



THE DOINGS OF DORIS

Agnes Giberne

Admet G. Johnson

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BY

AGNES GIBERNE





Published in India by :

Saptarshee Prakashan

Gat no.84/2 Behind Damaji College

Mangalwedha Dist Solapur (Maharashtra), India.

Pin:-413305

Mob: 9822701657

- Typeset/Printed by Krutika Printers, mangalwedha.
- This edition published in 2023 by:

Email: saptarsheepakashan@gmail.com

Website: www.saptarshee.in

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CHAPTER I

The Owner of Clover Cottage

"A DELIGHTFUL man!" Mrs. Brutt declared. "Absolutely charming! Handsome—accomplished—clever—fascinating!" She hung impressively upon each adjective in turn. "Fortune has showered her gifts upon him. Has simply showered them."

Mrs. Brutt viewed her present companion as the reverse of charming. But to one who hated solitude, anybody was better than nobody; and she had seized a chance to inveigle him indoors, much against his will.

"Showered—gifts—" he repeated vaguely, his one thought being how to escape from durance vile.

"Ah, your masculine mind is occupied with weightier matters!" —and she rippled into laughter. She had a habit, not agreeable to all hearers, of interlarding her speech with ripples.

"I was speaking of the Squire. As I say—a most attractive character. So good of him to come and take tea with me in my humble cot! Overwhelmed as he must be with engagements! I assure you, I appreciate the compliment."

Mr. Winton's grunt might or might not have spelt acquiescence.

"And his niece—such an attractive woman! So distinguée! That word does just exactly describe her. Not that I have seen so much of her as of her uncle." She had met Mr.

Stirling three times, and Miss Stirling once. "But enough to realise what a perfectly unusual character hers is."

The Rector grunted anew. He never discussed one parishioner with another; and he hated gossip with a deadly hatred.

"So touching to see his devotion to her—really quite beautiful! I am told that she has been everything to him since his poor wife's death—ten years ago, wasn't it? A great sufferer she must have been—and such a sweet woman. Everybody says so. And now he just leans on his dear niece. So touching, isn't it?"

No reply. Grim silence.

"Then, too, there is Mr. Hamilton Stirling—a most interesting man. So full of information. Really, it is a privilege to come across a mind like his. Do tell me—is it true that he is the heir to all this property—supposing, of course, that the Squire never marries again?" She rippled anew. "First-cousin once removed, isn't he?"

"Yes," was the least that the Rector could say.

Mrs. Brutt understood that she would get nothing out of him, and she resented the fact. Her eyes surveyed with veiled criticism his ungainly figure, broad and heavy in make, thrown as a blur against a background of dainty colouring. He wore a rough workaday apron, suggestive of carpentering, over an ancient coat; both being, under supposition, never seen outside his shed. But when pressed for time, he would steal across for a word with his friend the carpenter; and more than once Mrs. Brutt had captured him en route in this unclerical guise. He had begun ruefully to see

his own lost liberty, now that a talkative lady, with leisure for everybody's concerns, had chosen to plant herself within a stone's throw of the Rectory back-garden gate.

Hitherto the back lane had been little frequented, and he could do as he chose, with small fear of detection. Though Lynnbrooke had become a town, its growth had been mainly towards other points of the compass, leaving the old parish church and the original village almost untouched.

But Mrs. Brutt, coming for a week's change to the Inn, took a fancy to a couple of low-rented cottages, standing empty, and decided to make them her home. She had them transformed into a cosy dwelling, sent for her furniture, and settled down therein, with much flourish of trumpets.

For a while she was too busy to give heed to aught beyond the process of settling in. That ended, she found herself with superabundant time at her disposal, and during the last two months her presence had been in the Rector's eyes a standing grievance. He never could pass down the lane without a risk of being waylaid. Whatever else Mrs. Brutt might be doing, she seemed to have one eye permanently glued to her front window.

Capture on Monday afternoon was an aggravated offence. He counted Monday his own, free for the dear delights of his carpentering shed. So, though he came in because she insisted, he chafed under the necessity. Where she put him he remained, watching for the first chance to get away. Deep-set eyes under shaggy eyebrows rebelled; and the solid cogitative nose, broad at the tip with a dent in the

middle, twitched impatiently. When she made a pause, he heaved himself to his feet, capsizing a fragile table.

"Sorry! I hope nothing is damaged." He picked it up gingerly. "I can't stay longer, I'm afraid. Sermon to write."

"Ah, were you going home to write your next Sunday's sermon?" The dulcet tones held a sting of disbelief, and naturally, since his face had been turned the other way. "You don't leave your choice of a subject till the last moment. So wise of you!"

A twinkle in the deep-set eyes showed appreciation of this. She stood up slowly.

"And your daughter, Mr. Winton,—the sweet Doris. Do tell me about her. We have not met for days. I am so interested in that dear girl. She is so unusual—so charming—so clever and bewitching!"

It was hardly in father-nature not to respond to this,—even though he did not believe that she meant what she said. He and she had been antagonistic from the moment of their first meeting. None the less, he paused in his retreat, that he might hear more.

"I assure you, she has quite taken hold of me. Quite fascinated me. Such a charming face—hers! I adore hazel eyes, and hers are true hazel—positive orbs of light." The Rector uttered a silent "Bosh!" to this. "Now that I am unpacked and arranged, I hope to see a great deal of that dear child. Tell her so, please, with my love. We are such near neighbours—" "Much too near!" silently commented the Rector— "that I hope she will be always in and out. Tell

Doris—may I call her so?—that it will be a real charity, if she will come as often as possible to my little cot."

Why couldn't she say "cottage" like a sensible being? Mr. Winton hated being humbugged, and he abhorred gush. Praise of his Doris was sweet; but he could not quite swallow all this.

Mrs. Brutt studied through draped curtains his swinging stride down the little pathway.

"Of all uncouth beings! The contrast!" murmured she, setting alongside a mental picture of the Squire.

"And his wife. Not so uncouth, certainly, but really more unendurable. The girl's life, under such a regime, must be no joke. I wonder how she stands it, for my part."

Mrs. Brutt strolled round the room, which was crowded with furniture, with pictures, and with bric-a-brac ornaments, many of them old and valuable. She altered the position of one or two, thinking still about Doris Winton.

"A pretty girl," she murmured,—"and with pretty ways. She might make a sensation, away from this poky place. I wonder whether, some day, I could bring her forward. Not an impossible plan. What if I were to offer to take her abroad? I doubt if the Rector would approve. He likes me as little as I like him. But if I can get hold of the girl somehow—" She clapped her hands and laughed aloud. "I have it! I'll suggest the idea to the Squire. That will do. He simply rules the neighbourhood."

A ring at the front door took her by surprise. She glided to the window, just in time for a glimpse. Actually!—it was the Squire himself. Again—already! The impression she had

made on him must have been agreeable. This flashed through her mind as she fled to the mantelpiece and anxiously surveyed herself. Although past forty, she knew that no grey lines had begun to appear in her well-dressed dark hair; and while she was a plain woman, so far as features were concerned, she also knew that her figure was good, and that she could carry herself with the air of being a somebody.

"Mr. Stirling" was announced. He found the lady engrossed in a book, which she put aside with a dreamy air, before beaming into a surprised welcome.

"This is a pleasure indeed. A most unexpected pleasure. How kind—how very kind! Pray sit down."

The Squire had called in passing, to leave a small volume on architecture which she had said she wished to read. He came in only to point out a passage bearing on the structure of the parish church; and he had not meant to stay. But protests proved useless. He, like the Rector, found that once inside Clover Cottage, it was not easy to get away.

CHAPTER II

Baiting the Ground

"You remembered what I said. How thoughtful!" Mrs. Brutt turned over one or two leaves of the book. "It looks absolutely fascinating. I adore reading. After the society of friends—" and she sighed—"it is the chief solace of my lonely hours."

"I hope you will not be lonely here." The speaker was in age over fifty, and in looks singularly young, with few grey hairs and a spare alert figure. His features were good, and his expression in repose rather severe; but the smile brought irradiation. People thought much of him, both for his unfailing kindness and courtesy, and for the fact that his forbears had owned the land round about since the days of the early Henrys. He was perhaps the most popular man among rich and poor in the county.

Mrs. Brutt presently alluded with a smile to her last caller. "Such a dear good man and so deliciously unconventional. Don't you delight in that sort of moral sublimity? And dear Mrs. Winton—the busiest of rectorinns! That word just describes her. So useful! So efficient! She seems to understand everybody, and to think of everything. Quite delightful, is it not! Positively, I envy her. Such a soul for doing good."

The Squire hated gossip at least as much as the Rector; but he was not so quick to detect its presence. Still, an uneasy bend appeared in his smooth forehead, which acted as a danger-signal to the astute Mrs. Brutt, before he was

himself aware of uneasiness. She dropped the dear good Rector and his wife like a pair of hot potatoes, and skated in a new direction.

What charming country it was! Such lovely scenery! Such numbers, too, of sweet farms within reach. Didn't Mr. Stirling look upon English farm-life as a perfectly ideal existence?

"I had a drive yesterday afternoon, to return the call of your sister-in-law at Deene,—I beg your pardon, your cousin I ought to have said. Such a charming woman! I'm really quite in love with her already. And her son—one of the best-informed men I ever came across. One longs to sit at his feet and learn."

The Squire failed to echo this aspiration. Mrs. Brutt, noting his look, resolved to be in future more sparing in her praise of Mr. Hamilton Stirling.

"Then the driver took me a long round by the loveliest spot imaginable—'Wylld's Farm'—such an appropriate name. One of your farm's, he told me; as of course I might have guessed. I walked through a large field to get a nearer view; and the farmer himself came out for a chat. Not the new-fangled sort, but the real old-fashioned type—quite idyllic!—a genuine old yeoman. He simply charmed me. So respectful. So self-respecting. I hoped he would ask me to go in, for I saw the sweetest little face of a girl looking out of the window, and I wanted to know her. He didn't—but I shall go again, and perhaps next time he will."

Surely she had not "put her foot in it" this time! The Squire's forehead was puckered all over, fine lines ruffling its

surface. She racked her brain to discover wherein the blunder had consisted, while glissading off into fresh paths. Her exertions met with success, and gradually his look of annoyance faded.

"The real delight of country is, after all, in long walks," she remarked. "I can't afford many drives. But walks—with a companion—are delightful. Real long rambles, I mean."

"Miss Winton is a good walker," he said, as he stood up.

Mrs. Brutt caught at the suggestion. She did so admire Doris Winton; a captivating creature, pretty, graceful, full of life, "the dearest of girls." And wasn't it touching to see one, so fitted to adorn society, devoting herself to parish drudgery? So good and useful! But rather melancholy—didn't the Squire think?

"Of course one knows that the work has to be done. And the Rector's daughter has to take her share. But there are limits. And she is so young—so taking! For my part, I do like young folks to have a merry time—not to wear themselves out before they've had their swing."

Mr. Stirling's attention was arrested.

"Does Miss Winton work too hard?"

"Pray don't count me meddlesome." Mrs. Brutt put on a deprecating smile. "As a stranger, I have no right to speak. But sometimes—don't you think—sometimes strangers see more than friends? I can't help being abominably clear-sighted. It isn't my fault. I suppose I'm made so. And—I'm speaking now in strict confidence—" she lowered her voice to a mysterious murmur,—"I do feel sorry for the girl."

"For Doris Winton!" His manner showed surprise.

"Oh, you men!—you see nothing. You never do. She is bright enough in a general way. She doesn't give in. A brave spirit, you know—that's what it is. She makes the best of things, and people don't notice. Not that she meant to betray anything to me,—poor little dear. Oh, she is thoroughly loyal,—never dreams of complaining. But one cannot help seeing; that's all. I always do see—somehow. And I confess, I positively ache to get that dear child right away out of the treadmill, if only for a few weeks. To take her abroad, I mean, and to give her a really good time. It would mean everything to her—to health and character and—everything. However, at present I don't see my way. What with building and settling in, I have run to the utmost extent of my tether. Poor dear little Doris. It must wait. But it would mean fresh life to her."

Mr. Stirling said good-bye, and departed thoughtfully. Mrs. Brutt felt that she had scored a point. He would not forget.

She went back to her peregrinations about the room, indulging in dreams. Switzerland offered itself in tempting colours. She did not care to go without a companion. But a young bright girl, such as Doris—pleasant, and also submissive—would be the very thing. More especially if she could bring it about that somebody else should undertake all Doris's expenses; and perhaps not Doris's only!

CHAPTER III

Doris Rebels

MR. STIRLING had many miles to ride before turning homeward, but he showed no signs of haste, walking slowly from Clover Cottage. His face fell into a somewhat severe set, till a slight bend in the lane brought him almost within touch of Mrs. Brutt's "dearest of girls," the Rector's daughter.

She stood just within the back gate of the Rectory garden, the centre of a flock of pigeons. One white-plumed beauty was perched on her shoulder; another sat on her wrist. She was of good height, slender and supple in make, with long lissom arms and fingers. Small dainty ears, a pear-shaped outline of cheek, pencilled dark brows over deep-set eyes, and a pretty warmth of colouring, made an attractive picture. A broad low brow, with eyes well apart, spoke of intellect.

"Pets as usual!"

The swish of fluttering wings responded. Doris turned with a smile of welcome.

"I'm afraid I have frightened them off."

"It doesn't matter. The dear things are so shy. Won't you come indoors?"

"Not to-day, I think. Your neighbour down the lane has kept me longer than I intended."

"Is your horse in the yard? Shall we go through the garden?" It was a common practice of the Squire to leave his horse in the Rectory stables, when he had business in the village. She walked by his side with lithe free grace, carrying

her head like a young princess. "So you've been to the Cottage. Isn't she nice? I like her awfully." Doris's cheeks dimpled. "But father doesn't. He can't forgive her for being there. If he ventures out in his beloved old coat, she is sure to catch him."

Mr. Stirling stooped to pick up a snail, which he flung far over the wall. Then he admitted that he found Mrs. Brutt pleasant—something of an acquisition.

"When are you coming to see Katherine?"

"I did think of this afternoon—but I'm not sure."

He recollect ed what Mrs. Brutt had said. "Too much to do?"

Her face took a rebellious set.

"I don't like being made to do things."

"Even if you don't mind the things themselves?"

She laughed, but the rebellious note was still audible.

"I'd rather be free to choose for myself. I hate to have my whole life parcelled out for me by—other people!"

This was a new sound in his ears. Subterranean gases of discontent had been at work; but till this moment the imprisoned forces had found no vent in his hearing.

"Spirit of the Age!" he murmured to himself. Aloud he made a slight encouraging sound, and her words came in a rush.

"I don't see why I should have to do it all. I can't help being a Rector's daughter. If I were a clergyman, or a clergyman's wife, it would be by my own choice. Not because I couldn't help myself. Doesn't it seem rather unfair that I should have to spend my time doing things that I

detest, and having none for what I love?—well, not very much, at all events. Oh, I didn't mind so much at first. One likes variety, and it was a change from school. But—lately—" "

"Yes—lately—?"

"It has begun to seem—horrid. I've felt horrid sometimes. Don't you know—?" appealingly.

"Perhaps I do. What sort of things is it that you want to do?"

"Oh just heaps! I love music, and I could spend hours over it every day. And hours more over Italian and German. I'm rather good at languages. And I want to read—any amount. And then I should like—" and she paused—"more go—for fun!"

"You are asked to a good many tennis-parties, I believe."

"Heaps of them. But that is the same thing, over and over. The same houses, and the same friends. I should like things to be different. I want to go about, and to see fresh people." Her face flashed into brightness. "If only I could go abroad! That would be too delicious. Not keep on always and for ever in the same old ruts."

She sent a quick glance into her companion's face, and was sure that he understood, though he made no remark.

"I don't mean to grumble. But I do so detest handling dirty old library books, and running the Shoe-Club, and going in and out of stuffy cottages, and hearing all about the old women's complaints. I suppose, if I were really good, I should dote on that sort of life. But I'm not!—and I don't! I

do love things to be nice and clean and dainty. And—perhaps it is conceited of me—I sometimes think I could really do something with my music, if only—but there is never any time. Mother likes me to practise every day; but as soon as I begin to get into it, and forget the whole world, I'm morally certain to be called off, and sent to take some wretched note somewhere."

"That must be a little trying."

"It's just horribly trying, and it makes me so cross. Ought I to say all this? Of course mother doesn't mean—but you see, she's not musical. And when interruptions come again and again, I get out of heart, and it doesn't seem worth while to go on. Sometimes I feel as if I must chuck it all, and get right away!—as if I couldn't go on!"

Her face flushed. He questioned—had the elder lady acted as suggester to the girl, or the girl to the elder lady? Some collusion of ideas evidently existed.

"But you like to be useful."

The corners of her mouth curled upward in a protesting smile.

"Ye—es—I suppose so. Not always. And I'd rather be useful in my own fashion. Not in other people's fashion."

No more could be said, for on their way to the stable they skirted the glass door which opened from the Rector's study upon a side-lawn. There stood the Rector himself, in an attitude of bored endurance. There also was the rectorinn,—so named, and not inappropriately, by Mrs. Brutt,—large and comfortable in figure, calm and positive in manner. Though she never spoke loudly, her voice had a penetrative quality.

"Really, Sylvester, with that woman always about you must be more careful. Only last week you promised me never to be seen in this coat. I shall have to give it away."

"Drastic measure!" muttered the Rector.

"I don't see what else can be done. You never remember to change it; and positively I cannot have you going about in rags. She will gossip about you all over the place. If the husband goes shabby, it is always the wife who is blamed."

"Well, well, my dear, I'll be careful."

"You won't. You never are. When once you get to your tools, everything else goes out of your head—promises included. Nothing will cure you but getting rid of the coat altogether."

"The consent of the owner is generally supposed—"

"Not in the case of husband and wife, I hope."

The Rector wondered what his wife would say, if he proceeded to dispose, without her consent, of her best black silk. But he was not a lover of what the Scots call "argle-bargle."

"Hallo!—here's Stirling!"

The Squire made believe to have heard nothing; and the grateful Rector carried him off. Doris was not allowed to follow. Mrs. Winton beckoned herindoors.

"It is a disgrace to us all to have your father seen in such a coat. Absolutely in tatters. Past all mending."

"Everybody knows father, and nobody minds what he does."

"That is precisely why his own people have to mind. Otherwise, there is no check upon him. Doris, those library books are not covered yet."

"I didn't feel inclined yesterday."

"The things that one doesn't feel inclined to do are generally just those that ought to come first."

She spoke positively; not unkindly; but voice and manner jarred, and the girl moved in a restive fashion.

"I want to cycle over to see Katherine."

"You will hardly have time to-day."

Mrs. Winton held out her hand, as the maid brought a note on a tray. Susan hesitated, with a glance towards Doris, but the gesture had to be obeyed. Doris in her turn held out a hand.

"Mother—that is for me."

"Yes. I see that it is from Hamilton Stirling."

Doris flushed with vexation, and retreated to the bow-window. There she stood and read in leisurely style four pages of neat small handwriting. Getting to the end, she smiled, put the sheet into her pocket, and stood gazing out on the lawn. They were still in the study. Mrs. Winton waited two or three minutes, then said—

"I think you should allow me to see your letter, my dear. You cannot have secrets of that sort from me."

Doris faced round, her combative instincts awake.

"What sort?"

"I'm sure you understand what I mean."

Doris seemed embarrassed, though a smile lingered round her lips, and her eyes had a sparkle in them.

"It's—not meant to be shown."

"If you will tell me what it is about, I can judge."

The girl stood, slender and upright, against a dark maroon curtain.

"He says I am not to tell anyone."

"Mr. Hamilton Stirling would certainly make an exception in my case. He would not wish you to hide anything from me."

"He says—nobody!"

"Then I think he is wrong. And I do not think you are bound to follow such an injunction."

Doris's head went up.

"He advises me to read some books on geology."

"That cannot be what he does not wish you to repeat."

"No."

"And at your age—"

"I'm nineteen."

"Doris, you force me to ask you a plain question. Has he made you an offer of marriage?"

"Mother!" The girl crimsoned, and threw out her hands with a movement as of indignant repudiation. "Of course not! Why should he? It is absurd to ask such a thing. But you always spoil everything for me— always!"

Mrs. Winton was vaguely conscious, as the Squire had been, of some new element. She failed to analyse it, and the line she took was unfortunate. A word of loving sympathy would have brought submission; but she straightened her shoulders, and remarked coldly—

"That is not the way in which you ought to speak to me.
Are you going to show me the letter?"

Doris caught her breath, said—"I can't!"—and fled.

CHAPTER IV

The Morris's

LYNNTHORPE, Mr. Stirling's home, a large house in a park, lay about two miles from the parish church end of Lynnbrooke. But Mr. Stirling, instead of riding thitherward, shaped his course in the opposite direction, straight through the town. On quitting the latter, he followed a broad Roman road for some two miles, passing then the village of Deene, where lived his cousin's widow, Mrs. John Stirling, with her only son, Hamilton—commonly regarded as probable heir to the Stirling property, since it was believed to be entailed in the male line.

Instead of pursuing the high road, he turned off into a lane, three miles of which brought him to another, very narrow and winding, whence at length he emerged within sight of a lonely farm, upon a bleak hillside.

It was a neighbourhood far from town traffic, far from even the gentle stir of village life. The lane here ceased to exist; and his trot slackened to a walk, as he rode through a large meadow, on a grass-path. Fields of young corn grew near; and the "bent" of some stunted trees showed the force of prevailing westerly winds.

Distant lines of hills were pretty; and there was a healthful breeziness about the situation; but Mrs. Brutt's description of it as "the loveliest spot imaginable" was overdrawn, as her descriptions were wont to be.

Apart from the group of farm buildings stood the dwelling-house, with lattice windows and creeper-grown

porch. The grunting of pigs alternated with cawings from a rookery not far off. Mr. Stirling, a fine-looking man on horseback, noted neither, his mind being otherwise engaged.

Somebody came striding through the gate; older by many years than the Squire; bigger and broader; roughly clad, with gaiters and heavy boots. His face, red-brown like a Ribstone pippin, was lighted by the bluest of eyes; his hands, large and muscular, were unused to gloves; his bearing, though blunt and unpolished, was respectful. Yeoman farmer, every inch of him, as Mrs. Brutt had said. For once she had spoken correctly. He smiled at sight of the Squire.

"Fine weather, sir. Good for the crops."

"How are you, Mr. Paine?"

"I'm right enough, sir. I've nought to complain of. And having my niece and her girls here, it do make a lot of difference to me."

"No doubt!"—with a touch of curtness.

"Yes, sir,—a lot of difference it do make. The place was that lonesome with her gone." He had lost his wife some months earlier, and he pushed his cap back with a reverent gesture. "I just put it so to Molly when I wrote; and she wouldn't say 'No,'—bless her!—though it did mean giving up of her Norfolk home. I'd hardly have known Molly, that I wouldn't—she's that changed from the pretty girl she used to be."

"People generally do alter as they grow older." The Squire spoke in a constrained tone.

"Ay, sir,—'tis true. But she's more changed than I'd have thought possible. Twenty-seven years it is now since she

went to furrin parts with little Miss Katherine and her father,—and she was a right-down pretty creature, and no mistake, was our Molly. And if so be, as folks said, that she saved little Miss Katherine's life, sir, I'm glad it was so. All the same, it did go agin the grain with me—uncommon agin the grain it went!—Molly getting herself trained for a nurse, when this might have been her home all along. And then going off as she did, all of a suddent, to Canada, without ever seeing of us agen. I misdoubt but Phil Morris wasn't the best of husbands. She's seen a lot of trouble, she has—judgin' from her look."

The Squire was silent and motionless.

"But it seems like as if she couldn't abear now to speak to me of the past,—no, not yet of her husband, Phil Morris. Nor she won't hear him blamed. 'Let bygones be bygones,' says she. Only she's told how good you've been, sir, all these years, letting her have that house in Norfolk, dirt-cheap. I'm sure, if ever I'd guessed—but there!—how was I to know, when she'd never so much as wrote word to me that she was a widow, nor was back in Old England? Nor you never spoke of her to me neither, sir!" There was a note of inquiry, a suggestion of reproach, in the last words.

Mr. Stirling dismounted.

"It was hardly my place to inform you, if she did not wish to do so herself," he said gravely. "I was not likely to forget her care of my niece; and she has been welcome to any help I could give. Would you call someone to hold my horse? Thanks,"—as the farmer took the reins,—"I'll find my way in."

He walked up the narrow flagged path, bordered by such homely flowers as double daisies, pinks, and sweet-williams. Before he could ring the door opened, and a girl stood there—fair-skinned and grey-eyed, with short brown hair curling closely over her head. She had a fragile look; and the small hands were almost transparent. A shy upward glance welcomed him.

"How do you do, Winnie? Better than you used to be? You don't seem quite at your best."

"I'm much the same, thank you, sir."

"Rheumatism bad still?"

He gazed down on her with kind concern.

"Yes, sir. It's no good me minding. Mother's in."

She led him to a long narrow sitting-room, crowded with old-fashioned heavy furniture. Oak-beams crossed at intervals the low-pitched ceiling; and an aged spinnet stood in one corner.

The woman who rose to meet him must have been at least fifty, perhaps more. She was stout, unsmiling, blunt in manner, with features which might in girlhood have been well-shaped. But the complexion was muddy; the face was hard and deeply lined; she dressed badly; and the frizzling of her iron-grey hair into a fringe gave a tinge of commonness, which found its echo in the timbre of her voice.

"How do you do, Mrs. Morris?"

"How do you do, Mr. Stirling?"

The Squire was famed for his frank ease of manner among friends and tenants of whatsoever degree; but he seemed now cold and constrained. A look of displeasure was

stamped on his brow; and it grew into a frown at the sight of a second girl, who had followed him in. With her the mother's hardness and commonness were reproduced, and the fringe was obtrusively prominent.

"Good morning," he said curtly to her, and then turned to the mother. "Winnie is not looking well."

"Not likely in this dismal hole," declared the last corner. Jane Morris was sure to thrust in a word, if she had the chance. "The Norfolk doctor said she never ought to be in a cold climate; and this is going to be cold enough in all conscience. He said she ought to go to the sea before next winter."

"It's dry and healthy here," Mrs. Morris put in.

Mr. Stirling turned from Jane. "How is Raye getting on?"

"Like a house on fire, he says," declared the irrepressible Jane.

Mr. Stirling put up one hand with a dignified gesture.

"Will you please allow your mother to speak for herself. Can you give me a few minutes in another room, Mrs. Morris?"

"There!" Winnie said with a sigh, as they disappeared. She went to the stiff old-fashioned sofa, from which she was seldom long absent. "Now you have driven him off!"

"Rubbish!" shortly answered Jane. "He and mother always have a business talk."

"What made you say that about the climate,—and about my going to the sea? It was like asking him to send me."

"Well, why shouldn't he? I wish he'd send you and me together. Anything to get away from this hole."

"We have no right to expect him to do things for us."

"I think we have. Mother saved Miss Stirling's life by her nursing. And everybody says he just lives for Miss Stirling."

"All those years and years ago!"

"That makes no difference. If it wasn't for mother he'd have no niece now. I think he ought to be grateful; and I don't see that he can do too much in return. He might just as well send you and me to Brighton for a month."

"Jane!—don't!—how can you? Don't speak so loud! And I can't think how you can talk so." The small delicate face flushed with feeling. "It is just because he has been so good to us—such a real friend—that I can't bear to think of asking him to do anything more."

Jane mumbled something. "I only know I can't abide the place," she added. "I'm sick of it."

"Why, we've not been here six weeks."

"It feels like six months," Jane yawned vociferously.

"You are always going into Lynnbrooke."

"Couldn't exist if I didn't. I just hate this farm."

Winnie lifted an entreating finger; and Jane sank into sullen silence. Beyond a shut door two voices alternated.

"I believe they're talking about us," muttered Jane. And she was not mistaken.

CHAPTER V

A Secret Agreement

MR. STIRLING had placed himself in the farmer's high-backed chair; and Mrs. Morris occupied one of cane, exactly opposite. Their positions seemed to be opposed, as well mentally as bodily. A displeased dent still marked the Squire's forehead; and his gaze was bent moodily downward. Mrs. Morris, looking not at him but at the wall, with hands resolutely folded, heard what he had to say. An odour of stale tobacco filled the air; for this was the farmer's "den."

"You see what I mean?"

"Yes—I see," she replied.

"For my niece's sake, I will allow no risks to be run." She knew that he might have added, "And for my own sake!"—and her lip curled. "Remember!—I am quite decided about this. If, through any carelessness, you allow suspicions to be awakened, you know the consequences."

"Yes," she stolidly repeated.

"I have been a good friend to Raye." He spoke in unconscious echo of Winnie's words.

"Yes, you have," she admitted. "But—"

"You must be content with that. I will go on being a good friend to him, so long as our agreement is strictly kept to. Once break it—and you know the consequences."

He was gazing at her, and her expressionless eyes met his.

"Yes, I know," she assented in a dull tone.

"Your income stops, and I have no more to do with Raye. You understand what that means—for the future."

"Yes, I know," she repeated.

"One item in our agreement was—that Raye should never come to this neighbourhood, without my express permission."

"You mean—he's never to see me?"

"I mean what I say. He is not to come here. If you wish to see him, you go elsewhere."

"Not even—once in the year! I've always had that."

"Not even once in the year. It is your own doing. If you had stayed in Norfolk, as I desired, you could have had him as before. Now you cannot."

"It's a bit hard on Raye—if he mayn't ever come to his own home."

"That is your affair. You have chosen."

Her face took an obstinate set.

"I couldn't help coming. I'm wanted here. I just felt I had to come."

"Under the circumstances, you ought to have felt that you had to stay away, considering—though I would rather not say this—all that I have done for you and yours. Remember—but for me you were penniless. Remember, too, that I was not bound. You had from the first no real claim upon me."

"I don't know as I see that," she muttered.

"Whether you see it or not, it is true."

"Anyway, when I promised I'd do as you wanted, I did say I might some day have to come here and look after my

uncle. I don't forget that you've done a lot for us. But all the same, I had to come."

"Then you have to accept the consequences. When you wish to see Raye, it must be elsewhere. That is decided. I need not again remind you how much in Raye's future may hang upon this. One more point. You must keep Jane in order."

"I'm sure I don't know whatever I'm to do. She's off on her bike for hours together. I can't stop her. She aint like Winnie, always happy with a book. Jane likes lots of friends, and she don't trouble to tell me where she goes, nor what she does with herself."

The Squire's look was uncompromising.

"She's for ever on the go, wanting amusements. I don't know what's come over the girls nowadays. It's always amusement that they want,—not work."

"You must control her."

"I never could manage Jane, and that's the truth. She just goes where she chooses, and picks up whoever she comes across. It's her way."

"It is a great deal too much her way. She is becoming talked about. In Norfolk, however objectionable such behaviour might be, it did not matter to me personally. I will not allow it here."

"I don't see how I'm to stop her."

"You must find a way. Jane has to be kept in order." In a lower tone he added: "Do not make it necessary for me to take next year a step which I should be most reluctant to take—to refuse the renewal of your uncle's lease."

She was startled out of her stolid unconcern. "You wouldn't! It would kill him."

"I should regret extremely having to do it. But—he might have to choose between that and sending you all away,—or rather, sending Jane away. At any cost, I intend to guard my niece's happiness."

He could see that she swelled resentfully, and he stood up to say good-bye. No one, noting those two faces, contrasted and antagonistic, would have imagined how in the past their lives had been intertwined; not through any action of his own. The fact was known to themselves only; not even to her children.

They watched him from the sitting-room window, as he passed down the garden, and paused for a chat with the farmer; and Mrs. Morris observed—

"He's been making a lot of complaints of you, Jane. You've got to mend your ways."

"Much obliged!" Jane tossed her head.

"He says you're getting talked about in Lynnbrooke. You're always in and out there; and you're a deal too free and noisy with folks. He don't like that sort of thing."

Jane tossed her head again. She was extraordinarily unlike Winnie; not only by nature but by training, having been sent by her mother to a very third-rate school, and then having spent years with some distant cousins of her mother in Manchester; undesirable companions for any girl.

"He'll have to do without the liking. I'm not his humble slave—I can tell him that. Goodness gracious me, I'm not going to ask him what I may and mayn't do. He seems to

think he owns our bodies and souls, because the land belongs to him."

"He's always so kind," Winnie put in reproachfully.

"Kind to you, if you like. You know how to come over him. He just hates me, and always did. He thinks of me as if I was scum beneath his feet." Jane's metaphor was mixed.

"It's your own fault," Mrs. Morris said shortly. "And if you don't look sharp, you'll get us all into trouble. I can tell you, he won't stand it. I know what he means. It's those Parkinses he don't like, that you're so thick with."

Jane snapped her fingers.

"I don't care that for him," she declared.

Unconscious of Jane's rebellious attitude, the Squire rode homeward; and half-way between Lynnbrooke and Lynnthorpe he came suddenly on Doris. She was seated meditatively by the roadside, her bicycle propped against the hedge. She was so engrossed she did not notice his approach till he dismounted.

"Are you coming to see Katherine? Is anything wrong with your machine?"

She glanced up with a brilliant smile. "Oh no, thanks. I'm only making a debating-club of myself. Question under discussion—Shall I go on, or shall I turn back?"

"Why turn back? Thomas shall see you home."

"Oh, thanks—but it's light so late now. Mother wanted me to cover some books before going out; and I wouldn't. It's an awful business—such a state as they are in. And I was vexed about something else too; so I started off without telling her. Ought I to give up and go back?"

"Is that necessary, now you have come so far?" He met the appeal in her face with a man's decisiveness. "Tell your mother I wished you to come."

"Thanks awfully—" and she sprang to her feet. "That will put it all right."

CHAPTER VI

Doris Lets Herself Go

KATHERINE STIRLING and her cousin, Hamilton, were seated together in the hall at Lynnthorpe; really its "living-room." It had an old oaken door opening on a wide terrace; deep window-seats; a huge fireplace; and antique furniture. The house was very old; and successive owners had reverently refrained from spoiling it by brand-new additions.

As usual, Hamilton was the talker, Katherine the listener. He loved a good listener; one who would submit to be convinced by his arguments; one who would not interrupt. Katherine was an adept at fulfilling this role.

He had talked for fifty minutes without a break; and he could very well have gone on for another fifty, had the Squire allowed Doris to turn homeward. Having laid down the law on foreign affairs, on home politics, and on the state of the money market, he proceeded to skim the fields of literature—if the word "skim" could be applied to any of his movements—and to recommend a well-thought-out course of geological study.

Katherine cared little for politics, less for the money market, least for ancient implements and extinct monsters. But she paid unwavering attention, because it was Hamilton who spoke. With many women the speaker matters far more than the thing spoken about.

The two were second-cousins and friends; not lovers. At least, Hamilton was not Katherine's lover, and perhaps never

had been, though two or three years before this date some had looked upon him as tending that way. If so, he had made no further advance.

As for Katherine, he was and always had been for her the embodied type of all that a man should be. But she often told herself that she could not think of leaving her uncle to live alone; he so depended on her companionship. So perhaps she was in no great hurry for matters to ripen. It was enough for the present that Hamilton seemed to belong to her, consulted her, confided in her. She was placidly happy in the "friendship."

For Hamilton Stirling to "consult" anyone meant only that he wanted approval of what he had done. Since Katherine always did approve, he found in her what he wanted.

She was just thirty years old; and she looked her age, being pale, quiet, patrician to her very finger-tips. Many complained that she was proud and distant, and hard to know. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps she was proud—proud of her descent, of her blue blood, of her beautiful ancestral home, of her uncle. But if so, it was a humble and non-boasting type of pride; and she was also very shy, very self-distrustful; a not unusual combination.

Hamilton, now in his thirty-ninth year, possessed the typical Stirling outline of feature, which was even and regular. Somehow he managed to be less good-looking than Nature—to use a popular phrase—had intended. He had none of the elder Stirling's charm of manner. He was too rigid, too measured, too sure of himself, whereby he often provoked

other people, who could not for the life of them see why they too might not be sometimes in the right.

But he never provoked Katherine; and that no doubt was partly why he so enjoyed her companionship. She always gave in to his views.

At the end of fifty minutes, having done with extinct monsters and underground fire-seas, he broke new ground. Katherine found him to be discussing Doris Winton, of whom she was fond. An unwonted thrill became audible in his voice, and he even flushed slightly,—a most unusual phenomenon. It might have ranked for rarity among some of the pre-Adamite phenomena which he had been describing.

Katherine, on the contrary, grew rather more pale; but she listened with her ordinary calm.

"Yes," she said. "You want—what is it?"

He showed a touch of displeasure at her inattention, and went over the ground again. He wished her to use her influence over Doris. That was the point; and Katherine had heard, but had doubted her own ears.

Doris Winton was a gifted and most attractive girl; but—this between themselves—certainly a degree lacking in self-control. He ran through the little gamut of her faults, suggesting that, if Katherine would kindly exert herself, those faults would soon cease to exist. The thing which struck Katherine unexpectedly, as with a physical blow, was that he talked as one who had a personal interest in the matter. Doris was to be improved and shaped—for him! He did not say this, but he implied it. He wished her to be trained and educated up to his level.

"I am afraid I have very little power over Doris," Katherine said. "But, of course, I will do what I can."

Of course she would; since it was Hamilton who asked it of her. And still more "of course" nobody should ever guess what this meant in her own life.

"Here comes Doris with my uncle," she remarked, turning to the window.

Hardly a greater contrast could have been found than between these two; Doris, all life and glow and high spirits; Katherine, colourless, still, and impassive.

Nobody noticed Katherine's look. She had much self-control; and one who is always pale may easily be a little paler than usual, without causing comment. Doris's vividness absorbed attention. She had not expected to find Hamilton here; and the encounter, just after Mrs. Winton's unwise suggestion, threw her off her balance. Whatever she really felt about him—and no one knew this less than the girl herself—she was flattered by his attentions. Things might have drifted a good deal further, unconsciously on her part, if the mother's heavy hand had not reduced the abstract to the concrete.

Doris only knew that her spirits, after descending to zero, rushed abruptly to tropical heat. She made no effort to restrain this new mood. There is a charm in being carried on the crest of a wave, reckless of rocks ahead; and she allowed it full swing. She had found a seat on an old carved chair, facing the three; and her cheeks were a pretty carmine with excitement, while the hazel eyes shone like stars. The slender hands lay ungloved and quiet, but she talked fast.

They listened seriously to her sallies. In the Stirling composition existed a total lack of the "saving sense of humour," though the Squire's sympathetic readiness to smile with those who smiled often took its place. But he was grave to-day, and Hamilton was slow as a tortoise to grasp a jest, while Katherine seldom attempted the feat.

"I didn't believe I could come, for mother wanted me to put fresh covers on a lot of old library books. Don't you just abhor handling books that have been pawed over by the grubbiest fingers in the place? If I had my way, I'd whisk them all into the nearest ash-pit. I shirked the work yesterday, and to-day I was wild for a spin—leaving dull care behind! So I eloped without permission; and half-way here a most awful fit of remorse came on. I had to sit down on the grass to fight it out. And Mr. Stirling found me there, and said I might come on, which I was just dying to do. It's lovely to have things settled for one, in the very way one wants."

The Squire smiled because he knew it was expected of him. Katherine did not hear; and Hamilton objected to feminine frivolity.

"And isn't it perfectly horrid when one wants to do a thing and conscience won't let one alone? I had set my heart on coming, and I did my level best to smother remonstrances. Lynnthorpe is always my haven of refuge, when the world gets out of gear."

"I have always imagined needlework to be a woman's proper refuge," Hamilton remarked, and she flashed round upon him.

"You haven't! Needlework! It's my purgatory. It's the bane of my existence. If ever I have a home of my own—" the words slipped recklessly out, and though with instant realisation her colour deepened, she went on—"I'll never darn another stocking in my life. Don't I wish I could set a dozen men for a whole day to patch and mend? They wouldn't prescribe needlework again, I can tell them, as a sedative! Besides, I don't want sedatives. I want champagne. The only sort of needlework I ever found endurable is trimming hats. I should like to trim a new one for myself every week, and to give the old ones away. That would be jolly."

Hamilton disapproved alike of extravagance and of feminine slang, which she knew.

"A hat doesn't take long, when one is in the mood. Don't you love doing things when you're in the mood, and don't you hate doing them when you're out of the mood?" She glanced at Hamilton, and he tried to insert a remark about not being the victim of impulse, but she gave him no loophole, and rattled on.

"I wonder whether, if I waited long enough, I should ever be in the mood for handling dirty library books. But, of course, I shouldn't. It's too hopelessly against the grain. Oh, yes, I had your letter— thanks awfully." She suppressed a glimmering smile. "And I'll keep the list of books that you want me to read; though I don't believe I shall ever manage to wade through them. Geology is so fearfully dry. It's history that I love; and poetry; and languages; and really good novels. Not science. You don't care for novels, I know.

You only care for chemical combinations and explosive substances, and old bones and stones, and labelled specimens, and flints and arrowheads."

Katherine was silently indignant that the girl could laugh at Hamilton. He tried to defend himself; but for once the inveterate talker was over-matched. Doris did not raise her voice, but she poured steadily on like a babbling stream.

"Oh, I know!—I know! Old bones mean a lot; and everybody ought to be scientific. But everybody isn't; and I don't care a hang for rows of specimens. One wants something lively in a place like Lynnbrooke. It's always the same thing over and over again here. A weird old body marches up, born in the year one, and says: 'How do you do?—and is Mrs. Winton quite well?—and how busy the dear Rector must be!' Or perhaps from somebody weirder still it's: 'How's your Parr and your kind Marr?—and what good weather!' Or else: 'Deary me, Miss, I've got the bronchitis in my throat, that bad, you can't think!' And if it's one of the parish ladies—we're all old ladies and parish ladies!—it is: 'My dear, do you think you could get me some more soup-tickets?— and are there a few club-tickets to spare?' Or else a bit of gossip: 'I suppose it's quite true that John Brown is going to marry Lucy Smith. Dear, dear me, what a sad look-out for those poor young things!'"

She had slid into mimicry, giving one voice after another with delicate exaggeration. The Squire smiled again absently; while Hamilton's rigid face betrayed his disapproval. Yet even in his annoyance he realised, more

vividly than before, his growing captivity to this eager girl, with her slim grace, her warm colouring, her brilliant eyes.

She did not represent his ideal wife. The life-companion of Hamilton had always been, as pictured by himself, after a different model— refined, ladylike, self-controlled; a dove-like being, placid and meek, submissive and gentle, with manners full of repose, a tender smile, an infinite capacity for listening, and no pronounced opinions of her own.

Doris was neither meek nor submissive, neither reposed nor dove-like. Her laugh, though ladylike, could hardly be called low; and she much preferred, at least in her present mood, hearing her own voice rather than his.

He had not seen her like this before. She sat flashing nonsense at one and another, reckless of what might be thought. As a child, and still more as a school-girl, home at intervals for the holidays, he had generally ignored her existence. It was only during the last few months that she had dawned upon his consciousness as a distinct personality.

"How I should love to be in London!" This was a fresh divergence. "Always to be on the go, and seeing fresh people, and having a good time." Her words recalled Mrs. Brutt to the Squire. "I detest a humdrum existence; and nobody can deny that Lynnbrooke is awfully humdrum."

Tea coming in made a diversion; and when it was over Doris spoke of going.

"I really mustn't stay late, for mother hasn't the dimmest notion where I am; and those wretched books have got to be done. No need to send anybody with me, Katherine. I shall go like the wind, and get in long before dark."

Hamilton, with his air of disapproving gravity, offered himself as escort.

"Thanks awfully, but please don't. I'd rather not. I hate to be a bore; and you know you meant to stay here for hours. You and Katherine always have such oceans to talk about."

Katherine betrayed no shrinking under the thrust, which was not meant to be a thrust. Hamilton held to his point, and they started together.

CHAPTER VII

The Cycle Ride

ON the way home Doris's barometrical conditions underwent a change. Excitement had vanished; chatter ceased.

The talkative mood over, she became conscious of having given vent to a good deal of nonsense. And people seldom talked nonsense at Lynnthorpe. The atmosphere was uncongenial; in fact, Lynnthorpe was the wrong place for nonsense of any sort, good, bad, or indifferent.

From earliest childhood the doctrine had been impressed upon Doris that, when with any of the Stirling family, she must be on her best behaviour, must speak in her gentlest tones, must use her mildest adjectives. Perhaps she had never before so flagrantly run in the teeth of these rules.

So far as regarded Hamilton she did not mind. She had meant to shock him—a little—and if she had succeeded, so much the better. But to shock Mr. Stirling and Katherine was like shocking Royalty; a thing not to be got over. She determined that, next time she went to Lynnthorpe, she would carefully wipe out to-day's impressions by an elderly decorum, better suited to the dignified surroundings. She loved Katherine with a mild and flameless affection; and she looked upon the Squire as the *ne plus ultra*—the *ultima thule*—of all that a man should be. He was in her girlish eyes the embodiment of masculine perfection; and from judgment in that direction existed no appeal.

Besides these uneasy recollections, she was annoyed with Hamilton for his insistence in seeing her home. It was an annoyance entirely due to her mother's action. Possibly she might have been disappointed had he not insisted.

He rode his bicycle as he did most things, too rigidly; while her lissom figure swayed with easy grace to each curve in the road; and she flew along at a speed which he tried to check by holding back. In vain; for she shot ahead, glanced back, and gave him a wicked little farewell nod. He had to put on speed to overtake her.

She was thinking hard. She knew that he objected to rapid bicycling for women; and she was bent still on crossing him. Mrs. Winton had seemed to take it for granted—or so Doris imagined—that he only had to speak to be accepted. Her pride was up in arms. Nobody should suppose that she sat meekly, with folded hands, awaiting permission to be his.

She might marry some day. She might even marry Hamilton Stirling. It was not an impossibility. All things considered, she rather favoured the notion, as a dim and distant prospect. She enjoyed feeling herself the object of somebody's attentions. It gave her a touch of prestige. Moreover, she had a supreme admiration for intellect in every form; and thus far Hamilton was about the best embodiment of intellect that she had come across.

Or if not, he appeared so to her; and at least he thoroughly believed in himself. Doris was not unwilling to accept him at his own valuation. He had graduated with moderate honours, and had elected to enter no profession, but to devote his life to the pursuit of science. Since he had

enough to live on, he could do as he chose. His mother objected, but not strenuously, being glad to keep him at home. Friends opposed the decision; but Hamilton, with calm indifference, pursued the even tenor of his way.

He was not an energetic man, yet none could call him idle. He read a great deal, belonged to divers learned societies, and wrote much, with the avowed intention of becoming, one day, a scientific luminary. Doris decided that, if ever she did marry him, he should write something that would stir the world. She would be his helper, his inspirer. The idea was fascinating; and she failed to remember the disappointed ambitions of a certain "Dorothea," great in fiction,—aspirations like in kind.

While so cogitating she abstained from remark, waiting for him to begin. But he too was silent. He could not get over her conduct that afternoon, or the coldness with which she had so far received his confidential letter.

It dawned upon her that, if he had made up his mind not to take the initiative, no power on earth would make him. There was a spice of obstinacy in his composition.

"How nice it was of you to write and tell me about that article of yours being accepted!" she said approvingly.

He spoke in chilling accents. "I supposed that you felt no interest."

"But I do. Why, of course I do. I think it's most frightfully jolly that you are really going to get into print at last. Quite too delicious, I mean,"—as she recalled his dislike to girlish slang. Perhaps she had shocked him enough for one

day. "And now they've taken one paper, they'll take lots more, of course. How soon is it coming out?"

"Probably in a month or two." Curt still.

"Odd—isn't it?— that when a heap of old bones are found in a cave, people can put them together—like a jig-saw puzzle—and settle all about the sort of creatures that used to live there?"

Hamilton smiled a superior smile; and Doris's long lashes twinkled an acknowledgment.

"But sometimes the very cleverest men do make mistakes—and call the old bones by wrong names."

This "drew" Hamilton, as she intended; and he launched into an elaborate defence of scientists in general. Very much to his surprise, he found her remark to be no random shaft. He had discovered before now a cheerful uncertainty about Doris's mental attributes, which kept him continually on the stretch. You never could foretell what she would produce next from her hidden laboratory. Any amount of feminine inconsequence might come to the fore; but, when least expected, she would send an arrow straight to the mark.

"Oh, yes, of course. Nobody makes mistakes on purpose. But there was a bone somewhere, which all the savants declared was a human bone. And they proved a heap of things from it, about how long man had been living on earth. And in the end it turned out to be only a bear's bone; so all the wonderful arguments went to smash. Father told me; and I think he was rather pleased. Only, he was afraid a great many people who heard of its being a man's bone, never were told that it was all a mistake. And he said we

should never be in a hurry to draw conclusions of that sort, because Science is a structure built upon discarded blunders." She quoted the words with empressement.

Hamilton had intended to give, not to receive, information. He would not for the world confess that he had forgotten the incident in question; for a man whose cue it is to know everything naturally does not like to be caught napping. He was conscious of relief when she went back to his article.

"Would you care to read it in proof?" he asked.

"May I, really?" Her face flashed into brilliant interest. "I've never read proof-sheets. May I help you to correct the mistakes?"

His smile showed doubt of her powers. "I have it here," he remarked, and she was on the ground with a spring. Impetus carried him ahead; but he wheeled, came back, and dismounted.

"You should not jump off in that wild way. It is unsafe."

"Oh, I often do, going full speed. I always come down right way up. Do show me the proof. It's light enough."

Her eagerness gratified him. They stood at one side of the road, and red sunset gleams, shining through a thin veil of trees, found a reflection in her sunny face. He fished a small packet out of its retreat, and she scanned the long slip with delight, spotting instantly two slight printer's errors which had escaped his notice. He pencilled both; and then she pitched on another mistake, this time grammatical, not the printer's but Hamilton's own. He was chagrined, finding it impossible to deny the force of her contention; and—"I

"will consider it"—was all he could bring himself to say. He had expected praise, not criticism.

A motor car rushed by, covering them both with dust. Doris was too much absorbed to notice it.

"You couldn't let that stay. Think—how it would sound!" She read the sentence aloud with exaggerated emphasis. But the next instant she was soothing his ruffled sensibilities. "How you must love to see yourself in print! I should like it of all things. To feel that one has power over other people's minds—to feel that one may help them, and make them better! Don't you see?"

She met a non-comprehending glance. What Hamilton did see at that moment was Doris herself. He wondered that he had been so slow to realise her charm. Yes—she was the woman for him—with just a little shaping and manipulation. He was glad that he had spoken to Katherine.

"Don't you see?" she repeated, her hazel eyes deepening. "I think—I do really think—I would rather have that power than any other. Only, of course, one would have first to understand more of life."

But life in Hamilton's eyes wore a simple aspect, not in the least perplexing. He was always sure of his own standing, and he could look upon no landscape from his neighbour's position.

"People seem so oddly arranged for—so queerly placed!" She forgot the printed slip in her hand, as she gazed dreamily away from him and toward the reddening west. "Born artists set to darn socks; and born musicians set to sweep crossings; and born idiots set to govern nations.

People having to live with just those others who go most frightfully against the grain,—and having to do just exactly the work that they most detest and can't—really can't—ever do well. Why mayn't people always be with those that suit them—and do the things they like doing?"

His slower mind followed her gyrations with difficulty. There was in him no gift of instant grip and swift response, that most valuable of assets in dealing with other minds. He could talk for an hour at a time, but always in certain grooves. He could not catch up another's line of thought, and make it for the time his own. Before he could decide what to say, she was off on a fresh tack.

"I'm so glad you're going to get this paper out. It's a beginning. But you won't stop there, will you? You won't only write articles on geology and that sort of thing—will you? Not only about the bones of poor old dead people, who lived such ages and ages ago. Can't you sometimes write what would help the people who are alive now—something that will tell them how to make the best of their lives? Do you see what I mean? You don't mind my saying it? So many people seem to be all wrong—put in the wrong place, and having the wrong sort of work to do. And if you can write, couldn't you help them—say something to show them how to get right?"

Her shining eyes were full upon him; and he had an uneasy consciousness that she was asking of him that which he was powerless to give. The feeling of incapacity was unwelcome; and he took refuge from it by beginning to quote in his measured tones—

"The trivial round, the common task,
Will furnish all—"

"But that has been said before," she interrupted hastily. "Everybody knows it; and I think now we want something new. Couldn't you give us something fresh? Couldn't you think it all out, and give it us in words that haven't been said before?"

She read displeasure in his look.

"Besides—the trivial round never does furnish me with all I want. I detest common everyday tasks. They are so stupendously dull. Well—it can't be helped. We had better go on."

She in her turn was vexed with his lack of sympathy. She had opened out a corner of her real self, and had met with a rebuff. She gave him back his proof, and was off like an arrow, sweeping down the long gentle incline. Hamilton kept pace with her, but he counted the speed unsafe for a woman; and at the bottom of the hill he told her so. She glowered all the rest of the way. But her anger was not unbecoming. Most people, out of temper, look their worst. Hamilton was fain to admit to himself that she looked her best—reticent, dignified, with a geranium-tint in her cheeks, and a smouldering glow in the deep-set eyes which turned them nearly black.

More and more he was conscious of a growing thraldom. At some future day he would certainly make this girl his wife. It did not occur to him to say "If!" But some

training first was desirable; and he hoped great things from Katherine's gentle influence. He had never so distinctly disapproved of Doris as to-day; and he had never before found himself so definitely in love with her. The combination was a trial to his well-balanced mind.

CHAPTER VIII

Mrs. Brutt Suggests

AT a side-table in the morning-room, with its green carpet, faded green curtains, and air of general usefulness, Doris sat at work over the library books. Murmured interjections of disgust, on behalf of her dainty finger-tips, broke from her, as she handled covers which had passed through the "grubbiest" village grasps. She touched them gingerly.

Behind her, at the centre table, stood Mrs. Winton, cutting a roll of coarse flannel into lengths. No gingerly touches here, or wasted moments. Mrs. Winton was an expert with her scissors.

Neither had spoken for some time. Thus far, no more had been said on the vexed question of Hamilton Stirling's letter; but Doris knew that her refusal to show it was not forgiven. An atmospheric disturbance prevailed. More than once she had said to herself, "I'd rather have a good explosion, and have done with it!"

Yet somehow she had not named her encounter with Hamilton. In a general way she would have mentioned it freely. But Mrs. Winton's question had produced an uncomfortable consciousness; and she could not now talk of him quite naturally. So she took refuge in not speaking of him at all.

The silence came to an end.

"You did not tell me that you had seen Mr. Hamilton Stirling yesterday."

Doris pasted with diligence.

"No, I didn't. Why should I? He's always in and out there."

"You gave me the impression that you had seen only Mr. Stirling and Katherine."

"I never said so."

"One may convey a wrong impression without any actual untruth." Mrs. Winton did not speak unkindly, but she was troubled; and she found herself at a disadvantage, facing Doris's back. "It was not quite like you."

Doris turned hastily.

"Mother—I can't help people's impressions. I simply said nothing, because—"

Mrs. Winton waited in vain for the end of the sentence.

"He was not only there, but you and he bicycled back together. Mrs. Stirling came in an hour ago to speak to me. She was motoring back from a party with some friends; and they saw you and him in the road, standing and talking, as if—"

"As if—what?" proudly. For this sentence, too, remained unfinished.

"She was much surprised that I had heard nothing. Why did you not tell me?"

"Because I knew, if I did, I should be badgered half out of my senses." Doris returned to her work, pasting with hands that shook a little.

"You never used to speak to me in such a tone." Mrs. Winton was really hurt. "I cannot think what has come over you lately. Mrs. Stirling evidently thinks that you said or did

something which Hamilton did not like. She wanted to know from me what had passed, since she could not get him to explain."

"I don't see that it is any business of hers."

"No business of his mother's!" Mrs. Winton moved two steps nearer, and examined the sleeve of Doris's blouse. "You should get out this grease-spot."

"It's not grease!" The girl quivered under Mrs. Winton's handsome but ponderous hand.

"Certainly it is grease. You must see to it. But about Hamilton Stirling—I want to give you a word of warning. If you go on as you are doing now, you will end by driving him away. He is not a man to stand rebuffs."

"Horrid man! Let him go, and welcome! I don't want him to come bothering me."

"I don't think you mean what you are saying."

"Yes, I do. He puts me out of all patience."

Doris had swung round, after a night's rest, to a mood many degrees less favourable to her admirer. "And I can't stand being worried about him, mother. If I liked him ever so much—and I don't—at least I think I don't—that would be enough to turn me against him. All I want is to be let alone."

She flung a book down tempestuously, and vanished from the room, leaving Mrs. Winton to uneasy reflections.

That the mother should be solicitous for her child's happiness was only natural; and she honestly believed that marriage with Hamilton would ensure that happiness. True, some people counted him a bore, and others reckoned him something of a prig; but he was always agreeable to Mrs.

Winton herself. She had watched his attentions from the first with approval; but had been often exercised over her daughter's erratic changes of mood. One day Doris would be all smiles and graciousness; another day she would hardly vouchsafe a glance in his direction. One day she would welcome a letter from him with barely-veiled delight; another day she would toss it aside with a disdainful—"Old bones again! What a bother!"

To Mrs. Winton this meant real anxiety. How to set things right she did not know; and it never occurred to her that the sensible plan was to do nothing. She had yet to learn the wisdom, in such affairs, of holding patiently aloof.

Doris, meanwhile, catching up a garden hat, made her way to Clover Cottage. It was by no means the first time that she had fled for comfort, after a passage-at-arms, to her new crony, Mrs. Brutt. She did not mean to betray aught that had passed. She only wanted to be soothed and made happy again. But once in the power of that astute widow, she let slip a good deal more than she knew. Mrs. Brutt had a gift for worming things out of people, without their consent.

It was nice to sit on a low chair, close to the elder lady, beyond the region of home-worries; to feel kind and approving eyes bent on herself; to have no fear of fault-finding; to be listened to with affectionate attention; to be sympathised with compassionately.

"Poor dear child! Yes, I quite understand. You have been so busy, have you not? And you are quite tired—quite jaded—with it all."

Doris disclaimed fatigue. Yet a wonder crept over her—was this sense of discontent with her little world, this craving to get away and to live a different life, really tiredness? She began to pity herself.

"What with classes—meetings—district—shoe-club—library—parish accounts—errands—"

Truth compelled a protest. Some of these belonged to winter only; some not to her at all.

"So uncomplaining! Such a brave spirit! Not much leisure for your own concerns, poor dear child!"

"Well—of course—" admitted the girl.

"Yes, of course—I know. And I can so sympathise with you in your love of reading. I adore books."

"Mother seems to think it a waste of time to read much in the morning."

"Ah—true—yes—non-intellectual!" murmured the other, not inaudibly. "Poor dear child. But, really you know, it is most necessary that you should have some recreation—apart from the time for study, which—with your mind—is so needful!"

"I go to lots of tennis-parties and afternoon teas," Doris laughed. "No end of them. You mustn't think I don't have plenty of fun." Honesty again compelled this.

Mrs. Brutt surveyed her visitor with a meaning gaze.

"Tennis-parties! Yes. And afternoon teas! Yes. That sort of thing. Just the country round. Yes. My dear, I wonder if you half guess what a bewitching creature you are. Positively, neither more nor less than bewitching. Not at

your best to-day, perhaps,—you have been worried, and that tells. But if you could see yourself—sometimes!"

Doris blushed with pleasure.

"Yours is a sylph of a figure. And there is the sweetest little dimple when you smile. Yes—just there—" with a touch. "Your play of feature is simply charming. And your eyes are a true hazel—a blending of green and yellow and brown and grey. Now I have made you laugh. I like to see you laugh. It suits you to get excited. You should let yourself go oftener—give the reins, you know, and not wait to think what anybody may say."

"But when I do, I'm always sorry afterwards. I'm sure to say the wrong thing."

Mrs. Brutt ignored this.

"I only wish I had you in London," she said pensively. "Or—better still—abroad. Meeting all sorts and kinds of people, and making no end of new friends. It would do you such good. And you would be a success, Doris."

"Should I?"—wistfully.

"No doubt of it—with your figure,—your eyes—your complexion. Such a pretty creamy-white, and such a delicate rose-carnation. And you hold yourself well—you have such a natural air and pose. And you talk well, too. Oh, you would take everybody by storm. I know!"

She launched into a detailed description of life in foreign towns; of going from hotel to hotel, finding always delightful people, meeting with the élite of society. Incidentally she gave her hearer to understand that her own past career had been one long series of social triumphs, and

that her present retired existence formed a dismal contrast. She piled her colours massively; and Doris's "daily round" could hardly fail to wear a dingy hue, seen alongside.

"You should get your father to let you travel for a few months. Not, of course, alone, but with some older friend. Somebody who could take you about, and introduce you to the right people. Everything depends upon that."

"I should love to go with you," Doris said warmly. "But—no chance of such a thing!"

"My dear, I should love nothing better. Well—we shall see. Sometimes impossible things become possible. Who knows? Are you going to luncheon at Lynnthorpe on Friday? You had better drive there with me, unless you prefer your bike."

Doris thought she would prefer to drive. She was disinclined for another tête-à-tête with Hamilton quite so soon. She went home, elated at having been made much of, and having become in her own eyes something of a martyr.

Mrs. Brutt suffered from no twinges of conscience. On the contrary, she felt pleased with the progress made. Lynnbrooke was dull; and she was bent upon going abroad in August. She liked the notion of a young and pretty girl by way of companion; one whom she could show off, and who would have no voice in arrangements. An older person might be troublesome.

In a certain allegorical tale, published long ago, a pilgrim, named "Good-Intent," came across a company of men, groaning under the weight of heavy chains. They had not discovered their miserable condition, till some officious

passer-by had taken the trouble to point it out; whereupon, cheerfulness gave place to melancholy. That the chains existed only in their fancy, as a result of "suggestion," did not lessen their actual unhappiness.

Mrs. Brutt was doing the work of that officious passer-by. She was pointing out to Doris fetters in her life, which till then had not seemed to be fetters.

Of course the girl had trials; who has not? Of course she had to do things which she did not enjoy doing; who, again, has not? But though the fetters might not be a matter of pure imagination, their weight could be very much exaggerated.

Mrs. Brutt gave to vague dissatisfaction a definite voice. She magnified small frictions into serious troubles. Doris was warm-hearted, impressionable, easily swayed; and the elder lady knew how to manipulate such materials.

Not that she meant to do harm. Few people do. All she wanted was to bring about her own ends; to amuse herself, to make time pass pleasantly. She was kind-hearted, and by fits and starts she would go out of her way to help others. But in the main hers was a self-seeking nature.

Theoretically she knew little about the force of suggestion; but practically she was an adept in the use of that weapon. This is always possible. A duck may be an excellent swimmer, with no understanding of the theory of swimming.

Probably few of us grasp the tremendous potency of "suggestion," as exercised by one mind over another. Half the temptations that meet us may be simply the whispered "suggestions" of evil spirits. Half the helpful and comforting

thoughts which arise in our minds may be the murmured "suggestions" of angels.

CHAPTER IX

Sudden Silence

FRIDAY'S luncheon was in full swing; and Mrs. Brutt felt miserable. She loved to be the best-got-up woman in a room. But to be wrongly got-up is another matter.

She had come in her most imposing grey silk, topped by a toque fit for Hyde Park in the month of May. And she found rural simplicity to be the order of the day.

That Doris, whom she brought with her, should wear a serge skirt and white blouse mattered nothing. But when she found Katherine Stirling hardly better dressed; and when little Mrs. Stirling, who always looked as dainty as a doll under a glass case, turned up in a black alpaca, and the most innocent of country hats, her heart sank.

A woman of more force would, after a moment's regret, have dismissed the subject. Mrs. Brutt could not so easily put it aside. She might have felt flattered at being asked to so informal a luncheon—"quite a family affair," as she told herself; but she was direfully troubled, none the less.

Somebody else's heart had sunk very low beforehand. This was Katherine's first sight of Hamilton, since her discovery that he had begun to care too much for Doris—too little for herself. But she was a perfect hostess; and no one could have guessed from her look or manner how she had dreaded the hour.

The little party of six dropped naturally into three couples; and Mrs. Stirling, who fell to Katherine's share, chatted without cessation.

Hamilton was talking also, not less continuously than his mother; and Katherine heard every word he uttered, even while her polite attention in other directions never failed. In his monotonous undertone he was pouring forth a stream of information; and Doris listened with an air of deferential interest, which brought to his mind the ideal Mrs. Hamilton Stirling, lately hidden from view. He became sure that at last he had found her.

Doris was a different being this day from the girl whom he had met last in the house. She held herself in; she did not chatter; her voice was low; her colour was normal; her eyes were not brilliant. Despite Mrs. Brutt's advice that she should "let herself go"—advice which she had not forgotten,—she was bent upon undoing the previous impression.

So she heard, smiled, and was gracious; and if a slight yawn had to be more than once suppressed, he did not see. That she could be charming in a reckless mood, he knew; but this self-restraint, this pretty girlish dignity, suited him far better. He decided that Katherine must already have used influence to bring about such an improvement; and he sent across a grateful glance, which set Katherine's pulse leaping. Then he reverted to Doris and the Stone Age, and forgot her.

Mrs. Brutt had the Squire to herself; and—despite the dress blunder—she was bent on making the most of her chance. By hook or by crook she dragged in two or three titled names, offering them as credentials for her own respectability. Then discussion of the neighbourhood followed. Presently, gliding into foreign travel, she conducted her polite listener through two or three galleries of

pictures, and was just beginning to suggest anew the advantages of a trip abroad for Doris,—"So important for the development of a young mind! So widening, didn't he think?" —when a break occurred; one of those odd sudden breaks which sometimes come without apparent reason.

One instant all three couples were hard at work. The next—voices had stopped, as if by general consent.

"Farmer Paine—" had sounded clearly in Mrs. Stirling's little bird-like tones. And everybody waited to hear what would come next.

Afterwards Mrs. Brutt recalled that it was the Squire himself who first stopped; stopped in the middle of a sentence. He tried to catch it up, but in vain. Mrs. Brutt did not wish others to hear what she had to say about Doris; and her own attention was distracted by the farmer's name. Hamilton, having just arrived at the end of a lengthy statement, came likewise to a pause at the critical moment.

"Farmer Paine! Do you know him?" asked Mrs. Brutt, leaning forward. "Such an interesting old man! He told me all about his poor wife, and the niece that has come to live with him. A genuine son of the soil!— the real antique type, don't you know?"

Mrs. Stirling lifted her eyebrows. "He's a worthy old fellow," she said irreverently.

"I heard only yesterday," remarked Katherine, "about his widowed niece having come. Can that be Mrs. Morris—'Nurse Molly' that was?"

Mr. Stirling responded to her glance of inquiry. "Yes. She was your nurse for a short time." He spoke composedly,

but his forehead was a mass of fine wrinkles,—a sure token of disquietude.

"It has always been said that she saved my life."

"You were in a delicate state, and she was a careful nurse. One must allow for some exaggeration in such statements."

"I must look her up one day soon."

"Quite unnecessary. You have no recollection of her—and she was well remunerated. No need to take further steps."

The unwonted sharpness of tone took them all by surprise, as well as the objection made to so simple and natural a course of action. In general the Squire was noted for his considerate and delicate kindness towards his tenantry.

"If I were Katherine, I should certainly make a point of going," Mrs. Stirling observed. She and her son were about the only people who ever contradicted the Squire. "But if you could remember her—" turning to Katherine—"you'd find her extraordinarily altered. Nurse Molly was a perfect picture; the prettiest creature, with smiling eyes, and little tendrils of curly hair, and exquisite colouring— really exquisite. You remember, Richard?"

"She was good-looking—" reluctantly.

"That's all gone. She is transmuted into a stout, commonplace, middle-aged person, with not a ghost of good looks, and as dull as ditchwater. Nothing to say for herself."

"Unlike her uncle, then," rippled Mrs. Brutt, who never could endure a talk in which she had no share. "Such an

idyllic old man! I positively adore the real old yeoman farmer."

"Mrs. Morris is anything rather than idyllic. I never saw a more prosaic individual. She has two daughters—one rather like her old self, with a considerable difference. But the other—"

"As pretty as Mrs. Morris in her young days?" interjected Mrs. Brutt.

"Too sickly. One can't judge. Nurse Molly was a wild-rose beauty, in perfect health and high spirits. Winnie is gentle and refined—I can't think where she gets that refinement from. But the elder girl, Jane, is a most impossible person. She goes cycling about in a yellow blouse, with a voice that can be heard two streets off. You know—" to the Squire. "I was telling you."

The Squire answered by a disapproving glance, and Katherine tried to stem the tide.

"She is always carrying on a flirtation with somebody," pursued Mrs. Stirling. "Her mother must find her a handful. I believe she was sent to some very inferior school, which just did for her. Yes, Katherine,— I beg your pardon. No, nothing more, thanks."

Katherine looked at Mrs. Brutt, and a move followed.

"Would you rather go straight home, or would you like a longer round?" the hostess asked presently of Mrs. Brutt, who was to be taken back in the Lynnthorpe carriage. Katherine had had as much as she wanted both of the widow and of Doris; but she seldom thought of her own wishes.

Mrs. Brutt welcomed with avidity the idea of a longer round. She would be charmed. So excessively kind of Miss Stirling. And might she make a suggestion? Would Miss Stirling feel disposed to go in the direction of Wyldd's Farm? If that was not too far, she positively longed to see again that dear idyllic old farmer. She confessed also to a slight curiosity about the niece—the once-lovely Nurse Molly.

Privately, Katherine thought the request rather presumptuous; but she acquiesced. It mattered little either way. She meant to go some time; why not now?

When they were about to start, the Squire asked for a word with Katherine in his study. He shut the door, stood for a moment thoughtfully, facing the side-window which looked out upon a magnificent cedar of Lebanon; then, without preface, he said—

"I do not wish you to have anything to do with the Morris family. Since the subject has come up, I had better say so at once."

She did not ask why, but smiled gently.

"The elder daughter is a pushing forward person. You might find her troublesome."

That brought a smile of a different type. As Miss Stirling of Lynnthorpe she had had to do with pushing persons; and, despite her shy humility, she knew how to hold her own.

"I think there is no danger," she said.

"You have not seen the young woman. She is capable of a good deal. In any case, I wish you to keep her at a distance. The less you have to say to them, the better I shall be

pleased." His forehead was all over wrinkles again; but he laid a kind hand on her arm. "My dear child, you do not look well to-day. What is the matter?"

She could bear up better against anything than sympathy, and her throat ached fiercely. "I'm a little—tired," she said.

"Try to have a good rest by-and-by. You must not get over-done."

But at present no respite was possible. Outside the study door she was seized on by Mrs. Stirling.

"Hamilton and I have to be off. He declares it is going to rain. My dear—" in a whisper—"do you like that widow? I don't. She's a mass of affectations. How in the world she managed to get hold of your father—but he is as soon deluded as most men. And after a fashion she is clever. What made you propose to take her for a round?"

"She seemed to expect it."

"You look much more fit to go to bed! If ever there was a Spartan, it's you—you poor dear!—with those white cheeks. Well,—we mustn't delay any longer. You'll have her on your hands for a good two hours yet, if you don't take care. How sweet Doris looks to-day! So much prettier than when she gets into one of her rattling moods!"

Katherine was wondering why she had not mentioned to her uncle that she might be calling at the farm that afternoon. She wondered also—would it be wiser on the whole to give up the plan?

But the call would have to be paid. That little attention was, she felt, only due to one to whom—it was said—she

owed her life. Since Mrs. Brutt wished to see the farm again, the present was as good a time as any other.

She hardly gave a second thought to aught so unimportant as the manners of Jane Morris. And somehow she failed to gauge the force of Mr. Stirling's injunction. It did not occur to her—perhaps because her mind was preoccupied with Doris and Hamilton—that he had definitely meant her not to go at all.

CHAPTER X

A Surprise Visit

"WELL, I never!" ejaculated Jane Morris. "If that isn't a sell!"

She had donned her yellow silk blouse and a gorgeous hat, and was about to cycle to a gathering of Lynnbrooke cronies, when checked by a sudden downpour of rain. Till within the last twenty minutes the sun had shone, and nothing had been farther from her thoughts than weather.

In a trice the outer scene was transformed. Beneath a blackened sky trees bent low before the gale, and water poured in sheets. Miles of cycling under such conditions would reduce her to the drowned-rat stage.

She stood at the window in disgust.

"Plague take it! Always the way! Just the very afternoon when I was most set on going!"

"Why this afternoon?" asked Winnie. Each change in the atmosphere affected her fragile frame, and she was full of aches from head to foot. The soft eyes looked out from dark rings of pain; and a thick shawl could not keep her warm. The two were alone.

"Why? I like that! Anything to get away from this beastly hole. Nothing to do, and nobody to see! That's why."

"But why to-day particularly?"

"Oh, because—because there's a tea-party. You needn't tell mother. She only bothers."

"A tea-party where?"

"Some people I've got to know. Doesn't matter who. You don't know one from another, always mewed up here. I can't think how you put up with it. The life would drive me crazy. Well, I don't mind if I tell, only you're not to blab." Since Jane could not escape, she felt the need for a confidante. "It's at the Sparks'—Mr. Andrew Sparks and his wife. They've got a dairy, and the Parkinses are their cousins. That's how I've got to know them."

"You said there was a young Parkins."

Jane giggled.

"Well, so there is. And a young Mr. Jones. I shouldn't wonder if they'd both be there."

"Jones is the butcher."

Jane nodded.

"And there's a Mr. Winter too. I like him best. He's as clever as anything."

"You know what the Squire said," murmured Winnie.

Jane snapped derisive fingers.

"I wouldn't give that for the Squire!" she declared. "I say!—here come folks. Caught in the storm, I suppose. Goodness me—it's Miss Stirling and Miss Winton, and that fine new widow-lady—Mrs. Brutt." Jane knew by sight pretty nearly everyone within a compass of ten miles.

A ring demanded admittance; and the three ladies crowded into the narrow passage, thankful to escape from a fresh downpour. They had left the carriage at the beginning of the grass-path; and when half-way through the meadow had been overtaken by such a pelt, that they had found

shelter in a shed. A slight lessening had encouraged them to hurry on; and Mrs. Brutt was breathless with the final rush.

"What a deluge!" she panted, glancing ruefully down at her handsome silk. "Really, it is quite a mercy that we were so near the farm. We should have been soaked to the skin in the open carriage,—without even umbrellas."

"I hope Thomas will find shelter somewhere till the storm is over," Katherine said in her gentle indifferent voice, as she turned to meet a woman coming downstairs. "Mrs. Morris?" she asked.

Mrs. Morris's "Yes" was sufficiently curt.

Katherine held out a hand, with her distant graciousness, and it was taken slowly.

"I have only just heard of your being here. Once, long ago, you nursed me, I think, through a long illness, when I was a little child. You were—Nurse Molly."

"That's the name I went by."

"I came this way on purpose to see you—not thinking that we should be so glad to escape from the rain. It was fine when we started." Katherine smiled kindly; but no response was visible on the expressionless face. "I cannot of course remember you, but—" she hesitated, thrown back by the other's immobility—"I have always heard that I owed my life to your care; and I wished to thank you." As she said the words, Katherine silently wondered—was it a thing to be thankful for, this life which meant such a stretch of pain lying ahead, if things went as she feared? Then she rebuked herself for the thought.

"I suppose so." No look of pleasure lighted up the dull plain features; and Mrs. Brutt was deciding that reports of Nurse Morris's good looks were pure romance. "You'd like to come in," Mrs. Morris said, and she led the way into the long low sitting-room. Jane followed, and Winnie stood up, having thrown aside her shawl.

"Are these your daughters?" Katherine glanced from the freckled Jane to the delicately fair Winnie.

"Yes."

"I hope Farmer Paine is well."

"He's quite well."

Katherine's conversational powers, never great, were at an end. Doris, still in a retiring mood, had retreated to a window. Mrs. Brutt saw her opportunity, and came forward.

"What a perfectly charming spot this must be, when the sun shines! One always needs sunshine, doesn't one?—especially in the country." She beamed round upon them all. "Dear me, what glorious sunsets you must see from this window!"

"Looks east," stolidly remarked Mrs. Morris.

"Ah—sunrises, I should have said. And of course you are all up by sunrise. So different, farm-life from town-life, isn't it? Six o'clock in winter; four o'clock in summer. So deliciously primitive! So patriarchal! The Simple Life, in fact. Exactly what I should love to do myself." She breakfasted between half-past nine and ten; but that was a detail.

Katherine, relieved to have the burden of talk-making lifted from her shoulders, sat near in her attitude of gentle

reserve, chiming in with an occasional murmur of assent. Mrs. Brutt was delighted to take the lead.

"You seem so out of the world here! So forgetting and forgot. A perfect Arcadia. Plenty of time for thought and study."

"Beastly dull," muttered Jane. For once the elder girl was under a curb; the curb of Miss Stirling's presence. She might snap her fingers at the Squire behind his back; but she could not do so at the Squire's niece. Katherine, despite shyness and humility, had it in her to abash others; and with no apparent effort on her part, but simply because she meant it, Jane was abashed.

Mrs. Brutt felt round for a fresh topic.

"Dear me, what a charming old cabinet!" She started up. "I really must look at it more closely. How interesting! Real old oak!—and such exquisite carving! Quite a treasure. At the very least two hundred years old, I should say."

"It isn't oak."

"Not oak!" Mrs. Brutt seemed rather taken aback. "But really I think you must be mistaken. Such a genuine piece of old work. It must have been in the family from time immemorial."

Mrs. Morris said "Yes" to this, perhaps misunderstanding. She added, "I saw it made, thirty years ago."

"Really! Not more than thirty years! Extraordinary! But one comes across such wonderfully clever imitations in these days. Quite deceptive." Mrs. Brutt quitted rather hastily the

immemorial cabinet, moving towards Winnie. "Your daughter looks very delicate. Not lungs, I hope."

"Rheumatism." Mrs. Morris seemed bent on wasting no needless words.

"Is that all? Trying, no doubt, but not a thing to be anxious about. I have a remedy at home which never fails to cure rheumatism. It is most efficacious. I shall bring it with me the first day I can manage to get so far."

Winnie smiled. She had tried so many infallible remedies. Mrs. Brutt glanced from the one girl to the other. "And these are your only daughters, Mrs. Morris?"

"Yes."

"And no son?"

The indistinct response might have been either "Yes" or "No." Mrs. Brutt decided to accept it as a negative.

"But how nice for you to have two dear good girls, able to look after you, and to help in all the farm work. It must be so charming. Quite idyllic!" When Mrs. Brutt came across what she counted an impressive word, she was apt to work it to death; and for the time being "idyllic" was in the ascendant. "So interesting!—with all the animals about—dear dumb creatures! I dote on animals, don't you? So delightful to study their pretty little ways!"

Doris, recalling the speaker's dread of cattle, supposed that the pretty little ways of cows were not included.

Rain still poured without intermission, and Mrs. Brutt began to feel exhausted. Making conversation to an unresponsive world uses one's energies fast. Katherine, too,

was tired of her present position, and both were glad when the footman appeared, in a dripping condition.

"Would Miss Stirling go home in the carriage—or would she prefer a closed fly from the village?"

"A fly certainly, and as soon as possible," decided Katherine.

CHAPTER XI

The Portrait

THE atmosphere had become oppressive. Nobody had anything to say. Katherine was at the end of her ideas; Doris remained in the background; Jane was still subdued. Mrs. Brutt felt that it rested with her to keep the ball going. She walked across to the mantelpiece.

"What a remarkable picture! Quite realistic, isn't it, Miss Stirling?" Katherine went near. "Was that painted by yourself, Mrs. Morris? No?— oh, I see—" as she made out a scrawled "P. Morris" in one corner. "I see—her husband!" in a whisper to Katherine. "What wooden rollers!" Then aloud: "How interesting for you to have this. So touching! Was your poor dear husband a sailor?"

"No."

"He must have had a gift—quite a gift! An artist, I suppose."

"No."

"Not an artist! Then he occupied his leisure hours with painting. How nice! So good for a man to have some pursuit, apart from his regular work. It keeps him away from the public-house. It makes him love his home. And I suppose your younger daughter is like her father."

"No."

"Indeed. She does not take after you either."

"That's as may be."

Mrs. Brutt was at a loss how to meet this.

"I'm said to be like what mother was," Winnie observed timidly.

"Indeed." The notion was preposterous. Mrs. Brutt turned to a framed photograph. "Ah, this no doubt is Mr. Morris. Such a fine-looking young man! And was it in India that you lost him?"

"That's my uncle."

"You don't say so! Your uncle, Mr. Paine? But I ought to have guessed—quite the young farmer, leggings and all. And now I see—so like Farmer Paine! A perfectly charming old man!"

Mrs. Morris was silent.

"Now here is another, which I am sure must have been a triumph of skill. Do look, Miss Stirling. A painted photo, and really well done. Such a pretty creature—hair and complexion quite bewitching, and the sweetest roguish smile. The sort of face a man would fall in love with on the spot. Not a daughter of your own, Mrs. Morris! Though I see just a look of Winnie. A cousin, perhaps."

"That's me."

Mrs. Brutt looked from the picture to her, from her to the picture.

"Really!" she said. The information came as a shock. "Dear me! Really!" It was all she could bring herself to utter, with the utmost stretch of politeness. "Dear me—how very—how extremely—"

"People alter as they get older," jerked out Mrs. Morris.

Mrs. Brutt made no effort to combat a truth so self-evident; but the present application of it went beyond

bounds. She took up a small closed frame of leather, not realising in her confusion that the act might be counted a liberty, and opened it with a—"May I?" Leave did not come, neither did she wait for it.

"Is this—oh, I see!" as again she read "Phil Morris" written below. "Ah, so this is your husband. Poor thing!"—with a sympathy which called forth no gratitude. "A painting, I see,—not a photo. Done by an amateur." To Katherine she whispered: "Do look! How awful!" Then aloud: "Quite a speaking likeness; and how you must value it!" She put her head on one side, studying the narrow low brow, the common illiterate face, the insipid simper.

Doris for the first time made a move, and had a clear view of the portrait, which impressed itself vividly on her mind. Little did she dream when, and under what circumstances, memory would one day haul it up for her startled inspection.

Mrs. Brutt flowed easily on. "But I see quite a resemblance to your elder daughter; a kind of expression, not features. And he died—how many years ago?" She was treating Mrs. Morris as she treated the women in her district, showing what she intended for a kindly interest. They liked to be asked questions, or she imagined that they did; and why should not this woman like it too?

Mrs. Morris muttered something which sounded rather like "Twenty."

"Twenty years do you say? Ah, a long time. But years mean nothing where the heart is concerned. Twenty years

may be only as twenty days. And he was—how did it happen?"

Mrs. Morris jerked out one word—"Drowned."

"Really. But how sad! So sudden! So unexpected!"

A pause.

"I wonder how soon the fly will be here." Mrs. Brutt was conscious again of exhaustion. She put down the defunct husband, and tried a new notion.

"Wouldn't it be a capital plan, if we might see over the house? I love old farms. So full of curiosities, you know, and steps up and down. And farm-kitchens are too delightful for anything—the chimney-corners, and flitches of bacon, and saucepans that one can see one's face in. So idyllic! And I adore old beams. Such a history of the past written in them."

Mrs. Morris offered no objection. Perhaps she hoped thus to escape further questioning; a hope not destined to find fulfilment. The two ladies vanished, led by Mrs. Morris, and followed by Jane. Doris made a move towards Winnie.

"Are you ill? I think you ought to lie down." She had seen Winnie's start from the sofa when they arrived.

"By-and-by—" with a smile.

"You are shivering. Don't wait till by-and-by. I'll tell them I made you." With a pretty air of command she insisted, covering the girl well up. "What makes you feel so bad?"

"It's only rheumatism. I mustn't mind."

"Are you in pain now?"

Winnie whispered a "Yes," and lay as if worn out. The half-hour of sitting up had tried her severely. Doris examined

the pale face, and felt a wish to know more of what lay beneath that serene white brow, with its clustering hair, its sweet patience. Winnie Morris, though perhaps not much older than herself, seemed to have lived a good deal longer.

"Where is the pain, Winnie,—if I may call you so?"

"Almost everywhere. But I mustn't mind," the girl repeated. "People often have worse things to bear than rheumatism."

"I should think that was quite bad enough. How long ago did it begin?"

"Oh, some years. I seem to have been in pain—almost always."

The words struck home. Doris saw the contrast between her own health and vigour, her powers of enjoyment, her free active life,—and this restrained suffering existence. The gentle pretty face filled her with pity.

"Always in pain! Every day. No end to it. That is frightfully hard to bear. Can't anything be done? At your age—"

"I'm twenty-five. People often take me for less. Only one year younger than Jane, and two younger than Raye."

"I shouldn't have guessed you to be more than eighteen. Don't you get desperately tired of being always ill—not able to go about and amuse yourself? Don't you feel cross sometimes?" Doris recalled her own late mood of discontent, her impatience under little home-worries, her half-imaginary grievances. What did they matter, compared with what Winnie had to bear?

"I try not—" very low. "It is what—what God chooses for me—so it is all right."

"Does that really help you, Winnie?"

"Yes; often. It ought—always." Doris's gaze drew her on. "Don't you know those lines by Trench—

"'Thou cam'st not to thy place by accident;
It is the very place God meant for thee!'"

"And if He meant it—chose it—arranged it all—don't you see?—it must be right, because He loves me."

"The place—perhaps. But the pain—"

"That's part of it all—part of what He gives me to bear. It is all from Him—and through it all He loves. He couldn't give me more to bear than it's right for me to have—because He loves me."

Doris laid her gloved hand on Winnie's.

"I like to hear you. Some day you must say more." She had often herself spoken some such words to a sufferer in a cottage, because she supposed that she ought. It was a different matter to hear them uttered out of a girl's own experience. But she was shy of pursuing the subject just then. "Can you ever get out for walks?" she asked.

"When it is warm enough I sit in the garden."

"And—church?"

"It is too far off, and I can't sit up for so long. Last time I tried, the pain got so bad that I fainted."

"Have you no friends to come and see you?"

"Oh, yes—there's—" and she hesitated. "We left most of our friends in Norfolk."

"Did you like coming?"

"Uncle wanted mother; and she thought we ought. He was alone—and this had been her home when she was a girl—till she went to be trained as a nurse."

"And she nursed Miss Stirling—when was that?"

"When Miss Stirling was quite a little child. And then mother married. I think uncle didn't much like mother's marriage. She saw nothing of him, or he of her, for years and years after."

"I should like to come and see you, sometimes, Winnie. I might cycle over, now and then." Winnie's face brightened. "And I shall speak to Mr. Stirling about you. He always likes to know when people are in trouble."

This brought a flush. "He does come—"

"I suppose he calls to see Mr. Paine on business."

"He comes to see us too. He gives me presents. He is—so kind. He has done such a lot for us. I shouldn't like him to be asked to do anything more."

Doris had not thought of money-help. "I only meant that he might advise your mother to make you see a doctor."

"He would say, if he thought she ought." Winnie plainly deprecated interference. "Next time he is here he will say if it is right. Mother always does what he advises."

Doris noted the form of expression. "Then you have seen him a good many times."

"Only twice since we moved here. He is so busy. But—he has always been our friend—our very best and kindest friend. I don't know what we should have done without him."

Doris was rather astonished. Even in Winnie's soft tones, this sounded to her like taking a liberty.

"I suppose he is everybody's friend, in a way," she remarked. "I know he has property in Norfolk.".

"Yes; and we lived in one of his houses. And he sent Raye to college— my brother, I mean. Raye is so very, very clever. Mr. Stirling said that, with his talents, it was right he should go. So he helped mother. Raye is such a dear brother."

Winnie stopped, and a shadow crept over her face.

"I ought not to have told you that—about Raye at college. It was wrong of me. We never talk about it, because Mr. Stirling doesn't like it to be known. I can't think how I came to say what I did. Please, please, never tell it again to anybody."

"But why should he mind? It is only telling how generous he is."

"I know! But please promise."

Doris assured her of secrecy.

CHAPTER XII

A Little Plot

UNKNOWN to Mrs. Brutt, links were being forged in a chain of influences which was to bring about her pet scheme.

Katherine did not at once make mention of the visit to Wyldd's Farm. Not that she had intended delay, but that friends came to dinner two evenings in succession, and her uncle was out to luncheon and to tea. No good opportunity occurred, and it slipped out of her mind. The third evening, when they were alone at dessert, she named it simply as an unimportant matter. To her surprise, his face changed, and she met a look of severe rebuke, to which she was quite unused.

"You went!—after my expressed wish to the contrary! That was unlike you."

Katherine showed dismay.

"But I did not understand. I am very sorry. Did you really mean—?"

"I meant precisely what I said."

She tried to recall what he had said.

"I thought you were only warning me to be careful—advising me not to see too much of the family, because of the elder girl. If I had imagined—but indeed I had no idea that you forbade it altogether."

The Squire's brow was deeply dented, with not only displeasure but disquietude. Seeing her distress, he pulled himself together, and smiled.

"Tell me what passed."

Katherine did her best. She was in a mental condition to be easily upset, and her voice was not steady, as she related what little there was—in her estimation—worth relating. She was not gifted as a raconteur, and the tale sounded bare.

"Was that all?"

"Nearly all, uncle. Mrs. Morris seems an odd woman—not at all pleased to see me, I thought, so really I need not go again. Doris was a good deal taken with the poor delicate daughter—Winnie, they called her. Doris said afterwards that she meant to go and see her sometimes, and to take her books to read. It was a kind idea. And Mrs. Brutt—"

"Yes—"

"She talked a good deal, as she always does."

"About the farm people?" The Squire seldom showed so keen an interest in aught that might be described as verging on gossip.

"Yes. She seems to me to have found a mare's nest. I did not quite follow her line of thought—but it was about Mrs. Morris's past, and what she imagined to be the truth. She was sure there was some secret. It sounded rather absurd. But Mrs. Morris certainly is singular. The elder girl I did not like."

"I warned you. She will take liberties, if she is allowed."

"She did not try to take any. I found her rather subdued. It seemed to me only right to see Mrs. Morris, after what I owe to her. But of course, if I had understood, I would not have gone—and I will not go again. You know I always try to do what you wish."

Katherine stood up, with the words, and he went to open the door; courtly as usual. As she passed she gave him a slight wistful glance, and he took her hand in his own, then bent to kiss her forehead, as her own father might have done.

"I know!" he said. "You are my child!—my all!" The word came emphatically. "It startled me to think that you could go against my will. But it is all right now."

Both were by nature undemonstrative; and he dropped her hand. She gave him a gentle little smile in response, and moved on, her soft skirt sweeping the floor noiselessly. Within the drawing-room, when alone, she stood still and repeated the words half aloud—"His child! His all!"

Yes, it was true; and she knew it. She was his all; she had been his all, ever since the death, ten years earlier, of his adored wife, her adored aunt, the sweet, gentle, winsome Lady Mary, who when dying had given over her husband to Katherine's devoted care. She had most faithfully fulfilled her charge, with only the one doubt in her mind as to future days—if Hamilton should want her!

But he would not now. He would only want—Doris.

"As well, perhaps," she murmured. "How could I leave him—after what she said?"

But two great tears fell slowly.

Meanwhile the Squire went back to his seat, not to drink more wine, for he was the most abstemious of men, but to remain long motionless, lost in thought, with bent head. Gradually he saw his way, and determined what to do.

Fruit of which cogitations appeared in the morning, when his horse was brought to the door, and he said to

Katherine,—"Don't wait for me. I hardly think I can be back to luncheon. I have a long round."

He proposed to see Doris, the Rector, Mrs. Brutt, and the farm people. Which first?—was the question. He decided to begin with the widow.

A touch sufficed to draw from her a flood of details. She described the farm and its belongings, animate and inanimate, with her usual wealth of adjectives, appropriate and inappropriate. Another touch—and she launched into speculation.

"There's something distinctly mysterious about those people, Mr. Stirling. Of course it is no business of mine—" this was the usual preface. "But one can't help noticing, you know. And there's something about the woman that gives one such a sensation of something underneath. Something almost uncanny, don't you know? I always feel that sort of thing. I always know when there's more than shows on the surface."

The Squire said "Really!"—with an air of incredulity.

"Yes, indeed, I am certain of it. Mrs. Morris is not exactly what she makes believe to be. It's perfectly clear to me that there is something or other in her past that she is bent on hiding. If one asked any questions—the most innocent questions—she kept slipping away from the subject, and would tell nothing. And why should she? If there was nothing to conceal, why should she conceal it?"

"People do not commonly care to pour out to strangers," the Squire observed dryly.

"But Miss Stirling was not a stranger. And then there is her face—the extraordinary unlikeness to what is said to be

her picture when she was a girl. Really, quite unbelievable. People do alter—but there are limits. And I have serious doubts—"

"Doubts?"

"Whether in point of fact she is Nurse Morris at all! If you had seen how she tried to shirk the question—how she showed no pleasure or gratitude for your niece's kindness—how she seemed to shrink from every allusion to her past—you would understand. Why should she not be somebody else—just posing as Nurse Morris? The real Nurse Morris may have died. The man may have married a second time."

The Squire smiled again dryly. "I am afraid your interesting theory is not likely to be true. I happen to have followed Nurse Morris's career, and never for any length of time to have lost sight of her. She is hardly worth the trouble of exercising your imagination upon so vividly."

Mrs. Brutt was dimly conscious of being rebuked; and Mr. Stirling, dropping that subject as unimportant, introduced another. He referred to the idea she had mooted, of taking Doris abroad. Had she seriously meant it? He had given the matter some consideration, and he was inclined to agree with her in thinking it a wise plan for the girl. It might do her good in more ways than one.

Mrs. Brutt echoed and enlarged upon his words. Mentally, so good!—so wholesome!—so widening!—so precisely what the dear child needed! She could speak from her own experience of the effects of foreign travel upon the mental make.

The Squire did not care a "ha'p'orth" for the widow's mental make; but he listened with patience.

Mrs. Brutt poured on. The dear girl was really too much "sat upon" in her present sphere. Of course this was quite between themselves. Doris needed training, widening, developing—didn't he think? Exactly as Mrs. Brutt in the past had been trained, widened, developed. She held up her own mind for inspection, as a proof. And nothing would charm her more than to take that dear enchanting girl abroad—if only it were possible.

"But I ventured one day to put out a feeler at the Rectory, and I found it to be hopeless. Mr. Winton set his foot down, quite conclusively. Said he saw no need, and could not afford it."

Mr. Stirling suggested that the difficulty might be met. He wished the Wintons not to know that he had a hand in arrangements; and he unfolded his plan. Would Mrs. Brutt be willing to offer on her own account to take Doris, if he privately supplied the funds? No cost to the parents would be involved; and the scheme must be in strict confidence between himself and the widow; on no account to be breathed to any other human being.

Mrs. Brutt's face was wreathed in smiles. He might depend upon her—absolutely! She never talked. She never repeated anything.

Mr. Stirling had his own opinion as to the "never;" but for her own sake she would be silent here. He asked how soon she would care to go, and dates were discussed.

"Then you will speak to the Wintons," were the Squire's parting words. "I may perhaps say a word to prepare them. Better not to name definitely the length of your absence. If Doris is enjoying herself, and you wish to stay a little longer, I shall be willing."

CHAPTER XIII

"Have I Done Wrong?"

IN his beloved old coat, ragged and paint-stained, and his workman's apron, the Rector stood before a half-finished piece of woodcarving, a handsome lectern, destined for a poor East-End parish. Other carved work, just begun or nearly done, lay around him. In one corner a pile of unglazed picture-frames awaited attention. The shed boasted little furniture, as such, but it held a carpenter's bench, a turning-lathe, and a multiplicity of tools. At present he was entirely engrossed by the lectern.

He was always happy with chisel and mallet. Handiwork was with him a passion; and though his life-business lay in other lines, he found here his recreation and his joy.

Lines that he would not have chosen for himself! Strong pressure through years had been used, to force him thitherward. His mother, a woman of determined will, had made up her mind that he should take holy orders, and had refused to hear reason. The son had slowly yielded, believing that this insistent pressure might in itself constitute a "call."

A born mechanic, he might have excelled as an engineer. With the best intentions, the most earnest endeavour, he never would excel as a "Parson." Critics spoke of him often as an unmitigated failure; and they went too far. No man who puts his heart into his work, and does his utmost, even though he has no natural gift for it, can be an

unmitigated failure. But a success, from the ordinary point of view, he was not.

Though duty was never neglected by him, parish work ranked as a perpetual burden, and the visitation of sick and bereaved folk as a never-ending terror. Few guessed the fact, while condemning his uncouthness. His was a childlike nature, combining genuine enthusiasm with a man's shrewdness; but also it included something of animal dumbness. He could not voice his own emotions, could not say what he thought, could not express what he felt.

There were indeed seasons when, unexpectedly, he would break through these restraining bonds, when some sudden emergency would call forth his real strength of character. Then dumbness ceased, and he could take the lead, and take it well. But such occasions were few and far between. Usually, he only asked to be left in the background which he loved.

He was a square man in a round hole; and, do what he might, he never could fill the empty space. In the nature of things, this was impossible. A touch of the pathetic in such a sight, is there not? But has it ever occurred to you, how much grander a thing it is for a square man to be striving his heroic best to fill a round hole—even though the result be failure!—than for a round man to slip easily and without effort into a round hole which just fits him? The one means exertion, struggle, self-denial. The other means—nothing!

Do you question this? Think of a boat on a powerful river. From which does the looker-on gain most—from a man fighting bravely against the stream, whether he succeeds

or fails, or from a man swept easily down by the force of the current? Mr. Winton's daily battle formed an object-lesson to more than one silent observer.

When Doris came to the shed, and found her father in pleased contemplation of his handiwork, she had come to the right place. She was in a cloudy mood this morning, and things looked awry. And she felt that, though the dear old daddy—she called him "daddy" still, when they were alone—might say little, he would understand.

Twice he glanced up from the work which he had resumed, with a scrutinising glance.

"Eh, child?" came at length. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm only tired of things, daddy. I should like to get away."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. I don't mind. Don't you sometimes feel so?"

"I've had the sensation."

"And only yesterday I thought I wouldn't. I saw poor Winnie Morris, and she made me ashamed of not being contented. But this morning— somehow—"

Her father's broad hand, with its delicate capabilities, just touched hers. "I know—" it said.

"What do you do when you get a fit like that, daddy?"

"Knock it down," the Rector said grimly.

"And if it knocks you down?"

"Get up and fight it."

She laughed a little.

"I suppose one never ought to wish for anything one hasn't got."

"I don't say that. There is a right as well as a wrong way of wishing. And there is a Divine discontent, as well as a discontent which isn't Divine."

"And the Divine discontent—?" she questioned.

"Do you remember Mrs. Gatty's Parables? I suppose it is the sort that makes the grub climb out of the pond, to become the winged creature."

"I'm afraid mine is the discontent that isn't Divine," she said slowly. "I want things changed —different—and—Winnie said things were right because God had arranged them for us. I don't think I feel like that in the least."

The Rector looked up in her face. The one person with whom he was not tongue-tied was this daughter?

"My dear—some of God's saints have taken fifty years to learn that lesson perfectly."

"To learn that things are right—because—"

"To learn that, whatever our conditions may be, those conditions are the best that can be for us—in view of the future. It means a great deal. It means—knowing God, knowing Christ, with a personal intimate knowledge—as man knows man—and trusting His love and wisdom—as friend trusts friend. We begin with infantine knowledge. We go on to that."

"And Winnie has got to that, you think!"

"I don't know how far Winnie has got. I don't suppose she knows herself. She is learning—we are all learning. Some are more willing to be taught than others. And our Father puts us, each one, into just that class in His earthly school where we can best be taught."

"Then one ought never to wish for change?"

"One ought never to give in to a spirit of discontent. Natural 'wishing' is a different matter—if we keep our hold on the reins. But always remember—He loves—and He knows best."

Doris kept silence so long that he went back to his work, and presently lost himself in it, forgetting all else. She would not interrupt him again, but after watching a little while, she went out; and the Squire soon came in her stead. He too stood gazing. For the Rector with his tools was a sight worth looking at; a picture of power and perfect content. Sermon-writing had hung fire, and in despair he had escaped hither. Often he could not command his brain to work; but always he could command his hands.

"Morning—" he murmured in response to a movement.
"Sit down, please. I'll attend—two minutes."

Mr. Stirling obeyed, using the one chair. He knew that the two minutes would expand, for Mr. Winton at work had no consciousness of time. But for once it was the latter who spoke.

"I say—what has put into that child's wanting to get away?"

"Doris's?"

"Aye." "Why not let her go?"

The Rector looked up, shook his head, and gazed at the lectern.

"You think she could not be spared."

"Can't afford it."

"But if her expenses were undertaken?

"That's not likely. And after all—the child is well. Her turn will come some day. No need yet."

"Well, if an offer does come—and I have a notion that it may—don't refuse, that is all. A few weeks or months abroad would do her no end of good."

"Not months." But the Rector had grown thoughtful. Mr. Stirling, satisfied to have set the stone rolling, went to the Rectory garden, and there came across Doris, busy with her pigeons. She wore a pink blouse and a holland skirt; and her pretty face, with its dusky hair and deep-set eyes, broke into smiles at the sight of him. The pigeons rose with their startled swish, and her mind reverted to Winnie Morris. Here was an opportunity! True, Winnie had asked her not to speak; but she had confidence in her own judgment; and of course she would not let slip that which she had promised not to mention.

"Real June weather," she remarked, forgetful by this time of her discontent. "Mr. Stirling, I want to say something. We went the other day to Wyld's Farm—Katherine and Mrs. Brutt and I."

"So I hear."

"And we saw Farmer Paine's niece and her girls. I don't care for the elder one; but Winnie is sweet."

He made a hole in the bed with his walking-stick, and pushed neatly in a fallen leaf.

"You know them, don't you? Winnie said you had always been their friend. It sounded droll—put in that way!"—and she laughed. "That queer Mrs. Morris, and that vulgar Jane—and you!" She glanced up with girlish

admiration at the pale dignified Squire. "But of course I knew what she meant. You have been good to them, as you are to everybody. But don't you think Winnie ought to see a doctor?"

"Mrs. Morris will, no doubt, call one in if necessary."

"But Winnie said you would know you would tell them, if she ought. She almost seemed to think her mother wouldn't do anything without asking you first. Funny—wasn't it?" Doris stopped, noting the tension of his face, and he spoke with constraint—

"It is kind of you to feel an interest in the girl. She is delicate; and I believe not much can be done for her. Mrs. Morris must herself decide whether to have a doctor."

"Yes,—so I should have thought, but for what Winnie said. Poor girl, I'm so sorry for her. One day she fainted in church, and she says she almost always has pain. It must be frightfully hard to bear. And she looks so patient! I mean to cycle over sometimes, and try to cheer her up. I should like to know her better."

"You must be careful. The elder girl is pushing. Your mother would dislike the companionship for you."

Doris laughed merrily. "Oh, that is nothing. We 'clergy-folk' have to know everybody, and we don't mind. I'm not in the very least afraid of being taken for one of Jane Morris's friends!" No young princess could have held herself with more stateliness than Doris at that moment. "It's odd, two sisters being so unlike. Somebody said that Jane lived for years with her mother's relatives—not dear old Farmer Paine,

of course, but others—and that she got into their ways. But I should like to be a friend to poor Winnie."

"I think you should be cautious. Better not to take steps in a hurry, and then have to draw back."

He left Doris vaguely impressed, and rather puzzled also, and made his way to Wyld's Farm.

Jane was out, and he had first a private talk with Mrs. Morris. Then he returned to the sitting-room, and took a chair by Winnie's side. She was on the sofa, suffering too much to sit up. His manner had a touch of coldness, and she scanned him with anxious eyes.

"Winnie, I don't wish to find fault, and you are not to distress yourself. But I have a request to make."

Her lips parted with a gasp.

"I think you have been indiscreet. Yesterday you saw Miss Winton."

Her face fell.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I know! She was so kind, and for a moment I forgot." To herself Winnie added bitterly, "I didn't think she would have let it out."

"You forgot—what?"

"We were talking, and I—somehow I said—something. I forgot that you don't like people to know how kind you've been to us—paying for Raye, and all that!" She glanced up penitently. "I know it was wrong. But I didn't mean—"

"You told Miss Winton about Raye!" This was news, and his face darkened.

"I'm so sorry. It—somehow it just slipped out. I don't think I said 'school,' but I did say 'college.'"

"You have always been told that these things were not to be mentioned."

"I know! I forgot."

Winnie was fighting to keep down sobs. "She—she—promised—she wouldn't tell anybody."

This brought a frown.

"She! Do you mean Miss Winton? What reason did you give for asking her to be silent?"

"I said—oh, I said—you didn't—didn't—like people to know it."

"I do not. Stop crying, and listen to me." But he ordered in vain. The little thin hands were clenched over her face. He put a kind hand on her shoulder, and that only made her worse.

"Winnie—stop!" She obeyed this time, and sobbed no more, but the slight frame was convulsed. Mrs. Morris brought a glass of water, and he made her sip it.

"Now you are better. Don't begin again. If you do, I shall have to go away."

She clutched at his sleeve. "Oh please—please—don't."

He waited in silence, till the struggles for self-control were successful.

"Now you must listen to me. I wish you once for all to understand. People do not know what you mean, when you talk in that way; and it causes gossip. Remember, I owe much to your mother, for her care of Miss Stirling in infancy. I am always grateful for it; and if I choose to show particular kindness to her and you, that is my affair. But I do not choose my actions to be made the talk of Lynnbrooke. Even

Jane knows this. I have warned her; and she does not forget. I did not think it would be needful to warn you."

The girl pressed her handkerchief to quivering lips.

"Miss Winton did not tell me that you had talked about Raye's expenses. What she did say was that you spoke of me as your 'friend.'"

"Yes—" faintly.

"I hope I am a friend to you, and to all my tenants. But I object to have comparisons made, and jealousies aroused. If I have helped you as a family more than other families, I am perfectly free to do so; and I have my reasons, which do not concern other people. If it is talked about, those other people, not understanding, will expect the same for themselves. You see now! I want you to act with discretion, like a woman, not like a thoughtless child. It did not matter so much in Norfolk, but it does matter here. You must say nothing; you must tell nothing; either to Miss Winton or to anybody else."

She nodded silently.

"Then I need say no more. Come—there is no need to cry. Only be careful in future."

He stayed a few minutes longer, then said good-bye. Winnie hid her face in the cushion. He had never before shown displeasure towards her.

"It's your own fault," Mrs. Morris said stolidly. "If you hadn't been a little goose, you wouldn't have brought it on yourself. And I'll tell you what—if Miss Winton takes to coming here, it's got to be stopped somehow."

"Why?"

"He says so."

Winnie sighed, as her one scrap of blue sky clouded over.

But the difficulty did not arise. Doris was too much excited, too fully occupied, with the projected foreign trip, to have leisure for aught else. She did not forget her promise; and she still meant to go "some time." But the Squire had thrown cold water, and everything seemed to conspire to prevent her. When the time came to start with Mrs. Brutt, she had not again seen Winnie.

CHAPTER XIV

The Stranger

DORIS wondered at herself. Only a fortnight and three days since she had left home! The almanack must surely be wrong. It looked like six weeks, at the very least.

She was leaning idly out of her little bedroom window, surveying the hotel garden below, and the Rhone valley beyond, bounded by its stately mountain ramparts. Bex lies at the bottom of a tea-cup, closed in around by lofty heights, like the sides of the cup. She had always so longed to see Swiss mountains. And they were very grand, ineffably beautiful, clothed in pine-woods, streaked with ravines and valleys. Yet Doris, possessing her wish, was by no means in tip-top spirits.

She tried to smother down a sense of flatness, of disappointment, and hummed a tune softly. But it would not do. Things were not all she had expected. That is to say—Mrs. Brutt was not! Doris was growing deadly tired of her companion's talk.

It went on endlessly, like a babbling stream. In certain moods Doris herself could go on thus; but that was occasional. In Mrs. Brutt it was perpetual.

By this time the girl knew all, and more than all, that there was to be known, about that lady's early charms, her relatives, her friends, her admirers, her conquests, the places she had seen, the people she had known, the dresses she had worn, the troubles she had endured, the illnesses she had survived. Once and again a little of this might have been

interesting; but when it recurred day after day, with endless repetitions, patience was put to a severe test.

And patience was not one of Doris's strong points. It seldom is with anyone of her age. It has to be slowly learnt, through years of strife.

"I don't believe you know what you are going in for," Mrs. Winton had said. "It all sounds smooth. But you don't really know Mrs. Brutt. She is a woman who will have her own way; and you will be at her mercy. You need not suppose she will give up anything she wants, just to please you. If I'm not very much mistaken, you will soon wish yourself at home again."

Doris had indignantly repudiated the possibility. She was aware that Mrs. Brutt's seemingly generous offer was rather a trial to her parents; neither of them caring to be thus indebted to a comparative stranger. But she was frantic to accept; and she overbore all opposition. She was so fond of Mrs. Brutt. She would enjoy herself most awfully. It would be so frightfully disappointing to give it up. She couldn't—she really couldn't!—lose the delight. In the end she overcame or swept away all opposition; and leave was practically given for her to stay, within reasonable limits, as long as Mrs. Brutt might wish.

The idea that her friend's fascinations might wane on a closer acquaintance seemed to the girl absurd; till close acquaintance had lasted a few days. Then she began to realise that the agreeable widow, to whom she might escape for an hour's relief from home-frets, and the manager of a tête-à-tête trip abroad, were different beings.

Not that Mrs. Brutt meant to be different. She was simply now her natural self. Hers was essentially a self-centred nature; and she had a temper, not under good control. She expected unlimited attentions from those around; and she expected, as a matter of course, that Doris's will should always yield to her own.

Their tastes were in opposition, to begin with. Doris, young and active, wanted to go everywhere, to see everything. Mrs. Brutt had done it all before, and had no wish to do it all again. She cared not a rap for scenery, though given to piling on ecstatic adjectives. All that she really wanted was—a host of new acquaintances, with herself for their centre.

They had travelled direct to Geneva, spending a week there; and they had now been over a week at Bex.

On their arrival at the former place, Mrs. Brutt had enlarged on coming excursions. Doris must go up the Salève—such a view! Enchanting! She must visit the Park Arian—magnificent tapestry! She must see the junction of the two rivers—absolutely a unique spectacle! But day after day slipped by, and nothing was done. Each morning something prevented action. The weather was wrong; or shopping claimed attention; or Mrs. Brutt was tired,—so sorry, but really quite unequal.

And she was mistress of the situation. Doris, by this time painfully conscious of her obligations, could say nothing. She would gladly have gone alone, having pluck enough, despite useless school-room French. But Mrs.

Winton had exacted from her a reluctant promise to attempt no solitary excursions; and her hands were tied.

Here in Bex it was the same. Mrs. Brutt talked about a day in Montreux, a trip to Lausanne, boating on the lake; but a week was over, and they had done nothing. Soon they would leave for a little mountain village, where rooms had been secured.

Mrs. Brutt had an eye to economy. Mr. Stirling had named no time-limit. He suggested the spending of a weekly amount, liberal enough to cover, not only Doris's expenses, but with care part of Mrs. Brutt's also. She did not scruple to use it thus; and he certainly had said: "Pray consider it your own, to be employed as you think best." These words she construed into full permission.

The less spent upon excursions, the more for herself. Mrs. Brutt saw this plainly. Mr. Stirling had not seen it. His one object had been, if possible, to prolong the absence of both travellers, until their new-found interest in Wyldd's Farm should have died a natural death.

Another unexpected factor arose to interfere with the girl's enjoyment; and this was—jealousy! Mrs. Brutt was never happy to find herself in the position of Number Two. She expected always to be first; always to be the centre of attraction. She had quite left off praising Doris's face and figure, and had ceased to talk of her coming successes. It dawned early upon the latter that, if she wished for peace, she must refrain from competing with the elder lady.

And Doris knew that she had good looks, knew that she could win the liking of others. If, when a chance occurred,

she let herself go, the instant result was—neglect of Mrs. Brutt. And Mrs. Brutt's displeasure on those occasions was plainly shown. Doris, secretly indignant, remembered again her indebtedness, felt that she owed her presence there to Mrs. Brutt, and in silent vexation drew back.

Three especially dull days were ending. A middle-aged lawyer, on Mrs. Brutt's other side, had taken up her whole attention at meals. Doris, with Germans in front and Spaniards at her side, was condemned to silence. It never seemed to occur to her companion that she might feel neglected. If the lawyer would have preferred speech with the pretty girl, two seats off—as was only natural—he was allowed no chance.

Three days of this; and as Doris leant out of the window, peeping at the people below, all happy and chattering one with another, she had an unwonted sensation of loneliness. Her thoughts turned homeward, with a longing to be there. She pictured lovingly the old father, saying little, but ever on the look-out for his child; and the somewhat managing mother who, though at times a little trying, made her chief aim in life—this daughter. Never till now had Doris realised the sweetness of being always wanted, always thought of, always cared for, always welcome.

"I suppose it will be the same thing again this evening," she thought, observing that only ten minutes remained before the hour for table d'hôte. "I wish I could talk German. That is rather a nice-looking German lady opposite me. But I can't make out a single word she says. No hope of any change yet, I'm afraid."

There were changes, however. Mrs. Brutt's middle-aged lawyer had disappeared; and an elderly lady took his place. Also on Doris's other side two talkative Spaniards were gone; and she waited with curiosity to see who would fill the vacant seats.

They remained empty till the end of the first course. Then a man drew back the chair by her side, and slipped into it—bowing to those opposite.

Another "foreigner," Doris decided. What a pity! She was longing to exchange ideas with somebody. Perhaps he might prove to be a linguist.

One glance revealed to her a spare and muscular figure, broad-shouldered and of medium height. She saw that the sunburnt well-shaped hand, lying on the table, made no needless movements. "English—surely!" An odd feeling of confidence in the owner of that strong still hand took possession of her.

"Would you please pass the mustard?" she had to say; and the ice was broken.

"Pretty place, Bex," he remarked. So she had conjectured rightly.

"Rather shut in," she observed, brightening.

"Well, yes. One would not care to stay too long. I'm going higher."

"So are we in two or three days."

She gave another glance, and met a pair of good grey eyes bent upon herself. A good face too; not exactly handsome, but she liked it.

"I thought at first that you were a foreigner," she remarked.

"Properly speaking, we are both foreigners here." When he smiled, no question existed as to his good looks. The whole face changed. It reminded Doris of somebody—or something. "May I ask why you took me for a 'foreigner'?"

"Only because you bowed. We English don't generally, you know,—till we have begun an acquaintance."

"A bow isn't a bad preliminary. And sometimes it's not a bad plan to adopt foreign ways in a foreign land."

Again she met those dark-grey eyes, and their intense honesty, their abundant kindness, impressed her. Also their self-forgetfulness. They seemed to be too fully occupied with others' interests to have time for their own.

"I think I'll begin, the next place we go to." She heard a little murmur of approval, followed by—"It would save misunderstandings, if each nation would respect the rules of good manners in other nations."

"But don't you think foreigners quite as often offend against our rules, as we against theirs?"

"Yes; and perhaps as unconsciously. No reason why we should not be pioneers in trying not to cause needless annoyance."

"There was a Polish lady here, when we first came; and she told me her little boy said he hoped to be an Englishman when he grew up, 'because the English were always so polite.' I thought that rather nice."

"It looks as if our characters as travellers were improving. We might perhaps take more trouble than we do

to be understood. The average Englishman is a little too apt to stand calmly aloof, and to say: 'Only a foreigner! What the dickens does it matter?'"

"I suppose you have been a great deal abroad."

"I was at school on the Continent for some years."

Their eyes met afresh. Something in his was certainly familiar; or in the face as a whole. She had a curious feeling that he and she were not strangers. Yet she could attach no name to the memory-association, vaguely aroused. She was unconscious of her puzzled scrutiny, till he said—

"No. I don't think we are old acquaintances."

Doris promptly withdrew her gaze. "But how did you know? What made you think—?"

"Some people's faces are easily read."

"I did think I must have come across you before, somewhere—I can't imagine where."

"I have never come across you!" He spoke with absolute conviction.

She allowed the question to drop, and they fell into a very pleasant conversation, discussing places that he and she had seen, spots that should be visited, excursions which ought to be made. He was surprised to learn how little she had yet done.

Thence they turned to books, comparing notes over what each had read, and exchanging impressions. He found in her an intelligence beyond the average of girls, and readiness to take in fresh ideas. She found in him a cultured mind, clear and sensible, with signs of power. He made no attempt to engross the whole talk, but set himself to draw her

out. She felt like an instrument, played upon by a practised hand. It was a new experience, being manipulated by a strong masculine personality, encouraged to say what she thought, listened to with deference, treated as if her crude girlish notions were worth hearing.

Hamilton Stirling never did this. He could lecture and inform, but he could not throw open the doors of another mind; indeed he had no wish to do so. When Hamilton asked her what she thought, she always knew that he only wanted to prove her to be in the wrong. This stranger treated her as if she were a reasonable being; not an empty-pated and ignorant person, with no right to differ from him.

It is remarkable how many subjects may be skated over, in the course of one lengthy meal. Doris had no conception of the attention drawn by her own animated face,—the real charm of which few present had discovered earlier. Of course Mrs. Brutt was among those who saw; and jealousy soon awoke.

She tried to insert herself into the dialogue, scraps of which reached her ears in a tantalising fashion. Didn't the stranger think the views around perfectly enchanting—sublime—magnificent? No doubt they were; but he had not the least intention of discussing them across Doris; and Mrs. Brutt found herself dropped. She fumed in silence, and could not get over it. That she should have to her share a semi-deaf elderly woman, while Doris enjoyed masculine society, was not to be borne with patience.

Dinner neared its end. Doris had seldom passed a more delightful time. Could it be that, only an hour or so earlier,

she had not known of this man's existence? Again her eyes met his, again to be deciphered; and he shook his head, smiling.

"No! No! If we had met, I could not have forgotten."

"Perhaps in a former state of existence—" and she dimpled deliciously, he thought.

"Let us hope—not as cat and dog."

"If we did, I'm sure you wouldn't have worried me."

"Nature in quadrupeds is strong."

"Besides—I might have been the dog, and you the cat!"

"In which case, I should have been the worried, not the worrier."

"We might have encountered as spiders and beetles."

"Pray don't suggest anything so awful. Nonsense apart—your imagination may be equal to it. Mine isn't."

She laughed, and with one of her quick transitions, asked: "Are you going to do any climbing?"

"I hope so. And you—?" with a glance at the lithe figure.

"Oh, I want it most frightfully. I'd give anything in the world to go up a mountain. But I've had so little practice—none with real mountains. And I've no one to go with. Perhaps I shall find somebody soon." She named casually the village where they would soon be due, and his face lighted up.

"Are you going there? So am I."

"To-morrow?" she inquired eagerly.

"No, but in a very few days. To-morrow at six in the morning I'm off to Martigny. But—I hope we may meet again."

Mrs. Brutt was standing up, and Doris had to move. She longed to find out whether he would be at the same hotel with themselves, but could not resolve to put the question. He bowed a gravely polite farewell, as the two ladies withdrew.

Often after dinner Mrs. Brutt would stay in the salon. This evening she insisted on a walk in the garden.

"That man is really too forward," she said, drawing up her head with an air which Doris had learnt to understand. "You will have to be careful about making new acquaintances. It is not safe to be friendly with people that one knows nothing whatever about. He may be a sharper, or a man of bad character. Anyhow, a person you never set eyes on before. And you were treating him precisely like an old friend."

"I wasn't!" the girl said indignantly.

"I beg your pardon! I saw and heard. And nobody knows anything about him! I don't at all like his face. There's a sort of a sinister look." Mrs. Brutt was not always happy in her choice of adjectives. "I should not imagine that he is to be trusted. In fact, I am sure he is not. I can always depend on my own sense—my instinct—of other people's characters. I am never mistaken—and I have a strong sense that he is not a man in whom one could put any confidence."

Doris held herself in with difficulty. Her own sense said exactly the opposite. She decided that it was not necessary to name the possibility of their meeting in the mountains.

CHAPTER XV

R. R. Maurice

"GOOD morning, Mrs. Brutt. I'm going to breakfast. Are you better?"

Doris's face, dimpled and radiant, made its appearance, answering a fretful "Entrez."

"Shut the door, pray. Such a draught. I can't go down this morning—I am feeling so ill. It is the fault of the food, I am sure. And the heat yesterday was fearful—positively fearful."

The elder lady was still in bed, forgetting for once to pose picturesquely. Doris could not help thinking how abnormally plain she was, when deprived of all adventitious aids. Flat and rumpled hair is not becoming; and few faces fail to look plain in a mood of annoyed self-pity. Mrs. Brutt was not well; and, like many, people, when she was bodily out of sorts, she was sure to be also mentally out of sorts—in other words, out of temper.

"You needn't be in such a desperate hurry," she complained as the girl made a move. "You are always wanting to rush away. I must speak first about my breakfast. It is quite unbearable, having no bells—no way to get hold of anybody. I never expected to find this sort of thing, when I settled to come up into the mountains."

She had made the same remark at least twenty times already.

"If I had imagined the wretched accommodation, nothing would have induced me to bind myself to stay. Six weeks of it! I shall be dead before the end."

"Oh, I don't think you will." Doris thought it best to adopt a cheerful tone.

"You are a most unsympathising person! Most unsympathetic!" The two words meant the same for Mrs. Brutt. "You have no feeling at all for others. So very selfish."

"But I'm sorry you are not well. Only—if you hadn't secured the rooms, they would have been taken by somebody else. And, you know, you wanted to come here, because it is a cheap hotel."

Mrs. Brutt objected to this view, and she spoke sharply. "I am paying an excellent price for absolutely nothing. That is not what I call cheapness. These are not rooms; they are mere cupboards. Miserable rat-holes! No comforts! No space! Actually, I have to keep one of my trunks in the verandah. All my things will be ruined."

She gazed disgustedly at the opposite wall, which indeed did not lie far off. The boarded floor had no carpet, but a rug only, beside the bed. A wash-handstand of stained wood, with drawers below, served for a dressing-table; and above it hung an anti-vanity glass of small dimensions. There were also two cane chairs, a cupboard of limited capacity, and a writing-table—that sine quâ non of foreign bedrooms.

As a make-weight to its interior simplicity, the room opened upon a balcony, with a full view of the stately Dent du Midi, seen sideways, and of less distant ranges, all bathed

in sunshine. Doris wondered that anybody could grumble, with such an outlook.

She had been up herself since six o'clock; and from her little balcony, facing another way, had watched the goats of the village, starting for their day upon the alps; gathered together by the goatherd with his horn; each small beast coming composedly from its own stable at the sound. Already Doris had had one ramble, and now she was more than ready for breakfast. It was all too delicious—except Mrs. Brutt. The girl was in dancing spirits with the air, the views, the novelty, the freedom.

But the string of complaints went on. Her companion was presenting a new facet for her inspection.

"Not even a stove to boil a kettle on. I really dare not use my spirit-lamp except on a stove. In these wooden houses, it is so fearfully dangerous. Not wood! Of course it is wood. I am certain of it. At all events, there's an immense amount of wood about. And I felt so bad in the night. I would have given anything for a cup of tea. These people never seem to think of the necessities of life."

"I suppose nobody comes here, except in hot weather; and so stoves are not needed."

"Really, I don't see what that has to do with the question. Pray don't move those shoes, Doris!"—sharply. "I put them there to dry. They are damp still, after that rain of two days ago. The weather here is always in extremes. My room is an absolute oven this morning."

"It is a perfect day," Doris could not help remarking.

"Fearfully hot. I feel quite overpowered. There was such a noise in the night; people starting on excursions, and that sort of thing. These foreigners never mind what uproar they make. And just as I was dropping off, quite worn out, that wretched creature went blowing his horn all through the village. It is barbarous."

Doris was silent. What could she say?

"The food, too, is atrocious. I do not mind how plain the cooking is—nobody can be less particular than I am. But it is most essential that I should have things good. That extraordinary mess that comes round—I believe it is tinned meat, done up in gravy, and I never could eat tinned meat. It is that, I am sure, which has made me ill."

"Shall I tell Mademoiselle that you want your breakfast in bed?"

"And such a bourgeois set! Impossible creatures. Hardly a person one cares to speak to."

"But they are nice and kind. And for six weeks what does it matter? We have the mountains," suggested Doris.

"You might at least have the grace not to argue. Yes, you can tell them that I want my breakfast, and that I must have it at once. I am quite ill and exhausted. Tell them I must have freshly-made tea—not that boiled stuff that has stood for an hour. And mind you come to me after breakfast. I must know what you are going to do."

Doris went downstairs more slowly than she had come up, feeling a little flattened. The message had to be given, and she gave it prettily, with apologies. Mademoiselle, like

many Swiss girls, spoke English well, and she and Doris were on friendly terms.

Breakfast was laid out of doors, upon a wide stone terrace, which adjoined the back of the hotel on a lower level than the front door. A good many people were already at the tables. Doris glanced at none of them, but made her way to the edge, where she stood to enjoy herself.

Sharply away from the terrace fell the ground below; and deep down, out of sight, flowed a stream on its way to join another and larger torrent; whence both streams journeyed together to the Rhone.

Away to the left rose the jagged Diablerets peaks; and away to the right the spreading mass of the Dent du Midi. Just opposite, with lesser green heights between, a great range of bare rock-mountains lifted itself high into the blue sky.

Doris stood in rapt delight, drinking it all in, studying wondrous outlines, curves, and flutings. Then a feeling of being watched made her turn. She still looked at nobody, but walked to her own seat and took it, forgetting to bow as she did so. One of the smiling waitresses was already there, with a small teapot; and Doris was about to inquire whether Mrs. Brutt's needs had received attention. But the idea fled. Lifting her eyes, she met the gaze of a steady grey pair, at the same table, just on the other side.

The flash of pleasure in her face came before she was aware; and it met a like flash in his. But she knew at once that he had seen her before she saw him. He was not taken by surprise.

"So you have come to this hotel," she said, a little confused at having shown what she felt. It was like meeting an old friend, she said to herself. Yet she had seen him but once before.

He said—"Yes,"—smiling; and as before, with the smile came a nameless charm, amounting to far more than ordinary good looks. "And you are still here?"

"We've taken our rooms for six weeks. It's a perfectly—ripping place!"

"Seems so this morning. I got in last night."

"Are you going up a mountain to-day?"

"To-morrow. The Grand Muveran."

"Not alone!"

"No. I believe a guide is necessary—unless one is in a guideless party of experts."

Doris dimpled.

"I heard an English lady at Bex talking about the Grand-move-her-on, and the Petty-move-her-on."

"Which fixed the names."

"Don't you like the way the Grand Muveran stands? He throws up his head with such an air. And the Petit Muveran beside him is—Impudence beside Dignity."

He laughed, and asked: "Have you had any excursions yet?"

"Oh no, I've only wandered a little near at hand. But I'm aching to get higher—right up somewhere. Mrs. Brutt can't climb, and we keep to the roads. But I mean to do a little scrambling by myself."

He put down his knife, looking at her gravely. "That won't do! You say this is your first visit to Switzerland. You might be over a precipice, before you dreamt of danger."

"I'll be careful."

"Care is not enough without experience. The most innocent-looking grass-slopes are often the most deadly. Have you nails in your shoes?"

"No. Ought I?"

"It's not safe in these parts to leave the beaten track without them. If you take your boots to a village shoemaker, he will put in the nails. And you should get a strong pointed stick."

"And then I shall be all right?"

He shook his head.

"Not even then—going alone. Have you no one to walk with?"

"Mrs. Brutt—generally. She is a good walker; only to-day she is not well. But she doesn't care for scrambling; and I just love it. I've always loved any bit of climbing I could get hold of. And really I like going about alone. One sees so much more. And I'm beginning to find that I can make myself understood a little."

"You must be very very careful," he repeated, and he looked serious.

As before, they chatted without effort, one topic leading to another. And, as before, she had the sense of being drawn out, played upon, manipulated, made the best of. It was a delightful sensation. She was astonished presently to find that she had been more than an hour at table.

"It is getting late. I ought to go," she said.

"Have you seen any of these?" He drew from his pocket a supply of post-card views, came round to her side, and took Mrs. Brutt's vacant chair. "They are rather good."

Doris glanced through them with interest. "I've got some,—but not all."

A letter, which he had pulled from his pocket with the cards, fell on the table; and without intention she caught sight of the address—

"R. R. Mau—"

The rest was hidden by a post-card, but a movement of his arm brushed the latter inadvertently aside, and she saw the whole—

"R. R. Maurice, Esquire."

He thrust it carelessly into his pocket, and she did not feel impelled to apologise for having seen what he had allowed to lie just before her eyes.

"So now I know his name—Mr. Maurice!" she said to herself. Aloud she asked: "Are you going to take a long walk?"

"Some letters have to be written first. Then I'm going for a lengthy ramble up the valley. Not likely to be back till evening."

"Is it to be jour maigre with you?"

"I take a few sandwiches. That's enough for me."

CHAPTER XVI

The Cry from the Châlet

DORIS walked down the village street, more than half lost in a dream. She had forgotten all about Mrs. Brutt and the visit to her room. The last hour had swept such recollections out of her head. And, as if she had not already enough to fill her thoughts, when she left the breakfast-table the post came in, bringing a letter from Hamilton Stirling.

This was a typical Swiss mountain village, some three thousand five hundred feet above the sea-level, straggling along the side of a deep valley. Picturesque châlets were intermingled with houses of a more prosaic stamp; and there were little primitive shops, as well as hotels. Visitors abounded, chiefly Swiss and French, together with an admixture of Germans and Russians, and a few English.

The letter from Hamilton felt uncomfortable in her hand, as she walked; and she was in no haste to open it. She wondered whether she ought to have been glad to see his writing; and she came to the conclusion that she was not—very—glad.

Going more slowly, she tore the envelope, pulled out the sheet, and at a glance saw—

"I need not apologise for writing again so soon. You will have missed, as I have, our close intercourse; and you will be expecting another letter."

But she had not missed him, she told herself indignantly; not in the very least; and their intercourse had not been "close;" and she had not expected another letter.

She had not thought about him at all. What business had he to feel so sure that she wanted him? She didn't want him. It was quite a relief to escape his lectures on geology.

She put the letter into her pocket, and set off at a good pace, resolved to find some quiet retreat, where she could read it at leisure, and could try to analyse her own state of mind, which plainly needed dissection.

Missed him indeed! What nonsense! Nothing of the kind!

She held her head high, and went on with lithe and easy carriage,— a pretty picture in her shady hat. Somebody in the hotel she had left watched her from a top window, as long as she was in sight.

Possibly it might have been that steadfast gaze which conjured up a vision in her mind of a pair of grey eyes— dark-grey, earnest, solicitous—side by side with Hamilton's impassive features. She gazed at the two together.

"He's awfully nice," she murmured, not in reference to the early admirer. And then—"Missed him indeed! It's like his cheek! I've not missed him. I've never thought about him at all."

Leaving the village street behind, she went along the shady main road for a short distance; the hill uprising to her right, the wide valley down-dropping to her left.

A châlet close to the road drew attention. It was of pale brown wood, lately built, and not yet burnt by the sun to a deep red-brown, like other châlets. Carved balconies adorned the front and ran round the sides; and the pointed roof had deep overhanging eaves. Several pines grew in the garden,

and on a bench outside the front door lay a book. She was interested, for someone had told her, the day before, that it was taken by un Monsieur Anglais, and his young wife. Perhaps she would get to know them.

A little later she turned off to the right along a grass-path, which led slanting upward; and then she found herself in a meadow of long grass, specked with flowers, and thronged with thousands of grasshoppers and crickets. When she bent for a closer study of them, one after another, poised on the tip of a grass-blade, seemed to survey her with its big uncanny eyes, before taking a leap—literally a flying leap!—to another spot, yards away.

Still to her right, as she went, the grassy hill rose steep and high; and on her left, beyond the road, the valley descended, with green ranges beyond, and behind them vast mountains of bare rock. To the front, across the foreshortened Rhone valley, where flowed the historic river as a slender muddy ribbon, she could see the great spreading skirts and massive ridges of the Dent du Midi.

Following steadily a little footpath, she reached a store-châlet, with open door, revealing an empty inside. Deciding after one peep that it might be a cow-house, she perched herself on some stones outside, and heaved a sigh of content.

In front of her now a new vista had dawned, beyond the far end of the Rhone valley; a vista of snowy heights, crowded together in the distance; some sharp as needles; some lofty and rounded, with snowfields shining in sunlight, intermingled with light clouds. It was a delicate dreamland of

loveliness, contrasting with the dark rocky ranges which made for it a frame.

Hardly a sound broke the stillness, except the ceaseless buzz and murmur of insects, the snapping of grasshoppers, the song of a bird.

She settled herself to gaze and listen, but soon reverted to her previous line of thought. Again she opened Hamilton's letter, and this time read it through.

It seemed rather dull. All about geology, and the make of mountains. Well, not dull exactly, for he wrote well on his own subjects, and she was an intelligent girl—only—she was not in the state of mind to-day for science. She liked to learn, and she liked to have a lover; but a scientific lover hardly appealed to her present mood. It was preferable to have the science and the love-making in separate doses.

Mr. Maurice might be scientific too. One or two things that he had said left an impression of his being, in her girlish phraseology, "most awfully clever." But she was sure that he would never sandwich in his scientific information between layers of love-making,—supposing him to be in love with anybody!

It was not as if Hamilton Stirling would be willing to give her a fair share of talk and opinions,—should she in the far off "end" consent to be his wife. She said this to herself; and she was conscious of a rising rebellion at the thought. Before leaving home, it had not seemed impossible. This morning such a future looked unattractive. She would have always—invariably—to agree with him. She would have always—invariably—to act the part of submissive listener.

She would have always—invariably—to let her own ideas go down before his.

It was so much pleasanter to be allowed one's own opinions; not to be squashed flat, with a superior smile, the moment one ventured to make a suggestion. Mr. Hamilton Stirling was so fearfully superior, and sure of himself. Mr. Maurice was so different! A little laugh broke from her. Of course he had his opinions; and when he didn't agree with her he told her so, but not by way of a set-down. He explained what he thought, and why he thought it; and he let her say what she wished in answer.

She was gazing towards that distant dreamland of snowy heights; but she had ceased to see it. She had ceased to hear the snapping of grasshoppers. She only saw again that kind strong face, with its unexpected smile, and its clear truthful eyes. She only heard that well-modulated musical voice.

"How absurd!" She laughed again. "I've seen him—just twice! Why, we are strangers. I know nothing about him—nothing whatever. And yet—" she made a long pause. "And yet—I do think—I like him already in some ways better than—him—" with a swift glance at the other man. "Does that mean—I suppose it must—that I don't care so very much for him, after all? I can't see what else it can mean. And if that is it—what a mercy I've found out in time!"

She looked down at the letter on her knee.

"I won't answer it in a hurry; that's certain. And when I do, I'll say—oh, perhaps I'll say that I've been ever so much too busy to miss anybody, except of course my home-people. I should think that will about finish him."

It flashed into her mind that she had never gone to see Mrs. Brutt after breakfast, as desired.

She glanced at her watch, found the time to be not far from eleven, and wondered what that lady would say. Without delay she set off at a brisk pace through the wet grass, with its leaping grasshoppers, down the path and into the road, finding the distance less than she had thought.

Once more she had to pass the newly-built châlet, occupied by the English couple; and again she paused for a moment's interested gaze. A book still lay on the bench, and nobody was visible.

But as she stopped, a girl ran out of the front door, quite a girl in age, hardly more than a child in look, round-faced and fair, bare-headed, pale, and distraught. The blue eyes were widely opened, as if in fear, and she wrung her hands together with a despairing gesture.

"Oh, what shall I do? O God, what shall I do?"

CHAPTER XVII

A Great Effort

DORIS threw open the little gate and ran in. "Is anything the matter?" she asked. "Can I be any help?"

The girl seized her hands, with an exclamation. "Are you English? Oh, tell me what to do. My husband is so ill. I don't know what to do."

Her face quivered like the face of a terrified child, and she gripped Doris as a drowning person clutches a rope. Doris knew herself instantly to be the more capable, the stronger, of the two.

"Has he been ill long? Tell me—" and she held the little cold hands firmly. "Don't be frightened. Just tell me."

"Only a day or two—poorly—just poorly—only that!—and I didn't think anything of it. He is so well always. And he tried to hide it. He wouldn't wake me all night. I never guessed what he was going through. And this morning he is in such pain—and he looks dreadful. I've never had to do with any illnesses. I've never nursed anybody. And I can't talk French—and I've no one to ask—only a girl from another part. She doesn't know."

"He must see a doctor."

"But there's no doctor in the village."

"Then you must send to Bex."

"Will you—will you help me? I don't know how to manage. It's all so strange—and he has done everything."

"I'll find out about doctors for you, and which is the quickest way. There's an Englishman at our hotel—if only I

can catch him before he goes out! He is so kind, I am sure he would help. If not, Mademoiselle will advise me. But Mr. Maurice would be best."

"Maurice!" The name arrested her. "A friend of ours—a Mr. Maurice—was coming out to Switzerland soon."

"This is a Mr. R. R. Maurice—spelt M-a-u—"

"Dick Maurice!" She clasped her hands again. "Oh, if he is here—!"

"He was going for a long walk. I'll do my best to stop him."

"Will you? Oh, will you? How kind. If only it is our Dick Maurice! He is a young surgeon—just starting practice—so kind and clever. Please tell him it is Arthur and Amy Ramsay."

"I'll be sure—if only I can catch him. Anyhow, I'll let you know quickly. Keep up heart meanwhile—don't be frightened. People are often not so bad as they seem."

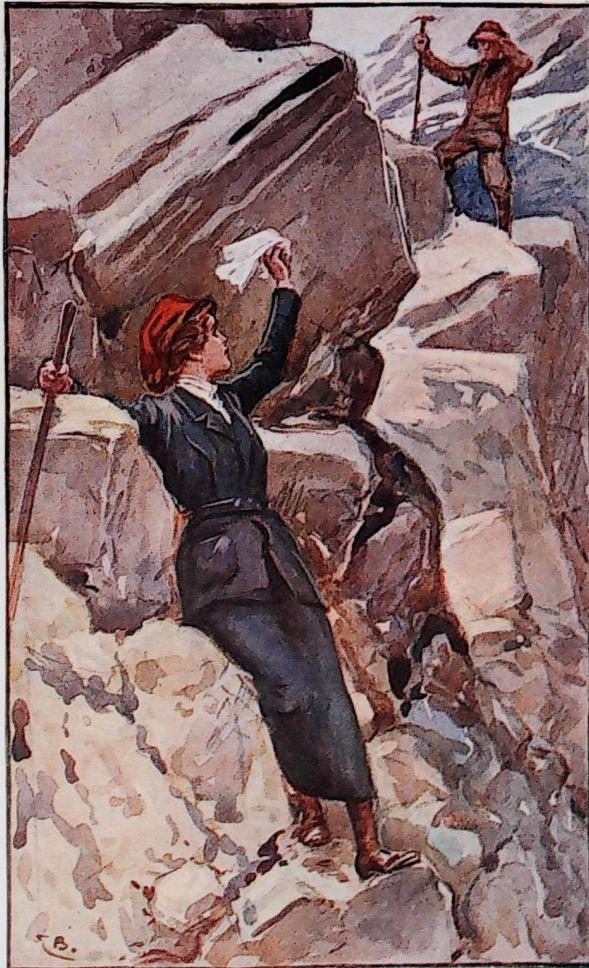
Five minutes brought her to the hotel; and she learnt that Maurice had just started.

No thought of Mrs. Brutt might stand in the way. She knew the direction he had meant to take; and her only chance of overtaking him lay in instant action. At her best speed she set off; and on quitting the village she caught sight of a masculine figure, slim and active, not to be mistaken, some distance ahead. Already he had left the road, and was mounting the steep hillside. One glance made clear that there was no one within reach whom she could send in chase. She could not risk letting him get out of sight, while she turned elsewhere to find a man.

All depended upon her; and she braced herself for the chase. He did not appear to be going at any great pace; but he was well in advance; and though she was both strong and vigorous, an upward rush soon brought her to a breathless condition. She had to pause, gasping, and to go more leisurely.

Despite her utmost efforts, the space between them gradually widened. Then he vanished behind some bushes; and when again he came within view, he had taken another turn up a yet more acute slope, still at the same long easy stride, which cleared the ground faster than it seemed to do.

Now he was on a steep zigzag, winding to and fro; and this brought new hope. A faint indication of a path led straight upward, ignoring the bends; a path of rough shale, broken and jagged. If she could mount thus, direct, she might intercept him as he, in more deliberate fashion, followed the bends. Spurred by the recollection of that distressed girl-face, she made the attempt.



GIVING IN HAD BECOME INEVITABLE, WHEN HE TURNED.

GIVING IN HAD BECOME INEVITABLE, WHEN HE TURNED.

No easy matter, as she soon found. The path, meant for use in coming down only, grew worse and worse, more stony, more difficult. The loose shale yielded beneath her tread; and for each step in advance, she felt as if she slid two steps downward. Yet advance she did, though with heart-breaking slowness.

If breath would but hold out! She was gaining upon Maurice; and she had healthy lungs; but this was severe work. Her heart was beating like a drum; and as she struggled on, she panted painfully. A call now might stop him; but no voice was left. She could only gasp.

Just when she had reached the stage, at which giving in had become inevitable, he stopped short, and turned. She waved her handkerchief violently. He waved his, and started at a run, descending by the steeper path. Rapid as were his movements, she was recovering herself before he arrived.

"You want me—!" with surprise, which changed into concern, as he saw her flushed and breathless state.

"I promised—to catch you—if I could!" She laughed at herself for having still to gasp between the words. "I'm—all right. It's only—" and she hurriedly explained what was wrong.

"Yes—they are my friends. I had no idea they were coming here. Thanks for calling me. You have had hard work."

"Oh, I didn't mind—only the stones were so horrid, sliding away under my feet. I thought I should never get up with you."

"You didn't attempt the short cut!"

"I fancied it would save time. Did it?"

"Doubtful. But you must be a good climber to do it at all."

She was delighted, but said: "Ought we not to be off?"

"Are you rested enough?"

"I'm all right. And that poor girl does so want you."

"Try this way."

He turned to a different path, shorter and steeper than that by which they had come. It meant a descent which Doris could not have tackled alone, with nailless shoes. He went first; and two or three times his hand caught hers; yet most of it she did unaided; and again he spoke in praise of her sure-footedness.

"Climbing always seems to come naturally to me," she said. "If only, only, some day I could go up a real mountain! I want that desperately—I can't tell you how much! And I don't see the very least chance of such a thing. Oh dear,—I wish with all my heart there were."

"Perhaps something might be arranged while you are here. We must see. I'll think about it."

Her deep-set eyes sent him a swift grateful glance, which stirred his blood. She was a pretty girl.

"Oh, it would be most frightfully nice!" was all she said.
"I'll see!" he repeated.

Then he spoke of these friends of his; the husband a college chum, "an awfully decent chap,"—the young wife, barely eighteen, and married three months earlier, whom he had known for years.

Doris would have liked to go with him to the chalet, and to see if she might be of use there. But she felt that the neglected Mrs. Brutt claimed first attention; and he promised to let her know if help were needed.

On reaching Mrs. Brutt's room, she was greeted with a gale which took her breath away, almost as the steep hillside had done. By this time she had learnt to know the agreeable

widow as a confirmed grumbler; but till the present hour she had not seen her in a passion. It was not a pleasant sight.

Breakfast had not been carried up till a full hour after Doris's departure; and for that she had to bear full blame, though it was not her fault. Mrs. Brutt had been "quite ill" in consequence, and alone all the morning,—an additional grievance. Doris was a most selfish, thoughtless, unkind girl! So ungrateful!—considering all that she owed to the speaker. Mrs. Brutt would not have believed it of her. But one knew nothing of people till one travelled with them,—a statement which Doris could have endorsed.

She tried to explain, but in vain. The more she tried, the more Mrs. Brutt enlarged on her wrongs. Somehow, all this did not sting like home-worries; perhaps because Doris's mind was full of new interests. She kept her temper, and at length said—

"If you are ill why not see a doctor?"

"So unkind!—when you know there is no doctor to be had in this wretched place!" moaned Mrs. Brutt, by this time reduced to the abject stage. "But I might die, for all you would care."

Doris let this pass, and remarked that there was a doctor—an English one to boot—in that very hotel. The news proved reviving. Mrs. Brutt loved nothing better than to be medically discussed and liberally dosed; and her spirits at once improved.

So when Maurice came in, he found another patient awaiting him; not always a welcome event on a man's holiday. But since she belonged to Doris, he had not the

smallest objection. To the latter he confided that he had left Ramsay very ill, and that he feared an operation might prove needful. He would spend the night at the châlet. No, he could not make his intended ascent next day.

"But how awfully disappointing for you!"

He smiled at that.

"Oh, it's all right," he said cheerfully.

"You'll go another day instead?"

"I hope so." He then explained that, in the nick of time, a brother-in-law of Ramsay's had telegraphed to say that he and his wife were coming immediately to join them. Nothing could be better. The wife was an experienced nurse; the husband was a first-rate climber, a member of the Alpine Club. "Their coming will make it quite easy, I hope, to manage our little expedition," he added. "Pressford is equal to any guide. We'll take you somewhere between us, sooner or later."

"Will you—really—?" in a tone of rapture.

"I'll do my very best to bring it about—I promise you."

After which he spent a full half-hour, listening to the catalogue of Mrs. Brutt's symptoms, which were of such abounding interest for herself, that she could not imagine their having less interest for other people. He could have prescribed for her in five minutes, with ease; but then he would have failed to win her confidence.

She recognised in him the "sinister" individual of Bex; but she promptly dropped that adjective, and substituted "delightful." He was really such a clever young fellow!—so observant!—so thoughtful!— so sympathetic! Such

penetration! He had read her whole constitution at a glance—positively at one glance. Mrs. Brutt prided herself on the abnormal complexity of her make, transcending the complexities of less distinguished beings; and she felt that never before had it been so truly perused.

Perhaps this came near the mark. Maurice had penetrating eyes, and he read her in more ways than one. If he took particular pains to ingratiate himself with the widow, it was hardly for her own sake.

CHAPTER XVIII

On the Mountain

"YES, we think you can do it." Maurice spoke aloud, scanning the girl with thoughtful eyes. "Pressford is sure. You are a born climber. But you must make up your mind to obey orders implicitly." He spoke in a tone of half apology, having found in her by this time an impulsive tendency to insist on her own way. Her face glowed.

"I'll be sure. Oh, I promise—anything you like. If only I may go! Is the Glückhorn a good height?"

"About twelve thousand feet. It's a peak of medium difficulty; not beyond a beginner of your calibre. Pressford has never been up it; but he has made full inquiries. There's only one really stiff bit; and we'll have you up that between us. Given a fine day, it will be all right."

Then he went into the question of preparations.

Under the combined skill of Maurice and Mrs. Pressford, Ramsay was by this time on the high road to convalescence. He had narrowly escaped a dangerous operation; but he had escaped it; and Maurice could at last venture on a long day's absence.

Mrs. Brutt offered no objections to the proposed ascent. She was completely captured by the young surgeon's attentions to herself; and she nursed the agreeable delusion that his kindness to Doris was solely on her account. She flattered herself that he found her as "delightful" as she found him.

Really, she repeatedly said, he had done so much for her!—it was quite amazing!—she began to feel like a different being. She almost believed that she might herself climb one of the mountains. Well, not the Glückhorn, exactly, but another, just a trifle easier. She could assure Mr. Maurice that she had been in the past a capital climber, quite light-footed—in fact, gazelle-like. And with Mr. Maurice's help—

Maurice listened with praiseworthy patience; but he did not encourage the notion of gazelle-like friskiness in perilous places. A timely reference to the beloved topic of her varying temperature turned the conversation into a safer channel.

During Ramsay's illness and Mrs. Brutt's little indisposition, Doris had seen a great deal of Maurice. In one way and another he was perpetually turning up. She went often to the châlet to cheer the young wife; and he was frequently there. Also at meals he was her vis-à-vis. She and he with Mr. Pressford had already taken several long scrambles, inclusive of rock-climbing, severe enough to test her powers; and results had convinced them both that she might safely undertake the "real ascent" for which she craved.

By this time Doris had left off analysing her own sensations; the state of her mind being too simple to need dissection. She thought no more of Hamilton; but she thought a great deal of Dick Maurice. When with him, she wanted nothing else. When not with him, she was looking forward to their next meeting. The present was enough; and

she shut her eyes to possible complications. Each day brought its own delights.

Mr. Pressford's coming had made developments easy. He was a strong wiry man, about forty in age; brusque in manner, taciturn in speech, and a passionate devotee of Alpine climbing. Always ready to take the lead, he would march steadily ahead, oblivious of or indifferent to the fact that his two companions had a trick of dropping behind, just out of ear-shot. If the "going" were difficult, he would be at once on the alert; though between Maurice's care and the girl's own sure-footedness, his help was seldom needed. At other times he preferred solitude, and liked nothing better than to be let alone.

All of which meant that Maurice and Doris were thrown more and more together; and neither wished things to be otherwise.

The first real mountain expedition was now to come off; and Doris was ready for it, down to the possession of an ice-axe, chosen under Maurice's supervision. All the day before she went about in a state of suppressed rapture, with glowing eyes and a perpetual breaking out of smiles.

Since they had to rise soon after midnight, it was needful to go to bed directly after table d'hôte; and her head was on the pillow by eight. But sleep was another matter.

Every pulse was beating with joyous expectation; and blissful visions floated before her mind's eyes in an endless diorama. She never consciously "lost herself;" yet when the awakening rap at her door came, there was first a bewildered wonder what it could mean, and then a sense of being

sharply recalled from a distance. She felt sure, doubtless wrongly, that she had that instant dropped off.

No matter how brief one's rest may be, getting up is as different from going to bed as sunrise is from sunset. The glamour had departed; and dressing in midnight gloom has a depressing effect, of which even Doris was conscious. She donned by candlelight her very short serge skirt, flannel blouse, Norfolk jacket, and strong nail-studded boots. Then proudly carrying her ice-axe, she went down to breakfast.

Both men were already there; wearing their rough tweed coats, with voluminous pockets inside and out, and their putties; while their heavily-nailed and well-greased boots waited to be drawn on the moment breakfast should be over. More than a hundred feet of rope lay coiled, ready for shouldering; and a couple of ice-axes leant against the wall. Maurice, who, as the less experienced climber, would play the part of porter, was in the act of tying up his ruck-sack, stored with provisions.

Doris's spirits were fast rising; and she was surprised to find, not only the ever-taciturn Pressford, but also Maurice, in a silent mood. The latter surveyed her carefully, and knelt to examine the lacing of her boots. But he had no light chatter at command, and breakfast was eaten in sombre silence. She wondered—was this a part of the programme? Wisely, she fell in with their mental conditions.

By half-past two they were off. Pressford, lantern in hand, took the lead, walking after his usual habit slightly in advance and apart, even when there was no need. Doris in

her eagerness would have hurried ahead, not heeding one or two stumbles; but she was at once checked.

"You must husband your powers," Maurice said.
"Steady, please. Pressford will set the pace."

She realised the wisdom of this later, when she found how she could keep on hour after hour at a swinging stride, with no tendency to flag.

For some distance they followed the main road; and then came an easy rise by pathway, till they gained an upland, and by-and-by entered a pine-forest, where reigned pitchy darkness. When after a considerable time they emerged, it was upon a stony alp. Darkness made their footing here far from easy, since they had left all vestige of a path behind; and starlight gleams seconded but feebly the glimmer of their lantern.

Not far from three hours after quitting the hotel, they reached the first belt of rocks. Here a pause was made for their first mountain breakfast,—that movable feast which goes on at intervals of two hours, until, on the way home, the climbers have "breakfast at afternoon tea."

It was, as it always has to be, a light meal; consisting this time of bread and potted meat. Maurice found a comfortable seat for Doris, supplied her wants, and placed himself near. A few remarks passed; and with a gesture of his hand towards the east he said: "See! Dawn is coming."

A bank of cloud lay low, and between it and the horizon, a pale grey glimmer had begun. As they gazed, a pink hue crept into the grey;—dim, indeterminate, a mere suggestion of what would follow. Yet in that tender gleam

lived hope "sure and certain" of high noon tide. They had to wait for it; but it would come!

Pressford stood up, a sign that they were to do the same. The rocky belt which had now to be surmounted meant a good two hours of work, difficult ax first in the morning twilight, though each minute made a difference with the growth of light. Doris had to pay careful attention to her steps; and Maurice, close behind, gave an occasional hint, when needed.

A halt again was ordered, that they might watch the coming sunrise.

It was Doris's first view of their widened horizon. She stood on a ledge; Maurice one step lower; Pressford a pace above. The cold was biting. A slight breeze, like liquid ice, crept past; and despite her exertions, she could scarcely feel her fingers.

Beyond the rock-belt, looking downward, they saw the long ascent of grass by which they had come; and lower still the dark pine-forest. Then intersecting valleys, dotted with hay-châlets; and here and there a tiny village, deep in shadow. But far above towered lofty peaks, bearing a hint of rose; and the soft colour grew bright; and the tide of light crept downward, revealing couloir after couloir, fold after fold, upon each mountain-side,—till, from beyond the peak which still hid the approaching monarch of day, streamed on either side slant rays of pure whiteness.

One moment the three were in shadow. Then, with a leap, sunshine burst forth, not white but golden; and the world around was transformed. Doris pulled off her woollen

gloves, and held out chilled hands, bathing them in the flood of warmth, laughing with gladness.

"That was worth seeing," Maurice remarked, as their silent leader moved. "Are you getting on all right?"

"It's too lovely for anything," she said with energy. "I never enjoyed myself one-hundredth part as much in all my life."

Two hours of this rock-climbing brought them to the foot of a snow-slope, which formed the "shoulder" of the mountain. Far away upward from where they stood stretched a smooth sheet of sparkling purity.

"Now we shall be above the snow-line," joyously exclaimed Doris. "I've been longing for that, ever since I came to Switzerland."

"Which means—goggles."

"Must we? That beautiful snow! And the goggles will spoil it all so desperately. Must we, really? But of course, if I'm told—"

"I'm afraid it has to be."

Again they paused for a light meal. Pressford decided that roping was advisable, the slope higher up being steep, and Doris's experience small. When they set off, he as usual led; and Maurice, with his ruck-sack, came last. The snow was in good condition, and they made steady advance, though some scraping of steps with Pressford's ice-axe became needful before the end.

An hour of zig-zagging progress up this slope brought them to the final rocks.

CHAPTER XIX

A Rotten Piece of Rock

THE belt which they had reached was both higher and more formidable than the one already surmounted; a stern and frowning rampart, giving access to the short arête by which they would gain the summit.

Seen from below, it looked like a bare wall of rock, seamed indeed with cracks and chimneys, but little less than perpendicular. Tiny patches of whiteness lay wherever it had been able to find a resting-place. For the greater part, however, the angle was too steep for snow to lie; and, as regarded the question of climbing, in mountain parlance "it would not go." A climber's only hope lay in the narrow snow-lined couloirs streaking it, one of which seemed to offer good promise for foothold and handhold.

It was a more awkward "pitch" than Pressford had expected. And, to make matters worse, the rocks were partially glazed with that terror of mountaineers, the dangerous verglas, a thin veneer of ice. Wherever this delicate coating shone, foothold was impossible.

From their position below a small bergshrund, choked with snow, the two men took an anxious survey of the rocks, which indeed wore a menacing aspect enough, especially for a tyro. Doris stood by in acute suspense; for she realised that one word now might dash all her hopes to the ground. And to give up—to turn back—having advanced so far, would be too dreadful! She read doubt in their faces; and imploring

words leaped to her lips. Wisely, she held them back, though her face was eloquent.

Maurice glanced at his companion, and murmured something. Pressford put off immediate decision, by suggesting another meal. The narrow snow-plateau, from which that rocky wall uprose, made an ideal breakfast-table, spread with the purest of snowy cloths.

"I may go on!" Doris breathed, as Maurice came near.

"We'll see—presently." He threw down the rück-sack, emptied of its contents, and offered it to her for a seat. For himself he planted his ice-axe deep in the snow,—a narrow support, which called for careful balancing on his part.

Pressford had unroped and gone off a short distance to reconnoitre; and on his return he beckoned Maurice aside.

"She can do it," he said. "I see how it will 'go.'"

"But the verglas—"

"Only in patches. They can be avoided."

"Shall we start now?" called Doris eagerly.

"Finish the sandwiches first. We shall have no other chance for some time. I'll scramble up a bit, and have one more look. Then—en avant!"

Still free of the rope, he moved some paces away, munching chocolate, and scanning the rocks which frowned grimly above. Maurice came back to his seat by Doris.

They had the world to themselves. Pressford, always aloof and preoccupied, hardly counted.

From their very feet the snow-slope fell away. Behind rose the stern rock-rampart, calling to be climbed. But their eyes were turned to the wide sweep of mountain pastures far

below, and downward thence to valleys shepherding cloudlets of morning mist.

Like birds they were perched aloft; away from common life; cut off from human habitations.

To right and left the gaze rested on snow-clad heights, rocky buttresses, sharp needles; all the fantastic wildness of bristling and icy arêtes; of rocky mountain-sides, seamed with gullies; of snowy mountain-sides, broken by outcrops of bare rock; of hanging glaciers, glittering in sunshine. Peak lay beyond peak; snow-field stretched beyond snow-field. To Doris this wonderful tableau brought a sense of joy; not gay delight, but solemn uplifting rapture.

"It's beyond words," she said. "It is—sublime. But that doesn't explain. Words don't seem strong enough."

"There are things that can only be felt, not said."

"I think I meant that. It is the width—the greatness—the immensity! All earth and sky and heaven. Nothing small or puny. Don't you feel as if you didn't want ever to go back to the paltriness of everyday life?"

"Is everyday life paltry?"

"Compared with—" Her glance swept the scene.

"Even compared with this. It all depends on what one lives for?"

"You mean—doing things for other people. But they are such tiny things. This is so grand—so vast! It seems to lift up one's whole being."

"If you were here always, the force of first impressions would fade. And that question would still push its way to the front."

"The question—what one lives for—do you mean?"

"Yes. Whether for Duty—or only for Self."

A slight pause followed. "If only one's duties weren't so often just the very things one most dislikes!"

A look in her companion's face somehow recalled her father. He asked simply—

"Don't you think that the less one minds about one's own likings, the better? And after all,—obedience against the grain is always grander than doing what one wishes. That may land one on a mountain-top."

"Yes—I see. I suppose—" and she smiled—"when you gave up your climb that day, for the sake of Mr. Ramsay, you really got to a higher peak than if you had gone up the Grand Muveran."

He laughed.

"Very kind of you to say so. But that was a simple necessity. Nothing else could have been possible."

"And since then you've never been able to go, because you have been so busy, teaching me to climb." That some self-denial might be involved in this had not earlier occurred to her. She looked at him gratefully. "But anyhow—you have the work in life that you like. You are not one of those people who seem put down in just the wrong place. You wouldn't wish to change!"

"It is the work I have to do. It was not my choice."

"But how—Was it settled for you?"

"Practically. My business now is to make the best of it. We can always learn to like what we have to do."

"Can we?" The corners of her mouth curled rebelliously.
"But I like to choose for myself. I like to be free."

"Most of us do. But there's a higher standing than just personal freedom."

"And the higher—?" she questioned.

"Carrying out the will of another, against one's own will—because it is one's duty."

"Carrying out—anybody's will!"

"I meant, primarily—the Divine Will."

She considered this soberly.

"But—if one can do the things that one likes better than the things one doesn't like—wouldn't that be best?"

"Not from the point of view of character-making. When a man does his best badly in the line that he does not love, it is actually better, actually worth more, than if he were successful to any amount in the line that he would love. Of course we're right to do the work we prefer, when it's given us to do. But the other may have grander results. Men are not always called to what they would choose for themselves."

She pondered this again, then said with a smile—

"Curious that we should have got into such a grave talk, up here!"

"One often does," he replied; and it was true, as many have found in their position. The splendour of a scene, such as that on which they gazed, does not lend itself to moods of frivolity. Pastures dotted with human homes may consort with gaiety; but the wild solitudes of mountain heights are not gay. They seem rather to be intensely earnest; uplifted above light talk and merriment; brooding solemnly over

earth's smallness; apart from lesser interests; leading the minds of those who gain their presence to deeper and higher topics.

Pressford, having gone farther than he intended, now came crunching over the hard snow. It was all right, he said,—and "a rare sporting bit." His quiet eyes held an unwonted gleam in them, as of a mountain warrior, eager for the fray, thirsting for a fight with Nature's obstacles.

But for Maurice all was not so clear. With regard to Pressford and himself, the climb might be practicable enough. Could it be looked upon as right for the girl? That was the real question, and he did not attempt to hide his anxiety.

"Indeed, indeed, I'm not afraid," urged Doris. "I'm not one least little atom afraid. It is all so much easier than I expected. And I'm splendidly fresh still. And to go back now—oh, it would be too desperately disappointing. Please, please, don't make me!"

"She can do it," once more asserted Pressford's imperturbable voice.

"I don't half like her to try."

"Well,—we'll put matters to the test. She shall wait here, while you and I do part of the way. If we find that it 'goes,' you shall come down for her on the rope; and I'll haul her up. That does away with risks. The awkward part is certainly not more than a hundred feet or so. Once over that, we shall be all right."

This plan, after some further discussion, was adopted. Pressford and Maurice began the ascent; the former leading.

Only thirty feet of rope separated the two men. They followed the rule, invariable in rock climbing,—one moving, while the other stood firm, hitching the rope over any convenient rock-projection, and thus making himself as secure as possible, to ensure safety in the event of a slip on the part of his companion.

Pressford's task as leader was by far the more severe; and his climbing was a work of art, worth seeing. He had chosen a couloir or gully, never more than a dozen feet in width, rugged, broken, partly lined with snow, partly glazed with ice. It swerved a little to the left, so that one climber would seldom be just over the head of the other.

Doris below, near Maurice, watched steadfastly, fascinated by Pressford's advance, as he crept upward, making no hasty movement, testing each foothold before he trusted to it, taking advantage of every handhold. At times he appeared to cling bodily to the steep rock, writhing and working himself cleverly over one obstacle after another.

Having thus mounted nearly thirty feet, he came to a halt, fixed himself in a good position, and then called on Maurice to follow.

"You'll be sure to let me come! It looks so deliciously easy!" begged Doris.

"Not so easy as you think!"

"But you'll have the rope."

"Yes. My work is child's play, compared with his."

"And mine will be child's play too," she said gaily.

He gave a little parting nod, and went up in steady fashion, till he reached Pressford. Then, in his turn, he settled himself firmly, and Pressford started anew.

The second advance of thirty feet proved stiffer than the first. Pressford managed it, however, with no real difficulty; and Maurice followed, his task as before greatly simplified by the "moral support" of the rope.

Next came Pressford's third effort, the toughest of all. This done, there would be nothing beyond to fear.

Slowly, quietly, with never a hurried movement, he worked his way up the gully, inch by inch ascending, till he had gained a level of nearly one hundred feet above their starting-point, where Doris stood, statue-like, on the snow.

"Is it easy going now?" shouted Maurice.

"Pretty fair," assented the leader. "I haven't had really to extend myself yet. But I think I'll have another ten feet of rope, if you can manage it, before you go down and rope Miss Winton."

"Are you over the worst bit?"

"Nearly. Ten feet more rope will do it. Quite easy after that."

"One moment—" called Maurice. "Can you stand firm? Another ten feet will put me in a splendid position."

A pause; and then—"Yes. All right."

Maurice mounted the few feet without trouble, and wedged himself in where the gully had narrowed sufficiently to imprison a fallen boulder. Each foot had solid support; and his shoulders rested in a hollow between the boulder and the

side of the gully. He could hardly have been better placed. When he had made himself secure, Pressford observed—

"It's a bit of a stretch to a perfect hold. Are you quite firm?"

"Yes. But don't risk anything. There's Miss Winton to think of."

"Oh, I can do it!" came in reply. "The rock's good enough."

Then a grim silence, long to the listener, broken only by the occasional patter of a stone loosened by Pressford, which came bounding down the gully.

Pressford was now out of sight of his fellow-climber, but in full view of Doris, who had followed the movements of each in turn, with mingled suspense and delight, counting the moments till she should be allowed to make her own essay.

Suspense, lest they should decide that the ascent was too hard for a beginner. That was all. She had no thought of fear; and nothing lay farther from her imagination than that either of her companions should come to grief. Two experienced climbers—one of them a practised mountaineer who had scaled without a guide some of the most hazardous peaks in Switzerland!—roped together, in a gully which she herself hoped to go up. The idea would have seemed preposterous.

But even a first-class mountaineer is never absolutely ensured against a slip,—still less against the perils of rotten rock.

She saw Pressford creep, worming himself along like a snake, over a slab of slanting rock, on which from where she

stood no foothold could be detected. His right hand rose stealthily, inch by inch, till it appeared to be at its furthest stretch.

For two or three seconds the climber rested thus,—silent, immobile, as a black shadow on the rock. Suddenly there was a spasmodic effort. His hand clutched at a hold six inches beyond reach; and in this act the only firm foothold was perforce abandoned. His fingers closed convulsively on the rocky projection; and in another moment he would have drawn himself up to a safe position.

He gripped a shade more firmly. And—like the snapping of a rotten branch, overweighted with winter snow—the rock came away in his clutch.

One second he lay prone against the wall, clinging with every muscle of his sinewy frame; the only clear thought in his brain a wild regret that he had trusted to an untested hold.

Then he came sliding downward, faster and faster; making vain clutches at the rock to stay his fall,—till, from thirty feet above Maurice, he was brought up sharply thirty feet below, by the rope.

And there, to the dismay of Doris, he hung; heavy, motionless, as if without life.

CHAPTER XX

Only a Girl!

THE first intimation of anything wrong, received by Maurice, came in the shape of a shower of stones; and a sharp exclamation from above warned him what to expect.

He saw Pressford slide past, vainly trying to check his own rapid descent. And before Maurice had time for more than a lightning-flash of realisation, came the shock—the grip of the rope about his chest and body, almost cutting him in two.

It seemed more than he could endure. All his strength was needed to withstand that first overwhelming pull, which tore fiercely at him like a wolf, bringing positive agony. He was unable to breathe save in broken gasps.

Half-unconsciously he shifted his position, to ease the intolerable strain. Then, as the pain lessened, he could breathe and think again; and he began to ask himself what had happened.

Was Pressford killed—or only stunned—by this fall of some sixty feet on relentless rock?

He shouted, and there was no answer. He tried to haul at the rope which bound him to Pressford; but the effort only endangered his hold. He dared not stir. For the time he could bear the strain of his friend's weight. But—how long would he be able?

He could not see the fallen man. He could only see the rope—twitching as it descended over the jammed boulder. He could only know by conjecture what had been the cause.

Would nothing break this death-like stillness?

He remembered Doris, whose presence had been momentarily driven from his mind by Pressford's fall. Why had she not called out? Then it occurred to him that she might have screamed, unheard, at the worst moment of the shock,—that even since then she might have called, without gaining his attention.

As he wondered, her voice, clear and steady, came up to him. "Mr. Maurice—something is wrong. Mr. Pressford has fallen. Can I help?"

"Can you see him?" Maurice's deeper tones asked.

"Yes." In the pure mountain air their voices travelled easily.

"Any support below?"

"I'm afraid not. It's all smooth rock." She scanned the part intently. "I can't be sure. There's a ledge a little to one side—not quite below him. May I come up? If I may, I can pull him on the ledge."

The offer took Maurice by surprise. He was amazed at her coolness, her presence of mind.

"No! No!" he called. He could not think of letting her run the risk, unroped. "Stay where you are." His tone was urgent.

"But indeed I must. Please let me." Her courage rose, as she recognised the need for action. "Let me come. Say yes. I'm sure I can do it."

"No, no. Wait. Pressford may revive."

Moments lagged slowly by, and still the heavy helpless body hung against the rock-wall, kept there by the taut rope.

For Maurice to stir was out of the question. As now placed, he might support the weight for an hour, perhaps even for many hours. But to slacken his hold of the rope for one instant would mean certain death for the unconscious Pressford and for himself; probably also for Doris, should she be left alone on a steep mountain-side, under such terrible conditions.

If the weight dragging at him could be but for a few seconds removed, he might make the rope secure, and then descend to Pressford's help. But that was impossible.

Only a girl below; a mere inexperienced beginner in the art of climbing. She could do nothing. He had to stay where he was,—till Pressford should revive, or till some problematic rescue-party should appear on the scene.

"Do let me," she entreated. "I'm almost sure I could get him on the ledge. We can't leave him like this. I'll be very, very careful."

Through fifty or sixty feet of height each word dinned mercilessly into his ears. He was sorely exercised. How to consent, he did not know; yet what else to do, he did not know either. Had Doris been a man, that which she suggested would have been the only right plan. But to allow her to risk her life—and he knew it must mean no ordinary risk!—the whole being of the young surgeon cried out in protest. It would have been out of the question with any girl, he told himself. How much more with her!

He pictured the awfulness of what must follow a slip on her part. No rope would hold her up. She would fall to the snow-ledge whence she had started, and with such impetus

that she would not stop there, but would roll and bound down the snow-slope and over the rocks below. And he, tied to his helpless friend, would be unable to stir a finger to save his love from a terrible death. Had he doubted the fact before, he knew in this hour that she was his love—the one woman in the world for him. And he would have to look on—to see it all! The horror of that thought went beyond endurance.

Yet more—he saw himself, somehow rescued, going to the hotel, to make known what had happened; wandering over the heights, in search for her crushed and mangled body. He saw what her friends would think, when he and Pressford returned; and only the young girl in their charge was missing!

Impossible!

"No! No! You must not," he repeated. "I can't allow it. Could you find your way down the mountain, and send help?"

She surveyed the long steep slope, which they had mounted, and shook her head.

"No!" she called, a thrill of fresh resolution in her voice. "It would mean hours and hours. And I might miss my way. You could not hold him all that time."

"Yes, I could."

"No. You must let me climb. That is the only thing to be done."

He set his teeth and groaned, before replying—"I will not have it. I can't allow it, Doris." The name slipped out unconsciously, and it sent a glow through her.

"But he has to be saved. He must be saved. And there's no other way," she cried in terse phrases. "You must let me try." Then, as he still refused,—"But if it is my duty! You will not keep me from doing my duty!"

He had at length to give in. Pressford showed no signs of returning sense; and Doris's insistence swept aside his opposition. He began to realise that, if he refused consent, she would come without his consent. He doubted, too, whether to attempt the long descent of the mountain alone would mean for her less peril. She would have to go unroped, feeling anxious, distressed, hurried. The tax to nerve and strength would last through hours; and he would not be at hand to lend encouragement. For awhile still he held out; but at last, with a deadly sinking of heart, he was impelled to yield.

"But you must be very careful—very slow—" he urged. "Make sure of each hold before you leave the last. And if you find it too much, turn back at once."

"Yes, yes," she cried. "I'll be so careful. I promise."

For three seconds she stood motionless, praying one short vehement prayer for help,—entreating that she might be kept calm and steady and sure of foot; that she might be able to carry out what she had to do.

She did not under-estimate the nature of the task before her. That it was both difficult and dangerous, a task which under ordinary conditions she would not have dreamt of doing, she knew well; and she realised also that the lives of these two men depended, in all probability, upon her exertions. Maurice would never abandon his friend. If no

casual passer-by came to their rescue,—a most unlikely event,—and if Pressford did not regain consciousness, then, but for her, both were doomed.

Without further delay, and with every muscle braced to firmness, she set out upon her perilous emprise.

Although, as said earlier by Maurice, she was a born climber, her experience had been limited, and this was a severe test. The steepness of the gully, the paucity of good holds, the general slipperiness, the patches of verglas to be avoided—all demanded skill and nerve. And she knew, hardly less distinctly than Maurice himself, what a slip must mean.

Step by step she advanced, placing each foot with caution, testing each hold before she trusted to it! Maurice from above, spoke an occasional quiet word, when he could see what she was doing. When he could not, he lived through sickening agonies. A vision floated before his eyes of a false step on her part, and then of that fearful bounding fall down and down the mountain-side. But at the back of that vision, behind the anguish of suspense, though it seemed to him that no word of actual prayer was possible, his whole being was concentrated into one passionate appeal for her safety. "O God!— O God!"—was all he could utter. It meant— everything.

About half-way up she found herself on a narrow ledge, from which further progress looked all but hopeless. For a moment her heart failed. Could she go on? Should she turn back? She thought again of the two men; of Maurice, unable

to stir; of Pressford, hanging senseless. She was their one hope. The thing had to be done.

Again a cry for help was flung upwards from her heart; and she set herself resolutely to work, to surmount the difficulty—to climb a bare rock-surface, which commonly she would have counted insurmountable, unless she were roped.

Careful study showed the only track which she could hope to follow with success; and she set to work. Her whole mind had to be bent on what she was doing; and every nerve was tense, as she crept from crack to crack, clinging, gripping, holding on for very life. Not for her own life only! Was she not given this to do —for others? That recollection brought renewed confidence.

A single glimpse she had of the plunging depth below; a moment's awful realisation of what a fall would be. With the glimpse and the realisation came a shock and tremor. Then she calmed herself, holding hard, and looking upward. "It has to be done! It must be done!" she whispered; and the brief weakness passed.

Four more brave efforts; and the spot which had threatened disaster lay behind.

CHAPTER XXI

A Superb Rescue

IT took Doris twice as long to mount as it had taken Pressford; and each moment of the time was to her—but tenfold more to Maurice—an age in itself. She was in a state of acute nervous strain. One object only lay before her mind,—the next step, the next handhold. Other thoughts died out, or were entirely subordinate. Her powers of climbing, under the present exigency, were increased to a remarkable degree. Maurice marvelled, as he watched and feared.

At last she was nearly on a level with Pressford!

She could see now that he hung against a face of smooth rock, beyond the couloir which she was mounting; and that between him and death lay nothing but the upholding rope. But, as she had half made out from below, a ledge of rock, just wide enough for safety, gave access from the gully to a spot nearly below him. Once upon that ledge, she would be able to secure Pressford, and so to free Maurice. Her spirit bounded at the thought.

More work had to be done first. To quit the couloir and reach the ledge meant two or three dizzy steps. But' courage rose high, and fear was gone. All recollection of self was swallowed up in the joy of success. Perhaps her chief danger at this point lay in the direction of overconfidence; and Maurice's warning voice—"Steady, don't hurry!"—came at the right moment.

Three critical steps were managed without a shudder. She gained the ledge, passed to its farther end, measured

Pressford's distance with a glance, and called—"It's all right! I'm here!"

That crossing from the gully had taken her beyond the range of Maurice's vision; and the pause before her glad cry reached him meant another short-long agony of suspense. Then he knew; and the relief was unspeakable. For one moment his brain swam; and—"Thank God!"—was all he could utter.

"I'm on the ledge all right," she cried again.

Maurice spoke clearly. "Can you reach him? I can only loosen a foot of rope, without letting go."

"Yes—yes that will do. I'll get him—if you'll just lower him the least little bit. Yes—so—a little more."

Inch by inch, as Maurice allowed the rope to slip through his stiff and aching fingers, Pressford descended. Doris, steadyng herself, grasped him by the boots, pulled him towards the ledge, and called for further slackening. Soon he lay at full length, and she knelt to support his head.

"It's all right!"—once more in ringing tones. "He is here—safe—on the ledge with me."

"Can you unrove him, and fix the rope securely?"

"I'll try."

She freed the rope from Pressford, and then, with a good deal of difficulty, succeeded in fastening it strongly round a crag.

"I think it will do now. I've pulled hard, and it holds," she said.

"Stay where you are. I'm coming."

She could hear but could not see Maurice's movements. The waiting, the inaction, tried her much, after the past strain and exertion. Pressford did not stir, but once or twice she heard him mutter an incoherent word. She could see that he had had a heavy blow on the head, where his hair was matted with blood.

Keeping a hand on his shoulder, lest he should try to get up, she counted the slow moments. "If Maurice should slip," became a haunting fear. True, he had the rope; and that, if it held, would keep him from falling far. But what if she had not made the rope quite secure? What if the crag should snap under a sudden jerk? What if he, in his turn, should be stunned?

These and other possibilities ran riot in her mind. If anything happened to him, what could she do, alone on this ledge of rock with the helpless Pressford? She had come up, alone. She was certain that she could never go down alone.

Beyond and above such fears, it flashed across her what a difference would be wrought in her life, if Maurice were killed! Till this hour she had hardly recognised the place which he had won in her heart.

He was coming—coming. She could hear the sounds of his gradual approach. She said no word, called no question. He needed all his faculties, undisturbed, for the descent. The actual difficulties of the gully were indeed much less for him than for her; but he had passed through a nerve-trying experience, which might well have lessened his powers of endurance. And though the rope was there to break his fall, in case of a slip, it gave him no actual help in his descent.

Suddenly he was within sight. She held her breath. Those critical steps, dividing the couloir from the ledge, had to be taken, but to a practised mountaineer they meant nothing.

One moment more—and he stepped upon the ledge.

Doris's forebodings vanished like smoke. In an instant she felt as safe as if at the mountain's base. His hand grasped hers with a long and meaning grip which spoke volumes; and their eyes met. Words were not needed; perhaps, at least for Maurice, were not possible. Each felt only that the other was safe; that a great danger was over; that a terrible calamity had been averted. That prolonged grasp spoke of a thankfulness which could not be voiced,—of a mutual joy beyond speech,—of a drawing closer together of their two lives.

Then, still in silence, Maurice knelt beside Pressford, examined the blow on his head, and passed a careful hand over different parts of his body.

"Is he much hurt?" Doris ventured to ask.

"I hope not. I can't be sure yet as to other injuries; but no bones seem to be broken. He is badly stunned, poor fellow!" After a slight pause,—"I must rope you next, and send you down."

"And Mr. Pressford?"

"Afterwards. You first."

He made all ready, bracing himself securely as near to the couloir as he could stand, while within reach if Pressford should move. Then, as Doris began her descent, he let out the rope with extreme caution. Going down was, of course, in itself more risky than going up, but the rope gave confidence

and meant safety. Twice she slipped, and Maurice held firmly, till she regained her balance.

Arriving at the snow-plateau, she freed herself, and stood watching, while Maurice hauled the rope in, fastened it round Pressford, and slowly lowered the latter to her side. This done, he followed, fixing part of the rope to aid him over the worst rocks.

"Mr. Pressford seems rousing up a little," Doris announced. "He said something quite sensible just now."

The "something sensible" must have been hazy in nature, judging from the mutter which greeted Maurice. But after a few sips of cold tea, when Maurice had tied up the wound on his friend's head with a silk handkerchief, Pressford really showed signs of reviving.

"What has happened?" he was able to ask.

"You've had an awkward fall, old man. Did you lose your hold?"

"No—" after a pause for recollection. "No—I believe—the rock gave."

"Hard luck! But you'll do now, I hope."

Pressford seemed to lose himself again; and some time elapsed before his next remark. "Miss Winton—sorry—disappointed. Can't bag our peak to-day."

"No. That's unfortunate."

"How did you get me down? I suppose—the rope held."

"Yes; but I was a fixture. It was all I could do to support your weight. I might have stayed there till Doomsday—but for Miss Winton. She climbed up to our help."

"Climbed—where?"

"To that ledge." Maurice indicated its position, and Pressford, startled into full consciousness, raised himself on one elbow, staring hard at the rocky rampart, then turning amazed eyes on Doris. "You were hanging above that—to one side—on the smooth slabby bit."

"You don't mean to say—!"

"Better lie still a little longer." Maurice put him back with a gentle hand.

"You don't mean to say she climbed up there—alone!—unroped!"

"Alone and unroped. She did it superbly. Not a slip from start to finish."

"My goodness!" uttered Pressford, still staring.

Doris broke into a little laugh of pleasure.

"But I was dreadfully frightened once—at the worst part—and not at all brave," she confessed. "The rock was so steep; and there seemed almost nothing to get hold of. I thought I should have to give up."

"If you felt afraid, it was much braver to go on than if you did not," Pressford said. He seemed more himself, though pale and shaken; and his gaze went to and fro between Doris and the mountain-wall. "Well—" he muttered. "I shouldn't have imagined any girl could do it—with no more training!" He turned to Maurice. "How you could let her—passes me!"

"But it had to be done. There was no other way," Doris eagerly explained. "It would have been much worse to go alone all down the mountain. And Mr. Maurice couldn't have held you up, all those hours."

"I should have come to—in time."

"I rather doubt it—in the position in which you were hanging," Maurice said dryly. "And if you had, it would have been an awkward spot for you to tackle in your present state. You were not over the ledge. And just below you—"

He did not finish the sentence. Pressford took another look, and muttered—"Hm!"

"So we owe our lives, both of us, to Miss Winton's courage."

Maurice attempted no self-defence. He simply could not explain what the giving of that permission had meant to himself. He could not trust himself to speak of it.

"I say—time is going, and we have to get down the mountain. I believe I can walk now."

"Wait half-an-hour more. We will start then. Miss Winton and I want another breakfast first."

"Yes, indeed. I'm just starving," declared the girl.

During the half-hour they munched bread and chocolate, talking and laughing, as if none of the three had, only a little while before, been on the very verge of that gulf which divides this life from the next. Not that they had not been deeply impressed; not that they were not profoundly thankful; but something of reaction was upon them. Doris was in a state of natural exultation at having achieved a task of no small difficulty and danger, thereby saving two lives; and Maurice's hopes with regard to her had risen high. He could not but feel how much nearer together they had drawn this eventful day.

A start had to be made. They were roped again; Doris now, in the descent, going first; and Maurice, occupying the post of most danger, behind. Pressford, as the least capable of the three, had to be in the middle.

So soon as he was on his feet, it became evident that he was suffering greatly from pain and dizziness; but he pulled himself together, and managed better than might have been expected. While any real difficulty of footing existed, he kept this up; down the steep snow-slope, and on the lower belt of rocks, which had meant for them two hours of stiff ascent. Then he collapsed, and had to lie on the ground for nearly an hour, semi-conscious.

In the long stretch which followed of pine-wood and easy pasturage, he failed again and again; and one rest had to follow another. So hours passed; and it was dusk when they neared the village. Yet the time had not seemed tedious to Doris; still less, to Maurice. These repeated rests gave them opportunities for long quiet tête-à-tête talks on many subjects; and neither of the two had any wish to reach the end of the walk, for their own sakes, though both were solicitous for Pressford.

By the time that the lights of the village hove in sight, and their troubles were ended, it seemed to Doris that she had known Maurice all her life. It seemed yet more to Maurice that life without Doris had never been.

CHAPTER XXII

Two Hearts Drawing Nearer

PRESSFORD was for several days hors de combat; and Ramsay could hardly yet be called convalescent; so the two wives had enough to do. Mrs. Brutt, deeply interested in the invalids, confident of her own infallibility, and always anxious to be "in" whatever might be going, begged permission to lend her help. She was so accustomed to sick folks; she would know exactly how to manage.

"Not for worlds! Keep her off, at any cost!" growled the dismayed Pressford.

Excuses were politely framed; but Mrs. Brutt, like many who are abnormally sure of themselves, proved impervious to hints. If she might not share in the actual nursing, she was bent on at least supplementing the efforts of her "dear young doctor."

So she brought to the door, now a bottle of medicine for one patient, then a prescription for the other; now a plate of fruit, then a bunch of grapes; now a recipe for soup, then a pictorial newspaper. It was all most kindly meant; but her incessant comings and goings between hotel and châlet began to get upon people's nerves.

Since the accident, she had taken fright about mountain-ascents, and had put her foot down flat, refusing consent for another attempt. No, she really couldn't! It was out of the question. If Doris were killed, what did they suppose would be thought of her? This seemed to be a question of greater importance in her eyes, than the actual tragedy. Go up the

Glückhorn again! Certainly not! Doris must first get leave from her parents. Mrs. Brutt washed her hands of any such responsibility.

It was a severe disappointment; for Doris had set her heart on a second and successful climb. She doubted if leave would be given, after the manner of letter which Mrs. Brutt was sure to write. And days were passing! Maurice's time of absence was nearly up, though it had been slightly extended.

Thus far, in writing home, she had said very little about him,—vaguely dreading to have her present happiness cut short. She would have found it difficult to express by post her own half-defined feelings; and—whether consciously or half-unconsciously—she had not mentioned his name, but had alluded to him as the "English doctor in our hotel."

This was distinctly not ingenuous. From the first she ought to have written more fully. And in her heart Doris knew it!

Until the day of the Glückhorn ascent, she had not definitely allowed even to herself that the growing intimacy meant more than friendship. And, though now her eyes were being opened, still—Maurice had not spoken.

After divers protestations from Mrs. Brutt, and the quashing of various schemes, Maurice begged to take Doris to the summit of the Petit Chamossaire. He was bent on having her once more to himself. Something had to be said before they parted; something that he had no wish to say—that he would thankfully have deferred saying. But conscience spoke loudly, and would not be denied.

So he made his request, and explained that no risks would be run. A magnificent view could be gained at small cost. The summit stood some 7600 feet above the sea-level; yet to get there meant a mere walk, with no real climbing; a walk which any lady might venture to take. Any robust lady, he hastened to add, as he perceived dawning recollections of past gazelle-like agility. He did not wish Mrs. Brutt to forth a third in the expedition; and he knew that she dreaded nothing more than to be counted "robust."

After some fuss, leave was granted. Mrs. Brutt had her doubts whether Mrs. Winton would approve of the plan—just Doris and Mr. Maurice going together! She might have been perfectly sure that Doris's mother would very much disapprove. But since her dear young doctor thought it right, she could not refuse. And really girls nowadays did that sort of thing. Nobody thought anything of it.

She had not the resolution to oppose him; and she honestly believed that his "kindness" to Doris was wholly for her sake. He was really so agreeable, she said to one of her English-speaking German cronies; so charmingly "domesticated." This was another of her misused adjectives, which might give the impression of a man of the "tame-cat" order. Dick Maurice was not that. But it satisfied her; and she was delighted with his attentions to herself.

So the expedition was arranged.

No need this time for axes and goggles. And they started between six and seven, instead of between two and three.

Much of their way was a rough sledge-path through pine-woods, where footing might take care of itself; and they

talked without a break. Well as they felt that they had known one another before, mutual knowledge that day advanced by strides. No third person was present to act as a drag.

Somehow, Doris had told him much more about herself than he had told her about himself, up to this date.

He could talk with enthusiasm of his profession, his work, his friends, his aims and objects, the books he had read, the places he had seen, the mountains he had climbed. And that was all right enough. But from the first he had said little about his home. She knew that his work lay in Edinburgh. She did not know whether his home was there; and, though aware that his mother lived, she knew nothing more about his family. Sometimes she had caught herself wondering over this persistent silence.

Through the long early morning walk, he still said nothing; but she had a curious sense that he wanted to say something. There were occasional slight breaks and pauses, when his attention seemed adrift, his mind preoccupied.

They had a second breakfast at Bretaye, in the small open restaurant, with a fine distant view of Mont Blanc. Then they mounted the only steep place which had to be climbed; a mere nothing, after recent experiences.

On the summit, a lofty headland, they found themselves at the centre of a splendid panorama.

By the way they had come, the descent though sharp was grassy and gradual. On the other side, close to where they had found seats, a narrow belt of sloping grass ended in a deep precipice, facing the Rhone Valley. It was a day of glorious sunshine, tempered by a light breeze; and a few

cloudlets, like wisps of cotton-wool, lay in far off hollows. The heaven was one unbroken expanse of rich blue.

Maurice pointed out to her in a subdued voice some chief features in the landscape; beginning with the Lake of Geneva, a misty blur, bounded by dim Jura outlines; and travelling thence to the left, by way of the rugged Gramont and the pale blue Dent du Midi. Between the latter and the Dent du Morcles was a radiant vision of the monarch of Swiss mountains, pure and spotlessly white; also of the massed turrets and glaciers of the Valaisian Range.

Viewed beside these snow-clad giants the Dent du Midi, imposing enough when observed from a lower level, was dwarfed, much as some worthy village magnate is dwarfed in the presence of Royalty.

Farther to the left lay the grand rocky range, which Doris had been daily studying; and the individuals of that range also fell into their true places. Seen from this lofty standpoint, indeed, many heights which had claimed to be great grew small; while others, hitherto modestly in the background, rose to their real greatness.

Yet more to the left, as the eye travelled round, and beyond rocky ranges, was a vision of the Oberland giants; especially of the Jungfrau and her two mighty neighbours. Of all the vast mountain array that day, the stately Jungfrau alone, a coy maiden of substantial proportions, hid her fair face behind a veil of cloud.

Farther still came more and more masses of tangled rocks and pine-clad summits; following which, the circuit

was completed; and at length the dim Geneva lake once more claimed attention.

But no words can give the scene as a whole; no brain could grasp all its infinite complexity of finish.

Solid mountains and spreading valleys; hollowed ravines and rifted sides; towering summits and wall-like precipices; steep white glaciers, with tiny transverse lines suggestive of crevasses, and pure broad snowfields; lifted horns and jagged ridges; great pine-forests and fair green pastures; scattered villages and distant towns—all these went to the making of the picture. And over everything, far and near, a delicate intangible veil of pale blue mist, hiding nothing, dimming nothing, only adding to the perfect beauty by a slight softening of outline, while permitting every detail to be seen.

And, in the midst of it all, two human beings, a man and a girl; two hearts drawing hourly nearer together.

And the heart of a man is greater than the mightiest of mountains, as spirit is greater than matter.

CHAPTER XXIII

Almost Over

THEY had followed the circuit of the landscape, standing up to look each way in turn; then resuming their seats. A break in the talk came. Doris twisted round, to gaze over the abrupt descent behind them—then looked again admiringly towards the wonderful Oberland dream-vision. She had anew the feeling that Maurice wanted to say something; and waited for him to say it.

Her sense spoke truly. All the morning he had been pondering how to lead up to this something—how to produce it; and conjecturing how she would take it.

He dreaded coming to the point. It might make all the difference with her; with his hopes of winning her. But the thing had to be said. And he could hope for no better opportunity. When he spoke, there was a sound of strain in his voice.

"You were asking one day—not long ago—how it was that I took to my present work."

"Yes, I remember. You said it wouldn't have been your own choice. I suppose that means that you don't care for doctoring—or rather, for surgery."

"It is a life with no end of openings."

"Openings for what?"

"Helping others. Being of use."

"But you would have liked something else."

"My real bent was for the army."

"And why didn't you—?"

"The friend who paid for my education refused his consent."

She wondered why this brought a disagreeable sensation.

"What made him refuse?"

"He gave no reason."

"And you are sorry—still!"

"Nothing is more foolish than to be a slave to useless regrets. My line is marked out for me; and I have to make the best of it."

"That is brave—anyway," she murmured.

"It is my simple duty."

He had not yet said what had to be said. It was difficult to come to the point. He was sorely tempted to put off.

"But your friend who—had he a right to forbid the army?"

"I suppose he had—in a way. He made it a condition of giving the help that I—we—needed."

"I see," she said. But she felt that she did not see. "Was he a near relative?"

"No. A friend." Doris kept uneasy silence. He added, "My mother enforced his wish."

She repeated, "Your mother?" with a note of inquiry.

"I have meant to tell you more about her. It is right that I should. Her father, my grandfather, was, I have always heard, a very superior man; head-clerk in a large house of business in Manchester. But he married beneath him—one of the mill-hands. I don't know how it came about. My mother was left an orphan very young; and her home was with an

uncle—a farmer. She is not well educated. She was sent to school, I know, for two or three years—but perhaps she did not care to learn."

Doris was taken acutely by surprise. She did not know what to say; and she waited in silence for more.

"My father," he went on in a low voice, "died when I was a little child. I have no remembrance of him. But my mother once told me that he was well-born—well-connected. And I know—apart from what she said—I know, from what is in me, that he must have been of gentle birth. You understand, do you not? I have all the instincts of gentle blood. That at least I may claim, without hesitation. I have them—not from training only, but by inheritance."

Another pause. Doris had not stirred.

"Still—I must tell you frankly—I am afraid there may have been about him something not satisfactory. I only conjecture this, for my mother has said nothing of the kind. She is by nature extraordinarily reserved; and she scarcely ever mentions him. He may, possibly, have done something which she does not like to tell. But that my father was a gentleman, I have no doubt."

Doris made an indistinct sound.

"By the wish of this friend, who undertook my education, I have been very little with my mother and sisters. He has insisted on keeping me as much as possible away from them."

She managed to say, "That must make things difficult."

"It makes things very difficult. When we do meet, there is a gulf which nothing can bridge over. Our lives, our aims,

our whole outlook— are different. I suppose the separation was wrong. But I had no responsibility there. Nothing now can undo the past."

"And this friend—does he still wish you to keep away from them?"

"The same as ever. And though he has no real control over me, we owe him much. Besides—he makes other things depend upon—this!"—in a lower tone.

Another break. "You have sisters," Doris observed.

"Two. One of them has inherited—as I hope I have—the instincts of gentle blood. Poor little Winnie! But—Jane—"

He stopped short. Doris had started to her feet, crimson and half choked, hardly able to believe her own ears.

Winnie!—and Jane! Morris!—and Maurice!—the same name, differently spelt.

His father—a gentleman! In a flash she recalled the portrait, found and opened by Mrs. Brutt; the narrow, low-browed bad face, the worse than vulgar look. That—his father! And his mother—the heavy, blunt, silent woman, Mrs. Morris! And his sister—the impossible Jane, in yellow blouse and furious fringe and cheap gorgeous hat!

It was like an abyss opening before her! This new sweet world of happiness, in which for days she had lived, underwent eclipse.

In a flash she saw it all; and she forgot where she was. She forgot everything, except the dire discovery that Dick Maurice, the man to whom she had lost her heart, was the son of Phil Morris and Nurse Molly, and—the brother of Jane!

Her first impulse was to spring to her feet, to put a space between herself and him. She obeyed the impulse unthinkingly, with a hasty backward movement.

One step, and she was on the verge of that tremendous depth, which separated this lofty headland from the valley, far far below. Dominated by the one overwhelming thought, she did not dream of danger. A second step—and her foot was over the edge, in empty air.

She tottered—staggered—flung out her hands. Maurice, springing to save her, believed for one awful hundredth of a second that he was too late; that she had surmounted the perils of a dangerous rock-climb, to perish from off this grassy mount. The shock of her staggering clutch at the air, as she swayed backwards, drove every vestige of colour from his face; and any less instantaneous leap to the rescue must have failed of its object. She was in the very act of falling, when gripped by his hand and dragged away.

"How—could you?"

She saw that he was ghastly.

"I—don't know. Did I slip?"

"What made you?"

She tried to withdraw her hand, but he kept a firm grip, led her to the edge, and bade her look over. Where they stood, it seemed that nothing lay between them and the level of the Rhone Valley, thousands of feet below. From the contemplation of that sheer depth, her eyes sought his.

"I see! I—had forgotten. And you—you saved me." She gave a shudder. "How quick you were! I can't thank you. It has given you rather a fright."

Rather a fright! He drew her to a safe distance, made her sit down, and did the same himself—his face still as white as chalk. She submitted in bewildered silence, conscious that her escapade was being commented on by two or three strangers present, though no one ventured to accost the pair.

As she sat by his side, it dawned upon her what her death would have meant to Maurice, had she been thus, in one moment, swept out of his life. Then, reverting to what had gone before, she felt a great wave of pity for him. She could see that he was unnerved, shaken, hardly able to hold himself together. If things were as he said, it was not his fault. He could not be blamed for his parentage.

"But I ought to have known sooner," she said to herself. Maurice at length broke the silence.

"Was it—what I said? Did that startle you?"

Her reply was indistinct.

"For days I have felt that I must explain. Especially since your mention of Mr. Stirling. Don't you see?" as she looked puzzled. "It is he who paid for my education."

"Oh," vaguely. "Did I speak of him? He is a great friend of ours."

"It—has not been easy," Maurice went on, very low. "The temptation to put off has been—tremendous. More than I can explain! But I knew it had to be said. And I thought—if I could get you alone for this walk—"

"Yes. I understand."

He clenched his fingers upon his stick, till they whitened through their tan.

"Was it—what I said about my mother that startled you? Or was it—?"

"I have seen your sister Jane," was all she said; and Maurice needed to ask no more.

Doris sighed quietly.

"I suppose it is about time for us to start," she said. She spoke as one in a maze; and still to herself she kept repeating—

"The son of Nurse Molly! The brother of Jane Morris!"

Yet still Dick Maurice!—the man who was becoming so much to her!—the man by whom she could be sure she was beloved! Her eyes fell upon the strong, finely-formed brown hand, clutching his stick, the hand which had drawn her attention when first they met as strangers; and a wave of tenderness rolled through her. How hard it was for him!

"I meant to take you to the Lac des Chavonnes. It is part of the show. Perhaps you'd rather not—now."

His face was wistful; and a reckless fit carried her away. Everything was different, she told herself. This might be their last, their very last, walk together. Why cut it short? Why not make the most of it? He had been so brave, so good, speaking out the distasteful truth! This one little treat, surely, she might allow—whether to him or to herself, she did not mentally specify.

Nor did she pause to consider whether it was wise—whether, for his sake, if everything now would be different, she ought not at once to end their intercourse? The wish assailed her powerfully, and she gave in to it.

"I suppose I ought just to see the lake. It is not far off, is it?"

"Not half-an-hour's walk from Bretaye."

His face brightened, and they went at a rapid pace down the steep grass-slope, each trying to put aside the prevailing thought, and to chat lightly. If Doris succeeded, Maurice did not.

Reaching the small blue-grey piece of water, with its framework of jagged rocks and slender pines, they climbed to a shady spot, and sat long in silence, which neither was in haste to interrupt. Upon each stole a strong consciousness that, shared with the other, life offered the best that it had to give, little besides being essential for happiness. But, while this consciousness pervaded the whole being of the man, dominating his every faculty, it rested rather as a ray of brightness upon the surface of the girl's mind; not less genuine, but less deep.

CHAPTER XXIV

"But I'm Afraid"

"DOES it matter so very much?" Maurice asked at length, a thrill of intense feeling in his voice.

"I'm afraid it does." Her eyes were full.

"It was wrong of me not to tell you sooner. You forgive?"

"Oh, it isn't—forgiveness," she said, with difficulty. "It means so many things."

"Tell me—what things."

She shook her head.

"I can't. How can I?"

"No need," he said.

Then he explained how fully he knew; how deeply he felt his own position; how in college days he had suffered—always in silence—from the impossibility of asking his college chums to his home, as other men did. How he had fought the battle out, had accepted those conditions of life which were his, had determined to make his own standing, had found friends, had hoped that the worst was over. And then—how he had seen her, and had discovered, with a new and terrible poignancy, what his position indeed meant.

Not at the beginning; not when they first met; but day by day as they grew more intimate. Then the old battle had to be fought over again; only far worse, far harder, than ever before. Even when he had seemed to be at his best and gayest, he never could forget, and the strife had gone on. For all through he had known that, sooner or later, he must tell

her everything; and time after time he had striven to bring out the words, which he feared would dash his hopes to the ground.

"For I love you!—love you!" he said, with a concentration of passion. "I love you with all my heart—with all my soul. No one ever has been—no one ever can be—what you have become. Doris, do you care ever so little for me? Could you love me? Could you be mine—my own!—my very own?"

He caught her hands, and rained kisses upon them. She let them lie in his grasp, neither responding nor checking.

"Tell me—do you care? Sometimes I hope that you do. In spite of all this—do you love me, just a little? Am I nothing to you—nothing at all?"

"No!" she whispered. The monosyllable seemed to be dragged from her.

"You do—you do love! My own! My darling!"

The rapture of look and tone awoke a sense of prudence.

"Yes, but—no, stop, please. It can't be. It is impossible. It can never be."

"But if you love me, Doris, sweetest!—if you feel for me only one-hundredth part of what I feel for you—is this to keep us apart? This, that I cannot help—this, for which I am not responsible!—this, that does not change me, does not make me in myself unfit for you? Is the question of my forbears so tremendous a thing, that it must spoil my life—must spoil, perhaps, both our lives? If other things do not stand in the way, and if you know that I could make you happy—Doris, my darling, does it not seem that we are made

for one another? I have felt it so from the first. Have not you? I love you—and you do not deny that you love me. Is not that enough, my darling—my own?"

He was beside her on the grass, his eyes on a level with hers, searching into them, full of pleading, full of vehement appeal; his face white with feeling.

"If we truly love, can anything keep us long apart? Shall any lesser thing be allowed? Would it be right—reasonable? I do not minimise the difficulty. It is real, I know. But think!—think!—dear one. Could you choose to live your life apart from mine?—would you choose it, if the choice is yours? Are we not one already in mind and heart? If you love—would you consent to separation for life, only for this?—only that yours is bluer blood than mine! You shall make of me what you will! My people shall not trouble you—that I can promise. It is you and I who love—just you and I! What has the rest of the world to do with us? Just you and I!—my Doris!—my darling!"

His passionate energy swept her along, carried her away, and she burst into tears.

"I don't know. Oh, I don't know," was all she could say; and his arms were round her.

"My own! My Doris!"

"Oh, don't! Please don't! It is so hard. I can't tell what mother will say. And—there is Mr. Stirling."

"He is only a friend. He has no real authority over me." Maurice laughed joyously, holding her fast. "My own! My own!" he repeated, with a radiance of delight which infected her and bore her, metaphorically, off her feet. It was like

being carried along on a whirlwind. "I am of an age to decide for myself. And you—my darling—"

"If—mother—" she faltered. "But I'm afraid—I'm afraid—she won't—"

"Don't be afraid. Why should you? Now we know that we love, all else is nothing. We may face the world without a doubt."

This was all very well; but he did not know Mrs. Winton.

"Even if obstacles do arise, it will only be for a time. You are mine now—mine absolutely. While you and I are true one to another, nothing can finally separate us."

He had his way. He had won a confession of her love; and his ardour awoke a reflection in her. For the moment, doubts were mastered, and she consented to put them aside, to yield herself to him. Nothing—just then!—seemed of importance, beyond the fact that each loved the other.

Time fled on wings as they talked; and they had the place to themselves.

They compared notes as to the beginnings of love on either side. Maurice told her what lovely eyes she had, and how she had taken him captive with her first glance, her first smile. Doris more cautiously admitted that he from the first had seemed unlike other men. They laughed over some recollections; and they lived through once more the crucial hour of her difficult rock-climb.

Then they reverted to his early life; and he told her many things connected with his past,—how seldom he had been allowed to see his own people; how his holidays had

been spent with comparative strangers, or else at school. Doris said how she had taken to the gentle Winnie; and he replied earnestly that she should see Winnie as often as she chose,—but not Jane! She was silent, knowing that he could not, even for her sake, repudiate the relationship. And there was his mother too. A chill crept through her at the thought that she, some day, would be Mrs. Morris' daughter-in-law,—and Jane's sister-in-law! And what—oh, what—would her mother say? It was Mrs. Winton—not the Rector—whom she feared; and still more, opposition in herself.

She began to wonder how she could have so completely, given in to his urgency. At the first she had felt everything to be changed by this discovery; she had looked upon him as impossible. And now — here was she already engaged to marry him! Subject, no doubt, to her parents' consent; yet provisionally engaged.

Had she been too impulsive, too easily carried away? Would it not have been wiser, more sensible, at least to have insisted on time for consideration?

These doubts suggested themselves; and then again she met his ardent gaze, his glowing smile; and she could think of nothing else. He stole another kiss; and while she protested, she did feel that it was very sweet to be so loved.

"I don't understand about your name," she said later, having for a while lost sight of these questionings. "Why is it different from your mother's?"

"Mine is, I believe, the right spelling. Mr. Stirling settled the question for me in boyhood, and gave no reason. Sometimes I have fancied that my father may have wished to

disguise his name, when he went to Canada. But I know so little—beyond that one fact that he was by birth and education a gentleman. My mother only spoke of it once; but she was quite definite."

Doris could not resist saying—

"But I saw his likeness."

"We have no likeness of him."

"Yes; it was on the table, at the farm. Mrs. Brutt took it up, and his name was written—'Phil Morris.'"

"My mother has never shown it to me."

"It was there," repeated Doris, reading disbelief in the tone. "And—Dick—it was not the face of a gentleman."

He smiled. "Rather difficult to judge from a photograph."

"It was painted."

"Still less to go upon, unless the artist were first-rate. Would you like to be labelled from all your likenesses?"

She was silent; not convinced.

"And after all, my darling,—don't you think that the real question is—not, what my father was, but what I am? I don't mean that that is without weight; but surely—it has lesser weight."

"You don't know my mother, Dick, or how much she thinks of that sort of thing."

"She is—a little particular!"—fondly.

"Oh, very!—very!"

Doris heard her own voice speaking to the Squire, as she stood with head thrown back,—"I'm not the very least afraid

of being taken for one of Jane Morris's friends!" She added faintly—

"I'm afraid—I'm a little particular too."

He looked at her with admiration, ready to believe that she was so in the abstract, and failing to see the present application.

"You shall be as particular as you like with me, my darling. Whatever you wish shall be done."

She sighed, but did not explain; and again he poured out loving words, till he had once more the upper hand, and her doubts waned before his fervour. After a while she reverted to them sufficiently to observe—

"I wonder why Mr. Stirling has never spoken of you to us—or of your mother. We know him so well."

"He would hardly go about talking of his own generosity. I don't think that would be his way. Besides—" Maurice stopped.

"Yes. Besides—?"

"I have never felt that I could fathom him. His is a perplexing character—a curious mixture of opposites. My sister, Winnie, half worships him. But, with all his kindness to us, he has somehow never managed to win my affection."

"You don't care for him!"—wonderingly.

"No."

"But—why?"

He laughed, and quoted,—"The reason why I cannot tell—but this I do know very well—"

"We all think so much of him. Why, Dick,—he always seems to me just perfect. I've never known him do a wrong thing."

"He has been a most generous friend to us. Won't that do?"

They walked back slowly, neither of them in haste to end the day. Recurring waves of doubt assailed Doris from time to time; but she put aside each in turn. The future would have to be met. The present she would make the most of. Still, she could not feel quite easy.

When they reached the last piece of steep downhill, leading to the village, they found that they would be late for table d'hôte, and also that they were in for a grand "after-glow."

Not upon snow, but upon rocks, the nearer heights being at this time of the year almost free from snow. All the vast rocky barrier, extending from the Diablerets to the Dent du Morcles, was transformed as by the touch of a magician's wand from its ordinary cold grey to an extraordinary radiance, like molten copper shining with its own intensity of heat. Between the red-gold of the Diablerets and the rich orange of the Argentiere many varieties of tints might be seen; but all were brilliant, burnished, metallic, wonderful! It was hard to believe that the gorgeous wealth of colouring was a loan, not intrinsic. The splendour lasted long, and faded gradually.

Neither spoke. They stood and gazed.

Doris saw vividly how, but a short time back, she had been at the parting of two ways. A single step—and she hung

in the very arms of death—she was actually falling over an awful abyss. One instant of hesitation on the part of Maurice must have sealed her fate; and she would now be in that other world, beyond the veil which shrouds our senses; a world as real, as actual, as this; a world prefigured to the imagination by such a scene as that on which she was looking.

A vision came of what that fall would have meant,—the fearful downward rush through yielding air; the clear consciousness of time; the lightning realisation of past and present, of squandered hours and wasted opportunities; the shock of terrific contact with mother-earth; and then—the entrance on that other world.

But she had not gone. She was still on this side of the dividing veil. She had still to live this lower life of preparation, with its duties, its overvalued littlenesses, its undervalued greatnesses. And she was glad to be here; glad to be not yet called away; glad to feel that it was still in her power to make a better and nobler thing of her life than in the past.

She glanced towards Maurice, and found his eyes bent steadily—not on the glowing rock-mountains, but upon herself.

"Dick—I needn't tell Mrs. Brutt?"

"I don't think it is her business."

"But—my people must know."

"Yes. The question is—shall I write to your father at once? Or, shall I wait till I go home next week, and travel straight to Lynnbrooke?"

"Will you do that? Oh, Dick, it will be best—much, much best. If they see you, that will make just all the difference."

"I'm not so sure! But it does seem the wiser plan. One can say so much more—verbally."

"Only of course we can't count it really an engagement, till they know."

"I'm afraid I count it very real indeed."

"You don't know what mother will think."

Her face shadowed over, and a chill query shot through his mind. Had he brought trouble upon her by his impulsive action? He was not in the main a selfish man; far from it; but this day he had been completely carried away by passion.

In the morning he had intended to let her know about his parentage; but since she had never named the Morrises, he had no idea that she had ever come across them. He felt only that she had a right to know all; and he meant to enlighten her.

Now he had gone far beyond mere enlightenment. He had taken irrevocable steps. Whether their engagement should or should not be permitted to stand, he had called into active life longings, hitherto vague, now definite, which would not be easily laid to rest.

Was she to pay a penalty of suffering for his failure in self-control?

CHAPTER XXV

The Squire's Advice

"LETTERS. One for you, Sylvester, from Doris. And another for me, from Mrs. Brutt."

The burly Rector sat at one end of the breakfast-table; and at the other Mrs. Winton presided, with her usual air of state. She never forgot that a Peer of the Realm was her distant cousin. They studied their missives in silence.

"What a woman it is!" came presently. "The amount of talk! What does Doris say?"

"Wants to climb another mountain. Mrs. Brutt refuses consent."

"She shows some sense—for once!"

"So the child appeals to us."

Mr. Winton read on, smiling to himself.

"Mrs. Brutt says she has been ill—and her English doctor has done 'wonders' for her. Is that the one who went up the peak with Doris?"

"Probably."

"Mrs. Brutt seems full of him. 'A delightful young fellow,' she calls him. 'Young!'" Mrs. Winton scented mischief. She had pictured the doctor in question as a comfortable, middle-aged practitioner, father of a family.

"'Young,' Sylvester. You heard!"

"Yes, my dear."

"And Doris has been rampaging over the mountains with this young doctor! Just listen—"

"Such a dear young doctor—so gifted!—with quite distinguished manners. Really, I never came across a medical man with keener insight. I assure you, he read my constitution at a glance which must mean absolute genius on his part, for I am not a person easily understood—so very complex, you know!—as my dear old doctor used often to say—"Yours is such a highly-strung organisation, my dear lady; it needs acute observation—""

Mrs. Winton came to a bored pause.

"I don't believe any doctor alive would say anything so supremely absurd—unless by way of flattery."

"But about Doris?"

"I'm trying to find out. It is all about the woman herself. Ah, here we are. 'Doris is writing to Mr. Winton about her new craze for climbing. She went partly up one peak with Mr. Maurice and Mr. Pressford.' Now, which of them is the doctor? 'And Mr. Pressford had a bad fall, and was stunned. Such a mercy that they had a doctor in their party!' So Mr. Maurice is the individual. 'Doris will tell you all that happened. She seems to have helped the others out of their difficulty really most cleverly.'"

Mrs. Winton was scandalised.

"I never heard anything like it! Two full-grown men!—and a girl having to get them out of their difficulties. What next, I wonder?"

"Mr. Maurice was supporting his friend on the rope, and he was unable to move. Doris explains."

"Then he had no business to support his friend! They ought both to have been looking after her."

Mrs. Winton reverted to her letter.

"He is such an agile young fellow. But if an experienced climber like Mr. Pressford can have a fall, one feels that anything might happen; and really I must refuse any more responsibility in the matter.' I see she says later that Mr. Maurice is beginning to practise in Edinburgh— and is 'extremely well thought of!' I suppose he told her so himself! I wonder what Mr. Hamilton Stirling would say to all this!"

The Rector grunted. He did not want anybody to carry off his pretty Doris; but it was conceivable that a lively young Alpinist might be better than a human Encyclopaedia.

"I don't know what you think, Sylvester, but I consider that it is time for Doris to come home."

"Here's the Squire. Ask him."

Mr. Stirling walked in, apologising for the hour. He had ridden over before breakfast, secure of supplying his needs at the Rectory and hardly was he seated before Mrs. Winton had launched into the subject of the two letters. The Rector, studying him, decided that something was out of gear. He looked worn, almost old; and at first he seemed abstracted. Something in a sentence from Doris's letter called up his full attention with a jump.

"A new accomplishment for Doris," was his first remark, and it was said with a forced smile. Then he asked carelessly how the young doctor's name was spelt.

Extracts from the elder lady came next, with emendations from Mrs. Winton.

"I dislike this sort of thing for Doris—extremely. Mrs. Brutt ought to have known better than to allow it. She seems

infatuated. I dare say the young doctor is well enough in his way; but I do not choose that Doris should be mixed up with all sorts of people."

The Squire had ceased eating, and was lost in thought.

"On the whole," he remarked, "I am disposed to advise a recall. You will be wise to have Doris home."

Mr. Winton was again conscious of a perplexing element in tone and manner. Mrs. Winton, taken up with her own view of matters, noticed nothing.

"I happen to know something of a young Maurice, living in Edinburgh,—probably the same." His words came slowly, and Mrs. Winton threw up alarmed hands.

"You mean that he is an improper acquaintance."

"I have nothing to say against him personally. But his connections are unsatisfactory."

"You mean—if there were any danger of an attachment! No fear of that. Doris is too well trained; and she is as particular as I am myself. Not the slightest danger of such a thing. But the intercourse is undesirable. We had certainly better have her back as quickly as possible,—and this is the last time she shall be trusted with Mrs. Brutt. Quite the last time! I never did feel any confidence in that woman. She thinks of nothing but herself. But about Doris's return—if necessary, I suppose I must go myself."

"No need," the Squire said. "Your wiser plan, if I may suggest it, will be to write and say that you cannot spare Doris any longer. If Mrs. Brutt does not wish to return yet, an escort can be found." He was already planning a letter which would bring the elder lady home also. It was not his

wish that either of the two should remain in close touch with Maurice.

A few minutes later he rode away, resolving to call at Wyld's Farm. Some necessary business had to come first; but that should follow. He had not once been there since his rebuke to Winnie.

CHAPTER XXVI

Not Her Husband

FARMER PAINES in his garden was whistling softly, while he plucked a bunch of rosebuds for Winnie. She had drooped a good deal of late; and he was very fond of the girl. Big strong man that he was, her gentleness appealed to him, and he had a tender heart.

The niece "Molly" had disappointed him a good deal; she was so changed from the winsome maiden of earlier years, so "shut-up" and nonresponsive. And Jane was a trial. But he clung to Winnie.

As he stood in his rough coat and gaiters, putting the buds together with large careful fingers, a man came through the field, and stopped at the gate. Not a gentleman; not a farmer; not an ordinary labourer; hardly a beggar. Mr. Paine was at a loss how to label him.

He was short and knock-kneed, with toes that turned in, and a heavy narrow-browed face, a contrast to the fine old farmer. He might have been fifty or more, and he slouched along with an uncertain gait. Not the easy powerful swing of a sailor, or the characteristic roll of the Rector; but hesitating, dubious, wanting in aim.

"Good morning," he said. "Farmer Paine, I s'pose. I'd know you agen, anywhere. Fine figure of a man you was—and you're that still. You dunno me—easy to see!"

Farmer Paine looked up and down the sorry face, the backboneless, shambling figure.

"No. I don't know you, my man. Perhaps I ought."

A short laugh came in response.

"Didn't much s'pose you would—not expectin'. It's hard on twenty-seven years since you and me met. And you wasn't over-much perlite to me then, neither. You and your missus didn't think I was fit for your pretty Molly. Nor I wasn't. But all the same—"

The farmer fell back a step.

"Yes—I'm him. You know me now."

"Phil—Morris!"

"Same!" He held out his hand.

"But—but I say!—we thought you'd been dead, years and years ago."

"Well, I wasn't—that's all. I'm alive now."

"Molly said you'd been drowned—out in South America."

"Told that, was she? Wonder however she heard! Did she mind?" He showed interest.

"Why, of course she minded."

"Glad to hear it. Didn't think she'd have cared. No—I didn't."

"And you're here—alive! All these years after."

"I'm alive. I aint much more. And I've got about what's on my back—and nothin' beyond. I can tell 'ee that."

Paine hesitated. Was this unlooked-for return good for Molly—for the girls? A penniless failure, for husband and father! He had not liked Morris in the past, and he had strenuously opposed the engagement; but Molly had been wilful, and had taken her own way in this as in other matters.

He liked the man even less now. Lines in the face told of a life of dissipation. Still—here he was!

"To think that Molly isn't a widow, after all! And hasn't been, all this while."

Morris stared in his turn.

"Dunno what you're after now. She married—of course."

"No, no,—never."

"Eh? Then she must ha' cared a lot more for me than ever I thought."

"Of course she did. Molly ain't one of the talkin' sort. Leastways, she ain't now. Different when she was a girl. But of course she cared. Wouldn't be natural-like, if she didn't."

"And never married, after all. I wonder what became of the chap that was after her. And she's kep' her own name. Whatever did you mean, farmer,—talkin' as if you'd thought she was a widow?"

They were at cross purposes still. Farmer Paine turned towards the house. He had not taken in the sense of the last words.

"Come along. Come in," he said heartily. "She'll give you a welcome, Molly will. It'll startle her, maybe, just at first,—but you'll have a welcome, man. Care. Of course she cared."

With great strides the farmer reached the door, opened it, and called in lusty tones—

"Molly! Molly! Here's one come back, that we thought never to see again." A voice within him murmured—"And didn't wish to see again!"— but he put that down. "Now,

don't you be taken aback," he called energetically. "Where's Jane? Where's Winnie? Here's your father, girls,—come back from the grave, as one may say. Never drowned at all, Molly. It's all a mistake."

"Their father! No, no!" Morris tried to interpose, as the nature of the farmer's error dawned upon him. But Mr. Paine, all the more because of that protesting voice within, pressed forward, talking eagerly—

"Here you are, girls. Aint this a bit of news? Your father's come back. Wasn't drowned at all, and never wrote. But he's back at last. Here, Jane,—Winnie—Molly—come along. It's your husband, Molly."

The two were confronted. Farmer Paine dragged forward the wanderer, a sheepish, puzzled figure; and Mrs. Morris moved to meet him.

She was imperturbable even now, though her face showed that she was startled. Jane stared with round eyes. Winnie trembled like a leaf.

"Molly, my dear, it's your husband. Him as you thought was dead."

Mrs. Morris stood stock still, one hand folded over the other, after the style of the superior housekeeper receiving orders from her mistress.

"Some mistake or other," muttered Morris, holding back.

"Yes, it's a mistake," she agreed. She looked at the farmer. "That aint my husband."

"Not!" The farmer's jaw fell.

"And Molly she never was my wife, though she was to have been, if she hadn't gone and jilted me."

"Well, I never!" uttered Mr. Paine. "And if you're not Phil Morris, who are you, man?"

"I'm Phil Morris, sure enough. But I aint Molly's husband—worse luck." He turned to the girls. "Nor I aint their father. Wish I was!"

"Never been married!" The farmer was all astray still.

"Well, I did marry, and she's dead, and I've come back. I'd no luck out there, and I thought I'd try the old country agen. And a sort of a wish corned over me, to see if Molly was alive." He turned to Mrs. Morris. "And you married that other chap, did you?" She nodded, and his gaze went to Mr. Paine. "Whatever did you mean—saying she wasn't married?"

The farmer seemed dazed, and he spoke slowly.

"I thought she was your widow. I meant—she'd never married again."

"Well, she never was my wife, though she'd promised to be. She was comin' out to me in Canada; and all of a sudden she wrote and chucked me. Said she was goin' to marry another feller, and I shouldn't never hear from her agen. That hit hard, I can tell 'ee—it did, farmer. I cared a lot for Molly."

Other questions were thronging on Farmer Paine.

"Molly went to Canada," he said; and his fine rugged face had grown hard. "If she didn't go to you, what did she go for?"

A moment's silence.

"Who was it you married, Molly,—if it wasn't Phil Morris?"

Mrs. Morris spoke stolidly, one hand still folded neatly over the other.

"It was another man," she said. "I came across him; and I found I didn't care for Phil. I'd thought I did, and I didn't. It was the other I cared for—not him. He was a bit above me—a gentlemen out and out—and he didn't want his folks to know about me being his wife—he didn't want the fuss there'd be. So I just kept it secret, and let nobody know. It didn't matter to other people."

"It mattered to me," the farmer said, his voice grieved and hoarse. "It mattered to me and my wife. And you took us in too."

"Yes. It had to be, uncle."

"And you went to Canada with the other man."

"No, I didn't go to Canada—not at all. That was all a make-up, just to stop talk. We stopped a good bit where we were after we were married."

"Where was it?"

"We stopped abroad—all the time till my husband died. And then I went to Norfolk."

"And all these years you've been deceivin' me. And I thought you true, Molly. Whatever your faults might be, I've judged you true."

"I couldn't help it," she said. "There was reasons why I couldn't say more; and there's reasons now."

Morris was staring about the room.

"There's the picture I painted and gev to you, Molly," he remarked. "I gev it you when I went off to Canada—thinkin' as you'd come after me."

"I didn't know my own mind then."

"And they told you I was drowned. Who said it?"

"I heard it. And after that, I wrote to uncle here. I'd never been sure before that you wouldn't turn up, and say I wasn't your wife."

Jane broke in with a jarring laugh.

"And this—" she said, taking up the shut frame which Mrs. Brutt had noticed,—"we thought it was our father, and it isn't. Mother never showed it to us, till we came to Wyldd's Farm. We couldn't think why."

Mrs. Morris offered no explanation.

"It's me, anyway," said Morris. "But I ain't your father, my dear. Shouldn't mind if I was."

Jane giggled, and Winnie shivered.

Farmer Paine could not get over the blow. His straightforward nature recoiled at the thought of this long deliberate deceit. He had trusted Molly utterly; and at one blow his trust was shattered. With him, to doubt once was to doubt always. He would never again, after this, put confidence in her. Besides, he recognised that she had not told him all. She was shuffling; hiding something still.

Questionings thronged upon him. Why should she have pretended that she had been married to this man, when she had not? Why should she have passed all these years under his name? Why should she have displayed his painting, his likeness, as of her husband? Why should she have made

believe to have gone to Canada? Why should she never have revealed her whereabouts, even to her nearest relatives, till years after her husband's death? The whole tissue of lies seemed so needless, so foolish, over and above the actual wrong-doing. Each new aspect increased the mystery of her conduct. The more he thought, the more his spirit was stirred within him.

It was at this juncture that Mr. Stirling, on his way from the Rectory, arrived at the farm. Finding doors open, and his ring unnoticed, he walked into the midst of them.

"How do you do?" were his first words. His glance passed carelessly over the stranger.

"This is Phil Morris, sir," spoke the farmer. "That we all thought dead. That we thought was her husband!" He indicated his niece with a backward twist of his thumb.

Jane laughed once more, and the man snickered feebly.

"Eh? What do you say?" Mr. Stirling turned sharply, and his eyes sent forth a lightning-flash.

"It's Phil Morris, sir,—that we thought was Molly's husband, drowned twenty years agone. And he wasn't drowned. And she and he they both has it that they wasn't ever husband and wife. She jilted him for another man; and she never went to Canada. And all these years that I've thought her true, she's been deceivin' me—takin' me in right and left. Livin' a lie, as the sayin' is. And it beats me, it does, to know what all the tellin' of lies has been for."

The Squire's face was set rigidly; his forehead dented and lined; his eyes bent, as in stern demand, upon Mrs.

Morris. She came two steps forward, looking straight at him, with no sign of fear.

"It's Phil Morris that I was once engaged to," she said composedly. "And that I was to have married, as soon as I'd done nursing little Miss Katherine. I was to have gone out to him in Canada. And I let folks think I'd done it. But I didn't." She breathed a trifle harder, and seemed thinking what to say next. Her eyes and the Squire's met during this pause. "He wrote to say he was going to South America, and I was to make haste, and we'd be married before he left Canada."

"And you did not go."

"No. I'd met another by that time, that I liked a lot better. And I married him, and jilted Phil. And their names was pretty much the same, leastways in sound; and he didn't want his home-folks to know. And I didn't care. I'd got him, and that was all I wanted." The impassive face changed, just a little, with these words. "So I promised him I'd keep it dark; and I did."

Mr. Stirling listened thus far in silence. "A singular tale!" he said then thoughtfully.

"I'd got my reasons. They didn't matter to anybody else. If my husband wanted it, I'd got to do what he wanted."

"And after he died—why didn't you speak out then?" demanded the farmer.

"I couldn't!" was all she said. Her eyes sought the Squire still, oddly, as if asking his approval.

"And the painting—and the likeness—and the name—and the peck o' lies!" groaned Farmer Paine.

"That was all of a piece, uncle. It's no use to half do things. I'm no story-teller, not in a common way. But if a thing's got to be done, I do it thorough. And this had got to be done."

She folded one hand again over the other, and was silent. Mr. Stirling seemed lost in consideration.

"Could you ever have thought it of our Molly, sir?" the farmer asked.

"I should like a few words with Mrs. Morris in another room." The speaker glanced towards Morris, who muttered—

"I'd best be off. Don't see as I'm wanted here. I've got to look for work."

The Squire paused.

"What kind?"

"I ain't particular. Any sort of odd job 'ud do. I've got to live."

"Wait for me in the field. I can probably help you, if you do not mind going to a distance."

Morris signified his readiness, and disappeared one way, Mr. Stirling and Mrs. Morris going another way. The farmer dropped heavily into his chair.

"Who'd have thought it? Whoever would have thought it?" he groaned.

"But oh, I'm glad that man isn't—father!" whispered Winnie.

CHAPTER XXVII

The Eavesdropper

"THERE she is again!" uttered Pressford in dismay, as a familiar figure sailed up the garden. "For pity's sake, keep her off."

Mrs. Pressford being out, Amy had to throw herself into the breach. She was rather in awe of Mrs. Brutt.

"I've brought a few flowers for your poor invalids. Just to cheer them up, you know. So dull to be kept indoors this lovely weather! I have been thinking—could you not make a little more use of me, now they are better? If you would allow me to sit with your husband for an hour, while you get out with Mrs. Pressford, I should be delighted."

Mrs. Ramsay's childlike eyes widened with dismay.

"It would be no trouble—none whatever. So I hope you will not hesitate. Invalids need to be amused; and I would do my best. A little cheerful talk, you know—"

If she had known how Pressford loathed "talk."

"Thanks! It is most kind. Oh, what pretty flowers!"

"Then you will let me appear, some time this afternoon."

"I'm afraid not yet. They have to be kept so quiet."

"I assure you, my dear, I am most quiet. I know so well the need. The least stir—the smallest creak—in certain states become agonising. Simply agonising! I know too well from experience. But you may depend upon me. So if I might look in this afternoon—"

"I'm afraid we must not think of it at present. Thanks very much, all the same."

"Really! I am sorry. It would give you a short rest. Well,—if it must not be—By the bye, is dear Doris with you this morning?"

"I've not seen her to-day."

"Then she does not always come directly after breakfast?"

Mrs. Ramsay said—"Oh no,"—not seeing whither the question tended.

"Ah,—she gets a little walk first. And Mr. Maurice?"

"He generally comes in about eleven or twelve."

"I see. Yes, I see. And you are quite sure you cannot make any use of me. I should have been charmed."

Mrs. Brutt withdrew, sweetly smiling; her mind busy.

"Now I wonder where they are," she said to herself, as she sauntered away; for by this time she was in a state of highly-strung alertness with regard to the lovers, besides being eaten up with curiosity.

From a worldly-wise point of view, if they wished to secure secrecy, Maurice and Doris would have been wise to take the widow into their confidence. Had they done so, she would have fussed and protested, but the being told would have gratified her sense of importance, and she would have arrayed her forces on their side.

To be made acquainted with the affair before even the Rector and the Squire, would have meant a degree of distinction, which she would thoroughly have appreciated. Despite her love of talk, she could keep a secret entrusted to her care; and she loved to be confided in.

But the mere fact of anything being hidden from herself aroused another side of her nature, calling into play a spirit of self-assertive inquisitiveness. The secret and all who were concerned in it became at once in her eyes "fair game;" and she could know no rest till, by hook or by crook, she had discovered that which was hidden. Towards this end she would strain every nerve; nor would she be scrupulous in her methods. Not to be told what another might know, amounted to a personal grievance.

Until the evening of the Petit Chamossaire expedition, she had looked upon Maurice as her own property. She was not so clear-sighted as she imagined. "Nothing ever escapes me!" was a pet phrase with her; yet a good deal did escape her. Once aroused, however, she could be sagacious enough.

On the return of the two that evening, towards the close of table d'hôte, fresh from their day of intercourse, he must indeed have been nonobservant who should have seen nothing unusual in Maurice's look, however carefully repressed,—who should not have detected an unwonted brightness in Doris's eyes, and noted her soft brilliancy of colouring.

The girl looked lovely,—no less! It was useless for them to expatiate on their ramble, on the views they had enjoyed, on the wondrous after-glow. No sunset hues on rocky heights had brought that look!

"I know better!" Mrs. Brutt said to herself, and she waited to be informed.

But she was not informed. It dawned upon her that, whatever might have passed, she was not to be told. Then

she became angry. Since they did not choose to confide in her, she would find out for herself. With newly-quickenéd attention, she became aware of Maurice's absorption in Doris; of Doris's dreamy abstraction when he was absent; and also, not seldom, of a troubled expression in the girl's face. She observed too how each would quietly slip away after breakfast,—no doubt for a tête-à-tête elsewhere.

"So very deceitful!" she said to herself. "So wrong of them!"

All had happened rapidly, in few days. On this morning it occurred to her that, by an early call at the châlet, she might learn something. Before starting, she had seen Doris go down the village street, and perhaps the two might meet at the châlet. Finding her theory wrong, she had to hunt elsewhere.

"Really, so underhand!" she repeated.

Meeting on the road one of her new cronies, an English-speaking German lady, she expressed a wish to find her young charge; and the German lady pointed to a narrow path, ascending slantwise. "I haf seen her go dere sometimes."

Mrs. Brutt thanked her, and proceeded to investigate.

Using her eyes in all directions, she followed the path, seeing nought of beauty in mountain or valley; for her mind was taken up with one idea,—to find out whether Maurice and Doris had gone this way.

And she had her wish. After some fifteen or twenty minutes of slow progress, she caught sight of a small red-brown châlet, somewhat above the path. In front of it, side by

side, two figures were seated,—a man and a girl—deep in talk.

She drew instantly back out of sight. They had not noticed her, and they should not!

"So—that is it!" she ejaculated. And again—"Really, how deceitful! One would have thought they knew better. Above all things, I do detest underhand ways." She felt that, for the unearthing of such a conspiracy, any methods were admissible.

The dear young doctor had become many degrees less delightful, though she was disposed to lay chief blame on Doris.

When the girl rejoined her an hour later, she asked no questions, made no remarks. But next morning, having risen with unusual promptitude, she was the first to vanish, making her way briskly to the small châlet.

Did they always come here? Was it a daily trysting-place? If not, her trouble might be thrown away. If they did come — she hardly knew what she would do. Her first idea was to seat herself on the farther side of the châlet, where she would be hidden as they approached, and then casually to walk out on them. But as she debated, she noticed the châlet-door to be ajar; and she went in.

Rough flooring under her feet; rough beams overhead; some upright beams also, supporting the roof; and at one side what she took for a manger. That was all. Not a bad place in which to sit, and quietly to hear what might go on outside. This thought came; and she put the door quickly to. She had not quite made up her mind; but she dwelt upon the

possibility. And if a little voice whispered the words which she had been using about others,—"deceitful," and "underhand,"—she put them aside. Doris was in her charge, and surely it was her duty to find out what the girl was after.

Voces sounded, drawing near. Too late now for the other plan. She could wait here, however, just for a minute—and then make her presence known. She moved softly close to the wall, on the other side of which they would sit, if they did not pass on.

And they did not. It was a lovely spot. They believed themselves to be alone, beyond sight and hearing of all other human beings.

Thirty or forty yards below lay a fringe of shrubs and low trees; and the Rhone valley beyond was nearly hidden. Just in front stood boldly forth the great sweep of rocky heights, hard and grey, jagged and seamed. Lines of strata might there be studied, upright and horizontal, curved and twisted, telling of long-past pressure and moulding, perhaps also of great cataclysmic upheavals, in the shaping of these mountains. The vast rock-range, one of Nature's "out crops," rose high above softer grass-green alps, dotted with hay-châlets.

The Grand Muveran, as seen from this position, was still robed in morning shadow; and sunlight fell on the small glacier to the left just below the summit. The Petit Muveran, standing pertly up to his gigantic neighbour, also cast a shadow downward.

Across the fore-shortened Rhone valley, the Dent du Midi flung his stately head aloft, no longer reduced to

insignificance, as when seen from the Chamossaire summit, by the greater aristocracy of the mountain-world. Yet some fair aristocrats were visible, huddled together in the distance,—rounded and snow-clad heights of the Valaisian range, above the Glacier de Trient.

The Dent du Midi, wide-spreading, solid, substantial, with great saddle-back ridges extending outward and downward, was all blue with a different blue from that of the sky. And soft cotton-wool masses of cloud lay in the ravines, not yet dispersed by the sun's power. All around was stillness, unbroken except by the continuous murmur of insects, the click of grasshoppers, the rough caw of a crow, and two alternating human voices.

Little dreamt Doris or Maurice who was on the other side of the chalet wall!

Mrs. Brutt had meant to stay where she was "only a minute." She had an uneasy consciousness that her position was far from dignified.

So she would only just listen to a word or two. Then, with scathing apologies, she would step forth upon the guilty pair.

But she stayed much longer than a minute; and she heard much more than a word or two.

CHAPTER XXVIII

What Mrs. Brutt Heard

ONE or two murmurs; and then—

"Dick, I don't think you are well."

(Mrs. Brutt pricked up her ears. "Dick" indeed! Had it gone so far already? She felt that she was amply justified in listening. No one could blame her for carrying out so patent a duty.)

"I'm fit enough. Only worried."

"What about? Tell me."

"I've had a letter."

"From your mother? From one of your sisters? Try to forget it just now. Dick, I didn't half think we should get off this morning. I believe Mrs. Brutt has begun to suspect. She's an awful hand at ferreting out things."

"I should imagine she had a gift that way."

"Oh, she's awful! If once she suspects, we shall have no more peace. Her 'dear young doctor' will be in her bad graces at once. However, she vanished in a hurry after breakfast—perhaps to pester them at the chalet. She does so 'love cheering up invalids,' you know."

(The outraged lady held her breath. That Doris should dare to mimic her! The insolence of it! The impertinence!)

"Mrs. Pressford will probably be equal to the occasion," laughed Maurice.

(The "dear young doctor" had done for himself now. Mrs. Brutt reverted on the spot to her earlier opinion. Had

she not known him by instinct as a "sinister" individual? She bristled with wrath.)

"Tell me what worries you, Dick."

"One must have bothers sometimes, darling. It's a letter from the farm."

("Darling" indeed!)

"A most extraordinary thing has happened."

"Yes. Tell me all about it."

"Of course I will. My own, how sweet you look to-day."

("His own!" Atrocious! Scandalous! And she never to have been informed!)

"Take off your hat. I want to see you without it. Look at me, Doris. Those dear eyes! I never saw such expressive eyes as yours. They say everything you think."

"I'm always trying to keep them from doing it. Now, Dick,—what is it that bothers you?"

"Phil Morris has turned up at the farm. Such a scene. Winnie describes it all."

(Phil Morris. The farm! Winnie! Mrs. Brutt became excited. What could Mr. Maurice know about them? Her nostrils quivered, scenting prey. Doris's slight mimicry, Maurice's laughter, had turned her there and then into their bitter enemy. Kind-hearted though she was in the main, inordinate vanity was a leading feature of her character; and she could neither endure nor forgive aught of a personal slight.)

"Phil Morris"—slowly. "Your—" and a pause. "But he was drowned."

"That must have been a false report. He made his appearance without warning. Walked in upon them suddenly."

Doris took one flashing survey of the situation. She recalled the relationship, the portrait she had seen,—and she realised what this must mean.

"Phil Morris! Dick!—your father!"

(Through chalet walls the word had an electrical effect. Mrs. Brutt thrilled with the joy of a seeker after treasure, finding more than he has bargained for. She dismissed for the moment her personal injury, to give undivided attention. Here was a cache indeed, disentombed! Dick Maurice—no longer her beloved young doctor,—actually the son of Nurse Molly, and of that disreputable creature, Phil Morris, hitherto supposed to be dead. Oh yes—she knew—she remembered! She had since hunted out various facts about him, and had learnt to a certainty that he was disreputable. And to think that he should be Mr. Maurice's father! No marvel that, in her brilliant perspicacity, she should at first sight have turned against the young fellow. Within the limits of two seconds, the whole thing became clear; and she crept some inches closer to the wall, that she might not lose a syllable.)

"Then, after all, he didn't die, all those years ago."

"He did not die. It was a mistake. Phil Morris is alive still. But, darling, he is not my father."

"Not!"

"No. That has come out now."

"Oh, I am glad. Are you sure? I'm so thankful. I never could bear to think of you as the son of that man. It would have been too frightful."

"You did not admire the portrait."

"Oh, I couldn't endure it. I may say so now. Such a horrid face!—weak and common and low! It was that which startled me so dreadfully on the top of the Petit Chamossaire—remembering the picture and—That, and—you know, I told you how I came to see it. Mrs. Brutt was ferreting round, and she fished that up."

(Mrs. Brutt set this and the resulting laugh down to the debit side of Doris's account. She put her lips together, and formed one word—"Vixen!")

"I can't tell how far the present position of things is an improvement. I'm in utter ignorance still who my father really was. My mother seems to have admitted that he was above her in birth,— and that that was the reason for secrecy. He did not want his people to know."

"What a coward he must have been! But, anyhow, we can be thankful that it is not that dreadful Phil Morris. You have always been sure that your father was a gentleman; and perhaps this will prove it. Don't you see?"

"I see that I've won a rare treasure."

(Mrs. Brutt heard something suspiciously like a kiss.)

"Don't, please. You know it's not a real engagement, till my father consents." In her heart she said "mother."

"Nothing in life was ever more real to me."

"But tell me more. I want to know how it happened."

"I'll read you Winnie's letter"—and a masculine rumble followed.

First came the description of Phil Morris's sudden appearance, of the farmer's excited announcement, of Mrs. Morris's cold disavowal; well and graphically told, for Winnie was a clever girl, with natural ease of expression, and far better educated than her mother and sister. Then followed the coming of the Squire, Mrs. Morris's explanations, and the farmer's distress.

"And," the writer continued, "I felt I must let you know it all. Mother is sure not to, and Jane says she doesn't mean to meddle and get her fingers burnt."

(Mrs. Brutt nodded a sagacious head at the word "Jane," which clenched the truth of her surmises.)

"I always tell you everything, and mother hasn't said that I must not now. It all seems so strange, Raye. So very, very strange! To know nothing about our father, except just his name,—and not even his Christian name! I asked mother what that was, and she told me I needn't chatter."

"Uncle looks so unhappy; just as he did when we first came. Almost more, I think; for he is so good and true, and he hates deceit. He doesn't know what to think of it all. Jane seems not to care. She is full of her own affairs. But uncle and I care."

"Mr. Stirling looked so stern to-day. It frightened me to see how very stern he can be. I am sure he felt, as uncle does, how mother has deceived us all. He wouldn't say much before others, but he asked to see her alone; and then, I suppose, he told her what he really thought."

"We fancied he would make her confess more; but he didn't. At least, if he did, he kept it to himself. He only said to uncle—when he came out alone—that he understood mother's position, and that it was a very difficult one. Uncle said something about wishing to see her marriage-certificate. And—we were so surprised!—Mr. Stirling said he had seen it, and it was all right; only, he would say nothing more. Uncle had to be content; but he and I did think it odd. Why couldn't she have shown it to uncle, just as much as to Mr. Stirling? Of course he is a very, very old and kind friend; and we owe a great, great deal to him. But it does seem queer. It is all so worrying; and I don't find it easy to be brave. I suppose things are harder to bear, when one is ill and weak."

"Poor Winnie!" murmured Doris. Then, unexpectedly,—"Why does she call you 'Raye'?"

"My name is 'Richard Raye.' I've always been called 'Raye' by my mother and sisters."

"And not by your friends?"

"No."

"Dick—do you remember how I fancied, when first we met, that I had seen you before? I wonder if it is that you are a little like Winnie."

"I have never been counted like any of them. But of course there might be a look."

(Mrs. Brutt, listening to all this, could hardly restrain her eagerness. Something worth knowing had indeed come to hand. Not only that Maurice and Doris were, if not strictly engaged, at least conditionally promised one to another; but that Maurice, the would-be fiancé of Doris, was the son of

Mrs. Morris of Wyld's Farm, and of some unknown individual, who might have been—anything! She realised to the full what a bitter pill this would prove to the stately "Rectorinn.")

(And the Squire! How in the world had it come about that he should be mixed up with these third-rate Morrises?)

(In brief intervals of talk, she tried to puzzle out the mystery. Nurse Molly had been the attendant of his infant niece, during a time of serious delicacy lasting several months, up to the very time, no doubt, when she must have jilted Phil Morris and have taken up with the "other man." Perhaps the Squire knew all about it; perhaps the real husband might even have been a friend of his! This view of the question, however, she dismissed as improbable. On the whole, in her judgment, the only tenable theory was that Mr. Stirling had been as much deceived by "those dreadful Morrises" as everybody else.)

(She remembered with pride her own keenness of sight. "Didn't I tell Miss Stirling that there was something mysterious in the woman— something underneath in her history? I knew it! was sure of it! I couldn't be mistaken." She determined that, so soon as she should return home, she would thoroughly investigate the matter.)

Maurice was speaking again.

"Shall we go a little farther? Can you spare the time?"

"I can spare it,"—laughing. "But we must take care. Mrs. Brutt is awfully suspicious."

"It is not her concern."

("Thanks!"—voicelessly murmured the listener.)

"Only, if once she begins really to suspect, she will make frightful mischief, Dick."

"Well, we won't be more than half-an-hour. Perhaps she has forced an entry at last, and has been all this time entertaining them at the chalet. Imagine Pressford's state of mind!"

Another merry laugh from Doris, and the voices slowly receded. Mrs. Brutt waited, in a state of dire impatience, till she felt that she might venture out. Nobody was within sight. She peered in all directions, gliding with caution, and keeping the chalet between herself and the path they had followed. Her heart beat unpleasantly fast; for, despite her theory that she had every right to listen, the last thing she wished was to have her presence discovered.

Not till she regained the main road did she breathe freely. She walked some way down it, and took a seat by the roadside. The beauty of the scene was lost upon her. She had other things to think about.

Plainly now her duty was to write to Mrs. Winton,—not appearing to know of the engagement, but saying enough to alarm Doris's home-folks. It was no unwelcome duty; for the Rector-inn's importance at Lynnbrooke overshadowed her own, and she objected to be overshadowed. To give that importance a downward pull would be secretly enchanting.

Doris would be at once recalled. That was certain. Perhaps she would decide to go herself also. She was growing tired of this place. She would find it amusing to watch Lynnbrooke developments. The thought of her new knowledge brought a welcome sense of power.

Power that she proposed to exercise—not for the happiness of others, but as a relief to her own hurt and offended feelings. When she recalled the tone of Doris's allusions to herself, and the amused laugh which they had called forth from her companion, she was simply furious. Anything that touched her amour propre lay beyond forgiveness.

CHAPTER XXIX

What Next?

MRS. BRUTT'S self-control was limited; and, despite her best efforts, she failed to meet Doris as if nothing had happened. There was a constraint of manner, which set the girl studying her, and wondering what had happened.

Another letter to Mrs. Winton went off that afternoon. Mrs. Brutt explained wordily that, to her extreme distress, she had noted signs of a growing love-affair between Doris and the young surgeon,—no longer her "dear young doctor."

She regretted not having found it out earlier, and felt that she had trusted too implicitly. Mr. Maurice's conduct had been most reprehensible. She would not have believed him to be capable of anything so underhand,—or Doris either, with whom she felt sorely disappointed. However, though Doris had said nothing to her, she had doubtless kept her parents well informed. Mrs. Brutt certainly did feel hurt at having been left so completely in the dark; but her state of health had rendered her unusually blind. Some medical details followed.

All this and much more Mr. and Mrs. Winton were desired to look upon as in close confidence. Doris did not know that she was writing. She counted it her plain duty to send a word of warning, in case they had not yet heard.

They might, no doubt, fully approve of their daughter's lover. People viewed things so differently. The young doctor was on the whole quite presentable—quite well-behaved. And no doubt, too, he had principles, though in this affair he

was to be blamed. He seemed clever, and might do well in his profession. So far as she could gather, there was something rather hazy about his parentage; but she had only found this out from observation and intuition,—she had really been told nothing definite. That was a matter about which some parents were particular; and she confessed to a sense of particularity herself as to people's antecedents. Still, in this democratic age, the most unlikely unions did take place, and not always unsuccessfully.

Two letters crossed this effusion, arriving next morning. One, from Mrs. Winton, desired her daughter to return without delay, giving no reason, except that she had been absent long enough. The other, from Mr. Stirling to Mrs. Brutt, intimated that an escort for the girl had to be immediately found. If any difficulty existed, might he—in a friendly spirit, and in strict secrecy—offer to frank the widow's return-journey, that she might bring Doris? He apologised and expressed himself gracefully. Mrs. Brutt at once decided that no escort save her own should be available.

She saw that her earlier letter to Mrs. Winton had brought this about, making the second unnecessary. Still, she did not regret launching that shaft. In her present mood it gratified her to trouble anyone belonging to Doris.

Since Mr. Stirling's letter meant urgency, she settled to start in two days, making the best terms she could with the hotel people. Doris offered no objections. She knew from her own letter that it had to be; and though she was sorry, she also felt relief. Things could not go on as they were. Conscience was worrying her a good deal.

The last day fled on wings, wrapped in a golden haze, mingled with pain. On the part of Maurice, there was strenuous hope; on the part of Doris, a restless disquiet. She could not fathom herself. In Dick's presence she was content, wanting nothing. He controlled her, satisfied her, filled her life. He was so dear—so good! He loved her so intensely.

And she loved him, clung to him, did not know how to think of life without him. As he had once said, it was with them—"Just you and I!" Nothing else, for the moment, signified. They had hours together; for Mrs. Brutt let them severely alone; and they made the most of the remaining time. Each had the other; and that was enough.

Yet Doris had a dim consciousness of questionings, somewhere far below, which would not be stilled; questionings intangible, unexpressed, but real. For her world consisted of more than just Dick and herself; and that which was enough at the present moment might not always be enough.

Late in the afternoon they found their way up the mountain to a quiet spot, away from everybody. It had been a day of dull weather, and the heights were heavily capped with clouds. One or two distant growls heralded a storm. Maurice sat beside her on the steep grass-slope, his stick across his knees, his brown hands grasping it. Ever and anon the honest grey eyes wandered towards Doris.

"I'm off too," he said.

"But you've got a day or two more."

"I can't stand this place without you."

"And then you come to Lynnbrooke."

"You've made me promise not to arrive till after yourself." Maurice shifted the stick. "Mr. Stirling won't approve."

"Won't approve of what?"

"My going to Lynnbrooke. He has always kept me away."

"But—why should he?"

"I can't explain. He has insisted."

"Mrs. Brutt won't say yet whether she means to stay more than one night in Paris. You will have to allow for that. Dick, I wonder whether she has been making mischief. She has seemed so queer and glum the last day or two. I can't make her out."

"She's looking rather blue at me too."

"If she has begun to suspect, it would be like her to meddle. I do wish now that you had written off the first thing."

"Do you, darling?"

"They will think it so wrong of me. I know exactly how they will feel. And—I'm afraid it was wrong—really wrong."

"In any case, they will blame me, not you. Don't worry your dear self. Things will come right."

"Will they? I'm not so sure. It doesn't seem to have been quite—quite straight of me, not to tell at once. And I have always prided myself on being straight."

"You see, darling, it was simply a question which to do,—whether to write, or to wait till I could see your father."

"Oh, I know. But it was wrong. I see that now. I ought to have written. It was quite, quite wrong not to write! Or

else—if I didn't—I ought not to have been so much with you, these last days."

"Shall I write to your father now? Would you rather that I should?"

She considered gravely.

"Yes, I would. I don't like to go home, and to have to tell them. I'd rather find them knowing it."

"I'll write this evening." He held her hand to his lips.

"You might say you are travelling home, and will go to Lynnbrooke for your answer. Would that do?"

"It would be—diplomatic!" Dick was not a lover of diplomatic methods.

"If you give an address, they may write and stop you."

"Perhaps I wouldn't be quite so easily stopped. But I shall be travelling, as you say. And really, on second thoughts, I don't know what address to give for the next three or four nights. I've not settled which route to take, or where to sleep." Then he spoke earnestly,—"Remember, my darling, nothing can finally separate us against our will. Even if there are difficulties—oppositions—still we belong one to another. You to me!—I to you! Nothing can change that. Obstacles may be overcome. In the end our love will conquer."

She smiled, but only said—

"You will tell father all about yourself, when you write."

"In general terms. It is better to leave full details till we meet."

"But I must be free to tell mother about—" she flushed up—"about Mrs. Morris."

"You are free to say whatever you think right. Only, that must be in confidence. It must not get about Lynnbrooke, without permission from Mr. Stirling."

"I can't see why Mr. Stirling should mind—or what he has to do with it."

"He has had a good deal to do with me,—and he objects to my connections being known."

"Your—mother!" she murmured. "It seems so strange for a man not to be able to speak of his—mother!"

It was Maurice's turn to flush. He said only—"It is strange."

Another pause; and another far off thunder-growl. A sharp line of light traversed the sky.

"We've had a wonderful time here, Dick. I seem to have known you for years—oh, for fifty years."

"And I you—all my life. We must have been in touch long before we met at Bex."

"You don't mean—nonsense about previous existences."

"I don't mean nonsense of any sort. I don't think I know what I do mean. I only know what you are to me—my own. Life without you wouldn't be life."

"I've often thought of that day when we first met,—and I knew you to be an Englishman by your hand. Don't, please."

"My darling, how can I help it?"

"And then, the Glückhorn day! We shall never forget that. If only we could have gone up again! It is desperately disappointing not to have done one single peak."

"We'll do lots on our wedding tour."

"I seemed to myself to be another person that day."

"You were splendidly courageous."

"Oh, I don't think that. It just had to be done."

Rumbling thunder again and again made itself heard. By this time several storms were in progress, at varying distances. They ceased talking, to watch the strife of elements.

A flash far away to the right; a zigzag line to the left; a brilliant illumination from behind; an electric thrill to the fore. A low peal from the front; a deep mutter from one side; a clattering roll from the other side. This went on continuously. It was as if the mountains were holding solemn converse in a language not understood of the common people,—murmuring one to another of the things of eternity, disregarding the little human pygmies planted in their midst.

The circle of storms drew no nearer. It was an evening discussion of Nature's forces; an adjustment of differences.

Then, as the two walked soberly downhill, Doris caught herself wondering—"What next?"

CHAPTER XXX

The Squire is Mysterious

"WELL, child! So here you are. All right?" asked the Rector. He clipped his sentences nervously, squared his shoulders, and avoided looking in his daughter's face.

She was conscious of relief, to see him alone on the platform. It might be cowardice; but she welcomed any delay in the more formidable encounter. Ever since her arrival at Dover, she had been picturing what the latter would be like; conjuring up a stately and offended "Rectorinn," and imagining conversations enough to fill a small volume.

"Daddy, it's awfully nice to be back. What an age I've been away! You are glad to have me?"

"Glad" was not the word; but Mr. Winton could seldom say what he felt. He grunted an uncouth assent.

"Where's—she?" he demanded.

"Mrs. Brutt? She was bent on three days at Dover, and I was bent on getting home. So here I am."

"Had enough of her?"

"Quite!" expressively. "Oh, I must see to my luggage." She went swiftly along the platform, with smiling recognition of one well-known face after another, among guards and porters. "That is all done," she soon announced. "And now we can walk home, can't we?" She tucked a hand under her father's substantial arm. "What have you been working at lately, dad?"

Nothing more was needed to unloose her father's powers of speech. He could always talk on the subject of carpentry;

and he quickened his stride, rolling characteristically from side to side, while Doris hung on as best she might, and he sketched his plans, past, present, and future, with enthusiasm.

She listened dreamily, finding it difficult to keep her attention fixed.

"Then you're going to do two more lecterns?"

"As soon as I can find time." He explained his scheme for the next, keeping it up all along the main street. She wondered whether this were of set purpose, to avoid more ticklish topics.

As they neared the Rectory, her mind had wandered elsewhere; and the Rector reverted into dumbness. His burly frame did not preclude mental sensitiveness; and he knew in a moment when she no longer listened.

"Daddy,"—and she stood still, just within the Rectory gate,—"did you get Dick Maurice's letter, and mine?"

"Yes, yes, child." He tried to hurry her on. "Come—mother is looking out."

"But I want to know. Does she mind?"

"Ask her, my dear. She'll tell you."

The girl hesitated, and he went ahead.

"Here she is," he called joyously, opening the front door.

At once became apparent the fallacy of previous imaginings. Mrs. Winton came forward with an anxious smile; and Doris was folded in large, outspread arms,—folded and held.

She had not expected this. The Rectorinn was far from demonstrative; and while Doris had braced herself to meet displeasure, the last thing she had expected was tenderness. For a moment neither spoke. Doris's head went down on her mother's shoulder; and she nestled into the welcoming grasp, feeling herself to be a child again,— or like a little bird, returning from a long wander into the warmth and shelter of the nest.

Could Mrs. Winton have realised it, she might at any time have controlled this daughter of hers by the slightest of silken threads. Stern opposition, severe management, always stiffened the young back; but Doris would succumb at once to the touch of love and gentleness.

Those clasping arms meant to her what she had known, but often had not realised, the strength of mother-love! She knew that the firm grip meant more than love. She read in it guardianship, exclusion, disapproval,—all these. But the tenderness made up for everything, made all of small importance by comparison; and she gave herself over to it, clinging fast—was it for protection from herself? She could not have told.

Neither saw the tears which glistened in another pair of eyes, under shaggy brows.

"Are you tired with your journey?"

"Not in the least, mother,"

She stood up, and adjusted her hat.

"How nice it all looks! So pretty and homelike! Why—you have put fresh flowers in all the vases. It's not the day."

"For you!" Mrs. Winton's face said.

"And the best china out!" She appreciated that honour. "And those little cakes that I like. And what is this?" She stopped before a small table, on which lay sundry packages, addressed to herself.

"Tea first," suggested Mr. Winton.

"I'm longing to open them. Well—I'll wait." She sat down, and her parents watched her with hardly-veiled anxiety and admiration. She had never looked fresher, prettier, more charming. Mrs. Winton was thinking how, at this phase, she would doubly attract Hamilton Stirling. The other undesirable young fellow had of course to be got rid of as fast as possible. She did not foresee grave difficulty, but she did recognise a need for tact; and though not commonly a tactful person, she was cautious now through fear of consequences. Doris, as she well knew, could be roused to obstinacy.

"No end of invitations," Mrs. Winton said. She ran through a list of forthcoming garden-parties in the neighbourhood; titled names included. She was much too sure of her own position to care for any bolstering up by acquaintances. She would have said that she left "that sort of thing" to "people like Mrs. Brutt." But to-day she was desirous to get Doris back into the old atmosphere; so, with a purpose, important names figured prominently.

"Now may I open these parcels, mother?" The note of submission was unusual. "A pincushion from my Sunday class. Dear little things! And a pair of vases from the maids. How kind of them. Ah, this is from you, mother—a new hat!—and what a beauty! How did you guess that I wanted

one? Getting things for climbing cost such a lot,—I've no money left for clothes. And a dear little writing-case from father. Oh, thank you!"

She lifted a large bouquet of hothouse flowers, guessing the truth before she read—"From Hamilton Stirling."

"I don't think I ought to keep that."

"You could hardly send it back, my dear."

"I suppose—not. But I wish—"

The Rector bolted.

"Mother, we didn't write earlier, because we thought—I thought—it was better to wait. But just at last I changed my mind."

"There is a letter from a Mr. Maurice." Mrs. Winton's head became grenadier-like in pose, though she spoke still with studied kindness.

"What did father say?"

"He has not been able to answer it. No address was given."

"Oh, that was me—I mean, it was my doing. At least I wanted it; though really Dick had made no plans, and didn't know where he would be for two or three nights. I wanted you and father to see him. You couldn't say anything without seeing him."

"I think we will leave that question till to-morrow."

"Dick will be coming."

"Not for a day or two, I imagine. We will wait till to-morrow. You have your unpacking to attend to,—and I must write some letters."

"Oh yes,—and all my Swiss treasures to get out."

She ran off blithely, not sorry to defer the great discussion. Mrs. Winton smiled to herself.

The letters that had to be written made slow advance. Mrs. Winton leant back in her chair, and gave herself up to thought.

Mrs. Brutt's second effusion had not taken precisely that effect which it was meant to take. Like many mothers, Mrs. Winton could find unlimited fault with her daughter; but if an outsider ventured to do the same, she bristled into instant defence.

"I call it a very impertinent letter," she had said to her husband, after reading it. "Mrs. Brutt is out of temper; but, really, I do not see why she should have expected to be told. If she had done her duty, no such complication would have arisen. She has been disgracefully careless; just wrapped up in herself and her fancies. Mr. Maurice has behaved very ill; but his duty was to write to us, not to consult Mrs. Brutt."

"Poor little Doris!" the Rector said.

"Yes. I really do not see that the child has been so much to blame." This unlooked-for leniency gave immense relief to Mr. Winton. "She has fallen a victim between the two. Well, mercifully it is stopped now!" The Rector's lips formed a very dubious—"Is it?"—"And it will soon be over. The great thing at present is secrecy. Mr. Hamilton Stirling must certainly hear nothing."

The Rector asked how she meant to gag Mrs. Brutt.

"I must think what can be done. The woman is a perfect sieve, and if she is not checked, the whole tale will be over Lynnbrooke in a week. She will pour it all out to the Squire,

the first thing. Perhaps, if she does, he will stop its going farther. She is setting her cap at him, so she will do what he wishes."

The bare idea of Mrs. Brutt at Lynnthorpe, in the capacity of Katherine's aunt, was enough to send Mr. Winton into a prolonged chuckle.

"Yes, of course. We see the absurdity, but she doesn't. She has an overweening notion of her own importance."

Mrs. Winton pondered these things as she sat at her davenport. It had been decided between herself and her husband that something should be said to the Squire, anticipating Mrs. Brutt's probable confidences. Since he had confessed to knowing this young doctor, he might give fuller information as to the latter's antecedents. He had been absent from home since the arrival of Mrs. Brutt's former letter; but he was expected to return this morning. And as she debated, her husband appeared, ushering in the Squire.

"I told Mr. Stirling, my dear, that we had a question to ask him. Perhaps we had better adjourn to the study. Doris may come in here any moment."

The move having been made, Mr. Winton spoke a few words of careful inquiry. They were anxious to know about the young Edinburgh surgeon, whom they had named to him before,—Mr. Maurice. Would he be willing kindly to give them further particulars?

The Squire was leaning back in an arm-chair, with the air of languor which had lately often characterised him. He did not stir, but asked—"Particulars as to what?"

"You mentioned that his connections were unsatisfactory."

"They would not satisfy you."

"His parents?"—inquiringly.

"I am not able to go into the matter fully. It should, I think, be sufficient to say—and I do say it emphatically—that you would disapprove of them."

"You mean," Mrs. Winton put in, "that we should disapprove of him as an acquaintance for Doris."

"If that is all you wish to know—yes."

The husband and wife exchanged glances. Mr. Stirling had spoken with an unwonted touch of sharpness; and he looked, the Rector thought, strangely pale.

"That is not all," Mr. Winton said, taking the matter into his own hands. "Mr. Maurice has proposed for Doris. And she wishes to accept him."

The Squire seemed to rouse himself with an effort. He sat upright, facing them both.

"Does this mean that you wish for advice,—that you will allow me to offer advice?"

"Yes—certainly!"

"Then, if I were you, Winton, I would write by the next post, and refuse consent."

"Unfortunately, I can't. He sends no address, but says he will call in person for his answer, to-morrow or next day."

"He does!—does he?" There was a lightning-flash of indignation, though the Squire still spoke restrainedly. "It would be of no use giving you his Edinburgh address. A letter sent there would not arrive in time."

"You know a good deal about him," Mr. Winton could not help saying. "What about the young fellow himself—his character?"

"There is no particular fault to be found. It is simply a question of his connections. I cannot give you particulars. I can only advise you—urgently—to act with decision."

"He will be here before we can take any steps."

"Apparently so. You will have to make him understand that nothing can come of it. I suppose you will keep this—episode—to yourselves."

"As far as possible," the Rector began, and his wife broke in—

"But Mrs. Brutt—"

"Does she know?"

"She has found it out somehow. She wrote to warn us."

The Squire stood up thoughtfully.

"Perhaps I may be able to give her a hint. Yes, I will remember. I have to see her on a small piece of business. It is desirable that people should not be set talking. Good-bye. I must be off. You will let me know how things turn out."

"Will you not stay and see Doris?" asked Mrs. Winton, surprised at so early a move.

"I think not now. I have a good deal to do. Another day."

They gazed after him as he went heavily down the garden. He seemed all at once aged and altered, almost feeble.

"Something is wrong with the Squire," Mrs. Winton remarked.

The Rector made no comment. Five minutes later he stood at his study-table, reading anew Maurice's letter. He liked the tone of it, the manly frankness, the ardent warmth, the devotion to his child.

His eyes rested, by no means for the first time, on the signature,—"Richard Raye Maurice."

"I don't understand that," he muttered. The puzzle had been in his mind ever since receiving the sheet. He wondered at his wife's having failed to remark the same. Then he recalled that the Squire's invariable signature was—"Richard R. Stirling." Few knew what the R. stood for; perhaps almost no one in the place except himself.

CHAPTER XXXI

The Squire's Dark Hour

WALKING heavily, like an old man, Mr. Stirling passed through the Rectory garden, took the path which led across a small triangular field and entered the churchyard. A very quiet spot; at this hour entirely deserted.

The blow, long dreaded, had fallen at last. Difficulties, warded off through years, had suddenly arisen like granite walls, threatening to close him in. No way of escape lay open, except through the immediate crushing of Doris's new love-affair. If Maurice were at once and effectually dismissed, things might still go on as they had done. But what if Maurice refused to be summarily dismissed? What if Doris insisted on having her own way?

It seemed that the young fellow, after years of extraordinary submission, had at last taken the bit between his teeth. And he might, even if rejected, insist upon further explanations.

Strange that the Squire's own action, in trying to get Doris out of the way of the Morrises, should have actually thrown her into contact with Maurice, should have actually brought about this disastrous state of things! Disastrous from his point of view.

He went round to the farther and still more deserted side of the church. No human being could be seen; no human habitation even, though a town lay so near. Rooks cawing hoarsely in a group of elms alone broke the silence.

Typically fair and peaceful the scene; but peace lay far from the heart of Richard Stirling.

He found his way to a handsome marble monument, surrounded by railings; the tomb of his wife. He had refused to lay her in the dismal family vault, below the church. Here he could come and be with her, so to speak; could imagine her close by; could hold converse with her in thought. Not a week passed that he did not come. He would stand and gaze at the solid carved mass of marble, surmounted by an exquisitely beautiful marble figure of an angel, modelled after the form and features which he had loved so passionately. Nobody ever came near this part of the churchyard, when he was seen to go there. His lifelong sorrow was deeply respected.

And generally the spot soothed him. To-day it brought only keener memories,—more intense realisation of his present position.

His true position. Not as men saw it,—the admired and beloved Squire, looked up to by all the country round; handsome, rich, popular, distinguished. In very truth his was a poverty-stricken spirit. His "cupboard" held a "skeleton" which none guessed at.

It was his own doing, and he knew this. None the easier to bear for that! The troubles which we have brought upon ourselves, through wrong-doing, are harder far to endure than those which come straight from the Hand of our Heavenly Father.

If he had been brave, if he had spoken out at the time, if he had accepted with courage and patience, a trying

condition of things, he would, no doubt, long before this have lived down all that was unpleasant, have recovered completely from the nine-days' wonder.

Ah, but in so doing he might have lost her, his Mary! There was the crucial point! For when the truth came out, he had not won her. He had only been on the verge of proposing; full indeed of hope and joy, confident that she would be his. But, if this had become known, just at the critical moment, it might have turned the scale against him. Not perhaps by Lady Mary's own will, but by her parents' decision. And she, always gentle and yielding, would have submitted.

Except for that one possibility, he did see now how infinitely better and wiser it would have been to accept the inevitable, to let things take their natural course, much as he would have disliked that course. But — how could he?—when it might have meant—when at the time he believed that it did mean—the loss of her who was to him more than life itself!

Standing thus, deep in thought, he went through the past, recalling dates and events.

His mind reverted to boyish days, when he and his only brother were as one; a joyous, inseparable pair. Recollections leaped up of the gentle dreamy lad, always ready to follow his stronger guidance, always winning and easily led. Never a shadow had come between them when—thirty-two years before this date—the younger brother married, only to lose his wife less than two years later. A year later still the widower went abroad, seemingly still broken-hearted, taking

with him his tiny fragile Katherine, and a trained nurse to look after her; Nurse Molly of the farm.

Then came long intervals of silence on the part of the younger brother, and constrained short letters, perplexing the elder. Once and once only the two met for a few days in Paris. Something of a drifting apart had come about between the two. Stirling, not understanding, would have been sorely troubled, but for the engrossing claims of his own love-affair, his intense devotion to the fair and sweet Lady Mary, at whose heart he was laying persistent siege. Wrapped up in this one aim, he hardly realised that his brother's absence from England had lasted between four and five years.

Just when he hoped he had won his love, just as he was about to speak, a telegram summoned him to a distant and obscure German village, where his brother lay dying. He went without an hour's delay, only to arrive when all was over; only to have his eyes startlingly opened. Then he understood the constraint, the prolonged absence, the silence, the shadow, of the last few years.

A hard fight followed, with much weighing of both sides; and in this fight Richard Stirling was beaten. At all hazards, he determined to ensure secrecy. He could not, would not, consent to that which might in all probability mean—the loss of Mary! Whatever might be involved in silence, Lady Mary should not know; her people should not know. He could not give her up. He could not live without her. Everything went down before this test.

No doubt the temptation was immense. He felt that he had been ill-treated, in not learning sooner how things were.

But temptation is never excuse. To secure the woman whom he adored, he stooped to a course of elaborate and long-continued deceit,—a course also of definite and deliberate wrong to others.

He had his way, and he paid his price. A price, not only in money. He had been paying the price ever since, through twenty-five long years.

For the weight of this secret wrong had been always upon him. Not always to the fore. During the life of his wife he had kept it mainly out of sight; out of his own sight. He had borne himself proudly, courageously. He had looked upon it as a thing to which he was driven by circumstances beyond his own control. He had felt a kind of calm certainty that the thing had to be, that there was no escape out of the tangle.

Her death came as an awakening and crushing blow; almost, to his thinking at the time, as a direct judgment upon his past decision. Yet he had struggled back to a tentative composure, again regarding the position of affairs as inevitable, and determined that for Katherine's sake no question as to continued secrecy could exist.

But of late the burden had pressed with a strange new force; especially during the last few months, since the coming of the Morrises to the farm. He had realised, as never before, what the long concealment really meant; not only as regarded injustice to those concerned, but as viewed from a higher, a Divine, standpoint. A darkness lay upon him; a sense of guilt, of bitter unworthiness. For he had been always accounted—nay, by nature and training he was, except in this

one direction—a man of stainless honour. The contrast between what others thought of him, and what he knew himself to have done, weighed heavily.

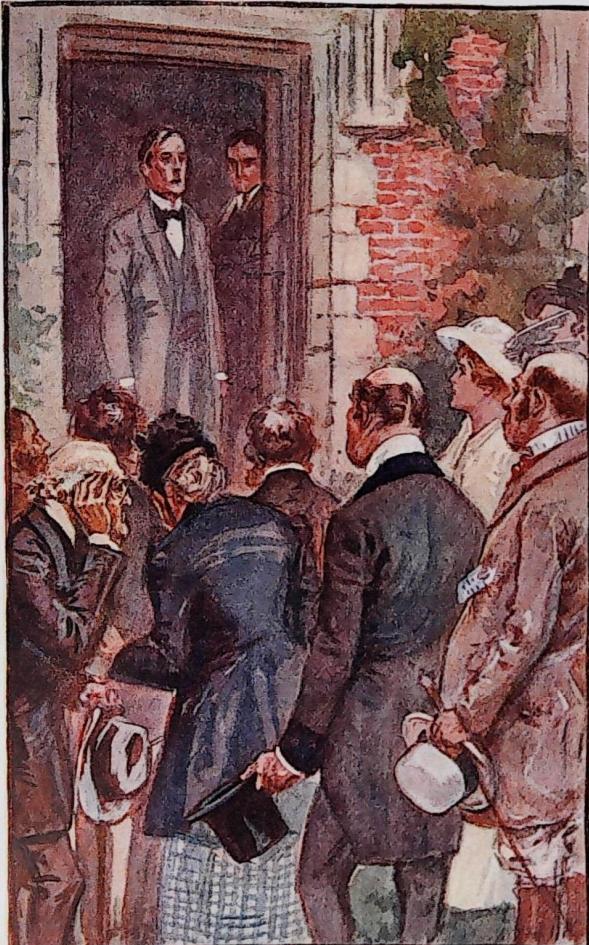
He felt now that the shadow had been always there, even when he refused to see it. He felt that it always would be there, till he should speak out, should make the truth known, should right that which was wrong.

But—how could he? He—the beloved and esteemed and honoured Squire—the foremost man in the neighbourhood—he to confess all! He—Richard Raye Stirling of Lynn thorpe!—so to lower himself in the eyes of men! He—to put these people into their rightful position before the sight of the world, his world, which meant so much to him! The thing was impossible. Wildly, madly impossible.

Nobody imagined aught of what he was going through. He had great self-control, never betraying what he felt. "He isn't quite the thing—looks worried!" one or another might remark. But none dreamt of the ceaseless inward strife, the long slow torture of spirit.

It had amounted to that of late, as he weighed and examined the question, viewing it from this side, from that side, ever striving to excuse his own action, to prove how out of the range of practical possibilities any other course had lain. And he did prove it, times without number, to his own satisfaction. He would feel settled and almost happy, for an hour or two. Then he would revert to the endless topic, the perpetual facing of what he had done, the terrible reality of those long years of deceit; and he would see again, vividly,

the hopelessness that aught except confession could put matters right, together with the desperate blank impossibility of confessing.



I THANK YOU ALL, FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY HEART.
[See page 365.]

**"I THANK
YOU ALL FROM
THE BOTTOM OF
MY HEART."**

So the circle of misery went on; and all the while he was the courteous host, the pleasant friend, the affectionate uncle, the busy Squire. But the pressure was wearing him out. He lay down at night with his burden; he rose in the morning with it. Gradually it was becoming an obsession.

Now this fresh stroke had fallen. Now, it might be, the choice was no longer his. Instead of being allowed to put things straight himself—as he had always purposed to do some day—it seemed that the wrong-doing was about to find him out, that the truth might become known without choice on his part.

"It was for your sake, my Mary!" he murmured, gazing at the lovely marble figure. "For your sake—my darling!"

The thought came—was it not conceivable that, even if he had lost her by right action, life without her, and without also this clogging weight on heart and conscience, might have been not only better, fairer, but actually happier?

And—he might not have lost her. At the time it seemed as if he must; but since then he had learned how she loved him from the first. What if she would have clung to him through all? What if the whole miserable tissue of guile and duplicity had been, not only wrong, but needless?

CHAPTER XXXII

"You Don't Know Dick"

NOT a word about Dick Maurice was spoken that first evening.

Twice Doris tried to bring him forward, and was rebuffed,—very kindly, yet decidedly. She could not resolve to do it again. She seemed to be under a spell; able only to bask in the sunshine of home, in the loving welcome from all sides.

And though she thought of her lover continually, yet in a manner he was pushed to the background of her mind. Switzerland already began to look far off. Her feelings had become mixed and indefinite. She had almost the sensations of a naughty child, come back to be good.

Everybody and everything had to be seen,—servants, neighbours, friends, household pets. The hours slipped fast away; and while much talk went on, it was talk mainly of Lynnbrooke interests. Mrs. Winton left no space for aught else. Doris was amply posted in local news; and the name "Stirling" came up perpetually.

When she went to bed, it was to dream of Dick. They were on the Glückhorn together; just he and she. Once more she was trying to climb to the rescue. Details differed, as they are apt to do in a dream; and the rock-wall of her sleeping fancy would have been ludicrous in the eyes of an Alpinist; but to her it seemed natural enough. In dreamland nothing is absurd. She mounted the rocks, reached Maurice, and then, as he clasped her hand, she found him to be—not

Dick, but Hamilton Stirling, in frock coat and kid gloves, solemn and dignified. The rocky height vanished; and he and she were on a high road; and he pulled a printed slip out of his pocket, offering it for her inspection.

She woke up, and had a laugh; yet she felt disgust with herself for having reverted in thought to the latter, even in slumber. "As if I had anything to do with him now! Oh, how curious life is! Everything seems such a muddle."

Further sleep proved impossible; and she lay long, thinking, thinking, about affairs in general, and about Maurice in particular. After breakfast she went into the garden, and enjoyed herself among the flowers, watching the bees at work, feeding her pigeons, anxious for and yet shrinking from the decisive talk, which could not be much longer delayed.

"Dick must be in such dreadful suspense," she thought. "I rather wish now that I had not asked him to wait. It is better to have things settled straight off. But anyhow, he won't be later than to-morrow. I know why mother will not speak in a hurry. She thinks she will give me time to get over my fancy. If it were no more than that—but it isn't. It is much, much more! My dear, dear Dick! If only his people were different! But that isn't his fault; and it doesn't alter in the least what he is in himself."

Sauntering indoors, she found Mrs. Winton in the morning-room, busy with needlework, but evidently on the look-out for her daughter. Doris sat down, slowly pulled off her garden gloves, and said—

"Mother, we've got to speak."

"Yes, dear." Mrs. Winton's was a heavy footfall; but she had in this case a wholesome dread of blundering, and she was doing her utmost to tread lightly.

"I've told you already—it was all my doing that we did not write sooner. You must not blame Dick for that."

A shake of the head responded.

"Don't you understand? How could you and father say anything, till you had seen him? How can you now? He is a perfect stranger to you both."

"He ought to have given his address."

"No; I settled that." The girl was instantly eager in his defence. "Even if he had known where he was going, I wouldn't have let him. He has to come here, before anything is done."

Silence met this; not an easy silence to Mrs. Winton, who could have said a good deal.

"I know I wasn't right in one thing. I ought to have said more about him in writing—when I began to see—but it was horribly difficult. Somehow, I couldn't. Till he spoke, I could never be sure how he really felt."

"The question is—had he a right to speak at all?"

"Why, mother!—of course. Any man has a right, I suppose."

"To ask any woman to marry him? No! There are limits."

"Well, yes, there are limits. A crossing-sweeper can't quite ask a duchess," admitted the girl hardily. "But—any gentleman—"

That brought matters to a point. Mrs. Winton put down her work, and looked steadily at the warm young face.

"We want you very much, my dear, not to do anything in a hurry. Remember, this is a question which involves your whole life's happiness. Of course there are things which your father and I could not possibly consent to—and we know you would obey. But we would so much rather that you should be sensible, and should see for yourself the need."

"If you and father forbid it—of course—" Doris said proudly. "I would wait—at all events. But it's not fair! You don't, either of you, know him."

"No, I know we don't. And I am sure he has managed to make himself agreeable. I dare say he is—handsome." This was a severe effort.

"I don't suppose you would call him handsome. I think he's awfully good-looking."

"And—pleasant too!"

"Oh, he's perfectly delightful—I can't tell you how delightful and dear he is."

"A great many men know how to make themselves liked by young girls, my dear,—men whose family connections"—Doris moved uneasily—"are not precisely what one could accept. You see, nice manners are not the only thing to be considered in marriage."

"But Dick is all right in himself. He is everything that you and father could possibly wish."

"How about his relatives?" calmly and mercilessly inquired Mrs. Winton.

"He has always said he is quite sure his father was a gentleman by birth."

"About the last thing he would ever think of saying, my dear,—if it really were so."

This thrust went deep, and Doris's face was flooded with colour.

"You see, it is not merely a question of the man himself. He may be all you think—personally delightful. But when you marry a man, you adopt your husband's family, whatever they are. His mother becomes your mother-in-law. His sisters become your sisters-in-law. That is inevitable."

"Then—you know!"

"Know what?"

"About his people."

"He speaks of his grandfather on his mother's side as a clerk in some house of business,—and of her uncle as a farmer. That at least is honest of him."

"It was frightfully hard for him to speak out; but he did it—quite openly. And we settled that I was free to tell you, before he came. He couldn't write the whole. But I have seen his mother. She is Mrs. Morris of Wyld's Farm—Katherine's 'Nurse Molly.'"

Mrs. Winton's whole air was aghast. "Doris!"

"Yes, I know!"

"This is far worse than anything I have imagined. Of all impossible connections! Mrs. Morris. Farmer Paine's niece! The mother of that dreadful Jane! Are you mad?"

Doris stiffened instantly. Mrs. Winton saw her own mistake, but could not at once recover herself.

"Mrs. Morris!—of all people! And do you know—but of course you do not—all that has just happened? Do you know that her supposed husband has just come back, after being looked upon as dead for twenty years—and that he is not her husband at all, and she will not say who was? For all we know he may have been a convict—a murderer! Farmer Paine is in such distress. He came to see us only two days ago. And you—you would have that person for your mother-in-law!"

Doris was silent, and Mrs. Winton spoke again in a different tone.

"Of course—I understand. You saw him away from them all, and you did not realise what it would be. No doubt he is unlike the others—unlike that terrible young woman, Jane."

Another and longer break.

"He did not tell us this in writing."

"He couldn't. But of course he meant you to know. Mr. Stirling is an old friend of theirs, and he has always insisted on keeping Dick away from his people. He doesn't even like it to be known that Dick belongs to them—so you mustn't tell anyone, please, without his leave. It is only for you and father."

"I suppose you are aware that, when one marries, there are settlements, and lawyer's inquiries, and everything has to come out."

Doris looked puzzled.

"Perhaps that could be got over," she suggested, with pleasing vagueness. "Or—there might be no settlements.

And Dick does intend to speak to Mr. Stirling, only not until he has seen father. Mr. Stirling won't like his coming here. But really, now that Dick is close upon twenty-seven years old, he surely has a right to decide for himself."

Mrs. Winton had again difficulty in holding back what she felt.

"All this ought to show you how utterly impossible the whole thing is," she said; and there was a fresh silence.

"But, mother, it is—Dick!" came at length. "It's not other people, and relations, and settlements. It is just—my Dick. If you only knew what he is, you would understand! It is—Dick himself."

She suddenly saw those pleading grey eyes, felt the grasp of those strong shapely hands, heard the tender musical voice,—and nothing else mattered. Mrs. Winton's touch came on hers, a trifle heavily, yet with real feeling.

"If you knew what he is to me, mother!"

"My dear, whatever he has been to you, he has not behaved rightly."

"He spoke out the truth about his people."

"Before he began trying to win you?"

"It wasn't long—after. I don't think he knew how much he cared—till that day on the Glückhorn."

"And then he explained all?"

Doris made no direct reply.

"It must be a little hard upon you, dear,—as well as upon him. You see, you have had your mind full of him. And he has been—attentive, and so on. But just think—if you married him—think of the position you would be in. Think

of your father's cousins." The Rector, though eccentric, was well-connected. "Think of my people."

"One needn't bring all one's relatives together, I suppose."

"But the people that one would like to keep apart have an unfortunate knack of coming together, just at the wrong times," Mrs. Winton remarked dryly.

Doris sat upright.

"I know all that," she said. "But I promised. I have given myself to Dick. I did it with my eyes open."

"You could only promise conditionally—if we should consent."

"If you forbid it—" Every line in her attitude spoke resentment.

"If we do, it will be for your sake, darling."

Hardly three times in her life had Mrs. Winton used that endearing term. The girl's face softened.

"By-and-by you will be grateful to us for saving you from a lifetime of unhappiness."

"You don't know Dick, mother!"

"But whatever he may be in himself, that does not touch the question of what his people are." Doris murmured an unwilling half-assent.

"I was sure you would see that. Now, do you think you could go into the town for me, and order a few things?" Mrs. Winton wished her words to have time to work. "I will make out a list while you get ready, and leave it on the hall-table."

"Yes, but I must speak to father first."

CHAPTER XXXIII

"How will He Take It?"

WHEN Doris's tap sounded at the study door, it found Mr. Winton at his ever-recurring struggle to compose two sermons for the following Sunday. At week-day services he was content, usually, to use old compositions; but for Sunday he sternly compelled himself to make fresh ones. And the task was hard. Not that he did not know, did not feel, did not realise, did not love, the things about which he had to preach; but that the gift of expression was not his. He could be, and live, and do,—but he could not speak. And a clergyman has to speak. It is one main part of his work.

"Come in," he called.

"Father, I want to speak to you."

Doris shut the door, and stood on the other side of his writing-table, her head thrown back.

"Mother has been trying to make me say that I'll give up Dick."

"Yes."

"Ought I?"

Mr. Winton kept uneasy silence. His shaggy eyebrows drew together.

"He loves me, and I love him. Ought I to give him up now—only because his people are not exactly what one would choose?"

"There are a good many things to be considered."

"But I promised myself to him, daddy. I said I would—if you and mother were willing."

"Ah—yes."

"But if I'm forbidden—" She lifted from the table a large ivory paper-cutter of Swiss make, with a tiny carved chalet at the end. It brought back in a flash the little red-brown building, outside which she and Dick had sat and talked. Doris put it down with a decisive air. "It will just mean—waiting!"

"I think you will do what we wish, my child."

"I know what mother wishes. I want to know what you think—what you really, truly think!" She spoke impetuously. "Mother only sees my side of the question—and not all that. Daddy, you are a man. You can understand. You can see Dick's side. I want you to remember Dick. He is so dear, so true,—and he loves me—and we belong to one another. Should I be right—now!—to give him up, because of his relations? I didn't refuse him at first, when he told me about them. Ought I to throw him overboard, when nothing is changed? Wouldn't it be wronging him? Don't you see what I mean?"

"How much did he tell you about them?"

"I've just been explaining to mother." She hurriedly went over the ground again; and at the mention of Mrs. Morris, his lips drew together. "You see, Dick couldn't put all this in his letter; but he left me free to speak, only it mustn't go farther, without Mr. Stirling's leave. And I knew this when I accepted him. Wouldn't it be wronging him now, to throw him overboard?"

"You might wrong him more, by becoming his wife, if it should mean in the future—?"

She caught the meaning which underlay his slow utterance.

"Yes, I know. I see that. If I should be sorry by-and-by—if I should be ashamed. And I can't be sure. Things look so different at different times. Just now, all I seem to care for is to have him—Dick! And I know you will like him. He and you will just suit! Daddy—ought I to give him up?" Tears again filled her eyes. "Must I?"

The Rector never could bear to see his child in distress; but he realised all that was involved in the decision; and he knew now that the thing could not be. "Don't, my dear!" he entreated.

She knelt down, and laid her face against his knee.

"In any case, we should have to know about his father," Mr. Winton observed, looking down with grieved eyes upon the mass of soft dusky hair. "I do not understand this mystery."

"Dick doesn't either. It is queer, isn't it? But Mr. Stirling seems to know more than most people. You might ask him. He would tell you, daddy. I can't think why he should have made Dick spell his name differently from his mother and sisters. But Dick's is the right spelling, and Mrs. Morris's is the wrong. I don't understand how it comes to be Mr. Stirling's business at all; only, it was he who paid for Dick's schooling and college. So I suppose it has been real kindness, all through."

The rugged face, listening intently, had grown stern.

"Sometimes it seems as if such things didn't matter at all,—not in the very least. Other times—I almost feel as if I couldn't stand his people—Jane and his mother! But still—all that is not new to me. Ought I to give him up?"

"Yes!"—decisively.

She had not expected this; and her face paled. "It won't do, child!"

"I wish he had nobody belonging to him," she broke out passionately.

"That is not usual."

"And—you won't help me! I thought you would be sure to help me."

"It won't do," he said again. "It can't be." He added: "A few written words from yourself would be best; sent off at once, if you know where to reach him." The Rector shrewdly suspected that she did know. "It is far better to act at once—decisively—when a thing is impossible."

"Oh, I can't, daddy! I can't! I won't!"

She fled from the room, fighting against a rising storm of sobs, and escaped to her own room. Mr. Winton's sermon-making was spoilt for that day. He struggled for another half-hour, then gave up in despair, went to his workshop, and tried to forget troubles in woodcarving.

Not till a good hour later did Doris emerge from her retirement, once more self-controlled, though heavy-eyed. She found a list of purchases lying on the hall-table, according to promise, and set off to get them done. The outcome of her solitude was a renewed determination not to give in. If she might not at present reckon herself engaged,

she would let Dick know that he only had to wait. He might count upon her later. Dear, dear Dick! How could she do otherwise?

Latest on her list came the butcher. This shop was in a side-street; and as she drew near, she heard a loud strident voice, which sent an unpleasant thrill through her. The younger Jones, blue-aproned, stood on the pavement, grinning broadly; and facing him might be seen a young woman in a staring blue silk blouse, shrieking with laughter.

"Oh, won't you, though? I know better, Mr. Jones. I know what I'm about! I say!—the Parkinses have promised they'll take me with them to the Show next week. You going too? Thought so! And the chap from Chicago—he'll be there! Somebody'll be jealous—I shouldn't wonder!"

"All right!" responded Jones, in a tone of familiarity, unknown to Doris. "I expect I'll manage to hold my own."

"You just try, that's all! He's uncommon sharp, that Chicago chap! Ain't easy taken in, I can tell you."

She went into a fresh fit of shrieking laughter, though there seemed to be nothing to laugh at. Then they both caught sight of Doris. The young butcher pushed up his cap, instantly quiet and respectful.

"Anything wanted, Miss?"

"Yes." She gave her order briefly. "Will you, please, see that it is sent early?"

"Goodness!—it's Miss Winton!" she heard from Jane, with a pert giggle, and that irrepressible young person bobbed her head in recognition.

Doris gazed straight through and beyond her, ignoring her existence. She neither flushed nor showed self-consciousness, but went slowly by; and not even the Rectorinn could have held her head higher.

"My! Ain't she proud?" reached her ears.

Another scene had presented itself vividly to her imagination. She saw herself standing again—in the future!—outside that same butcher's shop; the same young woman from the farm being on the pavement. She heard once more the loud screaming laughter; and with the laughter came unendurable words—

"I say!—that's my sister—Doris!"

More and more rapidly went the girl, as if driven by forces that she was powerless to resist. She reached the Rectory, and made her way, without hesitation, to the morning-room.

"Mother—"

"Yes, dear."

"You are right! I can't marry Dick!" There was a catch of her breath, but the tone was sternly resolute.

Mrs. Winton held down her joy.

"I was sure you would see it soon."

"I love him—dearly—but—I can't!"

She sat down with a reckless air, and opened her writing-case. "Father said I ought to write. I—suppose I must. He won't believe—if anybody else says it."

"You know his address—?" cautiously.

"He told me where he would be in town—to-morrow morning. I said I wouldn't let anybody else have it."

Mrs. Winton, with rare wisdom, kept silence. Ten minutes went by; and still Doris gazed upon a blank sheet.

"I don't know what to say," came at length. Mrs. Winton slowly approached. "Will you let me help you?"

"Yes—please." She scribbled the date and began—

"Dear Dick."

"It ought to be—'Dear Mr. Maurice.'"

"Ought it?" Doris seized a fresh sheet, wrote the words, and laughed—a heart-aching little laugh. "How horrid it looks!"

Mrs. Winton let that pass, and began to dictate—

"Dear Mr. Maurice; I regret extremely having allowed you to indulge in hopes, during our short time together in Switzerland—"

"It wasn't short, mother. It was a lifetime."

"You felt it so, perhaps. Only a few weeks, really."

Doris sighed. "Well—'in Switzerland'—what next?"

"As you are aware, I foresaw difficulties, and I was able only to give a conditional answer to your offer. That which I expected has come to pass. My parents are strongly opposed to anything of the kind. Their chief reason I need not specify. You will understand."

"Must I say that? It sounds—brutal."

"It would be better, if you could say plainly that you do not care for him."

"But I do care! I care for him—more than I can say!"

"You have to give something of a reason."

"I don't see why. He knows it all. There—'you will understand.' What next?"

"Will you read aloud what you have written?"

Doris obeyed. "It sounds so disgustingly stiff."

"I think the stiffness is necessary." Mrs. Winton carried on the last sentence—"And I confess that, on consideration, I fully agree with them in regarding our engagement as impossible."

Doris wrote the words, then flung down her pen. "Oh, it is hateful! If you only knew all that we have been to one another!"

"That was very wrong. He ought to have asked your father's permission first. But the more completely you can put a stop to the whole thing, once and for all, the kinder it will be to him."

"Go on, please."

"In regarding our engagement as impossible." You have done that. "In any case, as my parents refuse their consent, all is at an end between us; and I can only beg of you to forget me as soon as possible. Yours truly, Doris Winton."

"No—'Yours sincerely.' And I must tell him how awfully sorry I am to have let him think—"

"Your letter begins with that. No more is needed. Put it up, dear, and I will have it posted."

"No,—I'll post it myself." Doris sat gazing at the half-dry page, and a maid came in.

"Please, 'm, you're wanted. A child has got badly hurt—and they don't know what to do."

Details followed, and Mrs. Winton stood up.

"Don't lose the next post," she urged in a low voice. "I'll be back soon."

A pair of dreamy eyes followed her exit, then returned to the letter. Again Doris heard Jane's strident tones and shrieking foolish laughter.

"It can't—can't—be!" she murmured. "I see now that it can't. I must have been mad to think it could. But, oh,—my poor, poor Dick! How will he take it?"

Yielding, as often, to the moment's impulse, she seized her pen, and wrote hurriedly—

"P.S.—Don't mind too much! I'm not worth it. I shall never, never forget our time together!"

Then she blotted the page, folded and thrust it in, addressed and stamped the envelope, and ran at her best speed to the nearest pillar-box.

Just in time! The postman was emptying it. She gave him the letter, and walked back with a dragging step.

"That is done!" she murmured, and she dropped into an arm-chair, suddenly nerveless. Nothing seemed left that was worth doing. Dick Maurice had passed out of her life; and all looked dead.

"How will he take it? Oh, how will he take it?" she asked again and again. "Will it break his heart? If only there wasn't that dreadful Jane! I think I could put up with other things. But—Jane!—Jane!"

Mrs. Winton presently found her thus, pale and listless.

"The letter is gone," was all Doris said.

Mrs. Winton stooped to kiss her forehead, and the girl moved restlessly aside.

"Don't, please!" she entreated. "I'm so tired! Mother, you won't like it, but I put a few more words. I asked him not to mind too much."

"Was that wise?"

"Yes. I'd rather he shouldn't hate me."

The words ended in a short catch of her breath.

"Dear Doris—by-and by—"

"Oh, please don't. Mother, please leave me alone. It is done; and I feel—horrid. It is Dick that I am miserable about. I know what it will mean to him. But I'd rather not talk—any more."

CHAPTER XXXIV

Foiled

ONE hour more, and Richard Maurice would be off to Lynnbrooke,—to ask and claim his Doris. He had reached his London hotel the evening before; and two days after he was due in Edinburgh.

He was anxious and in suspense, of course; that goes without saying. But the tone of his mind was pitched in high hope and confidence; nay, certainty. He had no doubt of results.

His plan was to stay at Lynnbrooke Inn for a couple of nights; thus allowing as much time as possible for interviews with Doris and her parents,—also for seeing the Squire. He recognised that open speech with the latter had become a necessity. Mr. Stirling might be "only a friend," but he had been a most generous friend; and while Maurice was, without question, free to decide for himself, he was, also without question, indebted in no common degree to his benefactor. The past could not be ignored. His going at all to Lynnbrooke was an act of revolt; and though he did not intend to be prevented, he did intend to explain and apologise.

That he would meet with difficulties was only to be expected. Doris had prepared him for them.

Mr. Winton would probably be in opposition; and Mrs. Winton would inevitably be so. They would want for their only child a husband of unexceptionable parentage; and who could wonder? Not Maurice!—who saw the objections to

himself almost as clearly as Mrs. Winton did. Like most people without "descent," he valued it less than do those who rejoice in a pedigree; yet he could estimate their side of the question.

But with regard to Doris herself he had no shadow of doubt. He loved her; she loved him; and, as he had said, they together might face a world in opposition. In his young strong confidence, he smiled at the thought. So long as each was true to the other, nothing could ultimately separate them.

His wish had been to reach Lynnbrooke as soon as she did; but she had begged for a day or two first. He gave in to her urgency, though it was hard to wait.

In his eagerness now he was ready an hour before he had to start; his bag packed, his gloves beside it. To fill up spare time, he ran downstairs for a newspaper, and found a letter, which had just come in. A letter from Doris! He had half wondered at not receiving a few lines on arrival.

The lift was at hand; and three seconds saw him back in his own room. A letter from her was not to be read in public. He sat down, and with careful fingers cut open the envelope. Then his eyes travelled down the page, as far as the signature.

Sight failed him for more. He remained sitting; silent and motionless; dizzied with the shock. London's roar had died out of his ears, which were filled with another roar, inward, not outward. Physical surroundings vanished; and he was alone upon the Glückhorn with Doris,—her dear face, flushed and radiant, turned towards him; her dear eyes, earnest and glowing, uplifted to his.

She!—his own!—his darling!—could write to him thus!

He was stunned at first, hardly knowing where he was. Gradually he rallied and came back to the present. He heard again the babel of street sounds, and realised what had happened. A dense fog which had filled the room faded out of it. He sat up, and read the note once more, dwelling upon each word, collecting the full force of each sentence, while a bitter smile curled his lips—till he reached the scrawled postscript. He had not seen that before.

"Ah—h!" came with a gasp. The bitter smile disappeared, and he spoke aloud, crushing the sheet in his hand. "Now I understand! It is not Doris!—not my darling! She has been made to do it. The words are not hers. She never wrote such a letter. How could I be taken in for one moment? Dictated all through—except the ending. That is her own beloved self. That only!—nothing else. My poor darling!"

He wondered, pityingly, what she might not have had to endure, before giving in to parental tyranny.

"But she trusts me. She knows I shall not be so soon conquered. I shall go still, and insist upon being heard. So much, at least, I have a right to demand. If she tells me herself—if she looks at me with those true eyes, and says it—then I will be convinced."

And he started for the terminus, clinging hard to the little postscript, as a drowning man clings to a straw.

About an hour before luncheon, this same day, Mrs. Winton in the morning-room was at work over household accounts. Between the adding-up of successive columns of

figures, she cast divers glances of satisfaction at the present state of affairs.

Something drew her eyes to the window, and she became aware of a slim, alert figure, walking quickly towards the front door. A smart pull at the bell followed. Instantly she divined the truth, and whispered,—"What a mercy the child is not here!"

She did not know, though her husband did, that Doris was away on purpose,—knowing that Maurice might come, and not trusting herself to meet him.

"Please, 'm,"—the little between-maid came in, twisting her apron-strings,—"please, 'm, it's a gentleman wants to see the Rector. And his name's Mr. Maurice, please, 'm."

"Tell Mr. Maurice I am sorry that the Rector is engaged."

Rose went and came back.

"Please, 'm, Mr. Maurice says he can wait."

"Tell Mr. Maurice it is of no use, I am afraid."

A third appearance, round-eyed this time.

"Please, 'm, the gentleman says he's got to see the Rector, and he don't mind how long he waits, not if it's hours, 'm."

Mrs. Winton considered. Plainly this was a man with a will of his own. Since Doris was safely out of reach, it might be wise to yield.

"Very well—if it has to be," she said resignedly. "Take Mr. Maurice into the study."

The unwelcome caller being there installed, she made her way through the back-garden and along the lane,—for

once, regardless of prying eyes behind muslin curtains. Mr. Winton had again fled for refuge to manual labour, from the pain of seeing his child suffer. When his wife entered, he was hammering with a vigour which relieved his feelings, but which made her put two hands to her ears. Whereupon he stopped.

"The man has come, Sylvester."

"Eh? Who?"

"The man himself!—Mr. Maurice. I told you we should have him here. I sent him word that you were engaged, but he refused to go. You must see him, and make things clear."

"Couldn't you tackle him, my dear?"

"Certainly not. That is your business. And remember, you have to be firm—firm! He is on no account to see Doris, and he is not to come again. You have to get rid of him, once and for all."

Mr. Winton knew the need, but he hated the task before him.

"Well, well," he muttered, and was going off as he was, till a scandalised forefinger pointed at his workaday apron. "Oh, ah!—I forgot!"—and he tossed it off.

Three minutes later he was in the study; a broad, ungainly figure, seamed and rugged in face, awkward in bearing; not the type of father pictured beforehand by the young fellow who stood awaiting him. Yet in those deep-set eyes was a gleam of something which found its way to Maurice's sore heart, and gave him a sense that at least he would be understood.

The Rector put out his hand, and it was gripped with a force which told of passion below.

Now that suspense was about to be ended, Maurice hardly knew how to hold himself in.

"Sit down, please," Mr. Winton said, and took the lead in doing so,—his gaze bent searchingly upon the other.

"You don't need to be told who I am, Mr. Winton,—or why I've come. My name is Richard Maurice; and I am here to ask for your daughter's hand." The burning dark-grey eyes looked full at him; and the Rector liked them, liked the good open brow above, liked the frank, manly carriage. If only it had been possible, he felt that he would have welcomed such a husband for his child.

"My daughter has written to you."

There was a short, scornful laugh.

"Yes. But it was not Doris. That letter was not written of her own free will."

Dumb though the Rector might be under normal conditions, he could sometimes forget his dumbness, could sometimes rise to the occasion, if the need were great and if it came suddenly. Both these conditions were now fulfilled. He had to slay the hopes of this young fellow; and the more merciless plan might well in the end be the more merciful.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Maurice. My daughter wrote of her own free will."

"I cannot believe it!"

The responding gesture spoke so strongly of sympathy, not anger, that it took instant effect.

"Forgive me! I ought not to have said that. You of course mean—believe—what you say. But you do not know! Doris never wrote that letter to me—herself!"

"The actual wording may have been suggested. She found it difficult, and asked for help. But she had made up her mind. The decision was her own."

A white curtain spread itself over the bronzed face.

"If she herself tells me so—with her own lips—"

"She is away for the day; and at her own suggestion. This ought to convince you. She guessed that you might come, and she thought it better to be absent."

"How am I to know what manner of influence has been used? I have a right to hear from her lips—"

"She has given you her answer in writing. That should be sufficient. I cannot have my child put to needless pain."

"You acknowledge—it is pain to her?"

"Yes."

"And you expect that she will forget me?"

"I hope so."

"What this means to me is—of course—nothing!"

A gesture again replied; a gesture so full of kindness, of regret, that Maurice was touched, even while reiterating—

"I can't and won't believe that this is really her wish! After all that passed between us—all our time together—"

"Mr. Maurice, I can only say that neither her mother nor I could consent to the engagement. If Doris had decided otherwise, we should still refuse. But she now is convinced that it cannot be. It grieves me to say this, for your sake,—

yet surely you will allow that I must think first of my child's happiness."

"You do not believe that I could make her happy? I would die for her!"

"I believe it!"—and the Rector's broad hand came on his shoulder. "But many a man would give his life for a woman, whom yet he could not make happy as her husband. I do not know you, but I like your look. If other things were different, I would gladly consent to know you better—to consider possibilities. As things are,—the objections are insuperable."

"You mean—my mother being Mr. Paine's niece!"

"That has weight. I have the greatest respect and liking for Mr. Paine; but our positions in life are apart. But also—Mr. Maurice—who and what was your father?"

The strained white face hardened.

"Can you tell me anything at all about him?"

"No—except that he was not Phil Morris. So much we have just learnt. For some reason, my mother has shown—great reserve."

"A wife does not show such reserve without stringent reason."

Maurice flushed, only to whiten again.

"You see!" murmured the Rector. "It is impossible. And—Doris sees it to be so."

A relaxation of the tense muscles, a droop of the head, showed that at last Maurice saw it too, to some extent.

"Mr. Stirling—knows more!"

"If so—the reasons that silence your mother silence him also." After a break, Mr. Winton went on—"It must, I fear,

mean a measure of suffering for you both; not, I hope, lasting pain. Doris, I cannot doubt, would suffer more in the end if the engagement were allowed. I am very sorry to have to say it, but—you cannot have our child. You must forget her!"

"Forget Doris!" The words were wrung from him. Then he stood upright. "Of course, there is no more to be said—since she herself gives me up. I could not have believed her to be fickle, but—but—"

"You have known one another only a few weeks. The impression may soon pass."

"Thanks!"—satirically. "Women are sometimes made of such stuff, I believe!" He stopped, conscious that this was ungenerous. "It will never pass, with me. I cannot believe that it will—soon—with her. Mr. Winton—one word more. She knew how things were, when she accepted me."

"She realises now, as she did not then, all that would be involved." The Rector stood up, again offering his hand. "Try to meet this bravely," he urged. "Try to think of her happiness—not only of your own. Remember that a time might come when she would be tempted to repent having married you. Could you wish that?"

"If your daughter became my wife, she would marry me for myself, not for my relatives!"

Mr. Winton's troubled eyes noted the pose, the uplifted head, the proudly-confident air; and that which he saw came as a surprise. It was the reproduction of a manner to which he was accustomed.

"Tell Doris, please, that I have her letter, and that I accept her decision. I shall never come again,—and—I shall never forget her."

"You must not ask me to pass on that message."

"Why, pray?"

"If your love is real, you cannot wish to give her unnecessary distress."

Maurice's face changed, but he made no reply. He just touched the offered hand, and strode away, not looking back. Mr. Winton followed to open the front door, but he was already gone.

"So—that is what it really hangs upon!" Maurice said, as he walked rapidly through the garden. He saw nothing by the way. "That is the stumbling-block. Who was my father? What is the mystery? Why have I been kept in the dark, all these years? What possible reason can there be?"

He reached the gate, flung it open, and went through.

"Does Mr. Stirling know? If he does—I have a right to be told. I shall see him, and demand it, as a right."

Wounded pride and bitter wrath had him in their grip, mingled with overwhelming pain. His loving confidence in Doris lay shattered in the dust. His was a sunny-tempered nature in ordinary life; but it held cyclonic possibilities.

It had become plain to him that the question of his parentage was the real cause for which he had been thrown over; and upon this his mind was now concentrated. Why all the mystery? Why his mother's falsity? And who was his father?

He went to the cab-stand, and drove direct to Lynn thorpe, purposing to bring matters to a point between the Squire and himself. But when he asked for Mr. Stirling, the reply came promptly,—Away from home.

"Away for the day?"

"No, sir. Mr. Stirling went to London yesterday—quite unexpectedly,—and he said he would be away for a week or more."

"Can you give me his town address?"

"No, sir, I can't."

"Somebody must know where he is."

"Yes, sir,"—solemnly. "Miss Stirling has the address."

"Will you be so good as to ask her for it?"

"Miss Stirling has gone away this morning, for the week-end."

"Where has she gone?"

The stately butler disapproved of all this questioning. Or—was it that he had been warned?

"If any letter comes for Miss Stirling, sir, it shall be forwarded," he said.

One or two more vain attempts, and Maurice turned away, foiled. "This is not the end," he decided, as he drove off. "I shall come again,—and soon. I will have things out with him. There are facts that a man has a right to know."

But, recognising that at the present moment he was powerless, he returned to the inn, spoke of altered plans, paid his bill, and left for Edinburgh.

CHAPTER XXXV

Would Hamilton Do?

"EVERYTHING somehow seems so flat and stale; I begin to feel like a hundred years old," declared Doris, with a little laugh which had not much mirth in it.

More than a month had gone by since Maurice's brief visit; and to Doris it looked like six months. The days dragged, and all she had to do was a trouble. Under pressure, she had cycled over this afternoon to call upon Katherine,—and she found the way thither extraordinarily long.

On arrival she collapsed into one of the luxurious arm-chairs,— her pretty face laid against a crimson cushion; the cheeks less tinted than their wont; the mouth-corners dropped; the deep-set eyes dark and sad. Katherine, knowing nothing of the foreign entanglement, was puzzled by her present mood. Doris could not be ungraceful; and the outlines of her slender figure, relaxed and limp, were charming still; but the attitude would have been fatal with most figures.

"I don't think you need begin to talk about age yet," Katherine remarked. "Perhaps home is a little dull after foreign travel."

"Oh, I've been back long enough to forget all that; and—besides—"

"Is Mrs. Brutt at home?"

"Yes. I don't see much of her. She has turned so queer and stiff. Perhaps she was as sick of me as I was of her!"—with a laugh. "No—I don't care for her now."

There was a sigh; and Katherine watched with perplexed eyes. This depression, which she was sorry to see for the girl's sake, tended nevertheless to raise her own spirits. For if Doris had felt for Hamilton aught approaching to what she herself felt for him, coming home must have meant delight, not dulness. She knew that the two had not even met, so far; mainly because Hamilton had been absent most of the time, but partly also because Doris had shirked encounters.

"You will stay to luncheon with me," Katherine said.

The invitation was accepted listlessly, and was regretted almost as soon as given. For Hamilton Stirling walked in; and the look that came to his face at sight of her caller put an instant extinguisher on the little flame of hope in Katherine's heart. He went straight to the side of the younger girl,—for once almost impulsive in movement, while Doris received him with indifference.

"Why did you never answer the letter that I wrote, when you were in Switzerland?" he asked.

"Didn't I? Oh, I suppose I was busy—or forgot," she replied, with a backward cast of her mind to the little châlet and the leaping grasshoppers. "Was it about—mountain strata?"—and she laughed.

Katherine resented the laugh for Hamilton; but he only drew his chair near, and tried to lead the girl into a long talk. He asked where she had been, what she had done, how this and that had affected her; and for once he seemed really to

wish to hear what she had to say. She guided him to the safe shelter of his pet subject; and he poured forth information with his usual slow volubility; while she listened—or made believe to listen—in submissive silence. He thought her wonderfully improved.

The Squire being absent, those three had luncheon together; and all through, Hamilton devoted himself to Doris, with only so much reference to his cousin as politeness demanded. Afterward it was the same. They returned to the hall; and he had eyes and ears for the Rector's daughter alone.

When she cycled back, he insisted on acting as her escort. She was in no wild mood to-day, but gentle and dreamy. She did not rush down hills, or try to leave him behind, but kept to a steady pace, and allowed him to take the lead. Hamilton was charmed. This was indeed the model future wife of his imaginings.

He found her altered and developed. Something had drawn her out. She was no longer the excitable school-girl, a victim to every passing breeze,—but a woman!

And Doris could not understand herself this hour. For she was conscious of enjoying his companionship. She liked to hear of his literary efforts; and it pleased her to be again asked to help in his proof-corrections. At the beginning he had impressed her with a sense of his stiffness and heaviness, in contrast with the slight and agile young mountaineer; but this impression faded as they talked.

She was realising his good social position; the absence with him of family mysteries and undesirable relatives. The

difference brought a feeling of repose. No odd second-rate mother-in-law here!—if ever things came to that point. No vulgar, unbearable sister-in-law! A trifle too much of self-assertion, no doubt; and rather too great a love of improving and instructing others. But everybody has his faults. And whatever Hamilton's faults might be, he was refined, well-connected, with finished courtesy of manner. Nothing in him would ever shock her sense of what was correct, though a good deal might try her patience.

She did not say all this to herself definitely; but half-formed comparisons floated through her mind.

He was not Dick!—her dear Dick! A sharp pang shot through her with the name. But if Dick were impossible—utterly impossible!—must she also refuse Hamilton, who cared for her, who was good and kind, true and clever, who—taken as a whole—would be a not undesirable husband? If she could not have the best, might she not be content with the second-best?

Hamilton Stirling—to be reckoned second-best!!

She laughed quietly to herself at the idea.

But she liked his Stirling calm; his repose of bearing; his polish; his assurance. When she recalled Mrs. Morris and Jane, she positively basked in the aristocratic Stirling atmosphere.

With the coming of night, of darkness and solitude, a sharp reaction followed; and she hid her face in the pillow, with stifled sobbing gasps for—"Dick! Dick!"—and a feeling that she must almost die with longing for those grey eyes, those strong brown hands, that passionate enfolding

devotion. Yet, when once asleep, she slept soundly; and with early sunlight there was a reverse swing of the pendulum, as she grasped anew the hopelessness of that, the possibilities of this.

Hamilton had made up his mind at last. He was plainly resolved for once not to let the grass grow under his feet. He came again and again to the Rectory. He brought flowers, fruit, proof-sheets, and— geological specimens!

Doris's reception of him and his offerings varied, as of old. Sometimes she was submissively sweet. Sometimes she contradicted and laughed at him. Sometimes she was dignified and indifferent. Sometimes she felt that she never, never could, never, never would, marry any man living except Dick Maurice. Sometimes she felt that in the future—not too soon!—Hamilton might really do quite nicely.

Though she did not know her own mind, she knew her mother's mind. Every power that Mrs. Winton possessed was bent to the furtherance of Hamilton's suit. For she and her husband were definitely aware of that which most people only conjectured, or had heard as a matter of report, that Lynnthorpe was strictly entailed upon the next male heir. Katherine would have her mother's money; an ample supply; but Hamilton stood in the position of "next male heir." Which meant that his wife would be the future mistress of the place.

Of Dick Maurice nothing further had been heard. Doris was told in brief outline of his interview with her father. She often wondered that no letter, no message, came,—feeling

that she, in his place, would not have been so soon "choked off." Yet it was better for both that he should keep away.

She had not, of course, been near Wyldd's Farm. Her promise to Winnie troubled her; but she felt that a call there was for the present not to be thought of. Now and again she saw Jane Morris; and never without a throb of thankfulness at her own freedom from that tie. At other times recollections of Dick would rise with overwhelming power, making her crave to have him again at any cost.

But this was only occasional. In a general way she was caught, enveloped, held captive, in the old circle of interests, by the influences of her life. Appreciation of good birth, extreme particularity of taste, a passion for refinement and high breeding,—these were by nature and by training a part of her very self. In reverting to them, after a brief spell of dislocation, she reverted also to Hamilton Stirling as the embodiment of them.

"If it has to be, it must be, I suppose," she said one day to herself, as she stood in the hall, gazing out of the window. "I don't know what I really want. I wish I did. He really is a dear man—rather too fond of old bones and stones; but everybody is too fond of something. He might have worse likings. We shall get along all right, I dare say. Oh dear, what a difficult world it is! I hope Dick won't quite forget me! Shall I ever be able to forget him?"

The question came involuntarily, and it startled her. Then a step behind made her turn.

"Mother—Mrs. Stirling wants me to go to Deene to-morrow—for the day."

"Yes, I know, my dear. You will accept, of course."

This was going too far; and Doris drew back.

"I don't know. I'll think about it." She realised suddenly that a good deal might hang upon her answer.

"I can see no reason why you should hesitate."

Doris would not wait to discuss the question. She caught up a basket of flowers, just gathered, and went to put them in her father's study. He loved flowers, with the tenderness which underlay his rugged exterior. While she was there, standing by a little side-table, he came in and surprised her in the act of dropping quiet tears into a mass of blooms.

He had watched her of late with a growing sense of uneasiness; but it was not his way to interfere hastily. Silence with him was often wrongly supposed to mean non-observation.

"There!" Doris said cheerfully, when she heard his step; and she pushed the vase to its right position, then looked up with a smile. But two great drops, ready to fall, refused to be held back, and they splashed obtrusively upon a sheet of half-written paper. "Oh, what a duffer I am! I've spoilt a page of your sermon, daddy."

He shut the door, and went to his chair. Something in his look kept her when she would fain have fled. Instead of so doing, she drew nearer.

"Don't mind about me. I shall get all right in time."

She knelt on a stool in front of him, trying to smile.

"I wonder—will life always be so difficult?"

"As what?"

"It all seems one big tangle! One wants what one can't have,—and one doesn't take what one might have."

He waited for more; and she slowly pulled a late rose to pieces, making a little pile of the debris.

"Isn't that cruel? I've spoilt the rose's life. It might have lasted three days longer. What a number of spoilt lives there are in the world! I wonder if somebody is always to blame. Poor little rose. Dick and I one day counted the petals of a fine huge one, daddy, and we found—taking them all, big and little—hundreds. Would you have expected it?"

"No." He was thinking of her involuntary mention of Maurice; not of the rose-petals.

"It surprised us both. But about difficulties—I meant—in more ways than one. I used to fight so for liberty; just to have my own way. And I think Dick helped me to see that that isn't always the best thing." She was back in thought on the Glückhorn, listening to him.

The Rector made a slight sound of assent.

"I don't talk about him to other people, you know. I may sometimes to you—mayn't I?" Then she lifted her head higher. "Mrs. Stirling wants me to spend to-morrow at Deene."

Mr. Winton found speech.

"Are you sure of yourself, Doris?"

Her hand shook, and her cheek paled.

"No—" she said very low. "I'm not sure. I don't know what I want—or what I don't want."

The pause following seemed long. He said at length with emphasis,—"Whatever you do,—don't drift!"

"I think I am drifting."

"Then stop! Take time. Be cautious. Don't get yourself entangled, before you know your own mind."

She put both hands over her face, and bent forward, resting the backs of them upon his knee. His broad hand came on her head, with a strong and loving pressure.

"For your own sake—wait!—pray for guidance. Not for your own sake alone. Think of others too. You once asked me to consider Maurice's side of the question; and rightly. What now about Stirling's side of it?"

"You mean—should I be wronging him?"

"Not if you love him."

She lifted a flushed face.

"But—I don't. Not love, daddy. I love Dick. The two things are so different. I don't think—really—he would want that sort of love!"

"If you give yourself to him, he will want the whole of you—he will have a right to the whole. No man, worth calling a man, would be content with less. Loving one man, you cannot rightly marry another."

"People do sometimes, don't they?—and things get straight in the end."

"People do many foolish things. The question is not—what others do, but what you yourself ought to do. Could you truly and faithfully promise to 'love, honour, and obey' Hamilton Stirling? To LOVE him, child! You know what love means."

"Yes—" she whispered, her eyes brimming over again.
"I love—Dick!"

"Then, to marry Stirling could only mean unhappiness for you both. For him as much as for you."

"I've often wondered what he would say—if he knew about Dick."

"He would have to know all."

Doris remained motionless, thinking.

"I'd better—not go to-morrow," she said at length.

"It seems more wise—under the circumstances."

"Then I'll write and say so. Mother won't like it."

"You must decide the question on its own merits."

"I'll write at once. But of course I shall see him on Friday."

"Why on Friday?"

"Mr. Stirling's birthday."

"Ah—true. That is nothing. You need not see more of him than you wish, in such a crowd. Besides—your note of to-day should make him understand. To accept for to-morrow might involve you in more than you intend."

"Yes—I see. It won't do."

A letter for herself was brought in, badly written, untidily folded. She opened it, and said in surprise: "From Mrs. Morris."

The Rector waited in some suspense, till she spoke again.

"It is to ask if I will go to Wyldd's farm, to-day or to-morrow. Winnie has been worse, and she is to be sent to a hospital for treatment,—and it may cure her, or she may not get through. She wants to see me before she leaves. Daddy, I can't refuse."

He took the offered sheet, and read it, noting the ill-spelt words, the badly expressed sentences.

"No. I am sorry, but I do not see that you can well get out of it. You had better have the pony-carriage directly after luncheon. I wish I were free to go with you." He stood up, and added: "Be wise, child. Don't get drawn into a talk about—the son."

CHAPTER XXXVI

A Surprise Meeting

THE Rectory pony was famed for choosing his own pace, and that not a rapid one. Through the long drive Doris—having for once given over the reins to the boy—found ample leisure for thought.

Again and again she recurred to her father's question—"Are you sure of yourself?" "No, I'm not!" she answered each time. Again and again she heard his emphatic—"Whatever you do, don't drift!"—and repeatedly, with growing earnestness, she murmured—"No, I won't."

She had started early after luncheon; and on their way through Deene, she stopped outside Mrs. Stirling's garden, sending the boy to the front door with her note; a brief little note, giving no reason, but stating only that she was sorry she could not accept. That was her first step towards "not drifting." She hoped Hamilton would understand.

At the beginning of the grass-path near Wyld's Farm, she quitted the pony-carriage, bidding the boy wait for her, and proceeded on foot through the meadow. Mrs. Morris, stout and impassive as usual, opened the door. "I saw you coming," she said shortly.

Doris was conscious of a faint thrill, as her hand met that of Dick's mother, even while noting with distaste the woman's heavy ungracious look.

"I'm glad you sent for me, if Winnie wished it."

"She seems to have got her mind set on seeing you, somehow or other. I don't know what for. There was no pacifying of her, till I said I'd write."

Doris would have liked to put one or two questions as to Winnie's state, but no time was allowed. Mrs. Morris walked her into the sitting-room, and left her there, alone with the younger girl.

"Don't try to get up," Doris said kindly, reaching the sofa. "I am so sorry that you have been worse."

Winnie seemed at first voiceless. Her pale face flushed, and the blue eyes were very troubled. Doris had instantly a strong impression that Winnie knew something about herself and Dick. She thought of her father's injunction, and resolved to keep clear of that subject.

"Yes; I'd a lot of pain; and then—I suppose I got a chill at Jane's wedding."

"Your sister! Is she married?"

"Last week. Sam Blunt is American; and his father has got a big store out in Chicago. He's a friend of the Parkinses—you know—the drapers—and since he's been in England, he was always cycling over there, and seeing Jane. And he took a fancy to her. It all came in such a hurry; for he'd got to go back, and Jane wouldn't hear of putting off, as uncle wanted. She said she hated Wyld's Farm, and everything to do with it; and she didn't care if she never set foot in the country again. Sam means to be a rich man some day; and that's what Jane likes."

Doris was at a loss whether to congratulate or condole. Jane must have been a household trial; and certainly Winnie showed no distress.

"I hope he will be a good husband to her. And you are to be in the hospital—to have something done."

"The doctor says, if I don't I cannot live long. And he says I ought. He hopes I shall be ever so much stronger afterwards—if I get through."

"You mustn't say 'if.' You must say 'when.'" This brought a smile. "I am sure you will get through."

"Perhaps—" came absently. Winnie's eyes kept searching her face, and the gentle lips moved nervously, as if she wanted to say something, and had not courage.

"You must have thought it unkind of me, Winnie, never to come again to see you," Doris said hastily, anxious to stave off remarks. "But— Wyldd's Farm is a long way off. I was abroad a good while; and since I came back—somehow it has not been possible."

"You've been too busy."

"Or perhaps too lazy. Anyhow, here I am at last—as soon as I knew that you really wanted me. How soon do you go?"

"On Friday."

"The day after to-morrow. And—you don't mind! You are not frightened?"

Winnie's smile was an embodiment of serenity.

"Why should I be frightened? No—I don't think I am. It will be all right—either way. And I'm trying to want to get over it."

"But of course you want that. Of course you want to be strong—able to work and do things."

"I suppose so—of course! But—"

"Just think how different your whole life will be, if only you can feel quite well, like other people."

"Yes—" gently. "Oh, it will be all right. I don't want to have to choose. I'd rather—leave it all in His hands."

"I shall think of you on Friday, Winnie."

"Please do. I shall like to know that."

Again the wistful look, as of something that the girl had to say. Doris talked on, keeping it steadily at bay. She was not entirely successful. Winnie submitted quietly; but when her visitor stood up, with kind parting words, there was a tight clutch of hands, and the girl whispered with trembling lips—

"I'm to see Raye. He has promised to come."

"Your brother!" Doris's colour changed slightly.

"He is coming. I know you met—in Switzerland. May I tell him I've seen you?"

"You tell him most things, don't you?" With a sudden impulse, Doris stooped and kissed the pale brow. "I am glad you will have that pleasure. Now, Winnie, you must be very careful, and not do anything to tire yourself. I shall ask to have word sent me, how you get on."

She made her exit quickly, trying not to see the tears of disappointment which filled the girl's eyes. What else could she have said? To discuss the affair with Winnie was out of the question.

To her relief she found the passage empty; and she went out alone, through the little garden, into the meadow beyond.

There she stood still, to recover herself. The sudden mention of Dick had set her heart beating. She was rather disposed to resent Winnie's attempt at interference. But, far more strongly, another thought had possession of her.

She followed the grass-path, looking towards the wind-driven hills, and came again to a pause, when only a few yards from the farther gate. As yet the pony-carriage was out of sight. Doris faced round, for another look at the old farm and its surroundings.

"And that is Dick's home! The home he is never allowed to come and see. It seems so strange. Why does Mr. Stirling want to keep him away? Why does he submit? Why doesn't he insist on coming? I do think it is all very hard on poor Dick. And whatever his father may have been, he himself is not to blame for it."

Then, after an interval, emphatically—

"Daddy is right. He is quite, quite right. I'm glad I wrote that note. Now I see! Now I know! Mr. Hamilton Stirling—oh, never! I can never, never, never marry him. If not Dick—then—nobody!"

She repeated aloud,—"Nobody! Nobody!"—and turned towards the gate through which she had to go.

The movement brought her face to face with Dick!

He stood like a statue, just beyond the gate; a stern, white-faced statue, sombre and still. Only that instant had he become aware of her presence; and the sight seemed to have frozen him. But with Doris a great rush of joy surged

upward, bringing colour and radiance. The sudden encounter, following close upon her own vivid realisation of how things truly were with her, caused momentary forgetfulness of all else. She did not even notice that the boy and the pony-carriage had gone to a distance, and were still invisible. She knew only that she and Dick were together again.

"Dick!" she said, under her breath, and she went forward, through the gate, holding out both hands. "Dick!"

His dented and troubled forehead, even in that moment; impressed her curiously, bringing again the feeling which she had had on their first meeting, that surely she had known him in earlier years, or, at the least, that he strongly resembled some familiar face. But then, as now, she could not put a name to it. It was a subtle, elusive likeness; perhaps rather belonging to play of muscles than to actual form of feature.

"Dick!" she murmured, a third time. Then she awoke to his lack of response, and her hands dropped, her glow faded. She stood looking at him with something of wonder. "Have you come to see Winnie?"

Maurice was holding himself in fiercely; his lips pressed together; his hands clenched. He could not have told at that moment whether wrath or pain, anger or longing, was the stronger. He only knew that he was tempest-tossed.

Doris spoke gently.

"You won't be too much worried about her, will you? She will get through. I know—I am sure—she will get through. She is so sweet and brave. And afterwards—only think, if she is well and strong! Won't that be a joy to you?"

A wordless sound came hoarsely in reply; and she knew, from the blanched passion of his look, that he could not speak,—that he was thinking, not of Winnie, but only, solely, of herself.

He came a step nearer, his breathing hard and rapid, as he gripped the top bar of the gate.

"Why do you speak to me? Why not—pass me by?" The words were almost inaudible. "If—you meant—that letter!"

"How could I pass you by, when you are in such trouble about Winnie?"

There was a harsh laugh—almost a sob. "Winnie! Do I care? I suppose I do. Sometimes it seems to me—I care for nothing—nothing else—only for you. Tell me the truth now,—tell me plainly! Was it you— you yourself!—who gave me up?"

She looked at him sorrowfully, wondering if she had been wrong to stop.

He spoke again in the same hoarse faint voice. "Tell me—it was not you who wrote that letter!"

"I did write it, Dick!"—and he made a sharp turn as if to go; but her hand was on his arm. "Let me explain, please. I did write it. Mother helped me with the wording—but—I thought it had to be. I had just come across Jane—and I felt as if I never could endure to belong to—her."

"That was it, then!"

"Yes; that was it."

"And you never gave a thought to—what it would mean to me!"

Doris's hand still rested gravely on his arm. She said no more, and his face was set as if in iron. But the strain was too great, and his self-control broke. He seized her hand, and kissed it stormily. Twice again came that strange short laugh, almost like a sob.

"Is there no hope—none?" he struggled to say.

"My father will not allow it, Dick. And I never will marry without his consent. But—I can say so much as this, that I do know my own mind now. I know that at least I couldn't marry anybody else. If that is any comfort—"

His chest heaved convulsively. "Any comfort! To know that you—care still! To know that you—love me! My darling—"

She held him off firmly, with both hands.

"No, no! Nothing further. I've told you so much, because I can't bear to see you so unhappy. But things can only be like that. I know now that you love me, and you know that I love you. We are not engaged. You are free to marry to-morrow, if you like."

He exclaimed indignantly. "Yes; but you might change your mind. It might mean too long, the waiting."

"Too long for you—" huskily.

"It doesn't seem to me now as if it could be," she replied.

CHAPTER XXXVII

The Mischief-Maker Again

"IS Mrs. Stirling at home?"

The caller, in her best toque and white kid gloves, put this question with a beaming smile.

Mrs. Stirling was at home, but would be engaged for the next quarter of an hour.

That did not matter in the very least. Mrs. Brutt was in no hurry. She would be most happy to wait. She stepped out, and trailed impressively after the maid. It was well for her peace of mind that she could not see and hear through brick walls.

"Mrs. Brutt!" The tone was significant. "Did you not tell her that I was engaged?"

"You said, ma'am, for a quarter of an hour. Mrs. Brutt doesn't mind waiting."

"If I'd known who it was, I would have been engaged altogether." This was an aside. No love had ever been lost between the two widow-ladies. Then to the maid—"You can bring tea in about twenty minutes." To herself again—"It shall be an elastic quarter of an hour!"

Which it certainly was. Mrs. Brutt, unconscious of her hostess' sensations, but much occupied with her own, stood poised in a graceful attitude at the exact centre of the room, conning over all that she meant to say. She had arrived with a definite purpose.

Unwittingly, the Squire had given her deep offence. It was almost inevitable that he should do so, sooner or later,

since she ranked in her own eyes as a personage of high importance, while in his eyes she was nobody.

On her first return from abroad, he had called to thank her for the prompt response to his letter, shown in bringing Doris at once home; and he had also let her know that she was to keep to herself the story of Dick Maurice's suit. Mrs. Brutt had assured him that he might depend upon her discretion. She never talked! She never repeated things. "No one ever concerns themselves," she said, being often guilty of that most common of grammatical blunders, "less than I do, with other people's affairs!"

The Squire knew better, and smiled inwardly; but he believed that he had effectually shut her mouth. And it would have been so, had he followed the matter up, as he really at the moment had led her to expect, by personal attentions in the way of invitations to Lynnthorpe.

But he forgot to mention to Katherine that he wished such attentions to be paid; and Katherine disliked the talkative widow so thoroughly, that she was not likely to take steps on her own initiative. The Squire in fact forgot all about Mrs. Brutt from that day forward. He was harassed, worried, very far from well; and his mind was entirely taken up with his own secret conflict.

Katherine, though not a keenly observant person, began to notice with concern his unwonted languor, his frequent absence of mind, his oblivion of details. These things were new in him. He had been always prompt, business-like, never needing a reminder as to engagements or work. She often had to remind him now.

Weeks had passed, and Mrs. Brutt awaited still the expected invitations to Lynnthorpe—which she looked upon as the price of her silence about Doris and Maurice. But they did not come. Two large parties had taken place, and she was left out. Now the Squire's birthday was at hand, always a fête-day in the place; and she had set her heart on being included in the big dinner-party of relatives and intimate friends.

No such thing! She had a formal card of invitation to the mixed afternoon gathering, to which everybody went,—an omnium gatherum, of which she had often heard, and at which she turned up her nose.

That was enough. If she was to be slighted in such a fashion, after all her trouble in carrying out the Squire's plans, he should be sorry for it! She would follow her own devices, and would hold her tongue no longer.

It occurred to her that to let slip the fact of Doris's love-affair to the mother of Mr. Hamilton Stirling would be the most effective method of revenging herself, not upon the Squire only, but upon Mrs. Stirling, whom she cordially disliked, and upon Mrs. Winton. She was quite aware that the latter wanted to secure Mr. Hamilton Stirling for her daughter, and she had gathered that the Squire did not desire him to know about Dick Maurice. If so, he should have taken a little more trouble about her. She was not going to be shunted on one side in this fashion. People might be offended with her for speaking out,—but what then? She could easily shift her quarters again. Lynnbrooke was a fearfully dull place, and she had had nearly enough of it.

Standing in an elegant attitude was well enough for ten minutes, but the ten grew into fifteen, the fifteen into twenty, and she became both tired and annoyed. Tea was brought in, and still the hostess remained absent. She wandered round the room, paying a perfunctory attention to the pictures.

One in a shady corner drew closer interest. Two heads, side by side, were lightly sketched in French chalks; both of them bearing an unmistakable resemblance to Mr. Stirling, though the one was more delicate in feature, more refined, more really beautiful than the other. Both were young.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting so long," a voice said behind her. "How do you do? Will you have some tea?"

Mrs. Brutt turned to shake hands.

"I quite understand," she said, secretly wrathful at receiving so scant an apology. "You are always such a busy person. But we had not met for so long, I thought I might venture to say I would wait. I am rather struck with this pair of heads. So well sketched: such fine faces! Am I wrong in supposing that one of the two is Mr. Stirling?"

"He and his brother."

"Ah, to be sure—the father of Miss Stirling. He died, I believe, when she was quite a little child."

"Yes. Years ago. Will you come and sit down?"

"And—which of the two, may I ask, is our Mr. Stirling? This one, I suppose,—such a handsome face!"

"That was the brother—Maurice Stirling."

Mrs. Brutt echoed the word "Maurice!" with an intonation of surprise. Then she took a chair, and poured out a string of bland remarks on the weather, the neighbourhood,

why she had come, whom she had seen lately, gradually edging her way in the direction that she wished. Switzerland had to be dragged in, neck and shoulders. Mountains, with their exquisite scenery, came next; and Doris followed.

"By-the-by"—playing with her bracelet—"I wonder whether you have happened to hear of the young surgeon, Mr. Richard Maurice, whom we happened to meet abroad. Curious how many Maurices there seem to be!"—reflectively. "Really, quite odd. I imagine that the Squire is acquainted with him."

"Not unlikely," Mrs. Stirling said carelessly. "Will you have some cake?"

"Thanks. Such delicious cake! Home-made, no doubt. We met Mr. Maurice first at Bex, and then in the mountains. A rather agreeable man; and clever too. He and Doris went no end of expeditions together. Girls do such odd things, you know, in these days. You and I, when we were girls, would no more have dreamt of going off for a day with a strange young man, than of flying to the moon. The one would have been as impossible as the other. But everything now is so different! Of course they were not strangers long. Very much the reverse, as you may imagine."

Mrs. Stirling, having received Doris's little note, and having been impressed by it, woke up to the fact that there was method in this outpouring. She handed more cakes.

"Thanks very much. I'm really ashamed—I am making quite a meal. And my appetite is generally so small—so precarious, you know. To tell the truth, I rather blamed myself for laxity, in allowing the two to be so much

together—perhaps in trusting them too implicitly. Mine is a trustful nature, and one is so liable to be taken in. But pray count all this to be in the strictest confidence! You see—things really did go rather far. I quite thought something was coming of it. But even in modern days, the course of true love doesn't always run smooth."

"This may be only the second volume of the novel. Perhaps a third will follow," cheerfully suggested Mrs. Stirling.

"It may—of course. But something seems to have gone wrong. And when one sees Doris, one cannot help feeling very sorry for the poor girl. So very apparent—what she is feeling! But I ought not to have said so much. I—in a manner I almost promised! Only, you of course—being so intimate with them all—it seems as if you really ought to know. But unless you can assure me that it will go no farther, I must not say any more."

"It sounds an interesting tale. I can undertake that it will not travel beyond my son and myself."

Mrs. Brutt professed herself satisfied, and proceeded to pour forth the whole story—not to say, a good deal more than the whole. Mrs. Stirling listened with an air of placid detachment, smiling sympathetically. Whatever she felt for Hamilton's sake, she did not turn a hair; and Mrs. Brutt, who had meant her tidings to come as a blow, was disappointed.

"Quite a nice little one-volume love-affair!"

Mrs. Stirling remarked at the end. "It seems rather a pity, since he is such a pleasant young fellow, that he should

not have her—even though he has not the sixteen quarterings!"

"Very far from that. There is something most hazy about his family history—his father, more especially—putting aside the Wyld Farm relationships. And besides—between ourselves—I imagine that her parents have other views for Doris."

"Really! Are you sure? We are not too well off in this place for eligible men. Do, pray, tell me—who can it be?"

Mrs. Brutt could have shaken her; and the temptation proved irresistible.

"Of course I don't pretend to know. I am hardly more than a stranger—not in the Wintons' secrets. But I do happen to have heard, and on extremely good authority, that your own son has been paying a good deal of attention to Doris—and that her parents are more than willing."

Mrs. Stirling lay back in her chair, and laughed till tears ran down her cheeks.

"My son! Hamilton! After Doris Winton! My dear Mrs. Brutt!—where can you have picked up such a preposterous notion? Doris Winton! Hardly more than a child! A pretty girl, and a nice girl, but not in the least suited to Hamilton. He has known her all her life, and they are very good friends,—in fact, he is rather fond of instructing her in geology, and I have seen her unmistakably bored with it. He and I will have a good laugh over that report. Oh, I quite understand—you had it on the best authority! Did you ever hear any piece of impossible news which was not on the very best authority? I never did. I'm afraid somebody has been

amusing herself at your expense. If you really wish to know the truth—quite between ourselves!—I can assure you that the one woman in the world for my son would be—Katherine Stirling! But at present she would never think of leaving her uncle. He so depends upon her; and she is a very embodiment of unselfishness."

Mrs. Brutt felt herself foiled. She had had distinctly the worst of the encounter; and she took herself off with a much offended air. When she was gone, Mrs. Stirling went straight to her son, and related what had passed.

"I've no doubt there is a modicum of truth in the woman's gossip," she said. "Though why she should have taken the trouble to tell me, I don't know. Mere love of talk, probably. All that about the farm people is, I dare say, pure imagination. But this explains Doris's note. She has been éprise by the young surgeon, and can't think definitely of anybody else."

Hamilton looked solemn. He was more amazed than distressed. He had never doubted that he only had to propose to be accepted. That Doris should prefer another to himself was almost inconceivable! But clearly it was the case.

"If you take my advice, my dear boy,"—she called him a "boy" still sometimes, as mothers do, long after boyhood is passed,—"you will give up thinking about Doris, and just go back to Katherine. And—I may be mistaken, but somehow I do think you are a good deal to Katherine. I think you might succeed in that direction. And I've made it easy for you now to prevent people from saying that you have been refused.

You know what I have always wished. Doris is a charming girl. But Katherine—!"

That "But Katherine—" with its unspoken suggestion, took hold of him. The thought of Katherine soothed his wounded pride. After all, nobody had been to him what Katherine always was. She, and not Doris, formed the embodiment of his typical wife. And if Doris really had taken up with somebody else, rather than himself—well, Hamilton was sorry for her!

He spent a restless night, and next morning went to Lynnthorpe, for two hours in Katherine's company.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

"Who was My Father?"

IT was the morning of Mr. Stirling's birthday. Presents, letters, congratulations, had been showered upon him; and now at last he had an hour alone. Hamilton was with his niece; and Mr. Stirling's horse, brought round for a ride, was dismissed. Early though it still was, the Squire spoke of being tired; a rare admission on his part. No; he did not want Katherine; he did not want anybody. He only wished to be alone.

Shutting the door of his study, a lofty though not large room, well lined with bookcases, he sank back in the big arm-chair, close to his writing-table.

Many letters demanded attention; but he was in no mood to give it. A feeling of utter languor, almost of powerlessness, had possession of him. What mattered birthdays, friends, tokens of affection,—while this ever-pressing weight dragged him down? How much longer could he endure it? Was there no way of escape—no road to freedom?

"Yes,—one, and one only." So, with relentless calm, Conscience made answer. He looked that way in the face, and recoiled from it with a shudder. Nothing but confession, and putting right that which was wrong. Nothing but—the impossible!

Round and round the old weary circle his mind was working—almost like a personality, separate from himself. He could neither control nor hinder the treadmill of thought.

He pictured to himself, as he had done hundreds of times before, what Katherine would feel, what Hamilton would say, how the world—his world—would take it. He saw the looks of amazement, the silent contempt of some, the disdainful pity of others. He heard the comments, the whispers of wonderment; and again he felt that to meet all this was out of the question. It could not be. The thing had gone on too long. It had to go on still, during his lifetime. Afterwards, the truth would become known. That was inevitable. But men would be kind to the memory of the dead. They would make excuses—then—such excuses as they would not make while he lived.

Yet, if things were to go on—must he endure to the end this terrible weight, this ever-increasing sense of unpardonable guilt, this constant remorse? That was the crucial question.

His thoughts went again to Mary, his wife; to that scene, twenty-five years or more earlier, when the truth had burst upon him, and he had realised in an agony that to divulge it might lose him the woman he loved.

Vividly he recalled how, first for his love's sake, afterwards for his wife's sake, later for Katherine's sake, and all through for his own sake, he had insisted on silence as the price of his doing aught for Mrs. Morris and her children. And so between them—between him and her—the tissue of deceit was woven.

For she was left penniless, worse than penniless, with a mass of unpaid debts on her hands; debts, the existence of which Mr. Stirling had never known. They gave him a powerful handle, and he used it. She was helpless, for she

had no resources; and the money which would one day come to Katherine was tied securely out of reach for many a long year.

As the price of her silence, Mr. Stirling paid all the debts, undertook the education of the little boy, and promised her an income of two hundred a year, so long as the secret should be faithfully guarded.

And she had kept it, even from her own children. She had never betrayed him. She had followed all his directions, had obeyed all his commands. She was a woman capable of loving, and she had loved her husband with utter devotion; but the whole tenderness that was in her seemed to have been expended in that one direction. It was as if the long deceit, and the separation from her son, had seared and hardened her nature, deadening other affections.

Yet in a way she did care greatly for this son, of whom she was allowed to see so little, between whom and herself so complete a separation of mind and heart had come about. She cared for his future; and she believed that his future depended on her strict observance of the conditions imposed. Uneducated and ignorant, she knew little beyond the circle of her own home-interests; and she had always believed that it was in the power of Mr. Stirling to leave his property where he chose;—only not to a woman, therefore not to Katherine. She had heard something of the "entail," and this was all that she supposed it to mean. The Squire had, perhaps, made no definite statements to her, but he had certainly implied that he had such power, and he had allowed her deliberately to remain under this delusion. Whereas, in point of fact, he had

no power whatever to break the entail, without the consent of the next heir.

Thinking over these things, as he lay back in his study chair, with closed eyes and aching head, the deceit looked very black. Whether he had or had not actually said this or that, mattered little. It was enough that he had misled his sister-in-law, had allowed her to be deceived.

A knock at the door made him sit upright, opening a book, with an air of being occupied.

The butler came in.

"Somebody wishes to see you, sir."

"Who is it?"

"He didn't give any name, sir. He said he'd rather not. It's—" Forest lowered his voice—"it's the same gentleman that came when you were in town, sir, some weeks ago, and wanted your address."

"Tell him I am engaged, and he had better come another time. Ask his name, please."

The butler went, and returning said—"It is Mr. Maurice, sir."

"I decline to see Mr. Maurice." The Squire had gone strangely pale.

But in the doorway, behind the solid figure of the old butler, stood a younger and slighter figure, resolute in air.

"And I decline to be sent away," a voice said, stern as the Squire's own.

Forest glanced doubtfully from the one to the other. And the one thing which powerfully impressed him was—not the anger of his master, not the presumption of the caller, but a

curious intangible likeness in those two faces; a likeness which could not be defined, but which was undeniable.

Mr. Stirling stood up slowly. The younger man's eyes met his, and there was a swift crossfire, a brief, silent passage-at-arms, which ended in victory for the newcomer. Mr. Stirling said—

"Very well. I will give you five minutes. You may go, Forest."

"I beg your pardon for insisting," Maurice said when the door was shut. "But insist I must. A few words with you are necessary."

He hesitated, noting the Squire's changed and haggard look.

"You are not well!"

The remark was put aside.

"What, pray, is the meaning of this?" Mr. Stirling demanded. "You know that in coming here, you break conditions—"

"Unreasonable conditions!"

"Allow me to finish, if you please. Conditions, upon which your mother's claim to a lifelong pension rest."

"I cannot help it! There are times when a man must judge for himself,— must put aside other considerations. I have a question to put; and I intend to have an answer."

"No doubt in reference to Doris Winton. I have heard of that folly."

"It is in reference to my love for Doris Winton. My life's happiness depends on marrying her; and one great obstacle stands in the way. Mr. Stirling—who was my father?"

No answer was vouchsafed.

"Is he living now?"

"No."

"When did he die?"

"Just after the birth of your sister Winnie."

"Was his name really Maurice?"

The Squire's face was set in a hard mask. He said—
"Yes."

"What was his standing?"

"A gentleman of education,—and of good connections."

"How did he come to marry my mother?"

"He had been ill,—and she gained some sort of hold over him. I can only call it insanity. He deeply regretted his action later, there is no doubt,—and none of his own people knew of the marriage till after his death."

"Then he punished his wife for his own folly. The brute!" burst out Maurice.

A deep flush spread itself over the Squire's face. He sat down suddenly; and Maurice saw the shaking hands, the trembling underlip. He took a seat himself, unasked, and made an effort to speak calmly.

"I am sorry to distress you, but I can put off no longer. Things cannot go on like this. I must know more. One fact you have made clear to me. That is, that the man who married my mother was a cad at heart, though he may have been a gentleman by birth. How, otherwise, could he have visited his own weakness upon a woman—his wife!"

"You are speaking of your father—remember!"

"No father to be proud of!"

"He was good to her, I believe,—always—"

"I don't call that being good to her."

"It is not possible for you—knowing so little—to estimate his position. You pass judgment, not understanding."

"I hope I know the duty of a husband to his wife. To marry—and then be too much of a coward to acknowledge what he had done! Abominable!" After a pause, Maurice went on—"When he died, why did she not speak out? What possible cause could there have been then, for silence?" He turned upon the Squire. "Why have you insisted on this silence—made her income depend upon secrecy?"

"I am not able to explain fully. There were reasons!"

"I dare say! For the sake of his grand connections—no doubt!" Maurice all but gave expression to the thought which flamed up—"Perhaps you are one of them!" But the deep flush had come again, mounting to Mr. Stirling's forehead, and he held both hands there, murmuring with evident pain and difficulty—

"I cannot have any more of this. You must leave. I am suffering from a very severe headache."

Maurice gravely studied the crimsoned brow and its swelling veins.

"Yes, I see. You are not well. But I must see you again. I have a right to know more."

The Squire, leaning forward and breathing heavily, did not move. Maurice stood up, said "Good-bye" coldly, and walked to the door. There he hesitated, and glanced back.

A strained and troubled face the supporting hands—a face of beseeching appeal. It was as if the Squire were being impelled by some strong force to take action, against his own will.

"Don't go!" came slowly. "Wait! I have—something to say to you."

CHAPTER XXXIX

"That was Well Done!"

THE omnium gatherum of friends and neighbours, tenants and retainers, had come. It was a warm, brilliant, autumn day. People thronged the house and grounds, the garden and the cricket-field. On this one day in the year, for three hours in the afternoon, all Lynnbrooke was welcome; and Lynnbrooke did not fail to make the most of its opportunity.

A slight shadow brooded over the usually light-hearted throng; for the Squire was unwell. He did not appear at the usual time; and it leaked out that he was lying down, much indisposed. Anxious inquiries made known the fact that his doctor had not been summoned, but was enjoying himself with the cricketers; so, of course, nothing could be seriously wrong.

Katherine was an enigma that day. She looked excessively pale, and had little to say; yet it could not be said that she seemed unhappy. Something of a small thunderbolt had indeed that morning fallen at her feet. But, to balance a piece of news which touched her most unpleasantly, was the fact that she had again her devoted knight in close attendance. The news had affected him even more acutely in one respect; and he still laboured under a sense of bewilderment at so complete a change in his worldly prospects. But he and Katherine comforted one another; and he hardly left her side. How then could she be really unhappy?

At four o'clock refreshments were served in the schoolrooms to tenants, retainers, and so many of the neighbours of whatsoever degree as chose to partake. There were few on these occasions who did not choose to partake. It had always been a day in which high and low mingled together in the happiest possible manner.

Generally the Squire was there among them, going from one to another, chatting with landowner, farmer, tradesman, cottager, exchanging kind and cordial words with each in turn, knowing everybody, forgetting nothing. To-day, for once, Katherine alone received guests, overlooked arrangements; and at half-past four he was still absent.

"Rather odd, isn't it?" Mrs. Brutt said in mysterious and suggestive tones. She had by this time told a good many acquaintances—in the strictest confidence—about Doris and the young surgeon; and, as she intended, people were beginning to talk. Mrs. Brutt had come across Dick Maurice himself that morning, and had passed him with the curtest of nods. She made a good deal of capital out of this encounter.

Doris, a winsome figure in white frock and shady hat, kept studiously in the background. She did not wish to come into contact with either Hamilton or Mrs. Brutt; and the latter seemed to pervade the place. Wherever the girl went, she was sure to see the agreeable widow bearing importantly down upon her.

Towards five o'clock, in common with many others, she found herself in the garden, outside the west front of the house. A general impression prevailed—how or whence, nobody knew—that Mr. Stirling was about to make his

appearance here; and a surging movement hitherward took place. The terrace was soon crowded; the lawn and side-walks below were full. People pressed quietly together, closing their ranks, and drawing as near as might be to the bay-window of the great library, with an air of expectation.

Expectation soon to be fulfilled. Doris, having retreated to a quiet corner, glanced carelessly up—and saw something which took away her breath.

Mr. Stirling had at last shown himself. He stood at the opened window, looking down upon them all—pale, haggard, weary, unlike his ordinary self. A buzz of welcome broke out at the sight, quickly checked, for he made no response; and there was that in his look which portended that something was about to happen.

But it was not his face that startled and stirred Doris. It was the vision of another behind the Squire, following him closely, standing motionless when he stopped—a slim, broad-shouldered muscular man, with head well up, and clear, dark-grey eyes surveying the scene—eyes that searched till they found Doris, and rested there.

Dick—with Mr. Stirling! What could have happened? The girl's heart was beating furiously.

A breathless hush reigned; everybody waiting for what should come next. Mr. Stirling stood in silence—the crowded terrace at his feet; the velvet lawn, with its beds of variegated colour beyond; then a sombre background of trees, between which could be seen peeps of distant hills.

Of all this he saw nothing. He was conscious only of the presence of the people, his friends of a lifetime; neighbours, tenants, dependants; one and all known to him.

Those who were near enough could not but note the difficulty he had in controlling himself; in suppressing an agitation which all but gained the mastery. Dark shadows were under his eyes; drops stood upon the drawn and troubled brow. Twice he tried to speak, and failed. A slight swaying movement could be seen, as if he suffered from dizziness; and Maurice spoke earnestly, in a low voice. A few overheard the words—"I think you are not fit. Better put it off."

This was met by a gesture of refusal. The Squire stood firmly, and spoke in raised tones—

"Will you kindly all listen to me? I have something to say."

So abrupt was the resulting stillness, that one sound only broke it—an incautiously loud remark from Mrs. Brutt—"I wonder what next!" The Rector, who happened to stand near, put up his hand with an authoritative gesture, imposing silence. Mrs. Brutt fumed, but had to obey. The Squire began anew—

"I have something to say to you all. Many here are old and tried friends of mine; and to none of you am I a stranger. I have to ask your patient attention for a few minutes—your kindness—your indulgence. That which I am going to say has long been a great trouble, weighing on my mind. The time has come when I can no longer be content to keep it to myself."

"A quarter of a century ago, certain facts became known to me, which I had not before suspected—had not dreamt of, as even a possibility. My only brother, Maurice—some of you will remember what he and I were one to another!—after losing his wife, went abroad with his little child—my niece, Katherine. He took a trained nurse to look after her—Nurse Molly of Wyldd's Farm. He lived abroad several years; and when a summons came to me, telling that he was in great danger, I went at once—only to find him gone."

"I found also—not only my little orphaned niece, but—a widow and other children. My brother had secretly married Nurse Molly, telling no one of what he had done. Hush!" at the sound of a rising murmur. "Let me go on, please."

"It was a great trouble to me; and the question came up as to continued secrecy. I blame myself now for giving in to the temptation—and it was a very strong temptation!—to let nobody hear of this second marriage. At the time there were reasons against making it known, which to myself appeared overwhelmingly heavy. I need not enter into them fully."

"You must not misunderstand me here. I have the warmest respect and regard for Farmer Paine. I believe he is not here this afternoon. But, if he were, he would, I am certain, agree with me in admitting that there are, and that there must be, differences in birth and in position; and that those differences are apt to tell against happiness in married life. Farmer Paine is a better and nobler man than many a one in a higher social position. That, however, does not touch the question. My brother's marriage was, in my opinion, a grave mistake."

"Such considerations and others also weighed with me; and I decided—wrongly, as I see now—to insist on continued secrecy. The widow was left in extremely straitened circumstances. I made it my condition of helping her that she should remain in retirement, and that nothing should be said. She agreed to all that I proposed; and she has since carried out loyally all that she undertook to do."

"I do not suppose that she had any clear idea at the time of all that would be involved in this plan; and certainly I had not. But I cannot offer ignorance as any excuse for myself. If I did not realise, I ought to have done so. Nothing can be worse than to plunge headlong, not realising, into a course of deceit and wrong. And that was what I did."

"My little niece, Katherine, I adopted; and she has been to me since as a daughter."

"There were two other little girls and one boy. The boy, as my heir, I have kept as much as I could away from his own people, that he might be brought up in a manner suitable to his future position. This I believe to have been, on the whole, wise and necessary—yet it has been hard upon his mother."

"I have always hoped and intended that matters should continue thus through my own life. But of late it has been strongly impressed on my mind that the facts ought to be known, that my brother's wife and children have a right to open acknowledgment. It has been hard work, as you will believe, to make up my mind to speak. But having so resolved, all I can do is frankly to confess the whole. I trust that all who in any way have suffered through this long

silence will pardon me, even as I hope to be forgiven by One above, Whom most sorely I have wronged."

He spoke haltingly, as if the words were difficult to utter; and then, with a slight turn, he laid a hand on Dick's arm.

"This is my nephew, the only son of my dear brother. His name is Richard Raye Maurice Stirling. Till to-day he was not aware of his parentage, or of his true surname. Now he knows! I present to you all— my heir!"

Dick stood, pale and grave, facing the throng of curious faces, without a word. Dead silence followed, broken only by subdued whispers. The Squire, having made his statement, remained upright, dignified and calm, gazing down upon his audience with a singular detachment of expression, as if he had little to do with them. Some present noted a look of intense relief, almost amounting to gladness, as of one who had just parted with a heavy burden.

No one knew what to say, or how to meet the situation. It was a perplexing position to handle on the spur of the moment.

Hamilton and Katherine were behind in the library, out of sight; both having heard all earlier in the day. Doris, with a rush of joy, recognised that Dick, her Dick, no longer ranked as a fatherless waif, without descent or standing, but that—though he still had an undesirable mother and an objectionable sister—he was nephew to a leading landowner, heir to a fine property, and possessor of a long line of ancestors. Her first sensation was of joy that she had effectually checked Hamilton, before this development, and

had spoken frankly to Dick. Had it been otherwise, how could she now have given up the disinherited man in favour of a prospectively wealthy Dick?

Mrs. Brutt stared, open-mouthed. She felt actually angry that the Squire's courageous confession had taken the wind out of her sails, destroying her power to harm him.

The silence lasted only a few seconds, though to all concerned it seemed endless. Then the Rector came forward. It was one of those rare occasions when, taken suddenly and deeply stirred, he could lay aside his shyness, could cease to be dumb, could say and do precisely what was right.

Deliberately he pushed his way to the front, reached the open window, stepped over the sill, and faced round, standing beside the Squire, a gleam in his deep-set eyes. He held up a silencing hand, for murmurs were swelling, and his voice rang out.

"I don't know how you all feel, my friends. The Squire has taken us by surprise; and most of us want a little time to get used to what we have just heard. It is a new order of things; and at first we feel a little strange at the idea of this new heir—his nephew. But since he is the Squire's nephew, we will give him a welcome. I for one do so gladly. For though I have only seen him once before—as Mr. Maurice—I can assure you, from that interview, that he will not disgrace the name he bears."

"As I say, I don't know how it may be with you; but I know how it is with myself, in regard to the fact that Mr. Stirling should have come forward in this grand way, in the face of the county, as one may say, to confess his error—to

tell of his own wrong-doing—and to set matters right. In so acting, he gives himself into our hands; he trusts us; and the least that we can do is to respond as old and tried friends should."

"He made once a grievous mistake. He has done wrongly. But who are we?—who are you? who am I?—that we should dare to pass judgment? Which of us has not done wrongly, has not made many a sad mistake, has not been overcome by temptation? And which of us, I wonder, would in his place have come forward with frank and open confession, as he has done?"

"The Squire has been my friend for many and many a year. I need not tell you that I have always esteemed, always trusted, always loved him. But I have never so esteemed him, never so loved him, never so honoured him, as at this moment."

"It could be no easy step for him—for one who has taken always a foremost place among us—no easy task, to stand up here, in the presence of you all, and to tell in plain terms of the long concealment, of the lack of right dealing, into which, under severe temptation, he allowed himself to be led. And—mark you!—to make no excuse for himself; to lay blame upon no other! I do say—though I offer no word in extenuation—I do say that he is acting grandly in the present; and I honour him for it. And very sure I am, my friends, that Divine grace alone could have made possible for him such a line of conduct."

Mr. Winton stopped, laying his broad hand almost caressingly upon the other's shoulder; and cheer after cheer,

in gathering volume, rent the air. The Rector beamed approval. One or two county magnates, standing near, silently wrung the Squire's hand.

When a break came, he made a slight forward movement, and spoke again, pausing between the words—

"I thank you—one and all. You have made easier—what was, as Mr. Winton says—not easy! I thank you all—from the bottom of my heart!"

Katherine had stepped nearer, and now stood beside him, her arm in his. "Come," she whispered, "you must rest!" He obeyed, walking with a slow step, almost groping his way, as if unable to see.

The old family doctor had come forward, and Dick held back. He knew that he would not be wanted there. He sent one eager glance towards where Doris still waited; then, forgetting all else, and ignoring the crowd around, he turned to the Rector.

"This—will it make any difference?" he asked, in a low voice of concentrated eagerness. "Now that you know who my father was?"

Mr. Winton caught sight of his wife, laboriously threading her way through the throng, plainly bent upon being one of the first to congratulate the new heir. He gripped Dick's hand with a hearty shake.

"I rather think it will!" he said. "You'd better just ask—her!"

The gesture which indicated Mrs. Winton might almost equally have indicated Doris. Dick accepted it for both. Then the Rector, full of foreboding, made his escape to the study.

He knew what the terrific strain of the last hour must have been to that proud and reserved nature. It did not surprise him to find on the sofa a prostrate and powerless form. But the changed face of the Squire wore a look of repose, to which it had long been a stranger.

"That was well done, my friend!" Mr. Winton said in stirred tones, by his side.

The old doctor watched in suspense, to see whether the words would reach their objective. Perhaps they did. A faint smile flickered; and the drawn lips murmured one word—"Mary!"

It was his last utterance. Unconsciousness supervened; and he never awoke from it. A severe paralytic stroke had fallen; and before next morning he had passed away.

"Ah—well!—better so!" the Rector said, much moved. "It is mercifully ordered. He is spared a great deal that would have sorely tried him. And when all's said and done—he was a noble fellow!"

Thus Dick entered at once upon his inheritance.

And "this" did make all the difference with regard to Doris. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Winton offered any further objections. True, there was still Mrs. Morris at the farm,—somehow, people persisted in calling her by that name, though she really was Mrs. Maurice Stirling,—and she could hardly fail to be a thorn in the side of Doris's mother. But Dick's own position, inclusive of his line of ancestors, was assured. The objectionable Jane had taken herself happily out of reach; and everybody liked the gentle Winnie, whose

hospital treatment had proved entirely a success. Thenceforward she was in better health and spirits than ever before.

Hamilton met the reverse in his prospects like a man. He did not bemoan himself; he showed no resentment; and he treated the new heir with kind courtesy, recognising that Dick at least was not to blame. Moreover, he lost no time in bringing about an engagement between Katherine and himself, though she would not hear of being married till a year after her uncle's death.

Some delay, too, was necessary with Dick and Doris. The Wintons objected to parting with their child too soon; and Dick, entering upon a position of no small difficulty, as successor to, the beloved Squire, had an infinitude of business to claim his attention.

So it came to pass that the honeymoon was not until the following August. Dick then amply redeemed his promises, scaling two or three difficult peaks with his bride, and, one glorious day, landing her safely on the summit of the Glückhorn.