrown herself among the clover blossoms at the edge of the cliff. Her shade hat lay beside her. A scarlet sunshade was spread above her head. At some little distance, under the shade of a straggling elder bush Helen sat, reading. Bridget lay very still, listening half unconsciously to the whirr of wings, feeling the hot sunshine wrapping her round, her eyes fixed on the intense blue sky above the cliffs opposite, where the swallows were darting, wheeling, skimming in airy dance. In one hand she held a letter. This she presently drew noiselessly from its envelope. She had read and re-read it a hundred times; but now she read it once more with careful deliberation. It was dated the day after her walk with Carey in the Bushberry woods. She knew by heart the words with which it began.

"... Because I love you," it went on, "I will not bring more trouble into your life, rashly, passionately, as, selfish devil that I am, I long to do. You shall be free to think—free to realize what it means if we decide to take this step. I start for Spain tomorrow. I will not[209] even see you again. I *dare* not see you again. I will not write to you. It shall be as though I don't exist for you—for three months. Dear, think well. I love you as I never yet loved a woman; but though I shudder at the mere idea of life

without you, I will bear it somehow,—I must bear it, unless you can come to me without a single fear of consequence. I would gladly die to save you from pain. Think well; but (I feel a brute to say it, for it sounds as though I urge it as a plea, yet I cannot leave it unsaid) oh, Bridget! think also that I am wild for love of you!”

She read the words slowly, then she raised the letter to her lips before she replaced it in its envelope. For a moment longer she lay motionless. Then she rose, gathered up her sunshade and hat deliberately, and crossed the grass towards her friend. She slipped down beside her, in the shade, and laid her hand across the open page of her book.

Helen looked up with a start, and their eyes met.

“Bid?” she whispered, and paused. Her face had grown suddenly white.

“Yes,” said Bridget, slowly, “I have decided.”

There was a long silence. The shrill, insistent whirr of the grasshoppers, mingled with the hum of bees, was the only sound in the stillness.

Helen bent her head over the book on her lap. On the open page Bridget presently saw heavy tears falling. She raised herself to her[210] knees, and put her arms round her friend, and rested her cheek caressingly against her fair hair.

“Helen,” she said softly, “listen! I want to try to explain. You have been so good,” she faltered. “You have never worried me. It was so like you not to harass me,—to let me have it out with myself! But now I want to tell you. I want to try and make you understand. Helen, you know I haven’t come to this decision lightly, without thought?” There was a touch of pained reproach in the last words, for Helen was still silent.

She turned to her at last.

“Bid,” she whispered brokenly, “you know I trust you. You know what I think of you! Only—only—I am *afraid*—afraid of the years to come. Oh, Bid, laws are terrible things to disobey! One suffers—”

“Yes. One suffers. I don’t expect to escape suffering,” Bridget answered steadily. “I don’t think I even want to.”

“You—you are thinking of your mother?” Mrs. Trelawney hesitated.

Bridget moved restlessly, and frowned. She plucked up a handful of grass with nervous fingers, looked at it absently, a moment, then threw it from her, with an impatient gesture.

“Yes. Mother, of course!” she returned,[211] raising her head with a jerk; “but I have thought it all out, Helen! Mother mustn’t spoil my life. I have Larry to think of—and myself. It sounds horrible—hateful, I know!” she went on hastily; “but what am I to

do? I realize at last that it's hopeless to expect that mother will ever understand. I must take my own path in spite of her, if I don't want my life spoiled—incomplete—of no use to me or any one else!" There was silence. "I dread to tell her," Bridget said at last. She stirred again restlessly, and the frown on her face deepened. There was a note of half reckless defiance in her tone that Helen did not understand.

"You see," she went on after a pause, and her face cleared, "I have at least no religious scruples to overcome. Dear!" she broke off earnestly, putting out her hand towards her friend with a deprecatory movement. "You understand how I say this? I know what you believe, and I'm glad you believe it, if it makes you happier. I don't say it arrogantly, Helen, but simply as a fact. I won't even pretend to be sure there *is* a God, and so—"

Helen raised her head, as if to speak.

"Ah, yes. I know what you are going to say!" Bridget exclaimed, "that from my standpoint life is too terrible—too full of despair![212] It may be. But because one feels that to be true, must one necessarily believe? *I can't*. We've talked of this often before. It is only one other awful fact in this life of ours which holds so much that is terrible. But," she added immediately, with a smile, "I won't abuse life, or the world. It *is* awful; but it's beautiful too."

She paused. Her eyes travelled over the sea of sweet-scented flowers, up to the little gray church on the hill, and beyond it to the burning blue of the sky.

"It is a beautiful world," she repeated, "and life holds possibilities of joy too. But we are afraid; we hesitate; we haven't the courage to take our happiness! I don't *know* that there is any life but just this one. Why should I starve my nature? Why should I refuse the chance of a great happiness? I don't say the certainty, you see, but the chance, even! If I don't take it I shall be forever in a gray land, tortured with the thought that it's my own fault, my doing, my cowardice, perhaps. If I do—"

"Yes—if you do?" Helen repeated.

"I don't say we shall not both suffer," Bridget answered slowly. "I can't say that. One says contemptuously, 'Mere prejudice,' 'stupid conventions,' and the rest; but I know enough[213] by experience—of the actual living of a life—to tell me that theories are of no value beside practice. Oh! I know; but I accept the risk."

"For him too?" Helen murmured.

"No. He must accept or refuse it for himself, as I do for myself," Bridget replied quickly. "How can one human being accept or refuse a risk for another? We stand, each of us, alone. We have not rushed blindly into this, Helen. He left me absolutely free, to make my own decision. He wouldn't even see me again for fear he should urge me." Her voice shook, "Helen, if you only knew what his gentleness and

tenderness are to me! I don't think you can realize it till you have had to endure the other sort of love. *Love!*—I mean the mere selfish passion.”

The last words were almost inaudible. She held her hands tightly clasped on her lap; but Helen saw they were shaking.

“My dear, I do, I do!” she said tenderly. “Bid, you know I only want your happiness. If this—this will give it to you, then take it. You have thought, you have struggled—and you are *Bridget!*” she ended, with a burst of proud confidence.

There was a moment's silence.

“Bid, have you considered,” Helen began again hesitatingly, “that there may be other[214] lives for which you *will* be responsible? Perhaps you are right about Mr. Carey. You are two grown-up reasonable, beings; you have a right to judge for yourselves. But your children?”

“Yes, I have thought of that,” she said gravely.

“Well?”

“If we have children,” she went on in a low voice, “they will be born into a world which is slowly freeing itself from the chains of prejudice, and of hateful, perverted morality. By the time they are old enough to understand, there will be still more free men and women than there are now, who dare to face realities. *They* will be their friends. But in any case,” she raised her big eyes, and looked full at her friend, “I can't help believing, Helen, that his children and mine, would rather be born of a man and woman who love each other, than of a legal marriage where contempt was the strongest feeling, on one side, at least! Would you care to see me with a child, the child of a father I could only pray it might never love? If I have a child now, it will have no legal right to its father's name, certainly; but I shall not bear it with shame, with self-reproach, with terrible pity for the burden of life I have laid upon it!” Her face was flushed with vivid color.

[215]“If he—if Mr. Travers—divorces you, shall you—?” Helen faltered.

“Marry? No. What will be the use?” Bridget answered. “Haven't we agreed a thousand times that marriage *is* only a marriage so long as there is love and tenderness on both sides? So long as Larry's love and tenderness lasts for me, I shall be his wife,” she added softly.

“And—if it fails?”

“Well, if it fails, will it be any comfort, any compensation to me that I am his legal wife? On the contrary, how awful—how terrible to think that he hates the bond; chafes under it. Oh, I know, I *know!* I'm not saying that doing away with marriage is any cure for the sorrows which may come. It will happen a thousand times, of course, that love lasts on one side and not on the other. But that is the tragedy of life,—

terrible, but inevitable. And how does the legal bond which holds two people chained together, when one loves and the other hates, mend matters? I know if I loved my husband, but he wished to be free, though it killed me, I would say—go. Wouldn't it be better to endure separation, once for all, than to bear the daily, hourly agony of seeing his indifference, his impatience, or, worse still, of watching him trying to disguise it?"

[216]There was a long silence. Helen turned to her at last. Her eyes were wet with tears, but she smiled.

"I've been trying to put myself in your place," she said gently. "From your point of view I think you are right. I," she hesitated, "*I* recognize a higher law; you don't. Oh, Bid, understand me! I know yours is no cheap, unthinking unbelief. You can't help it. Perhaps, after all, belief or unbelief is a matter of temperament. Anyhow, I understand, I sympathize. You are doing what you believe to be right. If only," she faltered, "I knew you were going to be happy! But, as you say, we must leave that. In any case, God bless you, dear!" she whispered huskily.

They walked home through the sunny fields, where the poppies and daisies were shed broadcast in sheets of white and scarlet. The larks sang madly in the dazzling blue, and the steady pulsing of the sea made a deep, slow music. They reached the little pine-surrounded café where they were staying, and strolled slowly up the garden, in which the grass grew long and rank, and purple and red zinnias blazed in the overgrown flower-beds.

Madame Leroux came to the door, with a letter in her hand.

[217]"*Pour Madame!*" she said, with her large smile, giving it to Bridget.

She glanced at the envelope. "I think I will read it out here," she said, turning to Helen. Her voice was calm, but there was an undercurrent of excitement in it. She turned back a few steps to a vine-shaded arbor, where there was a wooden table and some forms. Breakfast was usually served out of doors at the Café des Sapins.

Helen went into the house. As she was crossing the flagged passage leading to the salon, ten minutes later, Bridget stood on the threshold. She held the letter clasped in one hand.

"He is coming to-morrow," she said, as she passed her friend on the way upstairs. Helen had a glimpse of her happy eyes, and turned aside into the garden, with a half smile and a sigh.

After they had gone upstairs that night, Mrs. Trelawney knocked at Bridget's bedroom door.

"Come in," she called, turning as the door opened. She was sitting at the toilet-table, in a little white wrapper, with her hair all loose about her face.

"You look like a little girl again, with your hair down," Helen said, seating herself on the bed, and watching her as she brushed and arranged it.

[218]"I've been thinking of myself as I was, as a little girl, to-night," she answered, pausing, brush in hand, to glance at herself in the glass. Her face was grave.

"Helen, when this is settled I want to be quiet and peaceful for a little while," she said wistfully. "We shall live abroad a great deal, I think. I wonder if I ever *shall* be peaceful and content," she went on musingly. "I'm afraid not. What an awful thing it is to have so many moods, and to want fresh things and people to appeal to them! Why, in some of my moods lately, I've even wanted the type of person I used to hate and despise so intensely, just as an antidote to the simple life I was wild to lead, when I hadn't the chance of doing it!" She laughed a little. "Poor Larry!" she murmured, half laughing, half in earnest. "Will he put up with me, I wonder?"

"You're an aggravating person, but most people put up with you," Helen returned.

"Yes, it's a charming way they have; I love them for it! It's—it's—rather a tremendous thing to have come to this point in one's life, isn't it?" she went on presently. She rested one elbow upon the table, and pushed back her thick hair with the other hand. "I've found myself going over all my past life to-night, as they say you do when you're dying,[219] you know. It seems to me that I've always been rebellious, always struggling against something,—kicking against the pricks, in fact. When I left school, I used to lie awake night after night, and listen to the shouts of drunken men outside, divided between an agony of shame that we had anything to do with their drunkenness, and contempt of myself for hating my father's business. That was bad to bear. Then the next rebellion was against the dreary, loveless teacher life; after that, followed revolt against the degrading existence of a woman who doesn't love her husband, but is forced to be his slave. Now, I am up in arms against social prejudice, which makes two people suffer a lifetime (perhaps their only lifetime) for a mistake which one of them has made! When will it end, Helen?"

"Never, while you are alive, with that restless mind of yours," Helen said, a little sadly. "You, and women like you, are born into the wrong age for peaceful happiness, I'm afraid. A transition age is surely the most difficult one for a woman to live in, well,—worthily. There's only one thing that comforts me, Bid," she added after a

pause, “a great thing. You *love* this man,—I see it, I know it. You have never loved any man before.”

“The only good that comes out of what is[220] past, as far as I can see,” Bridget replied, turning her shining eyes upon her friend, “is that I can compare it with this new feeling—and trust myself. But”—she smiled with quivering lips—“I always was an extravagant person. My experiences, even, cost more than most people’s!”

When Helen left her, she went to the window and drew back the curtains. The moon hung like a great white flower in the clear sky; she fancied the sweet scent which came floating into the room, as she pushed open the casement, streamed from its shining heart. There were mystic silver pathways through the pine woods round the house, and between the black motionless trees the distant sea shone like a lake enchanted. The silver radiance of the night held her spellbound. She covered her eyes with both hands at last, and shut out the white glitter of the moonlight. She was intoxicated with the beauty of the world, with the joy at her heart,—alive, clamorous, insistent. The cup of life, brimming and honey sweet, was at her lips at last. “*At last!*” she repeated, whispering to herself in ecstasy, “this is my moment—this—and tomorrow. And I thought life had cheated me,—that it held nothing I had dreamt of!—that I should die without—” She sank on her knees before the window,[221] and hid her happy, smiling eyes against her folded arms.

A moment or two later, the breathless stillness, which seemed to encircle her, and hold her delight at its heart, was broken. Somewhere in the distance, the silence was cut by the sudden hoarse barking of a dog. She raised her head slowly, with a long sigh, to find the room in shadow. A cloud had floated across the moon. There was a glint of silver on the distant sea, but the glamour had gone from the landscape. In a moment’s space it had grown gray and dim. The mysterious, silver pierced wood, was just a clump of pine-trees, overhanging the darkening sea.

She felt a sudden, inexplicable contraction of the heart. Her exalted mood was evaporating, escaping, melting away from her. It was as though a cloud had passed also over her mind. She wondered vaguely why she had felt so deliriously happy a moment since. There were troubles,—there was suffering in store, of course. She had said so to Helen that very day. There was her mother, for instance. She paused. Her forehead contracted into a frown. She had thought out this question so many times, why need she go through it all again? She shrugged her shoulders impatiently. Why couldn’t she have even one perfect hour, unspoilt by misgivings,[222] by self-torturing scruples? She had decided. The thing was settled. Why couldn’t she give herself up to her joy? She was possessed by an impatient, impotent sense of anger at her inability to recapture the mood of ten minutes ago. It evaded her; it was gone. Instead, unrest, a vague troubled sense that she was considering the question for the first time, filled her mind. The first time!—when she had gone through it all, reasoned with herself every day for months, and had finally made her decision!

With a sigh she turned away from the window at last, from the sight of the darkened wood, and the slowly lessening streak of silver on the sea.

The noise of barking was renewed; it was answered presently by the voice of Zut, the dog belonging to the café. Bridget paused to listen as she unbuttoned her dressing-jacket. Zut's clamor increased; he was barking furiously, and she fancied she heard a step along the road. There was a stir, and the sound of subdued voices overhead, and presently some one went softly down the creaking stairs outside her door, just as the garden gate slammed. There was a whispered colloquy below, and then a retreating step on the gravel path. A moment later, there was a gentle tap at her door.

[223]Bridget drew her dressing-jacket on to her shoulders again, in surprise, and softly crossed the room and opened it.

Madame Leroux, in wrapper and bedroom slippers, was standing outside. There was an envelope in her hand.

"For Madame," she explained—"a telegram. There had been an error, a wrong address. It had gone to Veules; but a telegram perhaps was important? Monsieur Grouet's Alphonse, who slept at St. Marguerite's, had brought it therefore, at this late hour."

Bridget took it from her outstretched hand, and slowly shut the door, her eyes fixed on the envelope. She crossed to the bed, and sat down. Her heart began to beat violently, and then stood still with nameless fear.

"If Larry—" she opened it slowly. A moment later, the paper fluttered out of her hand to the floor. For a long time she sat motionless, looking straight in front of her towards the open window. Then she rose noiselessly. She crossed the room to the chair she had left beside it. She was careful not to let her dress make the slightest rustle as she sat down. (When people were dead, you were always quiet.) She rested her elbows on the sill presently, still holding her breath lest she should make the smallest sound. There was a stunned,[224] dazed look in her eyes. She noticed that all but a thin streak of silver was gone from the sea. Heavy clouds were drifting over the sky, and the air was close and oppressive.

Bridget wondered idly whether the storm would come in the night, or next day. "To-morrow, I should think," she murmured vaguely; "to-morrow, perhaps."

[225]

CHAPTER XVI

CAREY walked across the wide, sunny fields next day in the direction of the Café des Sapins. He had driven as far as the village next to St. Marguerite, and had decided to walk the rest of the way. Now he was so near his journey's end, he dreaded to find himself actually at the threshold. He would delay a little longer. The rattle of the trap, and the cheerful attempts of the driver at conversation, had become insupportable. He wanted intensely to be alone.

It was noon, when, following the direction of the blue bloused village children, he came at last in sight of the café. A midday stillness brooded over the hot fields, where amongst the poppies and the white foam of daisies, a solitary tethered cow was grazing.

Involuntarily he slackened his pace. His eyes were fixed on the streak of blue sea, and the fringe of pine-trees that bordered the cliff. In a few moments he stood at the door of the inn.

"Madame Trelawney was out," Madame Leroux explained. "She and Monsieur. But Madame[226] Travers? Yes, Madame was at home. She should be told that Monsieur awaited her."

He was shown into the salon, a primitive, stone-flagged little place. It was filled with cool, green light, that filtered through the vine leaves round its window. Out in the glaring sunshine, a yellow dog lay sleeping, stretched across the garden path. There was no other sign of life. The stillness grew intolerable. Carey rose and stood by the window in the hope of feeling a breath of air, and heard his heart beating in muffled throbs.

The door suddenly opened. He turned with an effort, and saw that it was Bridget who stood there; but he dared not look at her. She wore a white dress, he noticed, and slowly he raised his eyes to her face. It was almost as white as her gown.

She closed the door softly behind her, and came and stood before him.

He did not move.

"Well?" he said at last. He had framed the word several times, but could not utter it.

"I want to talk to you," she said, below her breath. "Larry, my father is dead—I heard last night."

His face changed. A look of exquisite relief flashed into his eyes, as he took a sudden step towards her.

[227]"Poor child! poor little Bridget!" he murmured. "What an awful shock for you! No wonder—"

She put out her hand wildly to keep him away.

"Don't—*don't!*" she cried sharply. "I can't,—I can't talk if you do!"

She sank helplessly into a chair opposite, and looked up at him with despair in her face.

“Oh—why can’t you understand without words? Why can’t people see into one another’s minds? And I must talk and explain, and it’s all no use—no good!” she cried incoherently.

He had pushed both hands into his pockets, and he stood looking down at her, trying to read her face, his own lined with mingled doubt and fear.

All at once he flung himself into a chair.

“Yes! you must explain. I don’t understand,” he returned doggedly. Then he leant forward with a swift, contrite movement. “How could I? You are ill—upset, no wonder!” he repeated.

“No,” she said deliberately, keeping her voice steady. “I’m not ill. It was a shock, of course; it was unexpected. But father and I were never—we didn’t understand one another,” she added looking past him. “It isn’t as though I had loved him very much!”

[228]He was silent. “Then what is it?” he asked desperately.

She let her eyes rest on his face for a moment before she spoke.

“I—I can’t do it, Larry!” she said at last, in an almost inaudible whisper.

“You mean—you can’t come with me?”

She bowed her head.

There was no sound in the little vine-shaded salon. Carey looked out across the screen of leaves, and noticed the motionless pine-tops against the hot blue sky. His eyes travelled down their red trunks to the sunny garden, to the scarlet zinnias burning amidst the long grass, to the curly yellow dog lying with his nose between his paws on the hot flagstones before the door.

“Why?” he asked, turning his eyes from the garden to where Bridget sat.

She gave a long trembling sigh. “Because of mother.”

Again a quick light of hope flashed into his eyes.

“Yes—yes!” he said eagerly—“I see. Of course just now—in the midst of her trouble—dear, we must wait, of course. I—”

“It is not because of that,” she interrupted, in an even toneless voice. Then, with a restless movement—“Oh, Larry! It must come![229] I must, yet I know I *can’t* explain!” she cried, with a sharp note of misery in her voice.

“Listen!” she went on, desperately. “Of course you will think that it’s—father’s death, that has made me see things in a new light; but it isn’t—it isn’t. It drew the veil from before myself—my nature—a little sooner, that’s all. It would have come anyway,”

she murmured. "See!" she turned to him with trembling lips—"I had decided. I had told Helen yesterday—I had justified myself. I told her what I had been telling myself for weeks, that it would be mad, foolish, weak, to let mother's prejudices spoil my life."

"And mine—" he interrupted, tersely.

"Ah, *don't*!" she implored, twisting her hands together in her lap.

"Last night," she went on after a moment, "last night I was so happy!"—her voice faltered so that he hardly heard—"but only for a little while. Ten minutes, I think. Larry, in the midst of my happiness, the old haunting, miserable feeling, that I was treading down part of my own nature in hurting mother, came back! I—" she pushed her hair back from her white face—"And then the telegram came; and after a little while I saw it all: what I must do—what my life was to be!" she added bitterly.

Carey looked at her a moment. He rose from[230] his seat and came deliberately and knelt beside her.

"All this can wait," he said firmly. He put his arms round her, and drew her towards him. She hesitated for a second, then turned to him with a cry, and put up her lips to his.

She drew herself away presently, shuddering and cowering in her chair.

"Don't—oh Larry, don't! If I cry I can't tell you, and I must—I *must*," she wailed—"it must be settled now."

"Yes; it must be settled now," he said, rising and dragging his chair closer to hers.

She recognized the tone, and shuddered again. He meant to reason with her, to argue point by point; she could never hope to explain properly, it would last so long, such a terribly long time!

"Larry, I'm worn out already!" she urged pitifully—"don't."

"You poor little girl! We won't talk about it. To-morrow will do."

"No, no!" she exclaimed, with feverish haste, sitting upright. "Let it be now. I can't bear another night—I should go mad! Say what you have to say now—quickly!"

"You say it is your mother," Carey began. "She will look upon this as a sin, you think? She—"

[231]"No," she answered wearily. "It isn't even that. Mother is not a religious woman in the sense of the word. She *thinks* she is. She goes to church, of course, and says her prayers, but her religion doesn't enter into her life; it isn't a vital thing to her. The thought of the sin against God would not count for very much with her, it would be the outrage against social prejudice—the—"

She paused. Her voice was dry and hard.

Carey looked at her—puzzled, uncertain. Her face was rigid—it told him nothing.

“You acknowledge this, and yet, surely the knowledge that she would not be tortured by fears for your soul, is much? I understand, I realize what a fearful thought the idea of inflicting pain of that sort must be. But you say yourself her unhappiness will be caused merely by the fact that you may—well, by what she calls your social disgrace. That is hard enough, I own; but, Bridget, will you let scruples like these stand in the way? I mean if you are willing to brave it for yourself, surely—”

He rose impetuously.

“Oh, you don’t understand—you don’t understand,” she wailed, wringing her hands. “Don’t you see that it doesn’t matter to me whether her misery comes from a worthy or an unworthy cause? The fact remains that she will be^[232] wretched—*wretched*—and I shall have made her wretched. *I*—her child! She has lived for me, thought of me, worked for me early and late, all these years—these long years! Oh, don’t think I don’t know—don’t think I idealize her; don’t think we are devoted even in the sense of being friends—of being in sympathy with one another. We are not. We haven’t a thought, a hope, an ideal in common. We exasperate and irritate one another continually—we always shall. But, don’t you see? She is my *mother*, the mother that cried over me when I was little, because I had the toothache, or because some one slighted me, or because—Oh!” She threw out her hands towards him with a gesture. “You don’t remember your mother, Larry. If you did, you would know what these things mean—the little baby things that make one feel the bond, the only bond there is between us, just the tie of blood. I’m her child. She’s my mother. I can’t tell you any more!”

She stopped abruptly, shaken and trembling, and hid her face in both hands.

Carey was silent for a time. He took one of them and put it to his lips before he spoke.

“I *do* understand,” he said very gently. “But, Bridget, think! You have done many things already which you felt to be right, but which must have made her suffer. Would you have^[233] them undone? You left home, for instance, and went out into the world. You left your husband”—his face darkened. “Do you think you did wrong? Dear! I know your feeling. It is terrible, this conflict between what one owes to one’s self, and one’s love, or obligation to those who stand in the way. But, Bridget, what are we to do? How will the world go on if we are to be cramped, hindered, fettered, forever? If we are never to be ourselves, never to take the path that leads highest? Suppose you had remained with your—with Travers, out of fear of hurting your mother? You would have done yourself a deadly injury, you—”

She sat silent while he spoke, and his voice grew firm with hope as she listened; but all at once she turned resolutely to him, and put her hand on his.

“Larry,” she said brokenly, “it’s no use! I’ve told myself all that many times. It doesn’t alter things. It’s true I’ve made her suffer, it’s true it couldn’t have been otherwise. There has always, always been this fight in my life. I should have left home long before I did if it hadn’t been just for this very thing. Perhaps I should never have gone at all if mother had been alone. But she wished it at last. There was father too, you see; and I—she saw at last that it was impossible for me to live at home.[234] Then about—the other—I did it—it had to be done in spite of her; though the thought of her kept me with him three years. But, Larry, don’t you see?—don’t you *see* that it was different? I can’t disguise it from myself, though I want to. My God! don’t you believe I want to?” she broke out passionately, rising as she spoke. “That was a question of mother’s happiness against my self-respect, my decency; this is a question of her happiness against *my* happiness. I had a right—a right! I couldn’t do otherwise than to buy my self-respect, at the price even of her suffering, but I have no right—” She stopped, leaning faintly against the window frame.

“And—about me?” Carey said coldly. “Have I no claim, Bridget? You don’t seem to have thought of that.”

She turned slowly towards him, and as his eyes met hers he felt as though he had struck her. She made no answer, but sank down again, with her arm thrown out against the back of the chair, and her face hidden against it, and broke into bitter, hopeless tears.

Carey stood silent a moment, with set face, watching her. With sudden violence he stooped and drew her from the chair into his arms.

“Let everything else go,” he whispered fiercely. “We love one another. What does[235] anything matter? You are the woman for me in all the world! I am the man for you! We belong to one another. No one—nothing—has the right to part us. Think, Bridget. Together, I believe we can do great things, live full lives, drink deep of the cup of life, and find it good. It is only offered to us once—we shall be mad if we refuse it!”

She clung to him, and was silent so long that a sense of exultant triumph began to stir at his heart. He put her away from him a little, and looked in her face with a smile.

She met his eyes steadily, and with a groan he released her.

“You are like the rest of women, after all!” he said bitterly. “You delight in sacrifice. No wonder the wheels of Fate have crushed you—you throw yourselves down before the car, and invite your doom!”

“You are very cruel,” she answered wearily, letting her hands fall heavily in her lap; “but I suppose you can’t help it.”

“Have you thought what life means for you?” He flung out the words between his set teeth.

“Yes. Mother will live with me—and I shall work.”

He started and looked at her for some moments silently.

“Do you realize it, Bridget?” he enquired at last.

[236]“Perfectly,” she said calmly. “I shall work all day. In the mornings I shall teach, in the afternoons I shall write in my own room. The evenings I shall usually spend in unsuccessful attempts to keep my temper.”

“And what sort of woman will you be in five—ten years’ time?”

“God knows!” she cried wildly, her forced calm breaking up. “I don’t. That is nothing to do with me! Some people would tell me—people with lofty, high-toned minds, you know,” she added with a sneer—“that I shall be a very fine character, chastened, subdued, with latent strength, and that sort of thing. Perhaps if I were an archangel, with none of the lower passions, I might be; but I think it’s much more likely I shall be merely a bad tempered, irritable, middle-aged person.”

“And yet—” he began.

She turned her head, with an exasperated, restless movement.

“And yet—and yet” she repeated—“Oh, Larry! it isn’t a question of reason, of judgment, of anything rational. Whatever I do I shall regret it!” she broke off recklessly. “See! if it had been possible I would have gone with you last night—taken the irrevocable step, and ever afterwards cursed myself for doing it! You talk of leading a full, worthy,[237] happy life!—with a woman who is eternally self-tortured? It doesn’t matter whether it’s on her own account or some one else’s; to live with any one under such conditions is impossible—hopeless. You know it!”

“It wouldn’t be so!” he urged. “You exaggerate—”

“I know myself better than you know me—too well!” she interrupted. “No, it’s no use, Larry!” She made a gesture with her hands as of flinging something from her. “Life is too hard for me. I can’t reason, I can’t think any more! I can only cling blindly to this strong instinct, a savage instinct, if you like. I think we come back, after all, to our savage natures in most of the big things in life. It isn’t a question of duty, inclination, religion, or *anything*, but just the one overwhelming necessity of not breaking the tie of blood. Larry, you must go,” she added, in a hoarse whisper. “I can’t—stand it any longer.”

“One moment,” he said, keeping his eyes fixed on her haggard face. His own was white and rigid. “Do you mean that I’m to go away—abroad—not to see you again? You don’t mean *that*?”

He could hardly keep his voice steady enough to frame the last question.

She raised her head slowly, and looked in his face.

[238]“Larry,” she said at last, under her breath, “what am I doing this for? Is it that I’m afraid for myself? You know it is not! But you know as well as I do that if you stay, and—there is talk, as there will be—our names coupled together—I might just as well—better—have gone with you, in the face of the world. Besides, for my own sake—” she lifted her head proudly, “I couldn’t live a life like—a life of deception.” She paused. “But for mother—I would have gone with you—to the ends of the earth. You know it. But—”

There was a long silence. A film of thick white clouds had gathered over the sun; the air was heavy, breathlessly quiet. At the window, the vine leaves hung straight and still, not a tendril stirred.

At last Carey moved. He raised both her hands to his lips. “Forgive me!” he said brokenly.

She flung out her arms with a cry, and they closed round him. She shed no tears, but her whole body was shaken with her sobs.

At last she pushed him from her.

“Go—go!” she implored. “I can’t—don’t come back.”

“I will go,” he said. He started at the sound of his own voice. “I will not come back—unless you send for me.”

[239]“I—I pray I never may. If I can bear it I—oh, go! only go!” she cried incoherently.

She dragged herself to the window and watched him with wide, dry eyes, as he went down the garden path. His footsteps, crunching the gravel, sounded loud and harsh in the stillness.

“He stoops like an old man. He didn’t stoop this morning,” she thought idly. “I wonder if I stoop?” She turned and glanced at herself in the little mirror opposite the window. “No; I’m young, dreadfully young. I have—how many more years to live? How old am I? I can’t count, I never *could* reckon.” She smiled a little to herself, and caught sight of her face in the glass. “I wonder if I’m going mad?” she murmured listlessly.

A heavy drop fell on one of the vine leaves outside, it swayed, and tossed it lower; another—and then the first low growl of thunder.

Helen hurried up the garden path, spoke a word to Madame Leroux, and opened the door of the salon.

The vine-leaf screen at the window made the room almost dark, and the patter of rain on the leaves was the only sound as she crossed to where Bridget sat crouched in her chair.

“Bid, dearest!” she whispered, her voice almost lost in the second louder peal of thunder.

[240]Bridget turned to her with a wan smile, and she almost cried aloud at the sight of her face in the gloom.

“I’ve sent him away,” she explained, “do I look rather dreadful? Never mind. When we go back—to-morrow, is it?—I want you to choose rooms for mother and me.”

THE END.

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