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Author: Anna Chapin Ray
Illustrator: Wilson C. Dexter

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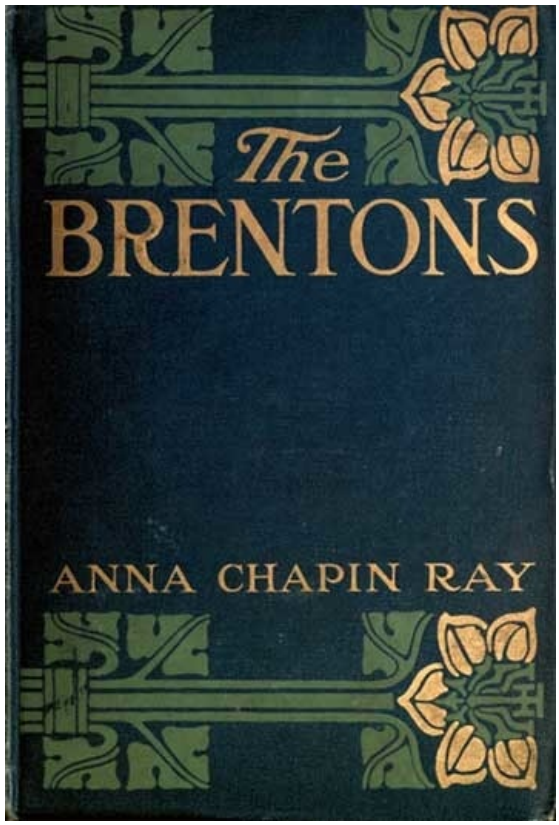

NOVELS BY

A N N A C H A P I N R A Y

THE DOMINANT STRAIN
BY THE GOOD STE. ANNE
ON THE FIRING LINE
HEARTS AND CREEDS
ACKROYD OF THE FACULTY
QUICKENED
THE BRIDGE BUILDERS
OVER THE QUICKSANDS
A WOMAN WITH A PURPOSE
THE BRENTONS

CATIA PUT HER ELBOWS ON THE TABLE AND CLASPED HER HANDS AROUND HER CUP.
FRONTISPIECE. *See Page* 84

THE BRENTONS

BY

ANNA CHAPIN RAY

AUTHOR OF
"A WOMAN WITH A PURPOSE," "THE BRIDGE BUILDERS," ETC.

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

W I L S O N C . D E X T E R

B O S T O N
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY 1912

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Transcriber's Note:

Beginning with Chapter 19 the spelling of Kathryn inexplicably changes to Katherine.

The Table of Contents is not contained in the original book. It has been generated for the convenience of the reader.

CONTENTS

THE BRENTONS

CHAPTER ONE

However archaic and conventional it may sound, it is the literal fact that young Scott Brenton was led into the ministry by the prayer of his widowed mother. Furthermore, the prayer was not made to him, but offered in secret and in all sincerity at the Throne of Grace.

"Oh, my dearest Lord and Master," she prayed, at her evening devotions upon her knees and with her work-roughened hands clasped upon the gaudy patchwork quilt; "guide Thou my son. Bring him to feel that his perfect happiness can come only from going forth to preach Thy word to all men."

And, as it chanced, the door of her room had been left slightly open. Scott Brenton, young and alert and full of enthusiasms which his years of grinding work and economy had been powerless to down, came leaping up the steps just then. The front door had been left unlocked for him. He closed it noiselessly behind him, and then started to run up the stairs. The murmur of his mother's voice checked him, stayed his step a moment, and then changed its pace. He went on up the stairs quite soberly, thoughtful, his face a little overcast.

It was now the middle of the Christmas holidays of his junior year. The day he had left college for the short vacation, his chemistry professor had sent for him and had said things to him about his last term's work and about his examination papers at the end of the term. The things were courteous as concerned the past; to Scott Brenton's mind, they were dazzling as concerned the future. The dazzle had endured until his mother's words had fallen on his ears. Then it had eclipsed itself, leaving him to wonder whether, after all, it had not been the *ignis fatuus* of self-elation, and not the steady glow of truth. Scott Brenton was not much more given to introspection, at that epoch of his life, than is any other healthy

youngster of nineteen. None the less, he slept curiously little, that night.

Next morning, while he dressed, he kept his teeth shut cornerwise, a habit he had when he was making up his mind to any noxious undertaking. Then he went downstairs, to find his mother smiling contentedly to herself, while she added the finishing touches to the breakfast. It was sausage, that morning, Scott Brenton always remembered afterwards. They had been chosen out of deference to his boyish appetite. He never tasted them again, if he could help it. They seemed to have added to their already strange assortment of flavours a tang of bitterness that bore the seeds of spiritual indigestion.

His mother looked up to greet him with an eagerness from which she vainly sought to banish pride. He was her only child, her all; and he was sufficiently good to look upon, clever enough to pass muster in a crowd. To her adoring eyes, however, he was a mingling of an Adonis with a Socrates. And she herself, by encouragement and admonition and self-denying toil, had helped to make him what he was. Small wonder that her pride in him could never be completely downed! Nevertheless,—

"Have a good time, last night?" she asked him tamely.

But she missed a certain young enthusiasm from his accent, as he answered,—

"Fine!"

"Catie there?" she asked again, with the crisp elision of one whose life has been too strenuous to waste itself in the more leisurely forms of speech.

"Yes. Is breakfast ready?"

She nodded, as she speared the sizzling sausages one by one and transferred them to a platter. Then, while she poured off a little of the fat by way of gravy, she put yet another question.

"Look pretty?" she said.

Her son felt no difficulty in applying the question to Catie, the proper object, rather than to the sausages on which his mother's gaze was bent.

"About as usual," he said temperately.

His mother laughed out suddenly. The laugh brought back to her face a faint resemblance to the girl who, as the pretty daughter of old Parson Wheeler, had been the acknowledged belle of all the small community. Later on, all the small community had been jarred to its social foundations by the discovery that Betty Wheeler, child of a long, long line of parsons, was going to marry Birge Brenton who had come to "clerk it" in the village store. She did marry him, and, a little later on, and most obligingly for all concerned, he died. Few people mourned him. His wife, though, was among the few. She had a conscience of Puritan extraction, and the keenest possible sense of what was seemly.

Scott, at the time, was ten days old; therefore he did not share her mourning. Indeed, he was too busy trying to adjust himself to things in general and pins in particular to have much energy or time left over to spare for thinking about other people. Already, the trail of Mrs. Brenton's reading ancestors had led her to the naming her child Walter Scott. Her sense of decorum caused her to wonder vaguely, after her husband died, whether it would not be proper to change the baby's name to Birge. Her wonderings, though, merely served to render her uneasy; they bore no fruit in action. The associations with the name were not of the sort she cared to emphasize, and the boy was allowed to keep his more impressive label.

As time went on, though, he rebelled against the childish Wally and insisted on the Scott, but prefixed by the blank initial whose significance, he fondly hoped, would permanently remain a mystery. A month, however, after he had entered college, he was known as Ivanhoe to all the class who knew anything about him at all; and, in the catalogue published in his sophomore year, he was registered quite curtly as Scott Brenton. Never again in all his lifetime did the incriminating *W* reappear.

If his mother felt regretful for the change, she was far too wise to show it. Indeed, it is quite likely that she felt no regrets at all. By the time that Scott came to his 'teens, Mrs. Brenton was doing her level and conscientious best to conceal from him the demoralizing fact of her belief that he could do almost no wrong, and she clung to the modifying *almost* with a passionate fervour born of her clerical ancestry and her consequent belief in the inherent viciousness of unconverted man. Moreover, her inherited notions of conversion included spiritual writhings and physical night-sweats and penitential tears by way of its accomplishment. According to the creed of all the Parson Wheelers since the Puritan migration, one became a Christian rather violently, and not by leisurely unfolding. It had been to her the greatest of all reliefs since the unconfessed one born of her husband's premature removal, when the young Walter Scott had got himself converted by means of an itinerant revivalist. From that time on, her gaze had been fixed unfalteringly upon the hour when he should assume the mantle of his clerical grandparents; and she inclined to look

upon his other talents as being so many manifestations of diabolic ingenuity.

And now, these Christmas holidays, the diabolism seemed to her to be rampant; it effervesced through all Scott's being like the mysterious things he brewed within his test-tubes. Not that Mrs. Brenton would have known a test-tube by sight, however. She only had gleaned from her son's talk the fact that they existed and held fizzy compounds which would kill you, if you drank them. Perhaps her analogy was all the better for her lack of specific knowledge. In any case, she saw and feared the effervescence. The sausages and the white bowl of hot fat gravy were so much carefully considered bait to lure her son back into the paths of orthodox uprightness. While they were being swallowed—slowly, by reason of their mussiness—she had certain things she wished to say to him.

To her extreme surprise, Scott said them first to her.

"Mother," he said, a little bit imperiously considering his age; "no matter now about Catie. I want to talk to you about—"

"About?" she queried nervously, while he hesitated under what obviously was a pretext of picking out the brownest sausage.

"About—myself."

Her nervousness increased.

"Take some more gravy, Scott," she urged him hurriedly. "You'd better dip it on your bread as soon as you can; it gets cold so soon, these winter mornings."

But he ignored the spoon she offered him. When he spoke, it was with a curious hesitation.

"Mother, did I tell you what Professor Mansfield said?"

"Yes."

"Weren't you glad—just a very little?" His tone was boyish in its pleading.

Mrs. Brenton's answer was evasive.

"Of course, Scott. I am always glad, when your teachers speak well of you," she said.

"Yes; but think of it," he urged impatiently. "I hate to brag, mother; but do you take in all he meant: that he saw no reason, if I kept on, that I should not make a record as a chemist?"

While he spoke, his gray eyes were fixed on her imploringly. Under some conditions and in some connections, she would have been swift to read in them the text of his unspoken prayer; but not now. Her ancestral tendencies forbade: those and the doubts which centred in her son's other heritage, less orthodox and far, far less under the domination of the spiritual. Now and then the boy looked like his father, astoundingly like, and disturbingly. This was one of the times.

Across his young enthusiasm, her answer fell like a wet linen sheet.

"But are you going to keep on?"

He tried to regain his former accent.

"That is what I want to decide, right now," he said as buoyantly as he was able. "Of course, it isn't just what I started out to do; but he seemed to feel it was my chance, and you and I, both of us, have been used to taking any chance that came. What do you think I'd better do?"

For a moment, she worked fussily at the twisted wire leg of the tile that held the coffee pot. Her eyes were still upon the wire, when at last she answered.

"You must do as you think right, my son."

"But what do you really think, yourself?" he urged her.

This time, she lifted her eyes until they rested full upon his own.

"It isn't exactly what we have planned it all for, Scott. Still, it may be that this will be the next best thing, after all."

"Then you would be disappointed, if I took the chance?"

She felt the edge of the coming renunciation in his voice and in his half-unconscious change of tense, and she dropped her eyes again, for fear they should betray the gladness that she felt, and so should hurt him.

"Do you need to decide just now?" she asked evasively.

"Between now and next summer."

"Why not wait till then?"

He crossed her question with another.

"What's the use of waiting?"

"You may get more light on it, if you wait," she said gravely.

Scott shut his teeth hard upon an end of sausage. It seemed to him that it was only one more phase of the same futile whole, when his teeth encountered a hard bit of bone. And his mother sat there, outwardly impartial, inwardly disapproving, and talked about more light, when already his young eyes were blinded by the lustrous dazzle. Oh, well! It was all in the day's work, all in the difference between nineteen and thirty-nine, he told himself as patiently as he was able. And his mother at thirty-nine, he realized with disconcerting clearness, was infinitely older than Professor Mansfield's wife at sixty. Indeed, he sometimes wondered if she ever had been really young, ever really young enough to forget her heritage of piety in healthy, worldly zeal. Whatever the depths of one's filial devotion, it sometimes jars a little to have one's mother use, by choice, the phraseology of the minor prophets. In fact, in certain of his more unregenerate moments, Scott Brenton had allowed himself to marvel that he had not been christened Malachi. At least, it would have been in keeping with the habitual tone of the domestic table talk. And yet, in other moments, he realized acutely that that same heritage was in his nature, too. The village gossips had been exceedingly benevolent, in that they had spared him any inkling of the sources whence had come certain other strains which set his blood to tingling every now and then.

Just such a strain was tingling now, as he laid down his knife and fork, rested his elbows on the table before him and clasped his hands tight above his plate.

"I think I have all the light I am likely to get, mother," he said steadily.

"But, if the light within thee be—"

He checked her with a sudden petulant lift of his head. And, after all, it was not quite her fault. Life, for her, had been so hard and so busy that he ought not to grudge her the consolation she had been able to dig up out of the accumulated *débris* of the ancestral trick of sermonizing. In a more gracious, plastic existence, she would have taken it out in Browning and the Russians; yet she was not necessarily more narrow because her literary artists were pre-Messianic. Neither was it the fault of those same artists that they were quoted in and out of season, and always for the purpose of clinching an obnoxious point.

"It isn't," he said, as quietly as he was able. Then the boyishness pent up within him came bursting out once more. "Listen, mother," he said impetuously. "Really, this thing has got to be talked out between us to the very dregs. We may as well face it now as ever, and come to the final conclusion. I know you started out to make me into a minister. I know you feel that it is the one great profession of them all. But is it?"

For a minute, her hands gripped each other; but they were underneath the hanging edge of tablecloth, and so invisible to Scott.

"What can be greater than to speak the truth that makes us free?" she questioned.

"Isn't there more than one kind of truth, mother?" he challenged her.

"How can there be?"

Again he shut his teeth and swallowed down his opposition. He was too immature to argue that there might be different facets to the selfsame truth.

"Listen, mother," he began again, when he had proved to himself that he could rely upon his self-control. "As I say, I started out to be a minister, to be another Parson Wheeler in fact, if not in name. I know it has been your dream to hear me preach, some day or other. And I know how you have pinched and scrimped and worked, to give me the education that I was bound to need."

"You have worked, too, Scott," she told him, in swift generosity. "You have tugged along and gone without things and worked hard, in your books and out of them. You know I have been proud of you; the credit for it isn't all mine, by any means."

His young face flushed and softened. Unclasping his hands, he leaned across the table and laid his palm upon her fingers as they rested on the cloth beside her plate. Both palm and fingers were roughened and callous with hard work; but mother and son both were of that fast-vanishing class of folk who spell their *Education* with the largest sort of capital letter. Their minds were alike, in that they both believed the work worth while, for the sake of all that it would be able to accomplish.

"Thank you, mother," Scott said unsteadily. "I am glad you feel so, even if I don't deserve it." Then he steadied sharply and became practical. "So far, we've put it through, one way or the other," he went on. "Still, if I go in for the ministry," and his mother winced at the bald worldliness of his phrasing; "I shall have a year and a half more at college, and then three years of divinity school. We can do it, I suppose. For a matter of fact, I ought to be able to put it through alone, without a cent from you; but is it quite worth while? According to Professor Mansfield, if I keep steady, I can go straight from my degree into the laboratory as a paid demonstrator. It wouldn't be much pay, of course. Still, it would help along, and I could go on studying under him, all the time I was about it. By the time three years were over, the three years I would have to spend in the divinity school, I should be, ought to be, well upon my feet and walking towards a future of my own."

His mother drew a long breath, as the swift torrent of words came to an end. Then,—

"And at the end of twenty years, my son? That is the real question."

Scott's enthusiasm all went out of him. His assent came heavily.

"Yes," he admitted. "Yes. I suppose that is the real question, mother. It all depends—"

She looked up at him sharply, as if in haste to probe the limits of his hesitation.

"Depends?" she echoed.

"Upon the way you feel about it, mother."

She shook her head.

"Not that," she offered swift correction; "but upon the question which is right. You are at the forking of the roads, the narrow and the broad. You are almost a man, Scott. I have no right to decide this for you; you must make your own choice for yourself. However, my son, you know my dreams for you; you know my prayers."

And Scott Brenton, boy as he was in years, bowed his head in grave assent, and then and there made his great renunciation. He did know his mother's dreams; he had overheard, albeit unknown to her, her prayer. She had given all she had for him; his young honour, taking no thought for disastrous consequences, demanded that he should give up at least this one thing for her. He pushed back his chair, went around the table and laid one hand upon her shoulder.

"I do know, mother dear. As far as I can, I will do my best to carry them all out."

He bent above her in a brief, awkward caress, the caress of a man whose life has been too hard and too narrow to give him opportunity to perfect himself in the arts of masculine endearments. Then, leaving his breakfast half uneaten, he went away upstairs and shut the door of his own room behind him. A long hour later, he came down the stairs again, and went away in search of Catie.

He hoped Catie would listen to him, and understand him and his crisis; but, all the time he hoped, he was conscious of a sneaking fear lest she would not. Scott loved to talk things out, and Catie, when she was not too busy otherwise, was a good listener. Nevertheless, her comprehensions were concrete and very, very finite.

CHAPTER TWO

To all seeming, there always had been a Catie in Scott Brenton's life, always had been a Catie for him to seek in seasons of domestic stress or discipline. Indeed, his first memory of her was inextricably mingled with the recollections of an early spanking. Scott was naturally a good child, and Mrs. Brenton, as a rule, spanked cunningly, but very seldom. Now and then, she felt that circumstances justified the deed.

Scott, seven years old and inventive withal, had been locked up in the house alone, one day, while his mother went to a particularly attractive funeral with carriages enough for even the outside circle of the mourners. One such mourner failing, she had been bidden to the vacant seat in the rearmost carriage, and her absence had been prolonged unduly. She came home, expecting to find Scott wailing loudly for his missing mother. Instead, she found him playing camp-out Indian, as he called it, with her best bed by way of wickiup, and the wickiup was provisioned lavishly and stickily from the resources of the closet where she kept her jams.

Prudence and frugality demanded that Mrs. Brenton should remove her best clothes, before she essayed to administer justice at short range. Scott, left to himself, played on

contentedly the while, until his camp was rudely invaded by a foe clad in a second-best petticoat and a shoulder shawl, and armed with a slipper which had seen better days. Even then, prudence cried out for yet another delay, for the young Indian was carrying so much of his commissariat upon his person that it seemed wise to wash him, before she proceeded to the spanking. Mrs. Brenton's point of view, moreover, was decidedly old-fashioned. Instead of rejoicing at this fresh manifestation of her boy's imagination, she concentrated all her remarks upon what she termed his theft, and she frugally used the period while she was scrubbing him, to drive her spoken condemnations home. Accordingly, it was a long, long time of duplex agony before the spanking finally achieved itself, and Scott, clean, but tingling from the slipper's impact, was told to go out and sit down on the doorstep and think over what a bad, bad boy he had been.

Like Alexander the Less, he found the doorstep distinctly cooling to his fevered person, and he sat there contentedly enough, while he gave himself over to the luxury of bubbly sobs and of digging his fists into his weeping eyes. So absorbed was he in this soothing occupation that he paid no heed to the patter of approaching footsteps, until a voice fell on his ears.

"Cry-baby!" the voice chirped, in the high key which, to the youthful mind, is expressive of disdain. And then it added even more disdainfully, "Dirty-face!"

Dazed by this two-fold attack upon him, Scott took down his smudgy fists and displayed to the intruder's view his smudgy countenance. An older pair of eyes might easily have discovered cause for wonder that, in so short a time since his scrubbing, so great a quantity of mother earth could have found its way upward to mingle with his tears and form the dust that grimed his face. Despite his tears and his grime, however, Scott's manly temper roused itself to face his critic.

"I ain't!" he bellowed hotly at the air around him, without troubling himself to look to see whence the strange voice had come.

The voice reflected somewhat of his opposition.

"You are, too. What's on your face?"

"Blackberry jam and soap," Scott answered, with a craftiness beyond his years. He told the literal truth, but not all the truth. No need to inform this critical stranger what was the crust that lay on top of all.

The critical stranger removed her pink countenance from the crack between the front-fence pickets, and pushed the gate open just a very little way. Seen through the larger crack, she stood revealed to Scott, a slim little damsel of perhaps six years, her pink calico frock starched until it stood out stiffly above her knees, and her topmost curl tied up with a mammoth bow of green gauze ribbon, obviously culled from some box of ancestral finery. She was a pretty child; but, even at that tender age, the decision of her little mouth and chin was too pronounced, the lift of her small head a trifle too self-satisfied.

"What's the matter, cry-baby?" she inquired, as Scott's interest in her appearing was punctuated with a fresh gulp of woe.

"I've been spanked."

The critical light faded from her eyes, to be replaced by another light, this time of interest.

"What for?"

"I was playing Indian in mother's jam."

Most damsels of that age would have asked for further particulars. Instead,—

"Hh!" she sniffed, and the sniff spoke volumes as to the quality of her young imagination.

Scott felt it lay upon him to defend himself from all which the sniff implied.

"'Twas fun, too," he asserted suddenly, as, with a final wipe of his fist across his eyes, he dismissed the outward traces of his grief. "You get things to eat to take with you, and the bed's the camp, and you live there for years and always, all alone. And then they smell the things you're eating and—"

"Who's they?" the small girl demanded.

"Oh, wolves and Indians and things, and they come around and growl awfully. But you aren't afraid. You take your gun, and crawl in under the blankets and go on eating, sure they won't come in after you—"

"What do you eat?"

Had Scott been a few years older, he doubtless would have answered,—

"Pemmican."

As it was, however, he responded glibly,—

"Snake meat."

"Hh!" Again there came the sniff. "Snakes don't have meat. They only wiggle."

Scott glared at her, during a moment of speechless hostility. Then suddenly he fired upon her with what was to be the favourite weapon of his later life.

"Prove it!" he ordered her defiantly.

But his defiance fell upon a surface quite impenetrable to its shaft.

"Sha'n't!"

"'Fraid cat!" he retorted curtly.

"Ain't!"

And then, for a short while, there was a silence. Out of the corner of her eye, the little girl was watching Scott. Scott, his head ostentatiously averted, was gazing at something he had dug up out of his trouser pocket, something concealed within the curve of his smudgy hand. Young as he was, his theories did not fail him. The silence prolonged itself for minutes which seemed to them both like hours. Then the eternal feminine yielded to the sting of curiosity.

"What you got?" she asked him, as the gate swung open just a little wider.

Scott was too canny to yield one whit of his advantage. His hand shut into a fist.

"That's telling."

The gate swung open wider yet, and the small girl marched through the opening.

"Tell me," she said imperiously. "I want to see it."

Scott still held himself aloof, still held his trophy concealed from her curious eyes. She tried to grasp his hand, missed it, then succeeded. Then she tried to pry open the tight-shut fingers.

"Show me!" she ordered.

He shook his head, smiling derisively at her, while her strong little fingers did their best to pluck open his hard little fist.

Without another word, she bent above his hand. An instant later, the hand flew open, and the ball of the opening thumb showed the prints of small, sharp teeth.

"What is it?" she asked once more.

Scott's voice dropped to a murmur which was charged with mystery.

"It's a back tooth of the whale that swallowed Jonah."

Instantly she struck his hand a blow that sent his trophy flying off into the thick grass beside the step.

"It is not," she said shrilly. "It's nothing but a dirty old chicken bone, so there!"

And then, to the unspeakable astonishment of Scott, she seated herself upon the bottom step, smoothed her calico skirt across her little knees, and prepared to await further developments in tranquil comfort. It was thus that Scott Brenton first learned the lesson that the feminine mind only gains the fullest comfort in having the last word, when it is able to sit by and watch that word sink in and be digested. Later on in his life, the lesson was repeated again and again, with an increasing list of corollaries. Oddly enough, too, it was always given to him by the selfsame teacher, sometimes with mildness, sometimes with spiritual floggings.

This time, however, she appeared to be contented with the form her teaching had taken, contented, too, with its effect upon himself. Accordingly, she made no effort to continue the discussion. She merely sat there, silent, in the place whence she had ousted him, and gloated on her victory, sure that in time his masculine impatience would lead him to break in upon the pause.

She knew her man.

"What's your name?" Scott asked her curtly, after an interval of digging one heel and then the other into the turf beside the step.

"Catie."

"Catie what?"

"Catie Harrison."

"Huuh!"

She scented criticism in his reply.

"It's better than yours is," she retorted.

"It is not, too," he made counter retort. "Besides, you don't know my name."

Slowly the little damsel nodded, once, twice.

"Yes, I do. The man told me."

"What man?"

"The man that sells hens' eggs to my mother. I asked him, and he told me."

Scott eyed her with fierce hostility. Was there no limit to this small girl's all-penetrating curiosity?

"What is it, then?" he asked defiantly.

"It's Walter Scott Brenton," she assured him. And then she added, by way of turning her triumph into a crushing rout, "I think it's the homeliest name I ever heard."

And once again Scott Brenton gritted his teeth upon the fact that he was downed.

Later, he took his turn for extracting information concerning his uninvited guest. He extracted it from herself, however, and with refreshing directness. At the advanced age of seven years, one sees no especial use in conventional beatings about the bush. One goes straight to the point, or else one keeps still entirely; and, at that phase of his existence, keeping still was not Scott Brenton's forte. Indeed, he was later than are the most of us in learning the lesson that the keenest social weapon lies in reticence.

The starchy little damsel, it appeared, was the daughter of a petty farmer, lately come into the village. She was an only child; her home was the third house up the street, and her mother, busy about her household tasks and already a good deal under the thumb of her small daughter, considered her whole maternal duty done when the child was washed and curled and clothed in starch, and then turned out to play. Catie was able to look out for herself, Catie's mother explained contentedly to her new neighbours, and she knew enough to come home, when she was hungry. Best let her go her ways, then. She would learn to be a little woman, all the sooner; and, in the meantime, it was a great deal easier to do the housework without having a child under foot about the kitchen.

And go her ways the little damsel did, with only her guardian angel to see to it that her way was not the wrong one. By the time her father's first week's rent was due, Catie had made acquaintance with every inhabitant of the village, from the Methodist minister down to the blacksmith's bob-tailed cat. Not only that; but Catie, by dint of many questions, had discovered why the Methodist minister's wife was buried in the churchyard with a slice of marble set up on top of her, and why the blacksmith's bob-tailed cat lacked the major portion of her left ear. If ever there was a gossip in the making, it was Catie Harrison. More than that, her accumulated gossip was sorted out and held in reserve, ready to be applied to any end that suited her small convenience. Scott Brenton found that fact out to his cost, when the story of his camp and his subsequent spanking came back upon him by way of the man that sold the hens' eggs, in retaliation for his refusal to ask that he himself and Catie should be allowed to have a ride in the egg-man's wagon. Catie might be but six years and nine months old; but already her infant brain had fathomed the theory of effectual relation between the crime and the punishment. Her ideal Gehenna would be made up of countless little assorted hells, not of one vast and indiscriminate lake of flaming brimstone. Perchance this very fact had its own due share of influence upon the later theology of Scott Brenton.

That there would be influence, no one who watched the children could deny. After the first day's squabbles, perhaps even on account of them, they became inseparable. When they were not together, either Catie was looking for Scott, or Scott for Catie, save upon the too frequent occasions when discipline fell upon the two of them simultaneously and forced them into a temporary captivity. When they were held apart, they spent their time planning up new things to do together, once the parental ban was off their intercourse. When they were together, it was Scott who supplied the imagination for the pair of them. Catie's share lay in the crafty outworking of the plan. When their plans came to disaster, as often happened by reason of the boldness of Scott's young conceptions, Catie took the disappointment with the temper of a little vixen, kicked against the pricks and openly defied the Powers that Be. Scott, on the other hand, shut his teeth and accepted the penalty,

already intent upon the question as to what he should undertake another time.

And so the days wore on. To the adult mind, they would have seemed to pass monotonously. The quicker child perceptions, though, the magnifying point of view that makes a mountain out of every mole hill, caused them to seem charged with an infinite amount of variety and incident, full of enthusiastic dreams and thrills, and of crushing disappointments which, however, never completely ended hope. Scott's heritage from the long line of Parson Wheelers would have made him stick to the belief that two and two must always equal four, had it not been for that other heritage which kept him always hoping that some day or other it might equal five. Already, he was starting on a life-long quest for that same five, and Catie, nothing loath, went questing by his side. Catie, though, went out of the merest curiosity, and her invariable "I told you so" added the final, the most poignant sting to all of Scott's worst disappointments. At the mature age of six or seven, Catie Harrison showed quite plainly that no mere longing for a possible ideal would ever lure her from the path of practical expediency. She walked slowly, steadily ahead, while her boy companion leaped to and fro about her, chasing first one bright butterfly of the imagination and then another, only to clutch them and bring them back to her to be viewed relentlessly with prosaic eyes which saw only the spots where his impatient touch had rubbed away the downy bloom.

And so the months rolled past them both, Catie the young materialist and potential tyrant, and Scott Brenton the idealist. The years carried the children out of the perpetual holidays of infancy and into the treadmill of schooling that begins with b, a, ba and sometimes never ends. Side by side, the two small youngsters entered the low doorway of the primary school; side by side, a few years later, a pair of lanky striplings, they were plodding through their intermediate studies which seemed to them unending. Catie was eagerly looking towards the final pages of her geography and grammar, for beyond them lay the entrance to another perpetual holiday, this time of budding maturity. Scott's eyes were also on the finish, but for a different reason. His mother, one night a week before his fourteenth birthday, had talked to him of college, of his grandfather, the final Parson Wheeler of the line, and, vaguely, of certain ambitions which had sprung up within her heart, the morning she had listened to the birth-cry of her baby boy.

A week later, she had given him his grandfather's great gold pen, albeit with plentiful instructions to the effect that he was not to use it, but to keep it in its box, untarnished, until such time as he was fitted to employ it in writing sermons of his own. Scott had received the gift with veneration, and then quite promptly had summoned Catie to do reverence at the selfsame shrine. But Catie had rebelled.

"Fudge!" she had said crisply. "What's the sense of having a useful thing like that, that you can't use?"

CHAPTER THREE

At the mature age of four, Scott Brenton's favourite pastime had been what he termed "playing Grandpa Wheeler." The game accomplished itself by means of a chair by way of pulpit, and a serried phalanx of other chairs by way of congregation, whom the young preacher harangued by the hour together. The harangues were punctuated by occasional bursts of song, not always of a churchly nature, and emphasized by gestures which were more forceful than devout. In this game Mrs. Brenton often joined him, lending her thin soprano voice to help out his quavering childish notes, and doing her conscientious best, the while, to keep the songs attuned to the key of proper piety. To be sure, she did insist upon bringing her sewing into church and, on one occasion, she patched her young son's trousers into a hideous pucker, by reason of her greater interest in the method of his expoundings.

"Just for all the world like father!" she was wont to say. "But wherever did he pick it up, when father was in his grave, three years before the child was born?"

The question was left unanswered by herself of whom she asked it. All too soon, moreover, it was joined by another question of similar import, but far more appalling. Indeed, where did the boy, where does any boy, pick up the tricks and manners and the phraseology of certain of his forbears who quitted the world before he fairly entered it? In Scott's case, the example was a flagrant one.

At the starting of the game of "Grandpa Wheeler," Mrs. Brenton had been so charmed with the outworkings of heredity as to balk at nothing Scott might do: sermon, hymn, or even prayer. When she was sure of her rôle and had the leisure, she joined him in his imitative worship, delighting in the unconscious fashion in which the sonorous phrases of convention rolled off from her son's baby lips. And then, one day, Scott's memory failed him in his invocation. There came a familiar phrase or two, and then a babble of meaningless syllables, ending in a long-drawn and relieved Amen. An instant later, Scott lifted up his

head.

"Mo—ther," he shrilled vaingloriously; "I forgetted how it ought to go; but didn't I put up a bully bluff?"

And, in consequence, Mrs. Brenton took her prayers into bed with her, that night. Some of them, even, lasted till the dawn.

This was when Scott was only four. By the time he was fourteen, he took himself more seriously. He still played "Grandpa Wheeler" in imagination; but he no longer called it play, but plans. Already, he was looking forward to the hour when, in creaking Sunday shoes and shiny Sunday broadcloth, he should mount the stairs of the old-fashioned pulpit in the village church, gather the hearts of the waiting congregation within the welcoming and graceful gesture which would prelude his opening prayer, and then scourge those same hearts with the lashing truths which lead unto regeneration. He saw himself distinctly in this rôle, more distinctly, even, than in the blurry mirror before which he performed his morning toilet. It was no especial wonder that he did so. Ever since he had been old enough to pay heed to anything, his mother had been holding the picture up before his eyes.

Catie, however, refused to be impressed by the picture.

"What makes you want to be a minister?" she asked him. "I'd rather you kept a store. There's lots more money in it."

"I don't see what difference it is going to make to you?" Scott answered rather cavalierly.

Catie's reply was matter-of-fact, regardless of the sentimental nature of its substance.

"Don't be stupid, Scott. Of course, we shall be married, when we get grown up, and then you'll have me to support."

It was the first time she had announced this rather radical plan of hers, so it was no especial wonder that, for the moment, it took Scott's breath away. Not that he objected especially, however. It was only the novelty of the idea that staggered him. To his slowly-developing masculine mind, it never had occurred that he and Catie could not go on for ever, just chums and playmates and, now and then, lusty foes, without complicating their relations by more formal, final ties. He rallied swiftly, however.

"Well, you'll have to marry a minister, then," he told her sturdily.

Her nose wrinkled in disgust.

"And wear shabby clothes and a bad bonnet, like Mrs. Platt, and have to go to all the funerals in town! How horrid! Oh, Scott, do be some other kind of a man. A minister's wife can't dance anything but the Virginia reel, nor play anything more than muggins. Why can't you be a dentist, if you won't keep a store?"

For the once, Scott showed himself dominant, aggressive.

"Because I'd rather preach. It's what all my people have always done."

Then Catie made her blunder.

"What about your father?" she asked, and her voice was taunting.

Scott forgot his holy heritage and turned upon her swiftly.

"Shut up!" he bade her curtly, and her cheek tingled under the blow he dealt her.

It was the first time in his life that Scott had turned upon her with decision. Moreover, perchance it would have been better for him, had it not been the last.

For three days afterward, the subject was as a sealed book between them. Then Catie broke the seals, and gingerly.

"I have been thinking about your being a minister," she told him, as she dropped into step beside him, on the way to school. "Of course, you were very rude to treat me the way you did, the other day; and I hope you are sorry."

Scott shut his teeth, although he nodded shortly. He had not enjoyed the three-day frost between himself and Catie; but he was sure that, in the final end, he had been in the right of it, even if he had been a little unceremonious in pressing the matter home on her attention. Moreover, his will had triumphed; Catie had been the one, not he, to break the silence. The casualness of her "Hullo!" that morning, had not deceived him in the least. He was perfectly well aware that she had lain in wait for his passing, her eye glued to the crack of the front-window curtains. The victory was his. He could afford to yield the minor point concerning manners, when he stood so firmly entrenched upon that other point which concerned the ministry.

"Of course," he conceded guardedly; "I know I was beastly when I hit a girl."

"Yes." Catie's accent was uncompromising. "It was a disgrace to you. I wonder you can look me in the face. If it had been any other boy, I never would have spoken to him again as long as I lived."

"Really?" To her extreme disgust, Scott seemed to take her utterances merely as matter for scientific investigation.

"Of course not," she said impatiently.

"But why?" he asked her.

"Why?" she flashed. "Because he wouldn't deserve to be spoken to, nor even looked at."

"No; I don't mean that," the boy answered, still with the same apparent desire to probe the situation to the very bottom. "But why should you speak to me, and not to him?"

She suspected him of fishing for a sweetie, and, out of sheer contrariety, she flung him a bit of crust.

"Because I am used to you, I suppose. One gets so, after eight or nine years of growing up together." And, in that one sentence, Catie showed the practical maturity of her grasp on life and on Scott Brenton.

Half way to the distant schoolhouse, she spoke again, this time more tactfully.

"Never mind the spat, Scott. That's over and done with, even if you were horrid," she told him. "But really, now we're growing up, we ought to think things over and decide things." And, despite her short frocks and her childish face, her words held a curious accent of mature decision.

"What sort of things?"

"The things you are going to do, when you grow up."

"I have decided, I tell you," he said stubbornly.

"To be a country parson, all your days?" she queried flippantly.

"To be a minister, yes. Not a country one, though."

"Oh." She pondered. "What then?"

He looked over her head, not so much in disdain as in search of a more distant vista.

"In a city church, of course, a great stone church with towers and chimes and arches, and crowded full of people, and with their horses and carriages waiting at the doors," he answered, he who had never trodden a paved street in all his life.

"Oh!" But, this time, the monosyllable was breathy, and not sharp.

"Yes, and there will be a choir as good as those people who sang at the town hall, last Thanksgiving, and flowers, lots of them, roses in winter, even," he went on eagerly. "And you can hear a pin drop while I am preaching, only once in a while somebody will sob a little in the pauses, and then put in a roll of hundred-dollar bills when the contribution box comes round."

Catie drew another long breath, and her eyes sparkled.

"Lovely!" she said, and she stretched out the word to its full length by way of expressing her contentment. "And where'll I be?"

Scott withdrew his eyes from distant space and gazed upon her blankly.

"I hadn't thought about that," he said.

Then, for an instant, the glory of his dream was shattered.

"Pig!" Catie said concisely.

However, it was not within the limits of her curiosity to drop the prediction at this piquant point. The framing of the picture, for so she regarded it, had pleased her. Scott failing, she must fill in the portrait to suit herself.

"I'll tell you, then. I shall be there, in the very front seat, dressed in flowing curls," Catie's hair, at this epoch, was pokery in its stiff straightness; "and a real lace dress. And, after service, all the rich people in the church will ask us out to dinner. Of course, in a church like that, the minister's wife is always at the top of things, and I shall help along your work by

making people like me and be willing to listen to your sermons because you are my husband."

And then the two young egotists fell silent, each one of them lost in outlining a future in which he himself was the central point, the guiding principle of all things. Between the two of them, however, there was this one essential difference: Scott's forecastings were vague and rosy dreams, Catie's were concrete plans.

None the less and despite that difference, from that time onward, it was tacitly agreed between the children that Scott would one day be a minister, with Catie for his wife. To be sure, it was Catie herself who supplied the latter clause, not Scott.

"You'll have to have some sort of a wife," she argued superbly. "Ministers always do. It might as well be me. You like me better than any of the other girls, and I am used to having you around." And, upon this rocky basis of practicality, their young romance was built.

Mrs. Brenton, meanwhile, looked on them with contented eyes, smiling a little now and then at the downright fashion in which the thirteen-year-old Catie made known her matrimonial plans. Mrs. Brenton liked Catie well enough, but not too well. She could have dreamed of another sort of wife for her boy, for Catie's crudeness occasionally irritated her, Catie's self-centred ambition, her intervals of density sometimes came upon Mrs. Brenton's nerves. However, girls were scarce upon the horizon of the Brentons. Catie was not perfect; but, at least, she might be infinitely worse. And Scott would be sure to need a practical wife, to counteract his habitual disregard of concrete things. Catie would see to it that his wristbands were not frayed and that his buttons were in their proper places. She might not enter into his ideals, but she would mend his socks and insist upon his changing them when he had wet his feet. Socks were more important to a man than mere ideals, any day, more important, that is, as concerned his conjugal relations. Scott could make up his ideals to suit himself. His socks must be prepared for him by wifely hands.

Of course, they were only children now, only little children, too young to be thinking about such things as marriage. And yet—And Mrs. Brenton shook her head. And yet, were not the happiest marriages prearranged in just this way? Surely, this was far better as a preparation for wedded life than was the sudden, feverish courtship which rushed at express-train speed and clatter from the first introduction of two strangers to the final irrevocable words before the altar. Mrs. Brenton's own experience had taught her that acquaintance should come before one's marriage, not wait till after.

All in all, the more she thought about it, Mrs. Brenton favoured Catie's somewhat premature announcement of her plans. Despite his heritage of sturdy parson blood, Mrs. Brenton confessed to herself that Scott might easily become a little erratic now and then, might let go his hold upon the one thing needful in order to gratify his curiosity concerning the touch of less essential, more alluring trifles. He needed the steady, sturdy influence of some one outside himself to keep him always in the beaten tracks. Already, for better or for worse, Catie's influence upon him was a strong one; stronger, Mrs. Brenton admitted to herself with a woful little sigh, than that of his own mother, despite the ill-concealed anxiety and the doting love that only a mother can give, and then only to an only son. Between the two of them, herself and Catie, Catie's will was the stronger law. Catie, if she chose, could keep Scott's feet well in the limits of the beaten trails. It should be her duty to impress on Catie's girlish mind that the beaten trail was the only one for him to follow, the path of expediency as well as the path of holiness; that complete contentment and success lay only at its other end.

Accordingly, Mrs. Brenton took it upon her shoulders to play the part of Providence for those two young children: Scott and Catie. To Scott, she pointed out Catie as the girl best worth his attention and his comradeship, the while, with the other hand, she still held up before him the picture she had so long ago created, the picture of himself, child of the preaching race of Wheelers, proclaiming the gospel to all men and some heathen. Side by side she placed them: the world-given wife, the heaven-offered career. Moreover, she was so far the artist that she was able to shift her lights and shades to fall now upon the one and now upon the other, according as Scott's interest in one or other of them appeared to her to wane. Her quick-sighted mother love was prompt to warn her of that waning, prompt to make her understand that, to a boy like Scott, a hard and fast monotony would be fatal to almost any plan.

With Catie, on the other hand, her course was altogether different, altogether simpler. With the constant and unwavering blows of a carpenter pounding a nail into an oaken plank, she pounded into Catie's mind the undeniable truths that Scott's ancestry alone was enough to fit him for the ministry; that the ministry, granted the sincerity of its orthodox convictions, may be the highest field of labour offered to any man. Moreover, to these palpable truths, she added others, a shade less undeniable. She impressed it on the mind of Catie that Scott's sole chance of happiness, in this life and the life to come, rested upon their combined ability to shield him from any adverse influence which might deflect his footsteps from his predestined goal. She impressed it on the mind of Catie, also, that it was her girlish duty to herd her immature companion into the proper fold; that her young and sprightly charms, her girlish loyalty should be to her as a shepherd's crook, the guiding wand to be applied in

moments of extremest peril.

After her lights, Mrs. Brenton was canny. If she only had been a little bit more worldly, she would have been a clever woman; moreover, her potential cleverness had never been one half so manifest as when she talked about all this to Catie. She did not put forward her urgings crudely, as for the sake of Scott, her son. Rather than that, she held them up to Catie coyly, as glimpses of opportunity and power which waited for her at the gateway of maturity: opportunity given only to the helpmeet of a man in the commanding position offered by his ministerial profession, power given to that helpmeet by reason of her position by his side.

Like the conductor of an orchestra who draws out from one instrument and then another the varied themes of an overture, so Mrs. Brenton drew from the unlike minds of Catie and her son the selfsame and successive themes of what she, in her mother blindness, deemed the one possible and ennobling overture to Scott Brenton's life. It was quite characteristic of Mrs. Brenton's make-up, however, that she took no thought of Catie's life, save in so far as it could be applied to the ultimate development of Scott, her son.

CHAPTER FOUR

"A puffic' fibbous!" the monthly nurse had announced triumphantly, when she had presented Mrs. Opdyke's first-born son to his mother for her inspection.

The phrase, and the smile which invariably accompanied it, were the main stock in trade of the monthly nurse. Upon these two items, she had based her popularity which now had endured for more than a dozen years of escorting over the threshold of this world the sons and daughters of "first families only," as her professional card insisted. To be sure, the constant employment of the phrase had robbed it of all critical significance. Indeed, it is very doubtful whether, even at the start of her career, the nurse had ever linked it in her mind with the great god Apollo. From some one of her predecessors, she had picked it up and found that it fitted well upon her tongue. Later, the "fibbouses" abounded more and more plenteously, as her clientage increased, and she applied the term indiscriminately, regardless whether the recipient were an Apollo, or a mere Diana.

However, from the start, Reed Opdyke certainly deserved the phrase. Long generations of clean, high-minded living cannot fail to produce an effect upon their offspring. Reed's father had branched off from a line of lawyers to hold the chair of chemistry in one of the great colleges for girls. Reed's mother was of Pilgrim stock, well-nigh untainted by the blood of later, lesser arrivals on the Massachusetts shore. On either side of the house, it had been a matter of simple creed to hold one's body and one's mind equally aloof from possibilities of disease. Reed Opdyke's make-up showed the value of this creed.

Not that he thought very much about it, however. He accepted as a matter of course his sanity, very much as he accepted most other things that came in his way. His loosely curled fists within his pockets, his head erect and his lips smiling, he went striding along through life, taking the best of it as his natural right, and letting the rest of it alone. From kindergarten into school and from school into college, the old, old road trodden by all his ancestors, he journeyed quite as a matter of course. In fact, it never struck him that any fellow could do otherwise; never, that is, until he met Scott Brenton.

For Scott, in time, had also come to college. His mother had insisted upon that; had worked for it that it might in time be possible; had scrimped and toiled and saved, the while she had been training her only child to a strict economy which, however galling, he must accept as well worth the while for the sake of all that it was going to put within his grasp. Accordingly, Scott had been sent to school throughout the termtimes, sent well or ill, in good days and in bad. He had been goaded into an ambition which held him at the top of his small classes in the village school. When the top of the top class was reached, and college was still inaccessible, Mrs. Brenton had stiffened her sinews for yet greater toil and scrimping, and had sent her son up to Andover where the Wheeler name was a tradition, where the knowledge of Scott's ancestry would help him to find the employment that he needed. Scott's education was to be by no means easy of achievement. To gain his school diploma and his later degrees at college, he too must work, not alone at books, but, in his off-hours, at any task that offered.

And Scott did work, too. Around him, other boys were going in for football, making records on the track team, getting occasional leaves to run in to Boston for an odd half-holiday. Then they came back, hilarious and triumphant, to discuss their experience at mealtimes, boasting, chaffing, wrangling merrily in the intimacy known to boyhood, the world over. They never thought to pay any especial attention to the other boy who brought them things to eat, a boy with luminous gray eyes and clothes which were in sore need of pressing. He was just "that waiter chap" and not a human being like themselves. They talked

about their secret plans before him, with no more thought of his personality than as if he had been a concrete post. And, after listening to their chatter throughout a protracted mealtime, after seeing, as he could not fail to do, how he counted to them for absolutely nothing at all, Scott Brenton had his hours when he too doubted the fact of his own humanity. An active brain and an almost automatic body trained to supple service: these by themselves, he realized, do not go far towards making a human thing of life. Contacts are necessary for that, not total isolation; and contact was the one thing denied him. Now and then he had his hours of wishing that those other boys, boys whose talk was full of reference to unfamiliar ways of life: of wishing that they would treat him a little bit unkindly. Anything would be better than this absolute ignoring of his individuality.

In his intervals of waiting on the table, he washed up the dishes. His meals he took, standing by the sink, a plate on the shelf before him, while he washed and chewed simultaneously. There were other tasks besides, tasks all of them more or less menial, all of them adding to the general drain upon his nerves and body. The rest of the time, his studies kept him busy. Indeed, it was no small wonder that he was able to maintain a decent footing in his class, so fagged out and weary was he by the time he had a moment's leisure to prepare his next-day's lessons. But prepare them he did, and well, although his eyes grew heavy over the task and ached with the strain of working by the one dim light with which his shabby garret room was equipped. It was a single room, unhappily. Even there, all contact was denied him. Saint Simon, sitting alone upon his pillar and gazing down upon his fellow men, was no more solitary than was Scott Brenton. Moreover, Saint Simon had the final consolation of being quite aware that he was looking down, a consolation which, to Scott Brenton, was permanently refused.

And then, Andover done, there came college, not one of the small colleges where individual idiosyncrasies count so much in making up the estimate of the student's character; but a great university, so great that it can stop to measure no man by any one trait or any several traits, so busy that it must grasp him in the round, or not at all. There lay the fact of Scott Brenton's ultimate salvation. He would have been downed completely, judged by the finical standards of the little college.

It was in his choice of college that, for the first time in his life, Scott Brenton's will had become dominant. His mother would fain have had it otherwise. The Wheelers, one and all, had been little-college men. The tradition was in their blood, and she had inherited it to the full: the strange belief that the smaller college offers less temptation to go astray; the equally strange belief that the closer contact with a few professors can quite atone for the lack of friction against a great crowd of fellow students, alien to one another in habits of mind and body, yet all of them, swiftly or sluggishly as may be, moving towards the selfsame goal. It had seemed to Mrs. Brenton something bordering on the blasphemous when Scott had endeavoured to put this latter phase of the question before her. Realizing his own futility upon that score, he finally had changed his tactics and assured her that, as far as money-earning work went, there were ten chances in the great college to one in the small.

And Scott was right, albeit his argument was wholly superficial. The truth of the matter was that his Andover experience had left him sore and downhearted; that he knew, in the bottom of his boyish soul, that he must plunge beyond his depth and swim into a wider sea, or else go down entirely, pushed out of sight beneath the overlapping circles of the little cliques, all too self-centred to admit of any common focus.

Mrs. Brenton did not care at all about any common focus. The phrase "college spirit" sounded intemperate, and she would have been the last person in the world to agree to the belief that Scott could gain any education from contact with boys of his own age. To her mind, one fusty old professor out-valued one hundred eager undergraduates, as source of inspiration to the young. Education, to her mind, lay in the desk-end of the classroom; it was unthinkable to her that Scott had lost the best of Andover, by reason of his solitary life there. As for college, the students, all but Scott, were bound to be full of the wiles of the devil. Scott's safety lay in his books, and in his keeping too busy in his off-hours to have time to get into mischief.

Moreover, the purely practical end of the keeping busy was beginning to loom large upon Mrs. Brenton's horizon. More and more she was coming to realize that it is no small undertaking for any widow with an almost imperceptible income to put a son through college. Valiantly she toiled and scrimped; but it was becoming increasingly necessary for Scott to help her out in both the toiling and the scrimping. Accordingly, the creases deepened, both vertically about the corners of Scott's lips and horizontally across his shiny knees and shoulder blades. His eyes, though, grew more luminous, as time went on, perhaps because they were surrounded by ever deepening hollows.

It was those eyes that first caught the attention of Reed Opdyke. Midway in his sophomore year, Opdyke, with a dozen others of his kind, had revolted from the monotony of the commons table, and had set up a so-called joint of their own, an eating-club presided over by a gaunt and self-helping senior, and served by a quartette of cadaverous and self-helping sophomores among whom was Scott Brenton.

Reed Opdyke was a busy youngster, full of the countless interests that cram the college

days of a popular, easy-going student. Also he was a potential leader of men, who gave himself leisure to study the people with whom he came into any kind of contact, to sort them out and classify them according to their possibilities as they unveiled themselves to his boyish eyes. Three of the cadaverous sophomores he dismissed with a glance. They were impossible. They lacked all spiritual yeast and, to the end of time, they would be waiters in one sense or another. Scott Brenton was different. A fellow with those eyes must have it in him to count for something, some day. Lounging in his seat at table, Opdyke kept his eye on Scott, talked at him, then talked to him; and then, obedient to some boyish whim or other, a few days later, the meal ended, he took him by the elbow and walked him off to Mory's for a second supper.

Mrs. Brenton, on her knees beside her bed, that night, prayed long and fervently and with full particulars concerning the education of her son. Her heart would have frozen with horror, had she seen the smoke-filled room where her son was sitting, with Reed Opdyke across the table from him. Her hopes for his future would have shrivelled into naught, could she have realized that, over that very table, her son, her Scott, was to receive a lesson, new and quite unforgettable. One hour of jovial human comradeship had opened Scott Brenton's eyes to more things than he ever yet had dreamed of. It had taught him once for all that irresponsible, carefree youth is not, of necessity, vicious.

As the days and the weeks ran on, the comradeship increased. Measured by the days of Opdyke, overflowing full of interests, it took the smallest possible share of time: a look of comprehension, a word of casual greeting, and, on rare occasions, a bit of a walk together when their ways chanced to coincide. Still more occasionally, a stray hour was spent at Mory's, or in Opdyke's room in Lawrence. As yet, a boyish delicacy had kept Opdyke from seeking to invade what he knew could not fail to be the barrenness of Scott Brenton's quarters.

Slight as was their intercourse, viewed in Opdyke's eyes, to Scott it filled the whole horizon, the one near and vital fact which broke in upon its emptiness and cut away the barren wastes about him. He lived alternately upon the memory of Opdyke as he had seen him last, and upon the anticipations of their next meeting. His hours of table service, ceasing to be wearisome, had become veritable social functions, for was there not always the chance of a random word and smile? Those failing, there was always the pleasure of watching Opdyke, now lounging lazily in his seat and mocking at his fellows, now bending forward above the table, heedless of his cooling plate, the while he harangued his companions with a facility which seemed to Scott the acme of brilliant eloquence.

At Reed's elbow, Scott followed each inflection of the persuasive voice, his lean face glowing with appreciation at every point his idol scored. For the time being, awkwardness was lost and all self-consciousness. Why think about himself, when he could have the chance to watch Reed Opdyke and to listen to him? Scott's nature thrilled in answer to the alien touch, unconsciously as that touch was given. It never once would have struck Opdyke that he was becoming an object of idolatry to this gaunt starveling to whom, as he expressed it, he had tried to be a little decent. It was quite within the limits of his comprehension that he could step down now and then to Scott. It never would have occurred to him, at that epoch of his experience, that Scott could try to clamber up to him. Save for the minutes when he consciously gave his attention to the ungainly young waiter, he disregarded him completely.

The other boys, however, were quick to take in the situation and to comment on it. "Reed's parson" they called Scott, and they chaffed Opdyke mercilessly, when Scott's back was turned. Scott, had he heard the chaff, would have been wounded to the death, a death he would have met far, far inside his shell, regretful that ever he had come out of it. Opdyke, however, merely laughed and stuck to his original position.

"A fellow with such eyes is bound to have it in him. He's never had a chance," he said to his chaffing mates. "Wait till he finds himself, and then see what happens."

"Nothing," came the prompt reply. "He won't ever find himself, Reed. He has found you, and that's as much as such a fellow as he is, can ever assimilate."

And the reply was by no means wide of the mark. For the present, Scott Brenton was finding it all he could do to assimilate Reed Opdyke. Indeed, it was only in the very end of all things that fulness of assimilation came.

As the time went on, partly in defiance of the chaffing of his chronies, partly on account of it, Opdyke lent himself more and more to the assimilating process. He sought out Scott more often, had him in his room, taught him to fill a pipe and smoke it after the fashion of a gentleman, dropped into his ears specious hints regarding manners, and about the efficiency of one's mattress as frugal substitute for a tailor's pressboard. To be sure, upon that latter count Scott took him with unforeseen literalness; and, in his zeal to carry out his teacher's dictum, subjected his coat to the mattress treatment, as well as his more simply-outlined nether garments. Moreover, it should be set down as distinctly to Opdyke's credit that he suppressed his merriment, the next time he saw the coat upon Scott Brenton's shoulders.

Just at this epoch, some waggish member of the eating club employed his camera at their

expense. The resultant film, in after weeks, became one of the most popular assets of the class. True, the needful haste had caused the camera to tip a little. None the less, what the picture lacked in composition, it made up in clearness and in vitality. Taken solely as a study of contrasting types, it was of no small sociological value, since it proved past all gainsaying that the absolute democracy of a great college can bring into close relationship the most impossibly divergent natures.

Scott, at this time, was thin and lean. His shoulders were bowed a little with the strain of unceasing work and worry; in his more self-conscious moments, he shambled when he walked. Only moderately tall, clothed in ill-cut garments which he wore as uneasily as possible, his immature young figure was not one to call out much admiration on the score of its virility. Indeed, the one really virile thing about Scott Brenton was his hair, which sprang out strongly from his scalp, fine, but thick and just a little wavy where it lay across his crown. His head was well-shaped, only that it was a bit too high above the ears, the brow a bit too salient; the eyes alone, though, at that time, redeemed from hopeless mediocrity his worn, ill-nourished face. Beside his hips, his hands dangled limply, showing a stretch of unclothed wrist sticking out below the shrunken coat sleeves.

Beside him in the picture, Reed Opdyke strode lightly, still, to all seeming, the "puffic' fibbous" that his nurse had dubbed him. Six feet tall, lean and supple as a deerhound and as totally unconscious of his long, slim body, it was impossible to fancy him as ever being betrayed into an awkward motion. Above his straight, slim shoulders, his curly brown head rose proudly, his thin lips smiled a greeting to all the world around him, his brown eyes looked straight and true into the eyes of every man he chanced to meet. Only his sense of humour and his comfortable smattering of original sin could have saved Reed Opdyke from being insupportable. Beauty like his, albeit manly, is bound to be a certain handicap.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was to Reed Opdyke's influence that Scott owed the encouraging plaudits of his chemistry professor.

In an elective system which, at that time, was still left quite unmodified, Scott had happened upon the chemistry class by way of filling up his courses for his sophomore year. He had been going on with it indifferently for some months, when Opdyke had been transferred to his division. Up to that time, Scott had liked the class but temperately; that is, although it had seemed to him a useless frill upon the garment of his education, he did not dislike it in the least, and he had made a fair showing in his recitations.

Opdyke's coming into his division had changed all that. At first, Scott merely had been possessed by a fury of desire to shine before his idol's eyes. A little later on, Opdyke's manifest, albeit rather casual, interest in the subject had led Scott to revise his earlier notions carefully, to decide that there might be something in it, after all. By the beginning of his junior year, Scott had won the tardy attention of the head of the department. By the beginning of the Christmas holidays of that junior year, the head of the department had felt it his plain duty to explain to Scott that the road ahead of him was likely to be an open one and easy. If he kept on as he had begun, in time he might be head of a department on his own account. Absurd for a fellow with a mind like his to be spending his time over rhetoric and the classics! Science was his line, pure science; above all, chemistry.

And Scott had listened in silence, at first too much astounded by the unexpected verdict to make answer. Then, as the head of the department left off predicting and fell to making plans, Scott plucked up courage to tell of the ministerial career supposedly ahead of him. The professor, downright and enthusiastic in his utterances, pooh-poohed the entire ministerial idea. Nonsense! Absurd! Spoil a chemist to make a parson! Preposterous! Any one could preach, if he tried. Not one man in a dozen could even make a quantitative analysis tally up, and get anywhere near as much material out of it as went in. Waste on flourishing gestures those lithe hands that were so obviously created for the manipulation of such delicate things as balances and test-tubes and the like! It was impossible. Scott must take the other idea home with him and think it over carefully, during the coming holidays.

And Scott did take the idea home with him; but, from the first, he found it out of the question to think it over carefully. How could he, when, within himself, he knew that his feeling for the profession laid down before him by ancestral tradition and by his mother's constant urgings: that his feeling for the ministry was a perfunctory affection, a wholly different matter from the passionate desire that throbbed within him at the thought of giving up his life to scientific study. To preach ancient beliefs that no human power could verify, or to work on steadily, helping to broaden the field of truth, and proving all things as he went along: these were the alternatives. Obviously there could be no comparison between them.

Scott took the idea home with him, as Professor Mansfield had advised him. All those first

days at home, he hugged the idea tight, tight, caressed it, gloated over it in secret, but allowed no one, not even Catie, to share it with him. Before he went back again to college, he would show it to his mother, would allow her to share his ecstasy at the new opportunity opened out before him. Not yet, however. For the first time in all his life, Scott Brenton was seriously in love. He gave to this new vision a fervent passion such as Catie had been powerless to arouse; like all young lovers, he desired a little time to revel in secret over the mere fact that he knew he was in love.

Of his mother's consent to the change of plan, Scott Brenton felt no doubt. Little by little, with his growth towards manhood, Scott had come to dominate his mother more than either of them realized. His very repression, his subordination in all his other relationships, helped towards this end. It was but a natural reaction from his servile position when away from home that, once more at home, he should assert himself as potential master of the house. His virile will was dormant, crushed, but it was by no means dead. And his mother, adoring him and idealizing him despite her maternal qualms on his account, yielded herself readily enough to his domination. And then, all at once, her yielding came to a sudden end against the bed rock of her character. Her own ambition, Scott's ultimate salvation, alike forbade him to renounce his ministerial career.

After all, though, it was one of the pitched battles that settle themselves without the final appeal to arms. On that winter night when Scott had come in, buoyantly alive and hopeful, to be met upon the threshold by his mother's prayer, the boy had realized that the fight was on. Next morning, over the plate of sausages, the crisis came, and went. Contrary to all his expectations, Scott left the table vanquished, his light of hope gone out for ever. It was a meagre consolation that, in thinking back upon the matter afterwards, he could take to himself the credit of having spoken no word which could ever fester in his mother's mind.

He had gone up to his room to lock the door and then to stand long at the window, staring with unseeing eyes down into the village street. By good rights, he should have seen one future, if not the other, opening out before him in ever-widening vistas. At nineteen or so, however, one is not too imaginative. Scott merely saw a vagrant dog trying to paw his way through a deep drift that lay across the road. He had a fellow feeling for the dog, when he gave up his effort and, sitting down in the ruins of his tunnel, abandoned himself to the contemplation of a flea.

After a while, he gave up his moody drumming on the pane, turned his back to the bleak perspective and, seizing his hat, departed in search of Catie. He found Catie mending a tear in the new frock she had worn, the night before, and unsympathetic in proportion to her discontent. The hollowness of the world was all about him, when he went back to college, three days later.

His first intention had been to throw over all his scientific study once for all. Forbidden the whole loaf, why whet his appetite by nibbling at the one slice offered him? His common sense, however, aided by the urging of Professor Mansfield, restored him to his reason. Scott had lost no time at all in making a clean breast of the matter to Professor Mansfield: his mother's dreams for him, her prejudices, his own choice and his renouncing of it all for the sake of what his mother had already given up for him. To his colleagues, the old professor expressed himself with plain profanity. To Scott, he took a gentler tone, spoke with appreciation of a mother such as Mrs. Brenton must be, spoke of the ministerial profession with an admiration he was far from feeling, and then craftily suggested to his favourite student that the preaching of the gospel should go hand in hand with scientific truth. In these modern days, a clergyman should be fully abreast of scientific thought. Best keep on with his chemistry. It might be useful to him, later on. Even eternal brimstone was susceptible of analysis.

Then, an instant later, the old professor could have bitten out his tongue for his unholy jest. His penitence was in no wise lessened by the quality of Scott's answering laugh. Best leave those fellows to their ministerial sackcloth, without questioning the quality of the flax from which it was spun. A man of Scott Brenton's calibre would do no harm by his preaching. What was the sense of seeking to upset any orthodox beliefs he might happen to have inherited? Besides, as long as Scott kept up his sciences, he was reasonably sure of keeping up his common sense and, what was a long way more important, his perspective and his sense of fun.

Despite his disappointed resolutions to dismiss the boy from his mind, the old professor, going his chemical way, worried about Scott. It seemed to him, according to his bald phrasing, to be a cruel waste of good material to make a parson out of what might have been a great explorer, for, to Professor Mansfield's mind, the incomplete and lengthening list of elements was just as reasonable a field for exploration as was the Antarctic Continent, or Darkest Africa. The results, indeed, of such exploration were bound to be a great deal the more useful. The professor worried. In time, he laid his worries on the dinner table before Reed Opdyke whose father had been a classmate of his own.

"It's an awful shame about young Brenton," he observed, when he and Opdyke and the tobacco had been left to themselves.

"What about him?" Opdyke questioned carelessly, as he picked up a match.

"That he has talents of his own, and a conscience that belongs to his mother. I believe in mothers, Reed; yours is a wonderful woman. But, in this case, I doubt the wonder, and I deplore the way she keeps her thumb on Brenton."

"You think she does?"

"I know it. Her confounded theories of sanctity are putting a binding around all his brain, a tight binding that is going to shrink and cause a pucker. Brenton has a first-class scientific mind, granted it gets the training. Left to himself and the divinity school, he'll turn into a perfect ass as preacher."

Opdyke shook his head.

"Nothing so possible as that, I'm afraid," he contradicted. "He'll just settle down on his heels, and shuffle along in——" He hesitated for a finish of his phrase.

The professor supplied it, and ruthlessly.

"Mental carpet slippers. Precisely. And I could give him boots and spurs."

"Why don't you do it, then?" Opdyke asked him bluntly.

In the interest of the subject, the old professor forgot that he was talking to one of his students and about another.

"Because he's got the very devil of a conscience, and won't let me. There is a widowed mother in the background, and a perfect retinue of preaching ancestors, whole dozens of them and all Baptists, and they have conspired to poison the boy's mind with the notion that it's up to him to preach, too. It would be all right, if he had anything to say; but he hasn't. He's tongue-tied and unmagnetic at the best; what's more, he has learned too many things to let him flaunt abroad the old beliefs as battle standards. He's gone too far, and not far enough. His life is bound to be a miserable sort of compromise, a species of battledore and shuttlecock arrangement between the limits of the deep sea and the devil." And then the professor pulled himself up short. "Know him?" he queried curtly, as he lit his match.

Opdyke nodded.

"As one does know people one never meets out anywhere," he said.

"What do you mean by that?" The question was still curt.

"He waits at my joint."

"Of course. And?"

Opdyke laughed.

"How do you know there is an *and*, Professor?" he asked easily.

"Because I know you, and because I've heard of 'Reed's parson.' You're your father's own son, Reed. You never could get a starveling like Scott Brenton out of sight of your conscience. How much have you seen of him?"

"Not much." And Opdyke gave a few details.

The professor nodded thoughtfully. Then,—

"See more," he ordered; "any amount more. You have time enough, you lazy young sinner, and I'll be answerable for all the consequences."

Opdyke yielded to his curiosity.

"What kind of consequences?"

"The inevitable kind that follow all you youngsters. Listen, boy. Brenton is a mixture of genius, and prig, and ignorant young hermit; or, rather, he has the elements all inside him, ready to be mixed. You'll have to do the mixing."

"I?" Opdyke looked startled. "Professor, what a beast of a bore!"

"No matter if it is. I believe in the conservation of all latent energy. Brenton's is all latent, and I count on you to do the conserving. I've been asking questions lately. From all accounts, you are the only man in college but myself who has taken the pains to get inside the poor beggar's shell."

"Hm. Well?" Opdyke's eyes were on the smoke in front of him; but, to the older man, it was plain that he was listening intently.

"Now you've got to go to work to get him out of his shell, so that people can see what he is like and, more than that, so that he can find out what people really are. He has no more knowledge of humanity than a six-months puppy; in fact, he hasn't so much. And—he's—got—to—learn." The words came weightily.

"What's the good?" Opdyke asked lazily.

The reply was unexpected, even to him who knew Professor Mansfield's downright ways.

"To teach him what an ass he really is. Till he finds that out—till you all find it out about yourselves, there's not much hope for any of you."

Opdyke flushed.

"Thanks," he said a little shortly.

Bending across the table, the old professor laid a friendly hand upon his arm.

"Don't be huffy, Reed. A few of you take in the knowledge with your mother's milk. That's what saves society, by marking it off into separate classes, what makes the difference between your father's son, and the strenuous scion of fifty ministerial Wheelers. But, because you've already got it, you owe all the more to the poor chaps who haven't."

"Yes, sir." Opdyke's reply came with dutiful promptness, although it was plain to the professor that he had flown quite beyond the limits of the young mind before him. "What do you want me to do with him, though?"

The professor's eyes twinkled, as he dragged himself back to the practical aspects of the case.

"Coax him out of his shell. If he won't come, then haul him out by the ears. Have him in your room and have some other men in there to meet him. Take him about with you. Take him to Mory's, on a thick night there. Show him life, the way you know it. If you must, show him an occasional siren. I can say this to you, Reed, because I have taken pains to find out that your sirens are pretty decent ones, cleaner than most of them. To sum it up, let Scott Brenton see life as you are living it, not as he imagines it from the point of view of the man who never can do anything but sit back in a corner and look on."

Opdyke filled his pipe anew, puffed at it silently, then spoke.

"Beastly tantalizing thing to do," he said. "What in thunder is the use?"

The professor spoke with sudden fervour.

"Much!" he said. "At least, it will teach him, when he's preaching for the Lord, to remember that Mammon isn't always quite so black as he is painted."

And so, on top of Reed Opdyke's other interests, Professor Mansfield laid the burden of Scott Brenton's worldly training. In pointing out the need of it to Opdyke, however, the old professor had been by no means as downright as he seemed. From above his lecture notes and his blowpipes, he kept keen eyes upon the members of his classes. Watching Scott steadily, in those days which followed upon the boy's bitter disappointment, he had seen new lines graving themselves about his lips, lines of decision now, not of worried mal-nutrition, lines that too easily might shape themselves to wilfulness. Scott, recluse that he had been, had also been as steady as a deacon; but the old professor realized that a reaction might come at almost any instant. One outlet, and that the highest one, forbidden him, he might seek other, lower ones in sheer bravado. Forbidden to climb into the Tree of Knowledge of all Good, he might, in revenge, fall greedily upon the Apples of Sodom. Left to himself, no one knew what harpies he might chance upon as comrades, nor what sights they might show him. To prevent all that, to provide him with an outlet which should be as wholesome as it was fresh and sparkling, the professor had given him into the safe hands of Reed Opdyke. It was as he said: he was quite well aware that, although Reed had his sirens, they all were curiously clean ones; in short, that his young Mammon was nobler far than many a senile God.

CHAPTER SIX

As a matter of course, Catie came to Scott's commencement. Had she answered sincerely to any questions put to her, she would have confessed to a two-fold purpose: the showing off of her proprietorship in Scott, and the showing off of her pair of new frocks, the most elaborate achievements as yet attempted by the village dressmaker. It must be confessed, however, that Catie found both of these deeds a little disillusioning. Scott was so busy in so

many ways that he seemed to Catie to spare her only the smaller fragments of his time; and her two new gowns, which at home had been tried on amid the plaudits of the girl friends bidden to the private view, sank into insignificance beside the round dozen or more frocks which each of the other commencement guests was wearing in bewildering succession. To be sure, Catie's gowns had the most trimming on them; but her satisfaction in that fact was somewhat modified by the discovery that all her trimming was running the wrong way.

Nevertheless, Catie enjoyed some happy hours, despite the chilling disappointment of finding her frocks inadequate. It would have been nicer, of course, not to discover too late that she lacked the proper gown for any especial function; nicer to have seen herself, as she saw some other girls, girls not nearly so pretty as herself, attended, not by one swain only, but surrounded by a laughing, eager dozen. Still, there were compensations, chaperons among them. Catie's expressed regrets were wholly perfunctory, whenever Mrs. Brenton confessed that she was tired and needed to lie down.

For Mrs. Brenton also had come to Scott's commencement which, to her mind, was the crowning event of her own lifetime. Not only that, but somehow or other she had squeezed out the money to buy herself a new black silk gown, the first one since her marriage, more than twenty years before. Moreover, in deference to the prevailing styles, she explained to Scott on her way up from the station, she had had it made to hook up in the back above a little black lace tucker. Scott, as a matter of course, did not know a tucker from a turnip. None the less, he nodded his approval. That same evening, he confessed to himself a moderate degree of pride, when he introduced Reed Opdyke to his mother. Mrs. Brenton might lack certain social frills and furbelows; but no one could look into her honest face above the trim little black lace tucker, without realizing that she was of good, old-fashioned stock which never would degenerate. No one but a lady born could take herself so simply. Scott read Opdyke's approval in his eyes, the while he himself stood apart and talked to Catie.

It was when young Opdyke's eyes passed on to rest on Catie, though, that Scott felt certain doubts, lately risen up within him, crystallize and solidify past all gainsaying. Outwardly, Opdyke's manner was respect itself; but there was an odd little twinkle in his eyes, as he gazed down on the top of Catie's flower-strewn hat, now tipped coquettishly askew as the girl turned her head sidewise and upward to speak to her tall companion. Catie was pretty, of course; but was she quite—well—right? Were her manners, like the cut and colour of her garments, a thought too pronounced and noticeable? Was her voice a little bit too loud, her manner too assured? Or was it that those other girls beside her elbow were effete and colourless? Scott struggled to repress his doubts, while he watched the gay assurance with which Catie answered to Reed Opdyke's chaff. Scott was perfectly well aware that Opdyke would not have chaffed some of those other girls upon such short acquaintance, and the surety made him restless. He took it out in wishing that Catie had not adorned her girlish neck with a gilded chain which could have restrained a bulldog, or a convict.

Then he pulled himself up short. Catie was Catie, and his guest. She would have fought for him on any issue, and downed any number of foes in the fighting. To Mrs. Brenton, she was as dear as any daughter, dear as the daughter that she meant one day to be. Besides, who was he, a self-help student temporarily excused from waiting upon table and attired in a misfit evening coat hired from a ghetto tailor: who was he to criticise the flowers and frills of Catie? If she had had the chances which had come to him, if she could have gone to Smith, for instance, or Bryn Mawr, she would have come out of the mill a finished little product, clever, adaptable, and not a gawky, under-nourished, over-strenuous bumpkin like himself. In the depths of his self-abasement, Scott Brenton did not hesitate to ply himself with ugly adjectives. Indeed, they seemed to him to be doing something towards the removal of his doubts concerning Catie's pinchbeck chain.

Later, as it chanced, Reed Opdyke and Scott Brenton found themselves going up the street together.

"It's all hours, I suppose," Opdyke said rather indistinctly through a mammoth yawn. "Still, Brenton, what if it is? Come along to Mory's."

"Too late," Scott objected, with a guilty recollection of his mother who would have wrestled in prayer, all night long, could she have seen her son's steps turn towards Mory's and at the bacchanalian hour of half-past ten.

But Opdyke's hand was on his watch.

"Not a bit. Besides, it's our last chance, you know."

"Till next year," Scott corrected, though he yielded to the hand upon his arm.

Opdyke shook his head.

"No next year about it, Brenton. That's all off."

"What now?" Scott asked him in some surprise, for it had been an understood thing that

Opdyke took his graduate science courses in the university that was giving him his bachelor's degree.

"The ancestral crank has slipped a cog," Opdyke returned profanely. "Being interpreted, my reverend sire thinks I'd do better work at the School of Mines and then in Europe. I'm sorry, too, confound it, even if I know his head is level. I'd been looking forward to the pleasure of romping along here for another year or two, and watching you get changed into a parson. It would have been well worth my while, too. It isn't every sinner like myself that has the chance to see a saint in the making. I should have found it an edifying spectacle." Then suddenly he broke off, and spoke with obvious sincerity. "Hang it all, Scott! What's the use? Chuck theology, and come along with me and be some sort of an engineer, or else the chemist old Mansfield has set his heart on making out of you."

As he spoke, his hand tightened on Scott's arm. Under the street light beside them, he could see the colour rush into the face of his companion, as if in answer to the touch and the appeal; could see the thin lips waver, then set themselves into a stern, hard line. Then,—

"It would break my mother's heart," Scott said gravely.

Instantly Opdyke flung up his head and relaxed the pressure of his hand.

"Then—last call for science!" he said, with a carelessness which did not quite ring true. "Your mother is worth the sacrifice, Brenton. I saw that for myself, to-night."

It was not until they were settled at an initial-hacked table in the smoke-thick air of Mory's that either of them spoke again. Then it was Opdyke who broke the silence.

"Who's the girl, Brenton? Your Book of Chronicles hasn't mentioned her, so far as I know."

"She's——" Scott hesitated, a little at a loss as to the proper way of cataloguing Catie.

Opdyke nodded at the hesitation.

"Ja. I comprehend. Well, she's a pretty thing, and she knows her good points," he answered. "That counts a lot, too, in a girl like that."

Scott turned on him a little bit pugnaciously, the more so by reason of his own doubts of an hour before.

"Like what?" he queried curtly.

However, Opdyke had no idea of being betrayed into any indiscretion.

"Like her," he made tranquil answer, and then he bent above his glass of beer and blew aside the froth. "She is sure to arrive," he went on, after a minute. "The only thing I question is whether you may not have to hustle a good deal, to keep up with her. You're a born student, Brenton, and a sanctimonious grind. Nevertheless, when it comes to the worldly question of arriving, you're a confoundedly lazy lubber, and I suspect you always will be."

Commencement over, and the intervening summer, Scott Brenton set himself to work to try to prove the falsity of Opdyke's words, by way of the divinity school. Moreover, as in the case of Opdyke, although in a wholly different sense, the parental plans for Scott had slipped a cog. He also left the university behind him, and went elsewhere in search of his professional degree. The change of plan, however, did not achieve itself without some tears and many lamentations upon the part of Mrs. Brenton. In carrying out her wishes that Scott should preach the gospel to the heathen, it never had occurred to her that he could preach any but the most azure forms of ultra-Calvinism. A sudden fading in the dye of his theology well-nigh destroyed all of her pleasure in his preaching.

The change in tint had come, to all appearing, during the summer that had followed his bachelor's degree. How far, however, the stability of the dyes had been affected by Scott's previous experiments in Professor Mansfield's laboratory, it would be hard to say. It is quite within the limits of scientific possibility that certain chemical changes might have been taking place for many months, changes so slight and so slow as to have escaped the notice of Scott or any of his friends who chanced to feel an interest in the soundness of his theology. Doubtless the change was there, potential, its elements held in suspension and only waiting for the final molecule to arrive and start precipitation.

The molecule arrived, that summer, in the person of a curly-haired young expounder of the Nicene Creed who came to spend July and August at the mountain inn where Scott, after the fashion of needy students New England over, was alternately engaged in keeping the books and sorting up the mail. It was by way of this latter function that Scott first came to be on speaking terms with the youthful rector of Saint-Luke-the-Good-Physician's. And the rector, despite his four hyphens and the gold cross that dangled on the front of his ecclesiastical waistcoat, was an honest, unspoiled boy who was quick to realize the curious appeal in the loneliness of Scott, to realize it and to answer to it.

The early steps of their acquaintance were limited to the daily handing out the letters, the daily thankful accepting them. Then, one morning, Scott so far forgot his official and personal manners as to comment upon the familiar imprint of one of the envelopes, as it was changing hands. He made instant apology; but his penitence was forgotten in the discovery that the curly-headed divine was also an old student of Professor Mansfield. The rest of the steps were logical and consecutive, down to those final days of August when together, hard-working, would-be student and holiday-making, prosperous divine, they spent Scott's leisure hours afield, talking, talking, talking of the things one only mentions to one's spiritual next of kin.

Before he left the mountains, Scott's mind was made up definitely to the step which was next before him. He knew that step would grieve his mother, would well-nigh break her heart. None the less, he was resolved to take it. Indeed, in honour, it seemed to him no other course was open to him, albeit, in his more downright moments, he realized that the taking it was nothing in the world but a miserable sort of compromise between his mother's wishes and his own. He had given her his word that he would be a preacher; keep his given word he must and would. Nevertheless, preaching, he must choose for himself a gentler sort of gospel than the lurid, flaming fires delighted in and set forth with all the cunning of word imagery, by every Parson Wheeler of his line. His God should be an honest gentleman, and not an all-pursuing Thing of Wrath.

For some reason he would have been loath to analyze, even to himself, it was to Catie that Scott first announced his change of plan. Catie took the announcement tranquilly. To her mind, religion was something that one put on, together with one's Sunday hat. There was no reason one of them should be unchanging in form more than the other. One's theology, like one's brims, should broaden with the fashion; the forms of worship might as well grow high as the outline of one's hat-crown. Given the three main elements of best clothes, a Sunday on which to wear them and an appreciative church to wear them in, and Catie asked no further consolations of religion. The tolerance Scott liked, although he deplored the cause.

"Lovely, Scott!" Catie said, with some enthusiasm, when at last she had grasped in its entirety, not Scott's idea, but the outward form in which it clothed itself. "You'll wear a surplice, then, and a purple stripe around your neck, and sing the prayers, like the man I saw in Boston. He had candles, too, burning at the back, beside a great brass cross."

Scott shook his head in swift negation. As yet, the higher forms of ritualism were totally unknown to him.

"That's Catholic, Catie," he reminded her. "Of course, I sha'n't do that."

"No; 'twas Episcopal," she contradicted. "It said so, on a sign beside the door. But, Scott, that makes me think—"

"Well?" he asked, wondering at her hesitation.

"Would you mind very much," she came forward to his side and fell to fingering the top button of his coat caressingly; "would you mind it so very much not to call me Catie any more?"

Absorbed as he was in his theological transference, he had felt sure that her request was on that selfsame theme, the more so, even, by reason of her unwonted hesitation. In his extreme surprise, he laughed a little at her question.

"Why not, Catie?"

She held up a forefinger of arch admonition.

"There you go again!" she told him, with mock petulance. "Do listen to me, Scott. You're so interested in your everlasting old churches that you haven't an idea to spare for me. I want you to promise that you won't ever call me Catie any more."

"But why? What shall I call you?" he inquired, with masculine and dazed bluntness.

"Catia. It is ever so much prettier; Catie is so babyish," she urged him.

"But, if it is your name?" he urged in return.

Her retort came with unexpected pith and promptness. Moreover, it struck home.

"So is the Baptist your church," she answered pertly. "I guess I have a right to change, as well as you."

Mrs. Brenton, that same evening, took the disclosure in quite a different spirit. To her mind, the relaxing of one's creed spelt ruin, the doorway of the church Episcopal was but the outer portal of the Church of Rome and, like all elderly women of puritanic stock who have spent their lives in a Protestant community, Mrs. Brenton looked on Rome as the last station but one upon the broad road to hell. None the less, she strove to phrase her

objections as gently as she was able. However misguided Scott might be, she saw that he was in earnest, and upon that account she was the more loath to hurt him.

"Scott," she said, with what appeared to herself to be the extreme of tolerance; "if you must, I suppose you must; but I am sure that it will kill your grandfather."

If Scott, just then, had been in a mood for theological discussion, he might have pointed out to his mother the flaw in the logic of her own belief. Grandfather Wheeler, translated into the glory that awaits the faithful servant of the Lord, in all surety should have been beyond the danger of vicarious and everlasting death. However, Scott was too much in earnest, just then, about his own fate, to heed that of his worthy and departed grandsire.

"I am sorry, mother," he repeated gravely; "but I am afraid it is that, or nothing. All this summer, perhaps even before, I have been thinking things over. I'll be glad to preach. Maybe—" his accent was boyish in its extreme simplicity; "maybe, if I try my best, I'll do somebody a little good. But," and his face stiffened, as he spoke; "but I'll be hanged if I am going to stand up in the pulpit and say a whole lot of things I don't believe and don't want to believe, just because Grandfather Wheeler and Great-grandfather Wheeler and all that tribe did believe them."

Across his energy, his growing excitement, Mrs. Brenton's level voice cut in a little sternly.

"What is it that you don't believe, my son?" she asked him.

Scott rose to his feet, took a turn up the room, a turn down it. Then he faced her.

"I'm not sure I even know that—yet," he answered. "I've got to find it out. Honestly, mother," again there came a note of pleading; "isn't it about as much to the point to find out the things you don't believe as the things you do? And there must be some truth, somewhere, that's worth the preaching, no matter how many things you have to throw over, before you get to it. It's that I'm after now, a truth that is the truth, that can be proved. Once I get it, I'll stand up and preach it, and prove it, too, to every man I meet. That's what religion's for. But, to do it, I must go into a church which gives you a little leeway, a church which lets you interpret a few things to suit yourself, not lays down the law about the last little phrase of the meaning you are allowed to put into them."

Again there came the restless pacing of the room. This time, it lasted longer. At last, though, he halted by her side, and rested one lean hand upon her shoulder.

"Mother," he said, and now all boyishness had fallen away from him; "I am sorry if this is going to hurt you; but I can't help it. Two years ago, I told you I would study for the ministry. I shall keep my word; but the way I keep it must be left for me to choose."

There was no mistaking the resonant purpose in his voice. Recognizing it, his mother yielded to it of necessity. As quietly as possible, she accepted the choice that he had made, and then she went away to her own room. A half-hour later, kneeling beside her bed, she lost herself in supplication on behalf of those who bow the knee to Baal.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the fulness of time, Scott married Catie. To put the case more accurately, albeit in less lovely phrase, Scott was married by Catie. From start to finish, Catie was the active force in whatever wooing achieved itself, the active force which swept down on and annexed a passive principle.

From the start, their courtship lacked most of the hallmarks of that tender process. There were few endearments, fewer still of the half-told, half-guessed confidences which, by their very fragmentary nature only serve to add emphasis to a comprehension that can construct a living, vital intimacy out of such slight materials. Indeed, there was no especial effort at spiritual comprehension between them. Instead, their unsentimental wooing was a sort of amatory bargain day for Catie, who must have the best sort of husband to be found on the domestic market. For Scott, on the other hand, it was the bored acquiescence of a man too full of other dreams and hopes and even concrete plannings to regard the choosing of a wife as more important than the selection of his next-morning's steak. His mother had impressed upon him that Catie would be the best wife possible for him. The professors in the divinity school had laid some stress upon the advantage of their clergy's marrying young. Therefore Scott Brenton dutifully took to himself a wife, without the slightest previous notion of what domestic intercourse was bound to mean.

Notwithstanding the education given him by Reed Opdyke and his pseudo sirens, young

Scott Brenton was singularly ignorant of the elements that go into the making of almost any woman, singularly ignorant regarding all the practical details of wedded life. Of course, he knew his mother well; but she seemed to him a little bit archaic. Besides, he knew her only as a thing apart from all other human relations, as an isolated personality whose one point of contact was with himself. The society of a woman who parted her hair straight down the middle of her head and who quoted Job at breakfast was not a perfect preparation for modern domestic life.

As for Catie, or Catia, as she now called herself, she was modern enough, distressingly so sometimes. Nevertheless, analyzed, she would not have seemed to Scott at all domestic. She was too much wrapped up in her own personal concerns, too uncomprehending in a spiritual crisis. Domesticity, to be practical, must consist of something else than mere ability to keep a house and to extract from the butcher the best cuts obtainable for one's income. One's spiritual bric-a-brac must be taken down and dusted with just as careful reverence as one shows the glass things on one's mantel. Catia could cut her own cloth up into pieces, and then sew up the pieces into quite presentable garments; she could make good coffee and cook lamb chops to perfection; but, that done, she could not sit down of an evening and fling herself, heart and soul, into the interests of her husband's life.

Of this, as yet, Scott Brenton was mercifully ignorant. He might have known it; but, unhappily, he never had found it altogether worth his while to meditate very much upon the question. He passed by Catia as an established fact; he left her quite unanalyzed. Instead, he turned the whole force of his analytic power upon the needs of his profession, without in the least realizing that, in the case of a married man, professional acumen and efficiency depend a good deal upon the quality of his domestic atmosphere. Later on, he was destined to find out that a family jar at breakfast, a discussion born of a muddy cup of coffee or a sticky muffin, can wreck the fervour of a sermon born of a week of prayer and meditation, wreck it at so late an hour that any salvage is impossible.

"Really," Catia observed to her solitary bridesmaid, a week before the wedding day; "you'd never think it that Scott was just getting ready to be married; would you?"

The bridesmaid was not so much tactless as envious. As she and Catia were well aware, Scott Brenton was the one really personable man upon the horizon of their village life, the only man who seemed to have it in him to translate a wife out of that humdrum village into the seething world beyond. Of course, it was nice of Catia to have chosen her for bridesmaid. Nevertheless, it would have been far, far more agreeable, if only she could have been the bride. Therefore,—

"No," she answered flatly. "No; I never would. I'd think he ought to be in a perfect twitter, by this time; but he takes it as calmly as if a wedding weren't any more important than a sack of beans."

Catia, hoping for a prompt denial of the point of view she had put forth, was conscious of a certain pique at the prompt agreement. She showed her pique with equal promptness, and phrased it in unanswerable rebuke.

"How common you are, Eva!" she said quite scornfully. "A sack of beans! One would know your father kept a country store."

Eva Saint Clair Andrews felt herself justified in the retort discourteous.

"It is better to keep a country store than it is to hoe your own potatoes, barefoot," she responded tartly. "Besides, what about Scott Brenton's father?"

Then, catching sight, by way of the mirror, of Catia's irate countenance, she stayed her speech. Already, she well realized, her bridesmaid's robes were in the extreme of jeopardy. Unsatisfactory as it was going to be to take the second place at Scott Brenton's wedding, it would be far more unsatisfactory to take the twenty-second, and watch the ceremony from one of the rear pews of the church, instead of from the front aisle which answers architecturally to the functions of the chancel. Besides, there was going to be a visiting minister extra, a rector who was a classmate of Scott Brenton and therefore rather young. And no one ever knew. Accordingly, Eva Saint Clair Andrews, called usually by the whole of her name, even in intimate address, stayed her speech and, after a fashion, temporized.

"Of course," she added, with a hasty giggle; "a minister like Scott is more used to weddings than we girls are."

Turning from the mirror, Catia spoke with a dignity which was crushing.

"But not to his own," she informed her guest.

And Eva Saint Clair Andrews gave up the effort to extricate herself from disgrace. Instead, she fell upon discussion of the wedding plans.

"How many do you expect at the reception, Catia?" she made query, with an accent which discretion had suddenly rendered exceedingly full of respect.

"Oh, I can't stop to count them up," Catia replied, with magnificent carelessness. "I've asked about everybody in town, of course. Mother would have insisted on it, anyway; and, besides, Scott's position would make us do it, even if he were the only one to count."

Eva Saint Clair Andrews opened her blue eyes a little wider than was quite becoming.

"I didn't suppose the Brentons were——" she was beginning.

But Catia interrupted, with a fresh access of magnificence.

"Not the Brentons, Eva," Catia had only lately forbidden herself the village use of the full name, and her sudden recollection of the fact caused her to speak with nippy brevity; "not the Brentons, but just Scott himself. Of course, we owe it to his cloth."

"Yes," Eva Saint Clair Andrews answered, in an appreciative murmur. None the less, lacking the training vouchsafed to Catia by the closing functions of the divinity school, she wondered what the cloth might be, that it should so outrank good Mrs. Brenton in its claim to social precedence.

A week later, came the wedding. Even the most carping one of all the village gossips was ready to agree that it had thrown new lustre over the entire community, and even shed its beams into the next county whence certain of the guests had come. There had been many guests and some unusual costumes. The church had been filled with a wealth of flowers, chiefly of the home-grown species, until the place reeked with the spicy odours, not of Araby the blest, but of a kitchen garden, or a soup bunch.

Beside the village parson, there had been three young clergymen in attendance and more or less in active service while the nuptial knot was being tied. Indeed, so many were there of them and so active were they in their ministrations that poor Mrs. Brenton, down in the front pew and painfully shiny between her proud maternal tears and the reflected lustre of her new black satin frock, was never quite certain in her mind which one of them, in the end, had pronounced her son and Catia man and wife. For the sake of the ancestral Wheelers, she hoped it was the broadcloth-coated village parson; but she had her doubts. Her doubts increased into a positive agony of uneasiness when she discovered, at the reception later on, that the three young clergymen, with one consent, had put their waistcoats on hind side before. Had she conceived the notion that, within the limits of three years, her son would adopt the same preposterous fashion, she would have believed herself in readiness for the nearest madhouse. Mercifully, however, so much was spared her, at that time and for ever after.

The reception itself was a glorious occasion. Practically the entire village was present, a good half of them in new frocks manufactured by themselves in honour of the great event. It was now four years and seven months since there had been a wedding in the village. The local type of damsel was a pre-natal spinster, and the few village boys went otherwhere in search of wives. Brides there had been, of course; but they had been of the ready-made variety. Other communities had had the glory of the weddings. It was not every day, by any means, that the local leaders of society were asked to prepare themselves a wedding garment. They stitched away all the more cunningly on that account. Judged by the standards of the *Ladies' Galaxy*, their gowns were models of the mode. Viewed even in the uncritical eyes of the visiting clergy, they were, as has been said, unusual.

Aside from gowns, the reception was chiefly notable for its cake; not cakes, but solid loaves made up in layers with oozy sweetnesses sandwiched in between. Served with neither forks nor napkins, it gave rise to complications; but it was none the less appreciated upon that account. There were two kinds of lemonade, too, one plain, one mixed with home-brewed grape juice. In all surety, Catia's wedding reception left nothing lacking on the score of elegance. Later, her satisfaction was obvious in her shining eyes, as she halted, half-way down the front stairs, to look upon her guests. The reception was nearing its end, for Catia was now dressed for going away, and topped with a hat which combined the more essential characteristics of the helmet of the British grenadier and a mascot upon a Princeton football field. Indeed, it was almost as rigid in its outlines as was the smile which creased its wearer's lips. Catia was not unimpressive in her new dignity of wifehood; but the dignity bore traces of diligent rehearsal, and left singularly little to the imagination. By her side, Scott, looking down upon his fellow townsmen, wore the self-conscious smirk of a sheepish schoolboy; and the best of his fellow townsmen respected him the more on that account. Catia was the more impressive of the two, they told themselves; but there was no especial sense in a pair of young things like these, trying to act as if their getting married were a mere fact of every-day routine.

Smiling steadily, Catia stood there, waiting until, by very force of motionless persistence, she had focussed every eye upon her person. Then, according to the mandates of the *Ladies' Galaxy*, she hurled her bridal bouquet down across the banister, not upon the waiting Eva Saint Clair Andrews who hankered for it lustily, but straight against the manly waistcoat of the least and the pinkest one of the visiting clergy, a youth of twenty-five or six who had reluctantly torn himself away from an anxious wife and a croupy baby, on purpose to be on hand at Brenton's wedding. Mercifully for Catia's poise, her young husband forebore

explaining to her the reason for the three-fold clerical roar which went up upon the heels of her well-meant attention.

Afterwards, in looking backward, that evening seemed to Scott to stand out as a dream, unforeseen, yet not inconsequential. Nothing that had gone before appeared to him to be able to explain it. It just was, a fact without any planning or volition on his part. He had known Catia from his little boyhood, had been used to her, had counted on her in a sense; but always he had held himself a little bit aloof from her, even when, to outward seeming, he had sought her with the greatest regularity. Early in their intercourse, indeed, he had discovered the main fact of all those which were to govern their later life together: that he could not so much talk over things with her, as talk them over with himself when she was present.

And then, all at once and without warning, Catia had swept in and dominated him completely, dominated him with her oozy layer cake, and her two sorts of lemonade, and with her Princeton grenadier of a hat. Beside it all, he felt himself dwindling into insignificance, despite the hind-side-before waistcoats of the visiting clergymen and his mother's gown of stiff black satin. It was a positive relief to him when he could turn his back upon the whole hot, chattering function, and, with Catia's new gilt-initialled bag to balance his much-rubbed suitcase, go striding away to the station underneath the wintry freshness of the night. Catia had rebelled at the idea of walking to their train; but the one hack afforded by the village had gone away to a funeral in the next town but two.

So they went stepping out into the new life before them: Catia Brenton and Scott, her husband. To Catia it seemed that, the first of her milestones reached, it was time for her to sit down for a while, and rest, and take a little comfort out of thinking over what she already had achieved. To Scott, the first stage of his journey had scarcely been begun. Indeed, it did not even start from that night, nor from any night in which Catia's memory could have a share. And yet, asked, he would have been swift to affirm that he loved Catia; that life ahead of him, without her for his wife, would be unsatisfactory, perhaps a little vacant. Catia had always been a part of his environment, ever since the long-gone day when she had hailed him, sodden in his weeping, the while he cooled his nether man upon the chilly doorstep.

For nearly twenty years, they had been meeting life together, and comparing notes upon the impressions they had gained. Often and often, each one had found the other's notes a cipher, had lacked the cipher's proper code. Nevertheless, there had been a certain sense of intimacy in the mere fact of the comparison. Without Catia in his past, Scott Brenton would have been lonely. Therefore he felt it safe to reason that, without her in his future, the loneliness would become infinitely worse. The marriage, in its inception, might have been altogether Catia's doing. In the end, he had been giving it his full assent, and he took his marriage vows in all sincerity, determined to do his best towards their fulfilment.

His fingers shut quite closely, then, upon the slippery handle of Catia's new bag, and he stepped a bit nearer to her side, as they halted beneath the shining stars, to look back upon what they left behind them. Catia saw the huddled gathering of the village people, already looking a little dowdy to her critical eyes. Scott only saw four faces, grouped in perspective: his mother, tearful, a little tremulous, yet radiant in her full content; behind her, two of the visiting clergy, classmates and chums of the divinity school, and, still behind these two, the eager young face of the curly-headed rector of the many hyphens, the man who first had opened his eyes to a brand-new gospel, one of fatherly affection, not of pursuant wrath, a gospel elastic as the mind of man, plastic as the flowing life of all the ages, not a hard and fast affair whose boundaries were laid down for all time, hundreds of years before. And this was the man of them all, and not the broadcloth village parson, whom Scott Brenton had chosen to pronounce himself and Catia man and wife.

Why not?

Scott waved his hand. His mother sought her handkerchief, though not to wave it. His two classmates saluted him, the one with Catia's big bouquet, the other with a crochetted "throw" snatched from the nearest chair. Above them all, though, the curly-headed rector flung up his arm in greeting, and with his arm his voice.

"Bless you, old man, and keep at it! Remember I'm always in the same old corner, if you ever need me."

And Scott Brenton took the assurance with him, as he entered into his new life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Scott," Catia let go the coffee pot and looked up to face him; "I do wish you'd begin to think about smartening yourself up a little."

Brenton, who still clung to his bachelor habit of reading the newspaper between swallows of coffee and snatches of toast and jam, looked up at the arraignment which lay in Catia's tone, if not within her words.

"Smarten myself up?" he echoed, in blank question.

"Yes." Catia put her elbows on the table and clasped her hands around her cup. "I was looking at you, Scott, all the time this last convocation was going on."

He smiled benevolently, by way of preparation for flinging himself once more upon the columns of his morning paper.

"You'd much better have been looking at the Bishop," he advised her good-temperedly.

She shook her head.

"The Bishop was all right," she said, with an emphasis so caustic as to catch and hold his attention.

Used as he had become, the past two years, to pinpricks of this sort, his colour betrayed how much the present pinprick hurt him. None the less, he still held on to his temper.

"And I wasn't?" he queried, with an effort at a smile. "Sorry, Catia. What's the trouble?"

"All sorts of little things," she answered, with a disconcerting frankness. "Not any one of them count for much; but, taken all together, they're——" She hesitated for a word.

Brenton supplied it.

"Deplorable!" Then he added, "Sorry, Catia, as I said before. Still, I suppose, if I'm not a beauty, I'm about what the good Lord made me."

"Fudge!" She put down her cup and rested her chin upon her palms. Seen across the table and in a pose so undeniably feminine and so becoming to almost every woman, Catia was good to look upon; would have been good, that is, had not her personality been uncomfortably domineering. The two years since her marriage had rubbed down certain of her angles, and had given her at least a superficial polish. She occasionally admitted to herself that she was very near to being handsome. A more critical observer and one less prejudiced, however, might possibly have added that she was curiously devoid of charm.

Brenton, on the other hand, was growing curiously magnetic, as the months ran on, was developing a personal charm of which his student days had given scarcely any hint. The old lines, born of hard work and scanty nourishment, had vanished from his face. In place of them had come other lines, vastly more becoming, lines engraved by earnest, conscientious thought and study, by a life so ascetic as to be a little narrow, perhaps, but noble enough in its aspirations to lift itself high above the common level. He still was lean and thin, still a little stooping. The habits of his life would account for that; he was too busy saving other men's souls to give much thought to the preservation of his own body.

Even in a small and humdrum country parish, the souls of men need careful shepherding; every now and then there comes a petty crisis when they confess to a desire for outside guidance, and it was in such crises that Scott Brenton found his opportunity. His sermons, albeit a trifle immature, were really clever. None the less, they dwindled into insignificance beside the practical, personal help he gave to his parishioners, a help that came without the asking, whether the crisis were a dying cow, a small son's broken arm, or a fire in a granary just after the final harvest. Whatever happened in the parish, for good or ill, Scott Brenton always appeared upon the scene. At the very first, he had come of his own accord. Later, if his arrival delayed itself for a dozen minutes, he was sent for in hot haste. In every crisis, he was ready with practical advice; but he worked with both hands, the while he gave it.

Under such conditions, how he wrote his sermons was a question unanswerable by any one but Catia who trimmed the lamps, next morning. To Catia's great disgust, despite the scale of living due to his profession, Brenton had taken it quietly for granted that, for the present, they would keep no maid. His salary was small; he must have something saved to give away in cases of emergency. Catia and he were strong, and the rectory was small. Of course, Catia could have a little girl to come in at odd hours. What other help she needed, he would give her out of his scanty leisure. And Catia, who had dreamed of a luxurious idleness unknown to most women in that community of simple habits, was forced to tie on a wide pinafore and roll up her sleeves above a steaming dishpan. She did it all, however, with an air of patient martyrdom which was not lost upon her husband; while, upon the rare occasions when they entertained a clerical guest, she added an extra note of unaccustomed abnegation which was intended to impress upon the guest that she was the hapless victim of a fall from better days. The parish, in so far as she was able, she disdained completely. At the infrequent times that she was driven into close quarters with it, she made up for her unpopularity among the vestrymen by taking it out most vigorously upon their wives. Indeed, her lifelong familiarity with what she termed the narrowness of a small community made her the more intolerant, now that its groove was closing about her for a second time.

Therefore, for over a year now, Catia secretly had chafed with the friction of her surroundings. As yet, however, she had not confessed to Brenton the chafing, had not explained to him that her eyes were searching their horizon for any possible loophole of escape. Catia was more wise than are most women. She never wasted any breath in demanding absolute futilities. For the present, she saw clearly, Brenton was quite contented with his parish. For the present, it was enough for his young ambitions to know he had a parish and was doing it some good. Later, she would take a hand in stirring up his slumbering ambition. If she knew Scott at all, he would not be content for ever with preaching to country farmers and dandling their babies on his knees; nor with interspersing moral reflections with inquiries regarding the season's crops; nor with basing his sermons upon the tares and the wheat, and the fig tree, and other texts so palpably bucolic in their interest. However, Catia would grant him a little resting time, before she goaded him up to girding his loins anew. Indeed, he needed it, she admitted freely to herself in her more generous moments. The years of study, long at best, and, in his case, lengthened by needful intervals of money-earning toil, had taken it out of him badly. He needed a little time to recover from their strain, to grow accustomed to his new dignity as preacher and to learn to take himself a little less strenuously, before he would be fitted to assume his proper place in a wider field than any of which as yet he appeared to be dreaming.

However, two years, it seemed to Catia, had been an ample rest-time. Therefore,—

"Fudge!" she said. And then, "Don't be profane, Scott," she rebuked him, with the literalness which had replaced her meagre childish sense of humour. "The good Lord didn't make your surplices a full eighth of a yard too long, nor put you into a black stole for the whole year round. Besides, you were the only man in that whole convocation that buttoned his collar in front. I should have supposed you'd have known better than that, before you got your license."

Brenton's lips curved into the little smile she always dreaded. Because she dreaded it, it antagonized her.

"Did you?" he queried.

Her antagonism lent a tartness to her reply.

"I never professed to go through a divinity school," she retorted. "If I had, though——" Her pause was fraught with meaning.

He made no effort to discount the meaning. Instead,—

"I don't doubt it, Catia," he responded quietly. "However, as it happens, I had some other things to think about."

That brought her to a momentary halt. However, she swiftly rallied.

"Some people can think of more than one thing at a time," she announced, with something of the same accent in which, long years before, she had ejaculated "Dirty-Face!"

But Brenton's mind was hungrily intent upon his paper. Not even two years of Catia's corrective moods had taught him to grasp the fact that she would never cease from her corrections until he had given evidence of writhing underneath their sting. It was not enough for her to have the last word; she must be left in a position to gloat upon its visible effect. Else, wherein lay the pleasure of having given it utterance? Brenton, with manlike unconsciousness of this great fact of feminine psychology, once more buried himself in his morning paper. Promptly and ruthlessly Catia exhumed him.

"Scott," she said, with a petulance which she permitted herself but rarely, not so much for moral reasons as because the *Ladies' Galaxy* had pronounced it bad for the complexion; "do put down that stupid paper and attend to me."

"Yes, dear." And Brenton blinked a little, in the sudden change of focus demanded of his eyes.

Catia only saw the blinking, and to herself she pronounced it a new and ugly mannerism. She did not take the trouble to notice the eyes themselves, to read the earnest desire to please her, written so plainly in their luminous gray depths.

"Oh, do wake up!" she adjured him, with increasing impatience. "Scott, do you know you never really come to life till after breakfast? Can't you see I want to talk to you? Now do listen and answer me. What do you mean to do about this Saint Peter's matter?"

"To do about it!" It was no especial wonder that the echo irritated Catia; and yet neither was it any especial wonder that Scott, in his astonishment, was betrayed into an echo of that sort. As yet, her meaning was opaque to him.

"Yes, do about it," Catia echoed, in her turn. "They say there's sure to be a vacancy, and that it's a splendid place."

"Who say?" Brenton queried cautiously.

"All the convocation. Don't be a dunce and pretend, Scott. Anyway, I'm not a mole; I can see which way the weather vanes are pointing. They were all talking about it, while the convocation was going on. Ever so many of the wives spoke to me about it, and told me that you were the man who ought to have it."

Quite tranquilly Brenton helped himself to more butter.

"Then, knowing the Bishop's common sense, it seems highly probable to me that I shall be the man to get it," he responded.

"You won't, unless you try for it," Catia assured him.

He shook his head. The idea of ecclesiastical wirepulling was repugnant to his nature.

"One doesn't try for things of that kind, Catia," he answered.

"Then one doesn't get them," she retorted curtly.

It was Brenton who broke the next period of silence.

"Besides," he said, as if his sentences had followed each other without break; "I am not at all sure that my work here is done, by any means."

"Scott!" Catia put on the cover of the sugar bowl with a defiant clash. "Surely, you don't mean to stay buried in this little hole much longer?"

Once more his smile showed whimsical.

"Really, Catia, I hadn't thought about it as a hole," he said. "About my staying here or anywhere, I suppose it all depends upon the Bishop."

She pushed her chair back a little from the table, and then clasped her hands upon the table's edge. Her attitude betokened her intention of staying there until the matter had been fought out to a finish.

"Not one half so much upon the Bishop as it does upon yourself," she told him firmly. "The Bishop decides things in the end; but he never originates them. Unless you stir yourself a little and show him that you're restless, you'll be welcome to sit for all time to come in one corner of the diocese. In fact, you have been sitting in a corner for two years. It is high time you showed him you were getting cramps in your knees, and needed a higher seat to straighten them out. There is no especial sense in your wasting your time among these people. Any broken-down old hack ought to be all they've any right to look for."

"But not all they need," Brenton interpolated swiftly.

She waved aside the interpolation.

"It's what you need, Scott, I'm talking about," she told him. "You are young, and you need a chance. What's more, the Bishop isn't going to offer it to you, until you give him to understand that you expect it. There are too many hungry mouths open for every bit of advantage to make it worth his while to hunt for any more. As for Saint Peter's, they all say it is an ideal parish: a rich church in a college town, with a large salary and not too much work. In fact," Catia added wisely; "they all say that there never does need to be too much work in a parish where a good share of the congregation are very young, and transients."

Brenton lifted his head. Then he lifted his brows, fine, narrow brows and arching.

"It strikes me that there might be all the more," he said.

Catia's fingers beat a tattoo on the table.

"You're just for all the world like your mother, Scott," she said, with renewed impatience.

"I hope so," Brenton assented gravely, for Mrs. Brenton had died, a year before, and her memory still was sacred in the mind of her son.

Not even Catia, in her present mood, dared introduce a jarring note, until a little interval had followed upon Scott's grave reply. She, too, had cared for Mrs. Brenton; at least, she had cared as much as it was in her to care for any one. She, too, had mourned sincerely, when the patient, unselfish, plodding life went out. Indeed, there had seemed to be no little cruelty in the fate which had ordained that Mrs. Brenton, after giving her life and strength and all her prayers to the equipment of her son in his profession, should not have been allowed a little longer time to take pleasure in the things her tireless effort had accomplished. For, though Scott had done his best to help himself, the real strain had rested on his mother, the more real in that it had been unbroken by the variety of his student existence, unrewarded by the elating consciousness of personal achievement which had

come to him at the end of every stage of his development.

In all truth, it had been upon Mrs. Brenton that the burden had fallen most heavily. She had accomplished the almost impossible achievement; yet to her had been denied the fullest fruition of her dreams. Scott was a clergyman at last, a preacher, it was said, of more than ordinary promise; but the gospel that he was going forth to preach to all men was not a gospel accredited by any of the ancestral Parson Wheelers. Therefore it was that, after all her struggle, poor Mrs. Brenton died, a disappointed woman. Therefore it was that, by the very reason of the sincerity of his own decisions, Scott, her son, realized her disappointment, and cherished her memory the more tenderly on that account. Vaguely, but resolutely, he had clung to the hope that the day would dawn when his mother would come into his own way of thinking. He only resigned that hope, while he listened to the prayer of the village parson beside his mother's open grave. It was an extemporaneous prayer; but it lacked no detail on that account. And there are few things in life more tragic than permanent misunderstandings between a child and parent. That this one must now be permanent not even Scott Brenton's theological tenets could leave him room for doubt.

Catia's cause for mourning was by far more practical. She realized that it was Mrs. Brenton who had provided her with a professional husband, in place of the petty farmers and shopkeepers who, otherwise, had bounded her horizon. Moreover, she missed Mrs. Brenton sorely, when there came a need to discuss Scott's faults and failings, to plan how best to put an end to them before they stood in the way of his career. Also of her career. For, despite her manifest disdain of the village parish where, as it seemed to her, Scott was merely marking time, Catia had her own keen notions as to the part, granted a suitable environment to serve as stage, a rector's wife could play. Saint Peter's, taken as a stage, would admirably suit her purposes. A college town, and a girls' college town at that, could not fail to surround the rector's lady, not only with a proper train of satellites, but with an audience worthy of her utmost powers.

Already, at the recent convocation, she had probed the subject cleverly. That is, in the most incidental fashion, she had led the talk around to the new Bishop of Western Oklahoma, had casually mentioned the parish whence he had clambered to the bishop's throne, and then, in greedily receptive silence, she had listened to the scraps of conversation evoked by her apparently careless words. At first, her investigations had been carried on among the other diocesan wives. Finding them, to all seeming, gullible and loquacious, she had even ventured on the Bishop. And the good old Bishop, near-sighted and slightly hard of hearing, had carried away the genial impression that Brenton's wife was a very pretty woman and would be of inestimable help to him in managing a parish. Indeed, the Bishop, who was celibate, thought much about the helpful influence of a proper wife, the evening after his short talk with Catia. He even wondered whether he had been quite wise in allowing the two of them—for, ever afterward, he persisted in thinking of them jointly—to be buried in a country parish where it was possible an experienced widower might manage the work alone.

Of this, however, and of the good Bishop's later meditations and of his consequent questionings and investigations, Catia unhappily was in ignorance. Her ignorance, moreover, led her now into employing on her husband the final weapon in her woman's quiver, namely pathos.

She dropped her eyes to her fingernails, and spoke with reverential deliberation.

"She was a good woman, Scott, a dear, good woman, even if she always was a little narrow. It can't fail to be a pleasure to you now to think back to the way we have done our best to carry out her wishes as—" suddenly Catia bethought herself of the change in the label of their theology—"as far as our own consciences would allow us. And now, dear boy," her eyes drooped lower still over her request; "now that you haven't her to consider any longer, aren't you willing to do just one very, very little thing for me?"

"I hope so, Catia," Brenton responded, still quite gravely. "What is it that you want?"

Despite her efforts to the contrary, her voice thrilled with the sudden surety that she had gained her cause.

"Write to the Bishop, dear, and tell him you will take Saint Peter's, when he offers it," she begged him.

Brenton lifted his head to stare at her, aghast.

"Catia, I can't," he told her sternly.

Nevertheless, in the end of things, he did. His later self-reckonings were all the more severe on that account. In more senses than one, Scott Brenton's rest-time ended with his turning his back upon the country parish.

CHAPTER NINE

"Well, what do you think about it, father?" Olive Keltridge queried, as she tapped the table with the corner of the note she was holding in her hand.

The tapping, however, was no indication of any filial impatience. It was merely to remind her parent that something was still expected of him, before he drifted off again into an absent-minded study of the medical journal clutched between his fists. Olive Keltridge would have been the last person in the world to dissent from the general adoration of her father. He was all in all to her, as she to him. None the less, she was driven to admit at times that it was a trifle difficult to keep him up to his social duties.

Olive's mother had died, six years before. The girl had come out of school to take upon her slim young shoulders the management of her father's house. Moreover, in that aged town where, aside from a few score new professors and their callow young assistants, everybody's grandparents had played dolls and tin soldiers together, Dr. Keltridge's absent-minded fashion of failing to provide his daughter with a feminine chaperon had caused no comment whatsoever. Everybody that one met out at dinner knew all about everybody else for several generations. Either they were indigenous, and born knowing; or else, imported and properly accredited, they took measures to inform themselves at the earliest possible opportunity. All the other people, whom one saw in church and in the street cars, did not count at all.

For that reason, no one appeared to find it at all strange that, from the day she put on long frocks, Olive Keltridge should preside, unchaperoned, at her father's table, should receive her father's guests without other protection from their wiles than that accorded by his presence. To be sure, that presence was not invariably dependable. On more than one occasion, Olive had been obliged to delay the serving of the dinner and excuse herself from her waiting guests, while she went in search of her father in his laboratory. The guests, though, as a rule, had known Doctor Eustace Keltridge even longer than his daughter had had the chance to do. They forgot their hunger completely in their amused curiosity as to the condition in which their host would put in his appearance.

Olive Keltridge was a born hostess. She had been prompt to grasp the fact that guests should be amused as well as fed, prompt to realize that a family skeleton can easily be converted to a family Jack-in-the-box, if only he can be snatched from the closet and manipulated with a little tact. Upon the first occasion of her father's failure to line up beside her in season to receive his guests, she had gone in search of him a little petulantly, had reappeared beside him, hot-cheeked and a trifle sulky. That one experience had been the last one of its kind, however. Olive had lain awake, that night, to ponder on the interval between the time of her discovering her sire, his hair rampant, his necktie shockingly awry and his sleeves rolled up, messing contentedly among his pots and pans of cultures and totally oblivious of his waiting guests, and the much later time when she had literally driven him, irreproachably clad and beaming delightedly, into the drawing-room ahead of her. She had thought it all over, all, from the quality of the delayed dinner down to the things that the guests were likely to be saying in her absence. Then, young as she was, she took her resolution. After that, she would catch her father suddenly, and bring him back, red-handed. A man like Doctor Keltridge ought not to be reduced to the conventional dead level of his fellow townsmen; it would be a waste of rare material. Rather, as the phrase is, he should be featured. And Olive proceeded to feature him accordingly, to the solid satisfaction of her father and to the no small rapture of his old-time cronies.

As a matter of course, under this new and unorthodox arrangement, a dinner invitation at the Keltridges' became a thing of almost infinite value. Apart from the surety of the good dinner, and the cordial welcome of the pretty little hostess who, young as she was, yet understood to the full the delicate distinction between chat and chatter: apart from all this was the humorous question contained within the host. No one could ever foretell whether he would greet them on the threshold in his overcoat and goloshes, or be invisible until the dinner was announced, and then be led in by one cuff, like a guilty youngster caught among the jam pots. No one ever could foretell, either, what would be the doctor's costume for the evening, whether it would combine a dinner jacket and a four-in-hand, or whether a wadded housecoat and no necktie at all above his evening linen would announce to his guests that a sudden thirst for knowledge had cut athwart his dressing and sent him to the laboratory to discover how some malignant brew or other might be getting on. Upon one point only Olive, product of these modern days, stood firm. Her father might be as charmingly erratic as he chose; but he must sterilize his hands, before he came into the drawing-room. And upon that one point of domestic discipline his guests rested in placid confidence, sure that, as long as Olive was at the helm, they could devour the Keltridge dinners in reasonable surety of not being poisoned.

If Doctor Keltridge was charming as host, he was even more charming, taken as a father. He was adoring, indulgent, whimsical, and singularly tactful in spite of his absent-minded lapses. To Olive, indeed, he seemed to be the only man at all well worth the while. Nevertheless, as now, it sometimes became imperative to be a little masterful in summoning him back to present consciousness just long enough to extract an answer from him. Therefore she tapped the table sharply with the corner of the note.

"Listen, father!" she urged him, as she laid her other hand across the open paper. "What shall I say?"

"Say that they are impossible young asses, a year and a half behind the times," her father growled, the while he shifted his paper slightly, to free its final column from her covering fingers.

A total stranger to the doctor might have distrusted either his own ears, or else the doctor's sanity. Olive knew her father, though; she felt no forebodings, albeit her eyes danced at the unexpected nature of his response.

"I am afraid that Mrs. Dennison might not take it nicely, if I did," she said.

The doctor's growl rumbled forth once more.

"Better know what one is talking about, then. That theory was all exploded, months ago." Then some echo of his daughter's words seemed at last to be penetrating his brain, and he lowered his paper with a sigh. "What has Mrs. Dennison to do with a thing like this, Olive?" he queried blankly. "Dennison is only history, not biological."

Olive laughed outright.

"And Mrs. Dennison is only socio-hospitable," she responded. "Father, you really are terrible, this morning."

The doctor smiled benevolently at her arraignment. Then, hurriedly gathering himself together, he stuck out an appealing cup for some more coffee.

Olive shook her head.

"No; not one other drop. You have had five, already. If you don't stop at that, I'll tell the cook to put you on to postum. Now please do listen to me. I was asking you whether we'd best go to this dinner of Mrs. Dennison's."

"When?" the doctor inquired.

Olive's lips twitched at the corners.

"About a half an hour ago," she answered. "No, wait." Swiftly she seized and snatched away the paper, just as her father was preparing to bury himself anew. "The dinner is next Thursday, to meet Mr. Brenton."

"Who is Mr. Brenton?" her father asked, with bland interest.

"The new rector. You heard him, two weeks ago, you know." This time, Olive's accent held a slight reproach. Purely as a matter of heredity, Doctor Keltridge was senior warden of Saint Peter's; but, as a general rule, he totally forgot to go to church.

"Oh, yes, yes. The new chap with the voice." The doctor roused himself suddenly. "It is a wonderful voice, Olive; his whole respiratory system must be perfect, and his lungs. I never heard a better resonance nor better breath control. Really, I'd like to hear him speak at closer range. When did you say the dinner is? Of course, we'll go. Dennison isn't a bad little fellow, even if his mind did stop short at history."

"The dinner is for Thursday," Olive reiterated patiently.

"Thursday. Hm. What am I doing then?" her father questioned for, as may be imagined, it was Olive who kept the run of his engagements.

"Nothing, after the hospital directors' meeting at two. Really," Olive spoke a little absently, herself; "I almost wish that you were."

As invariably happened, the doctor's attention became alert when she least expected it.

"Eh? What?" he asked her, in manifest surprise, for it was most unusual for Olive to balk at any invitation.

Her colour came.

"Oh, it's all right. Of course, we'll go. In fact, there's no getting out of it, as long as you are senior warden."

The doctor fished for the cord of his see-off glasses. When they were astride his nose,—

"You like Mrs. Dennison, Olive," he said crisply. "Therefore, by a process of elimination, it probably is the Brentons you don't want to meet. What is the matter with them?"

"Oh, nothing," the girl evaded. "It's only that I hate too prompt a rushing into a new acquaintance."

"Not always," her father reminded her. "As a rule, you've been willing enough to meet the new people at the college."

Olive Keltridge's ancestral notions, the notions born of Brahmin and academic New England, spoke in her reply.

"Yes; but they are different."

Her father, though, saw more clearly. He was too well aware of the quality of the raw material whence the growing college faculties must recruit their ranks.

"Not always, Olive; at least, not nowadays, even if it used to be. But what is the matter with Brenton? He seems possible enough."

"Nothing," she confessed, with a little blush for her distinction between man and wife. "It is only Mrs. Brenton. He is very possible, I should say; but she seems to me a—" and Olive laughed at the absurdity of her own coming phrase; "a trifle improbable."

The doctor shook his head.

"I haven't seen her."

"Yes, you have. She was just in front of us, the woman in the pinky-yellow feather and the pompadour. You must remember her; she was casting sheep's-eyes at Mr. Brenton, all the time he was preaching. That was the way I found out who she was. My curiosity led me to ask Dolph Dennison about her, and I was quite upset when Dolph tweaked my elbow and made signals of distress at poor Mr. Brenton who was standing near us. If he is as thin-skinned as he looks, poor man, it must be rather hard to go into a new parish and watch the people getting accustomed to his wife."

"He brought it on himself," the doctor said, with scanty charity.

"And he has also brought it upon us," Olive assented grimly. "Still, if you say so, I will write to Mrs. Dennison that we will come. You'll not forget? In the meantime, I'll raise my eben-ezer of devout thanksgiving that I'm a girl and therefore can't possibly sit next to Mrs. Brenton at the table. I only hope that honour will descend on you."

And it did.

Moreover, in the talk which followed on the being seated, it was Catia who took the initiative. She was affable, as befitted her husband's lofty rank, sprightly, as seemed considerate of the great age of the man beside her. Both attributes were a little bit intensified by her complete pleasure in her frock. It had come by express from New York, that day, ordered by a picture in a catalogue. The box that held it was adorned with a mammoth scarlet star, and the scheme of decoration of the frock was wholly consonant with the star. Catia had ordered it in hot haste, in deference to a rumour which had drifted to her ears, outstretched in readiness for all such rumours, that, even in that relatively small community, it was the custom to put on low-necked frocks for dinner. It was the first time that Catia had worn a low-necked frock; but she did not find it disconcerting in the least. It did disconcert Brenton very much, however. Its abbreviated bodice did not fit in with his notions of what was seemly for a rector's wife; moreover, to the end of time, he never could find any great degree of beauty in a woman's shoulder-blades.

Brenton himself was in his plain clerical costume from which, nowadays, he made it his rule never to depart. It was a slightly different costume from the one he had worn at first, more distinctly clerical. Even in the morning, when it descended to the worldly level of a subdued species of pepper-and-salt, it always opened chiefly in the back, and a plain silver cross invariably dangled from a cord about his neck. As a matter of course, he always kept himself clean-shaven; and his scholarly stoop endured still, although the old, self-distrustful shamble had strengthened into a manly stride. His eyes were as lustrous as of old, his close, up-springing hair lay as thick as ever on his crown; but the lower part of his face showed changes, born of the years. Still lined, still looking just a little worn, it had gained something in decision, gained infinitely more in sensitive refinement. In Scott, the native clay was being replaced by translucent marble. In Catia, it was hardening to something akin to adamant.

That night, Catia wasted but little time in the preliminary conversation with her host who, as a matter of course, had taken her in to dinner. Dennison was older than he looked, less impressed than he seemed, and clothed impeccably. Catia dismissed him as a youngster of scanty account, for he certainly was not formidable to look upon, and her studies in the Napoleonic period had never brought her into close acquaintance with his really epoch-making monograph. To be sure, she had heard some one saying that he golfed extremely well; but as yet her social education was far too rudimentary to allow her mind to grasp all that that fact connoted. Therefore she turned her attention to Doctor Keltridge a thought sooner than the strict laws of table talk allowed. Of Doctor Keltridge she had heard already and often. He was their senior warden, and she the rector's lady; they could not fail to have many points in common. By way of discovering those points quite promptly, Catia turned

away from Dennison and ruthlessly cut in upon Doctor Keltridge's amicable sparring with his other neighbour whom, as it chanced, the good doctor had escorted across the portal of this world.

"Oh, Doctor Keltridge!" Catia took great pleasure in the spontaneous accent she contrived to fling into the words. "I do want—"

Startled, and a little bit surprised at the sudden voice above his off-turned shoulder, the doctor bestirred himself and threw out a vaguely searching hand. Then, as his hand found nothing before it but a bank of flowers, he emitted one of the customary growls with which, to his more intimate friends, he disclosed the fact that the motors of his ego were temporarily stalled.

"Never is any butter at such a time!" he grumbled. Then he rallied to the questioning note in Catia's voice. "What else can I get you, madame?" he inquired benignly.

There was an instant's hush about the table. Olive, in the lee of the clerical elbow and with young Dolph Dennison by her side, was palpably in danger of hysterics. The others, all but Brenton, were well enough accustomed to the doctor to await the finish of the interview with no small degree of interest. Brenton felt the pause and reddened a little, more in marital self-consciousness than from any specific sense of conjugal alarm. Indeed, the only two unconscious ones about the table were the two protagonists: Catia and the absent-minded doctor, neither of whom appeared to be in the least aware of any pause in the general talk.

"Nothing at all," Catia told him suavely. "It was only that I wanted—"

Again there came the instant's hesitation. Again the doctor employed that instant in a frenzied search about the table to discover and make good the missing need. This time, though, his success was better. It was with a sigh of unmistakable relief that his fingers shut upon the salt. His gesture crossed the final words of Catia who had resumed her broken phrase, now rounding to a satisfactory conclusion.

"—So much to meet you, Doctor Keltridge. Ever since I heard of you," her eyes looked smilingly into his keen ones which now, a little bit inscrutable, were studying her intently from beneath their bushy brows; "I have told Scott that I felt quite certain that we should find out we had any number of tastes in common."

This time, the pause was not of Catia's making. The doctor let it lengthen while, to all of his old friends about the table, it was plain that the motors of his ego now were working at full speed. Meanwhile, his keen old eyes were still resting upon Catia's up-raised face, and in them was the same look an aged sheepdog might bestow upon a youthful terrier puppy. Then a smile broke over the keen face, and the stern eyes lighted, as the doctor spoke.

"I surely hope so, Mrs. Brenton," he answered her benignantly. "As you see, I like horse radish with my oysters. How is it about you?"

CHAPTER TEN

It was not until a good two weeks later that Olive Keltridge came into any actual contact with the new rector. At the Dennison dinner, she had been too busy in dodging the conversational assaults of the rector's lady to pay any great amount of attention to the rector himself. Since that time, she had viewed Brenton only with the height of the chancel steps between them. However, Olive was conscious that the man interested her, even at that distance; and it was with some degree of impatience that she confessed her interest to young Dolph Dennison who, as a rule, was her safety valve.

"I despise a woman who goes mad about the clergy, Dolph, and I despise the way this new rector-man of ours keeps my eyes glued upon him, all the time he's preaching. It isn't the quality of his sermons, either; it is something inherent in the man himself that causes me to watch him."

Dolph Dennison laughed with the callousness of a wayward boy. He was years younger than his brother, the professor. Moreover, he had never taken any especial pains to expedite the processes of his growing up.

"You'll recover, Olive; I have seen you enthused like this, before. As for Brenton, it's a mere case of burbling genteel platitudes in a marvellous voice. Even I, though I deplore the platitudes, find my own gooseflesh rising in response to his larynx. It's a tremendous asset to a man, that! Some day, when I have the time, I'll work it out into a series of equations: heart and brain and larynx as the unknown quantities to be properly equated, so much brain for so much, or so little, larynx. Thanks, no. I won't come in. I'm late for luncheon now. You

will be at the Evans tea, to-morrow afternoon?"

Nodding cheerily, young Dennison went on his way, leaving Olive to ponder upon the accuracy of his diagnosis. Was it only larynx, after all? Or had the new young rector something back of it, something that singled him out from the ruck of men, and held him up as worthy of attention? Olive's eyes grew thoughtful, for an instant, at the question. Then the laugh came back into them again, the while she thought of Mrs. Brenton.

It was only the next afternoon that Brenton came by appointment to call on Doctor Keltridge. There were certain minor matters to be discussed between the rector and his senior warden, before it appeared really wise to bring them up in open meeting. To both men, it seemed possible to discuss them with greater freedom from interruption at the doctor's house than at the rectory. Therefore had been the appointment between them.

According to his custom, Brenton kept his appointment to the very letter, and the clocks were striking three, when the Keltridge maid deposited him in the Keltridge drawing-room. The doctor showed himself less punctual, however, and a good quarter of an hour elapsed before steps were heard in the hall outside. Moreover, before Brenton had time to question to himself the weight of those same steps, the door was pushed open to admit, not a keen-faced and grizzly doctor, but a totally apologetic Olive.

"Mr. Brenton?" she said, with a slight lift, as of question, in her voice. "Really, I am so penitent at the message I am bringing you. The maid told me you were here. Then, after a while, she came back again and told me she couldn't find my father anywhere."

With a courteous little gesture, Brenton interrupted her apology and half rose from his chair.

"Really, it's not at all a matter for apology, Miss Keltridge. I can come again, some other day. Your father is a busy man, I know."

But Olive stayed him with scanty ceremony.

"No; wait, Mr. Brenton. I hadn't finished my tale. Besides, when you have lived in town a little longer, you'll know that nobody ever does apologize for my father; we all revel in his dear old absurdities. Sit down, please. He will be here before very long."

Brenton did sit down, the while he suppressed a vague question regarding the filial nature of the word *absurdities*. Then he yielded to the merriment in Olive's eyes, and laughed outright and boyishly.

"I've heard something of the sort already, Miss Keltridge," he confessed. "What was it, this time?"

For an instant, Olive paused, astonished at the change which had come over her companion. His clerical veneer had fallen from him; the man beneath was singularly human, likable, and as simple as Dolph Dennison himself.

"This time? I went to see, went to the laboratory, though the maid had told me he wasn't in there. She had knocked twice; then she had opened the door to look in. At first, I agreed with her. Then I heard a little noise, over in a corner behind the table. There on the floor, the flat floor, sat my father, sixty-five years old. His hair was all on end, and his cheek was smudged with something yellow, and he was as happy as a baby in a sand pile. Doing?" Olive made a helpless little gesture. "How should I know? I'm no student of germs. He had a row of glass pans in front of him, with hideous messes in them, and he appeared to be sounding the depths of iniquity in them with a small glass divining rod."

Then their eyes met above the finished story, and together the two of them burst out laughing, like a pair of merry children.

"You think he will become visible, in course of time?" Brenton asked her.

She shook her head, as she laughed again.

"I trust so, Mr. Brenton; but, of course, nobody ever can predict. He knows you are here. At least," swiftly she amended her phrase; "he did know it. How long the fact stays by him is another question. If you were only a germ, now——" She surveyed him dubiously. "You wouldn't care to go into the laboratory?" she asked him.

A sudden light flashed up into Scott Brenton's face, the dazzle of a flame long buried, never entirely to be extinguished.

"If I might! Wouldn't it disturb him, though?"

But Olive had seen the lighting of the quiet face, and her curiosity was aroused. What was there in the mere mention of a laboratory that could so transform a humdrum little rector into a thing of fire? That it was the laboratory, Olive never stopped to question. She was far too sane, too used to the tame-tabby-cat propensities of youthful rectors, to imagine for a

moment that the enthusiasm had come out of the chance to escape from her society. Therefore she decided that, for the present, she would keep this particular rector to herself, on the off-chance of discovering the real source of his enthusiasm. Her knowledge of her father's habits assured her, beyond doubt, that later on, much later, there would still be plenty of time for the laboratory visit. Accordingly, she answered Brenton's question with flat discouragement.

"Probably," she told him quite uncompromisingly. "However, it is good for him to be disturbed, once in a while, even if he doesn't always take it so very nicely."

With palpable regret, Brenton settled back again in his chair.

"Oh, well, I'd hate to be disturbing him," he said politely.

"Better stay here and wait," Olive advised him. "It can't be long before he comes, and some of those glass pans were very awful."

"Do you think so? One never really minds a laboratory smell, after the first whiff of it. It seems to go into the system once for all, at the start. After," this time, the regret was even more palpable; "one always rather longs to get back into it."

Olive smiled.

"So I have noticed, with my father." Then her accent changed, grew less conventional. "You have had it, then, Mr. Brenton?"

"Of another sort. I had three years in a chemical laboratory, when I was in college," he told her simply.

"Really? And you liked it?"

His voice dropped by a whole octave, thrilled with a new resonance which, for some reason that she could not analyze then or after, set the girl's nerves all a-quiver. It was the voice of a man who, for the first time, is confessing aloud his master passion.

"It made life over for me," he said gravely.

"Then—Forgive me, if I have no right to ask the question. But one generally keeps on with a thing like that." Olive was painfully aware that her curiosity, however she wrapped it up in apologies, was most unjustifiable.

Scott Brenton, however, did not appear to find it so. Too simple-minded and downright to obtrude his personal history, he also was too simple-minded to conceal it.

"I should have kept on with it, at any cost," he answered; "only for the sake of my mother. She was a widow without much money; she was giving all she had to educate me, and her heart was set on—something else."

If Olive noted the little pause, she had at least the super-feminine tact to ignore it.

"Your priesthood?"

He nodded slowly.

"After a fashion,—yes."

This time, the pause seemed to her entirely natural.

"She must be very happy now," she answered. "Saint Peter's is a dear old church, mellow enough in its traditions to make up for its hopelessly new architecture; and I am sure you'll love this sleepy town."

But it was plain to her that Brenton, quite oblivious to her words, was pursuing his own train of thought. Out of it he spoke.

"My mother died, two years ago, Miss Keltridge."

Her reply came promptly.

"How glad you must be that she lived to know that her wishes had been carried out!"

This time, the pause was a good deal longer. Without Olive's in the least suspecting it, the invincible honour of the man before her was struggling with his reticence. Should he absorb a praise to which he had no right; or should he thrust his confidence upon her at this early stage of their acquaintance? Honour won out.

"Only in part," he said a little sadly. "Really, Miss Keltridge, there's no especial reason I should bore you with all this, except that I don't like to be caught, sailing under false colours. I wanted to be a chemist of some sort or other, something experimental and

theoretical, if I could; and they told me that I could. Sometimes I wish they hadn't. It would have simplified things a good deal, if I never had found it out. And my mother, all the time, had been denying herself in order to prepare me to preach the bluest sort of Calvinism. I found that it was going to break her heart, if I gave up the plan, so I gave up the chemistry, instead, and took the preaching. Unfortunately, though, in the meantime, the chemistry—and some other things—had made me also give up the Calvinism. And so, in the end of all things, even my preaching seemed to her a wretched compromise."

His eyes were fixed upon the carpet, and he could not see her face; but the gentleness in her young voice set his pulses pounding. In all his life up to this hour, such gentleness never had been meant for him. His mother was too stern; Catia too metallic. As for other women, he had never been in sufficiently short range of them, psychologically speaking, to be aware whether they meant to be gentle to him or not.

"I think," Olive was saying; "that she understands it better now. Anyway, you always will be glad of the choice you made."

His eyes still on the carpet at his feet, Scott Brenton spoke moodily.

"I wish I knew," he said.

And then he was aghast at the consciousness that, before this comparative stranger, and a girl at that, he had taken down the barriers before the secret of his disappointment.

Happily, however, Olive was serenely unconscious of either barriers or secret. Instead, she was intent on preventing any retro-active regrets upon the part of a devoted son.

"All creeds are a good deal alike, just as they say all roads lead to Rome," she reminded him, with a curious crossing of Mrs. Brenton's mental trail. "The preaching, after all, is the main thing, that and the priestly life; it doesn't make much difference whether you wear a stole, or a gown and bands. And as for the chemistry," she laughed lightly; "if you ever feel your work in that was wasted, just go and talk to the head professor here. Only just the other day, I heard him laying down the law to father, claiming that his laboratory was the only open door to logic, the only training school where one can find out whether his elements can be combined safely, or whether they will explode and, what's a good deal more to the point, explode him with them."

The laugh came back to Brenton's face. Once more Olive wondered at its charm.

"There's something in his theory," he admitted.

"Everything, according to his notion. The last I heard, the dear man apparently was trying to get himself annexed to the literary courses. He declared in open faculty meeting, the other day, that a proper training in chemistry would kill off a good fifty per cent of the modern novels. The authors would realize the explosiveness of their plots before they touched them, and wouldn't waste months on months of work, brewing what, in the end of it all, was nothing more than a mere flash in the pan. He was still elaborating his theory, when the President called him to order, ready for the motion to adjourn." Then she harked back to her former theme. "You must see the laboratory here, Mr. Brenton, if you care for such things. Girls? Oh, yes, of course; but you'll soon get past regarding that as any handicap. In fact, according to Professor Opdyke, it is one of the best equipped laboratories in the country."

But Brenton's attention had wandered from the fact, caught by one of the minor details which surrounded it.

"Professor Opdyke?" he echoed a little blankly.

"Yes. You have met him?"

"Not here. Not at all, in fact. The name is so uncommon that I am quite sure. And yet—"

It was plain to Olive that Brenton was struggling with some half-forgotten memory, striving to bring it forth to light, to link it with the present; or, failing that, at least with something tangible in his past life. And yet, the blurring of his memory was not too inexplicable. Reed Opdyke still remembered Brenton clearly, still regretted the apparent waste of some of his more brilliant possibilities. Scott Brenton, on the other hand, had totally dismissed Reed Opdyke from his mind. In the contact between the two of them, the one had stepped up, the other down; and, as so often happens, the truer, the more lasting picture is the one gained from the upper level. Moreover, Brenton's later life, and most especially the summer which had followed the ending of his association with Reed Opdyke, had been so very strenuous as to obliterate by far the greater number of his earlier contacts.

Then suddenly memory stirred in its sleep, stretched itself, awakened.

"Did Professor Opdyke have a son?" he asked, with a new eagerness which was wholly alien to the one concerning his bit of autobiography.

Olive smiled at his phrasing.

"He did; I trust he still does," she answered; "though, with a mining man, one never can be quite sure. Why? Did you know Reed?"

The colour came into Brenton's cheeks, as he blurted out the totally forgotten truth.

"I adored him, all my last two years at college."

"Really? Yes, he is Professor Opdyke's son; and people who have seen him lately tell me he is more adorable than ever."

"When have you seen him?" For something in Olive's accent made Brenton realize that there was no necessity for any preliminary question concerning the fact that she knew Opdyke well.

"Not since the year of his graduation. In fact, I was at his commencement. Why," and suddenly her eyes gathered into focus; "I remember you then, Mr. Brenton. Reed showed you to me as——" Then, all at once, she faltered and her colour came.

He strove to help her out of the abyss into which she so unwittingly had fallen.

"One of the waiters at his eating club, and popularly known there as 'Reed's Parson'?" he asked her, with a little smile which sought to cover the sting that came to him with the memory.

But Olive shook her head.

"No; not that at all. It was one of the Might-Have-Beens, he called you," she said, with brave downrightness. But, afterwards, when she thought the matter over, she wondered whether she had bettered it, or made it worse. In any case, she went on a little hastily. "Since then, as it happens, I never once have been here, when Reed has been at home. Of course, he has been back here now and then; but once I was in London, and in New York, the other times."

"Where is he?"

She shook her head again.

"That is the hardest sort of question to answer, for he is always on the wing. He went in for mining engineering, and is making quite a record as consulting engineer. It's copper, I think, he consults about; anyway, no one ever can predict where he will be heard from next. Really, if you knew him, you must meet Professor Opdyke. The dear old man is bursting with pride in his only son; he talks about him by the hour at a time, if we let him. The trouble is that we all are so cloyed with hearing about Reed's virtues and Reed's triumphs that we have a tendency to run away before the paternal downpour commences. A new pair of ears will be a veritable godsend to his father. He and my father are the greatest sort of chums, and—" Suddenly Olive paused and began to look distinctly uneasy. "By the way, Mr. Brenton, where is my father? I really think that, in mercy to your patience, I'd better go and jog his memory once more."

And jog his memory she did, and with such success that, this time, Doctor Keltridge put in a tardy and apologetic appearance. However, when, smiling guiltily at his own sins of omission, he came to greet his guest, he came alone. Olive, her hospitable duty done, had vanished, to return no more.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Saint Peter's Parish was unique in all New England. The trails of old and new in its experience crossed and crisscrossed at every point, causing a long succession of eccentricities which endeared themselves to the minds of the oldest inhabitants. However, even the oldest inhabitants breathed a deep sigh of relief, when finally they were housed in the brand-new church up beside the college campus, a real stone church, with transepts and painted windows and choir-stalls within, and a cloister and a grand tall tower without. The ramshackle old wooden church had been dear to them, had even remained dear to them after the railroad had laid down its tracks under their very eaves; but they were fretted by the crudely caustic comments of strangers coming to the town, and they were still more fretted when the puffing, screeching Sunday trains drowned the voice of the good old rector whose mannerly traditions forbade his puffing and screeching in his turn.

He had been a dear old rector, rotund and pompous; and his surplice had been fully as long and voluminous as a Mother Hubbard nightie. Possibly it was on that account, to

equalize the demand for muslin, that, in those same old days, the choir had worn no surplices at all, but had been accustomed to come tramping into church in all the bravery of sack coats and violent haberdashery. Indeed, upon the part of certain of the congregation, there had been a tendency to regard it as a finger-post to Rome, when some younger member of the vestry suggested putting the ban on scarlet neckties. Saint Peter's Parish was set like a holy beacon in the very midst of a valley which was tainted with heresies Arian and unspeakable, tainted so thoroughly that the ritualistic development of Saint Peter's was delayed for decades upon that account.

Later, Saint Peter's became far wiser in its generation. Its policy had been to extend a cordial welcome to all men of whatever creed, and its early fathers had felt that it was surer to attract the more unstable of its neighbours, if it held its threshold at the common level of them all. In course of time, however, wisdom dawned and broadened to a perfect day of psychological common sense. A theological reaction, of whatever sort, was bound in the last analysis to be a matter of a sudden leap, not of a deliberate slide. One either took a veritable ski-jump into the next church but three, or else one merely stayed where one was, and fretted about the details of the service.

It was now a good twenty years and more since Saint Peter's had abandoned its old barracks of a church and moved up town into its new quarters. As a matter of course, it had settled down as close as possible to the campus. A student congregation might be a bit unstable, taken as a parish; but it was distinctly lucrative, when it came to the point of counting up the offertory. Furthermore, as result of its Sunday-morning habits of arising, it was prone to turn in at the first church door that offered.

Nowadays on Sunday mornings, Saint Peter's rector had no monopoly of surplices. The choir, discreetly garbed and outwardly reverential, warbled early English settings to the hymns, the while they came striding slowly up the aisle in a species of churchly goose-step that demanded a pause on each foot, to prevent the physical march outrunning the musical one. Nowadays, too, there was daily celebration; that is, when any one was sufficiently energetic to get up and get into church in time. What happened upon those other days, when the rector was abandoned to the rows of empty pews, was still a matter of profane conjecture. Discussed in whispers, it was agreed to be a subject best left to the disclosing hand of time.

Into this elaborate and decorative harness, Scott Brenton was now breaking his young strength, his young ambition. In his old parish in the hills, it had been a question of preaching the best sermons that he could and looking out for his people in the intervals, rather than of forms and ceremonies and intonations of the Nicene Creed. In accepting the Bishop's intimation that Saint Peter's Parish would extend to him a welcoming hand, he had thought singularly little about the outward trappings of his priesthood. Catia knew it all; but she held her peace. The Bishop also had held his peace, and a little bit for the same reason that Catia had done. He knew the theological history of Scott Brenton; he knew that, like all half-broken colts, he easily might shy at first sight of the harness; yet, once with the harness on and fitted to his back, he would fall to work in earnest and pull steadily with the best of them. And it was the pulling that the Bishop wished, not the mere jingling of the farthingale. Under the last incumbent, Saint Peter's had been running down a little. It was not in all respects an easy parish; and Brenton, young, earnest and as magnetic as he was self-distrustful, was the very man to build it up. Nevertheless, the Bishop saw to it that Scott Brenton should never attend a service at Saint Peter's, until his acceptance of the parish was settled past all gainsaying.

From the first morning of his reading service at Saint Peter's, Brenton had been aware that he was opening a fresh chapter of his life. In the old hillside parish, there had been things to do and souls to save. Here, it seemed to him that all the souls had been saved prenatally. As for the things to do, these people were too critical, too self-reliant to take kindly to the intimate sort of ministrations in which, of old, he had delighted. For the future, it would be the quality of his sermons that counted most, rather than his personal contact with his people.

The congregation seemed to him conglomerate, a jumble of conflicting elements. There were the old, old residents and their offspring, people who squabbled violently among themselves as to whose ancestor came aboard the *Mayflower* first, and which in what capacity. There were the mediæval spinsters who always reach their best development in the semi-small New England town, spinsters who have clubs and theories, and yet play golf, and frivol delightfully above their luncheon tables. And there were college girls in hordes, alert young things, critical alike of evil and of good, of the hang of the back of a surplice where the shoulders stoop a little, and of the turning of the final phrases that naturally lead up to the *And now*—To Scott Brenton, looking down upon the students in the congregation, his first Sunday morning at Saint Peter's, their befeathered hats and their intent young faces seemed to him the masking labels upon a store of frozen dynamite. Thawed, it might serve for any amount of useful tunneling; it might go off explosively in the open, at almost any given instant.

Taken all in all, it was upon the student fraction of his congregation that Brenton looked with greatest interest; it was to them, in greatest measure, that the best of his sermons

preached themselves. The phrase is no slipshod inversion of the fact. The best of all sermons do preach themselves, both in their original inception and their ultimate delivery. All the so-called preacher does about it is to give the intermediate polishing to his projectile, and then to hold himself still, while it is going off, and watch what happens, by way of preparation for aiming his next shot.

As a matter of course, with a target so unstable as a student audience, Brenton by no means hit the bull's-eye every time. That he did hit it occasionally, however, argues no mean ability, no paltry knowledge of youthful human nature. Over their Sunday dinners, the girls discussed his sermons with increasing vigour. The echoes of these discussions, coming to Brenton's ears, set him to preaching with increasing conscientiousness. However, there still was salvation for him; it was his sermons that he took so much in earnest, and not himself, the preacher.

But, although it was upon his student hearers that Scott Brenton tossed down, broadcast and unsaving, the best of all he had within himself, it was among the permanent residents of Saint Peter's that his real work was supposed to be done. He did that work most faithfully; he showed himself both tireless and tactful in his arrangement of the parish mechanism, in his gathering up and straightening and knotting here and there the threads his predecessor had flung down in a tangled heap. Nevertheless, his heart was in the other end of his work, not for any individual interest in the different girls; but because his whole instinct told him that here was the dynamic force of the whole organization, that the rest of it was curiously static. Under those befeathered hats were eager brains which weighed their theology and measured it, not took it ready made. It was for him to serve it out to them in such a guise that, weighed, they should not find it wanting.

Catia, on the other hand, looked upon the student end of her husband's parish with disapproving eyes. The girls annoyed her by their cocksure alertness, their little air of being primed, ready for any emergency that chanced to offer. They vexed her by their manifest absorption in her husband; they vexed her yet more by their inexplicable lack of interest in herself.

Upon the older and more stable fraction of the parish, however, Catia lavished an interested affection which would have seemed well-nigh maternal, had it not been for the care she took to emphasize the gulf in age which yawned between herself and certain of the individuals who made up its list. She studied the list with no slight degree of care. By the end of their first month in the new parish, she knew to a nicety how the line of local social precedence ordered itself, where, at any point in the procession, town must yield to gown, or the reverse. She knew the lineage and history of all the wardens and their wives, and then of all the vestry-men; she even cultivated a nodding acquaintance with their family skeletons, and learned to recognize the seals upon the doors that, as a rule, hid them from public view. She knew the hobbies of the average prosperous member at large of the flock ecclesiastical, and made a series of elaborate calculations regarding the intersecting social orbits of those same members. As for the other, lesser members of the congregation, she had an especial kind of smile, half of sweetness, half of deprecation, that she bestowed upon each one of them in turn; but she never made the slightest effort to separate them, one from another, in her mind, or to return any of their calls. To Catia's astute brain, the duty of a rector's lady consisted in helping her husband up, not on.

It was at about this epoch, too, that Catia ceased to be Catia and became Kathryn. In some respects, the most remarkable thing about the change was the suddenness with which it was announced to Scott.

A dozen of them had been dining at the Keltridges', one night, six months or so after Brenton had come to take charge of the congregation of Saint Peter's. It was essentially a church-warden kind of dinner, with all the other wardens and their wives to meet the rector and his lady, the kind of dinner that one gives and goes to, out of stern necessity, when, all the time, one longs for something just a little less made up by rule of thumb. The one exception to the prevailing ecclesiastical flavour, that night, was in the person of a local novelist who, albeit suave and very bald, wrote novels of the raucous, woolly West. Moreover, like all other novelists, he rejoiced in talking shop. Accordingly, with the utmost expedition, he dragged the talk around to the law regarding the choice of names.

"Of course," he expounded, for the benefit of whom it might concern; "the first thing I always do, when I go to work, is to name my characters. It's the hardest thing in the world to do—properly. You can stick any sort of name to any sort of character, I know; but that's not naming them. Not at all. The name must be a label; it must fit like a glove, and yet the character must be fitted to it. And most of the names I find are so trite."

"Likewise the characters," Dolph Dennison assured him, *sotto voce*.

Dolph, by way of his older brother, who was vestryman, might be termed sub-ecclesiastical. However, in any case, he would have been sure of a seat at the Keltridge dinner, even if all the other guests had been archbishops. It needs at least one such irresponsible youngster to act as appetizer for the solid things before him.

Only Olive heard his comment. As a matter of course, Dolph's place was next to Olive. Long since, discerning hostesses had discovered that therein lay the only path to peace. Otherwise, Dolph either sulked palpably; or else ignored his other neighbour and shouted all his talk across the table into Olive's ears. Not that either Dolph or Olive had any notion of being at all in love with each other. It was merely that things struck them the same way at the same instant, and that Dolph, being young and a good deal spoiled, could see no reason against a prompt exchange of comments on the fact. Therefore, for the peace of the other people at the table, it had become a universal local law that, no matter who took Olive Keltridge out, Dolph Dennison should be placed at her other side.

Olive, then, heard Dolph's comment and, what was infinitely worse, she feared the novelist had heard it, too. Therefore, to save the feelings of the bald little man, she flung herself into the talk.

"I see exactly what you mean," she told him. "Your idea is that, when you have conceived a character that is wholly original—"

"Ahem!" Dolph strangled suddenly.

But Olive continued, without pause for flinching, for now the bald little novelist was facing her intently, and it was plain, from the tentative waggling of his beard, that he would mount his hobby and be off again, if she gave him so much as a comma's breadth by which to creep back into the talk.

"Wholly original," she repeated sternly; "that it must be very trying to be obliged to descend to the every day of things, and name her Mamie."

There came a peal of laughter at the accent with which Olive had contrived to endow the name. The peal was cut short, however, by the fussy accent of the little novelist.

"You have hit the nail on the head, Miss Olive, distinctly on the head," he assured her, with a bow and smile so suave as to be devoid of meaning. "Really," and Olive felt as if she were a young child and he were offering her a stick of candy; "it was a very smart little tap. Yes, as you say, a Mamie is an anticlimax to one's best endeavours. Now, if all the ladies," Olive had a momentary longing to hurl a plate in his unctuous direction; "only were blessed with names like yours, we poor novelists would never be devoid of sources for our inspiration."

"Encore!" remarked Dolph Dennison, with admirable gravity.

Once again Olive sought to save the situation, as well as to remove the subject of the talk from resting solely on herself.

"If that is all you want," she answered lightly; "you surely will find Mrs. Brenton's name offering you all sorts of inspiration, much better than anything mine could give."

"Mrs. Brenton?" The little novelist was palpably uncertain as to whom the name belonged. He was not only Unitarian by theology, but inattentive by profession; and, moreover, he had but just returned from a copy-hunting trip in the direction of his raucous West.

"Yes." Olive made signals of distress in the direction of the rector's wife who was bending above her salad, with every appearance of anxious absorption in her tour of discovery among its elements. Her colour betrayed her, though, and Olive judged it would be the part of wisdom to drag her by the heels into the talk. "Mrs. Brenton, I am just telling Mr. Prather what a benefactor you ought to be considered, according to his notion about names. Surely, yours is unusual enough to win his full approval."

Even as she spoke, Olive realized the vapidness of her words and was ashamed of them. An instant later, though, her shame exchanged itself for astonishment.

The rector's lady raised her brows, and spoke with studied carelessness.

"Really, Miss Keltridge," she said calmly; "there is nothing so very unusual in the name of Kathryn."

"Kathryn!" Olive fairly stuttered over her reply, for she saw Scott Brenton's eyes turn to his wife, and she read amazement in them, amazement and something else that was dangerously akin to contempt. "I thought your name was Catia, Mrs. Brenton."

But Kathryn Brenton laid down her fork, as though the salad had ceased to interest her. Then she spoke, and her accent conveyed the same impression as concerned the conversation.

"Oh, no; Catia is just a little nickname. That is all. My name is really Kathryn."

And then, for an instant and to her lasting shame, Olive Keltridge's glance sought that of Brenton. Before the hurt and abased look in his deep gray eyes, her own eyes dropped, ashamed and pitiful. What right had she, in a moment so tragic, albeit so very, very petty, to

spy upon him in his disappointment? What right to obtrude her honest sympathy upon his secret pain?

She dropped her eyes, then, promptly. None the less, Scott Brenton realized that, alone of all the group about the table, Olive Keltridge had recognized both elements: the secret, and the pain.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was Catia, then, or, rather, Kathryn, who kept a weather eye upon the social powers of the parish. Brenton was too busy doing other things. Somebody, though, she argued, must look out for the personal end of life, as well as for the theological. Else, the parish would fall to pieces about their ears. Brenton might be giving them the bread of life; but man should not live by bread alone. He needed an occasional cup of afternoon tea to wash it down. Therefore Kathryn revised her social balance sheets often and with the utmost care.

Out of deference to what Kathryn was still pleased to term her husband's cloth, the Brentons promptly had been received into the inmost circles of the college set, an honour which they shared with Prather, the fussy little novelist. Kathryn liked the novelist; he was such an unctuous, eager little man, so redolent of the elements that went into his careful grooming. She even tried in vain to read his novels; but they proved too much for her. She explained to him that his local colour was so brilliant that it dazzled her; but the ignoble truth was that she found it boring, although her letters going out of town were splashed thickly with his name.

At the faculty wives Kathryn looked askance. They most of them knew things and they wore their clothes as if they were accustomed to them. Nevertheless, they seemed to her a little bit old-fashioned. Some of the grown-up daughters, the ones who had not been in college, she liked a little better. Nevertheless, Kathryn's attempts at closest comradeship were with certain of the young instructors. She told herself that she was mothering them, giving their homeless selves an outlook on domestic life. What the young instructors told, would be better for the editing. Indeed, it was somewhat edited and pruned of its finest flowers of speech, out of loyalty to Brenton whom they one and all admired exceedingly.

Brenton himself, meanwhile, though liking those jovial youngsters who, in reality, were of his age and epoch, was finding his most satisfying intimacy in the friendship of two of the older men: Doctor Eustace Keltridge, and Professor Opdyke.

Of the two of them, both mellow men of learning and of kindly humour, Doctor Keltridge was easily first choice. Before Scott Brenton had been a month over Saint Peter's Parish, he had fallen into the habit of dropping in upon the doctor at all sorts of hours and upon all sorts of pretexts, now smoking with him in the library and discussing things ecclesiastical, now following him into the laboratory, to hang above the trays of cultures, or the charts of perverse fever cases, while the doctor expounded and predicted, laying down the law with voice and fist and trenchant word. He saw Olive, as a rule, when he was passing in and out. Sometimes they merely nodded from afar, sometimes they had a little conversation. It was always as immaterial as possible, yet it never failed to have a little flavour of personal and friendly understanding.

Next to the absent-minded and erratic doctor, Brenton's loyalty was given to Professor Opdyke. At the very first, the consciousness that the gray-haired professor was father to his old-time idol had made all the difference; but, after a time, that fact sank into insignificance beside the personality of the man himself. Never was any artist more devoted to his medium, whether that medium were water colours or progressive harmonies, than was Professor Opdyke to his balances and his blow-pipes, to his effervescent mixtures and to his most unholy smells. His laboratory was his studio, a place apart from all the outside world, the threshold where he was content to stand and knock, waiting in perfect, reverential patience until the mysterious door ahead of him should open just a very little wider. To the outward eye, he was languid, indifferent, a little cynical and prone to boredom. Underneath it, though, the fires of his enthusiasm, of his ambition to advance, not his own career, but the sum total of scientific knowledge: this fire was burning at white heat. Indeed, it cost him something to bank down the flame upon the side of his nature which lay open to the general view. His somewhat cynical humour was the material which he selected for the banking.

Professor Opdyke almost never was betrayed into the sin of talking shop. Upon the rare occasions that he gave himself the privilege, save to his classes, he insisted upon but one congenial hearer, and that that one should be with him behind closed doors. More and more often, as the second winter of his acquaintance with Brenton went on, he chose Brenton as the one hearer he allowed himself. This was partly by reason of Brenton's interest in Reed, for, whatever his habit with his chemistry, it must be confessed that Professor Opdyke talked in season and out about his son. Partly, too, it came by way of Professor Mansfield

whose introduction of Brenton would have been the *Open, Sesame* to any sanctum in America. Most of all, though, it came from Brenton himself, from the young rector's manifest enthusiasm for all that went under the name of chemistry, an enthusiasm based, as Professor Opdyke made prompt discovery, upon no mere smattering of knowledge.

Bit by bit, then, the professor lowered the guard he had built up before his holy places, relaxed the vigilance of his watch upon them lest they should be invaded by the careless feet of those that did not comprehend. Scott Brenton did comprehend. To him, experimenting was an act of reverence, not a deed of idle curiosity. The world-laws were, to him, full of purpose, albeit only half revealed; and blessed was he who should assist in the revealing.

Brenton, listening, talking in his turn, sometimes questioning, sometimes uttering a trenchant bit of argument, felt the old impulses stirring within him, felt the old love of science renewing its hold upon his heart and brain. Not that he regretted his holy calling; at least, not yet. It was a goodly privilege to be allowed to set forth to all men the modern, elastic gospel of good will coupled with a bowing acquaintance with the sciences. Much might be done, that way, he told himself, while steadily he disregarded the voices whispering in his ears that he was offering his parishioners a set of pretty painted toys instead of the rugged, vital facts of universal law. Still, the toys were prettier and vastly more refined than were the old-time goblins of his mother's day, the goblins marched to and fro persistently by half a score of Parson Wheelers in their time. Those were monstrosities, palpably of human creation and yet in the likeness of no mortal thing. The toys he offered to his people were at least shaped and coloured into dainty imitation of existing facts. So far as he helped on the substitution, he was a benefactor to all mankind. And yet, it would have been good to bare his hands and arms, and with them grasp and wrestle with the naked facts, elusive facts, despite their ruggedness. Nevertheless, he bravely smothered his desires. He even, and to himself, professed to ignore the way they multiplied, after an afternoon in the society of Professor Opdyke. However, ignore them as he would and did, they burnt within him with an increasing fierceness, burnt away, indeed, some of the scaffolding upon which his system of theology had reared itself.

More than a little of this conflagration the professor realized. Also he realized its potential danger. If the scaffolding began to go, what then? Would the flames blaze up all the higher on the heap of fallen ruins; or would the ice water which, in the Parson Wheelers, had taken the place of good red blood, spurt from the veins of this, their latter-day descendant, and quench the fires before they reached the superstructure of his faith? The professor realized to the full, moreover, his personal accountability in the matter. None the less, he could never quite decide where the real right lay. Should he ignore the possible loss to science or should he help on the probable loss to theologic eloquence? He shook his head at the question. Like all true scientists, he must hold himself impartial. Asked, however, he surely had no moral right to withhold facts from a mature mind like that of Scott Brenton. Facts he would give, and plainly, and without modification or omission. There, though, he would stop. The inferences which Brenton should draw out from them should be no concern of his.

And Scott Brenton who, from the start, had had a trick of drawing inferences to suit himself, was all the better pleased on that account.

By degrees, then, the intimacy between the two men waxed strong. The one imparted things; the other absorbed them greedily. As time went on, there were few days in the week which did not find them together at some hour and place or other: in the laboratory, in the rector's study at the church, on the golf links, or scouring the hill and valley roads that stretched out, a lovely network to enmesh the town.

One such walk had been scheduled for a day in April, a day when the whole physical world is a fragrant commentary on the truths of resurrection. The professor, it had been agreed, should call for Brenton at two. At half-past two, he had not appeared; and Brenton, loath to lose his half-day in the open, set out in search of him.

As a matter of course, the search began in the outer laboratory where, in all probability, the professor had been hindered by a student grappling either with conscience or a condition, perhaps, indeed, with both combined. Such things had happened more than once in Brenton's experience of the department. The fact that it was a girls' college, though, made the earlier alternative more probable than was the later one. Brenton smiled a little, as he thanked his lucky stars that it was not the custom of the college girls to haunt their spiritual pilots as insistently as some of them haunted their mental ones. Smiling still, he doffed his hat before the dozen girls in the outer laboratory, while he looked about him. Professor Opdyke was not there. After an instant's hesitation, Brenton crossed the intervening strip of floor and tapped upon the door leading to the private laboratory beyond.

"Come in."

The voice was more than a trifle husky; and the professor's chair was carefully planted with its high back to the light. The professor was in the chair, and bent above the table which, Brenton's quick eye noted, was bare of anything that looked like work. As Brenton's face appeared in the doorway, Professor Opdyke looked up at him in a vague uncertainty which all at once changed to a guilty recognition.

"Brenton! I quite forgot. I'm very sorry," he said; but his voice lacked all resonance. "The fact is, I've had news from Reed."

"Bad?" The curt monosyllable was kinder than many words.

The professor nodded.

"There's been an accident."

"He's not—" Brenton faltered at the grisly word, not so much in mercy to the father, seated there before him, as because the old-time love for that father's son seemed to rise up and catch him by the throat and strangle him.

The Professor gave a long, shuddering sigh, the sigh of a woman verging on hysterics.

"No; not that—yet. They'll wire again, to-night, they tell me."

"When did you hear?"

"Just now. An hour ago. His mother doesn't know it yet. Brenton, I've got to tell her." And the professor turned a wan, appealing face up to the younger man, as though in search of help.

"Yes." The single word fell heavily. "You must." But Brenton, even while he was speaking, shut his teeth upon the thought. Then the priest within him rallied to the need, although the latent man of science in him forbade him to accompany the rallying with many words. "Can I be of any help?"

"If you feel you could go to the house with me, Brenton. You knew Reed."

Brenton's alert ear caught the unconscious change of tense. He interrupted with a question.

"Just how bad is it?"

"I don't know. 'Badly hurt', the telegram says. 'Will wire again in a few hours'. I suppose it's the same old story: an explosive and a panic. Somebody probably tried to stir a fire with a stick of frozen dynamite, or some such foolery as that." The scorn in the words came from the effort at self-mastery. Then the professor rose and looked about him vaguely for his hat. When he had found it, "Come along," he bade Brenton shortly. "We've got to get it over, even if it kills her. I believe in anæsthetics and hypnosis in such a case as this: drugging the victim and then impressing on him that he has always known the trouble and that it's certain to come out all right in time. Well, are you coming?" The voice sharpened again in its impatience to have the bad hour over.

Out in the street and walking rapidly towards home, the professor spoke once more. This time, there was no sharpness, but rather the same note of appeal which Brenton had heard a little earlier.

"Brenton, it's your chance now. I've been showing you the best of all my science. Now, for God's sake, give me back the best of your religion. In a time like this, science can't help us much. It shows us all the worst of things, and shuts down before whatever best there is. If your religion is any good at all, now is the time we need to make it count. Else, what's its use?"

Before the unexpected, swift appeal, Brenton was dumb. What was the use, especially to a man like Professor Opdyke? It was all very well to talk about Reed's being safe in his Maker's hands, when common sense and science alike were insisting upon it that it was in all probability the hands of the surgeon who could rescue him from peril; that much less depended upon prayer than on the sterilizing processes. Of course, no one, however scientific, could deny the Master's law at the back of everything; but that law was a trifle too remote to be a potent source of comfort to a quivering mind. Besides, when, in all probability, it was that same law, either in breach or in observance, which had caused the trouble, it seemed a little bit unmerciful to brandish the cause as an instrument of healing.

After all, in such a case as this, what was religion good for? One believed things, but only so far as they were based on law; and law is a stiff sort of moral plaster to apply to a bleeding wound. Of course, there was an infinite array of platitudes, phrased to fit every sort of emergency known to man. However, in a crisis such as this, it seemed to Brenton something little short of deliberate insult to offer a platitude to a man of Professor Opdyke's sort. All he could find to do, then, was to stand by and hold himself and them quite steady.

And stand by steadily he did, all through that interminable April afternoon while the sun came sifting down through the elm buds, to throw irrelevant golden splashes across their gloom; while the merry voices of the college girls, passing by in the street outside, came floating in across their waiting silence. There was nothing in the world that he could do, except to be there and, now and then, to stave off a caller too insistent to be appeased by

any bulletin issued by the maid. Among those callers was Prather, the novelist. Priest though he was, Brenton was conscious of a human and athletic wish to wring his neck, so palpably was his expression of fussy sympathy mingled with the professional sense of copy latent in the situation.

And at last, when twilight had dulled the sunshine and sent the chattering, laughing college girls home to supper, a messenger boy came to the door to bring a yellow envelope.

Professor Opdyke tore it open. Then, forgetful of his science,—

"Thank God!" he said quite simply, as he read the message to his wife.

Next morning early, Brenton went to them again. He found them taking breakfast with good appetite, while they made an infinite variety of plans for the home-coming of the invalid. There had been two more telegrams, the previous evening, and a night letter had followed them. To Brenton, however, the particulars seemed glorious rather than reassuring. Instead of the fire stirred with a stick of dynamite, there had been something infinitely more deadly. A careless blast, set off by an inexperienced miner, had brought down a fall of rock where it had been least expected. A dozen men had been injured, and some of the shoring had been loosened, imperilling the lives of many more. No reasonably sane consulting engineer, however conscientious, could have imagined it his duty to lead the work of rescue. Measured by the value to the corporation, his one brain was worth a dozen score of miners' lives. Nevertheless, Reed Opdyke had not viewed the matter in that light. He was alert and strong, trained to face every possible emergency known underground. Moreover, he knew better than any other man the conditions likely to be existent in the dismantled vein. Therefore it was Reed Opdyke who had led the first of the rescue parties.

Quite as a matter of course, he had made his way directly to the injured men, had helped to carry them back safely to the main shaft. Providence always looks out for little things like that. It uses its tools before it blunts them. Then Opdyke had gone back again into the vein, to see if he could make up his mind, at a superficial glance, concerning the extent of the damage and the best chances for repairing it. It was then that he found one more miner, wedged between the loosened timbers of the shoring. At best, minutes were ahead of him, not hours. At best, the danger in freeing him was almost infinite. None the less, while other men faltered and drew back, afraid, Opdyke had sent an ax crashing into the weakened timbers.

All this was told to the professor briefly. The rest of the message was couched in terms so surgical as to convey scant meaning to Scott Brenton's brain. At the very end, there were two dates, both only possible, both so remote as to turn Brenton sick at heart. Was it for this that such men as Reed Opdyke were created? Was nature merciless, was law, that it ordained such pitiful, pitiless waste?

It was with these questions ringing in his brain, then, that Scott Brenton, after his old fashion, shut his teeth askew and awaited the still distant homecoming of his old-time idol. He gained the slimmest sort of comfort by remembering how characteristic it all was of the boy he used to know.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

That Reed Opdyke was very badly broken, no one, seeing him, could deny. Exactly what was the nature of the break, no one but Reed Opdyke and the surgeons knew. The surgeons were inclined to secrecy. Reed himself welcomed no queries on the subject. He merely smiled inscrutably, and talked about the weather.

When, in late May, he first came home, his room threatened to become a place for penitential pilgrimage, a *memento-mori* species of lay shrine; but Reed stopped all that quite firmly. He had no mind to be a hero anywhere, least of all in a town where ninety-seven per cent of the populace was feminine. Moreover, unkindly as he took to hero worship, he took still more unkindly to visits that quite obviously were intended to console him.

"The Lord knows how long I'm destined to be lying up here," he remarked to Olive Keltridge, after one such visitation. "Anyhow, it is sure to be long enough for people to get the habit of me, and a chronic invalid is bound to be used as a spiritual salve. One takes him tracts and grape-fruit jelly, by way of offset to domestic rows. I'm not going to become accessory after the fact to all the local improprieties. It would have a rotten influence upon the entire community."

Olive, who had dropped in ostensibly for purposes of gossip, nodded in comprehension. Indeed, she was in a position to comprehend the situation a long way more perfectly than even Reed, its victim and by no means of doubtful understanding, could ever do. She heard

him talked about in a fashion that she found revolting. Her old-time comrade was as much a man as ever, despite his injuries, as sane in all his outlook, as whimsical and impersonal in his fun. She therefore resented the universal attitude of regarding him as a crushed archangel, a candidate for repeated and unlimited doses of mental gruel. If ever a man needed solid social nutriment, it was this energetic young engineer who was temporarily dragged off from the scene of action and reduced to the need of killing time within the limits of four walls. Indeed, it would take a good deal of social nutriment and social spice as well, to bring four walls and the exciting alternations of a canopy-top bed and a chintz couch up to the level of interest gained out of a succession of different mining camps and the different problems they presented, above ground and below. To Reed Opdyke, used to tramping over mountain trails, accustomed to riding anything from a half-broken cayuse to a wabbly platform at a rope's end, the day's journey nowadays limited itself to being lifted out of bed in the arms of his lusty nurse, being placed with all discretion in the exact middle of a couch and in being trundled slowly across the floor to the bay window. Later in the day, the process repeated itself in the reverse direction, but with even greater care because of the fatiguing experiences of the day. Therefore it was that Reed Opdyke preferred his visitors to have the flavour of tabasco, rather than whipped cream.

Olive dropped in upon him, every day, and she always found a welcome. She had known Reed long enough not to be likely to collide with any of his prejudices. She had rollicked with him in his active days often enough to save him from feeling any ignominy in having her behold him in his passive ones. She was never sentimental; never, since their first inevitable bad half-hour together after his return, had she torn her hair, metaphorically speaking, above the spectacle of his afflictions. She merely handed him the things he couldn't reach; and gossiped ceaselessly about the things that were happening among their common friends, without making him half frantic because he could not go out and happen, too. She even, and therein lay her final greatness, blinked at Reed's occasional profanity as concerned his accident, whereas the average woman would have wept maudlinly.

"Your vocabulary is a picturesque one, Reed," she told him, upon one occasion. "I ought to be shocked; but I've known you too long to be shocked at anything you do. Besides, in the end of all things, I imagine I should follow your own deplorable methods of speech. Swearing may not be decent socially; but it's a healthy pastime. Only look out you don't do it in the midst of a pastoral call."

"By the way," Reed looked up suddenly; "I hear that one is imminent."

Olive lifted her brows.

"Who?"

"Brenton."

"Haven't you seen him yet?"

Reed shook his head.

"No. It's been pretty decent of him, too, to hold off a little. Most parsons would have rushed in, hot foot, to administer extreme unction and be sure I was in a proper mood concerning Providence. Brenton has had the decency to wait a little. It was almighty decent, too. I knew him in my palmy days, when life was young. It's young for him still—Hold on, Olive; I'm not going to maunder!—and I had a natural dread of having him come piling in here to crow about himself and cackle over me."

Olive's laugh was obviously forced. Even the most irresponsible of gossips is not always altogether hardened.

"I love your metaphors, Reed," she told him. "To be sure, it never had occurred to me that Saint Peter's cock and Saint Peter's rector were identical terms."

Reed digressed.

"What's Brenton's wife turned into?" he inquired.

Olive cast an apologetic glance at Mrs. Opdyke, knitting by the other window. Then she dropped her hands, palms up, into her lap. The gesture was so expressive as not to need the one word of her answer.

"Impossible."

"I'm not surprised."

"You had seen her?"

"Yes, at our commencement. She was a country daisy, if you choose: but a nig-nose one, not a placid ox-eye."

This time, Olive felt called on to remonstrate.

"Reed, you are becoming intolerable. A man flat on his back ought to be pondering upon the convolutions of his soul, not cultivating flowers of rhetoric."

"Soul be hanged! I keep insisting that mine isn't in any more need of attention than it was when I was up and doing, and it's a long way greater bore. Besides, I am prouder of my rhetoric than of my spiritual convolutions. But about Brenton's wife? She seemed to me then the typical shrewd Yankee who would adapt herself to any sort of circumstances and get the best end of any sort of bargain."

Olive nodded.

"You've about hit it, Reed. But then, I'm not fair to her."

"Not your sort, eh?" But Reed, as he looked at Olive and remembered Catia, felt no real need to put the question.

"It's not that so much—well—no—I can't seem to understand her." Then Olive's eyes met his directly, and she stopped her rambling with a little laugh. "You needn't presume on your position, Reed. It's not decent to make me tell what I think of Mrs. Brenton, when you know you are driving me into a corner where I either have to lie, or else abuse her to a perfectly strange man."

"I'm not a strange man. I've seen her in her salad days. 'Twas potato salad, too, symbolic of the soil whence she had sprung."

But Olive held up her hand for mercy.

"Reed, you are a most impossible type of invalid. If you keep on like this, I'll tell Mrs. Brenton that you'd love to have her come and sing hymns to you."

"Olive! For—" And then his curiosity overcame his consternation. "Can she sing?" he queried.

"Very prettily." Olive's accent defied analysis. "She would love it, too. I know, because, only the other day, she asked me to give you a message."

"And you embezzled it?"

"Until it seemed a proper season. If I had given it too early, you might have mislaid it in your memory, and forgotten to send a grateful answer."

"What did the woman want?" Reed questioned, with a sudden curtness that betrayed to Olive's ear the crackling of the thin ice on which, day by day, they skated over the surface of the tragedy.

Nevertheless, Olive struck out fearlessly. Even if the ice did crack and let them through, such old, well-tried friends as Reed and herself could face what lay beneath it, without sentimental fears. They had taken one such plunge together; they both preferred to avoid another, if they could, and yet better to flounder through the ice than to keep away from it entirely. Therefore Olive's tone was nonchalant, as she reported,—

"I met her in the street, the day after you came home, and she begged me to tell you—"

"She took it as a matter of course you'd be bidden to the private view," Reed interrupted.

"Of course. The whole community understood that. Else, what was the use of our breaking our collar bones in unison, when you lured me into tobogganing off the barn?" Olive replied promptly. "Where was I? Oh, yes,—begged me to tell you how well she remembered your kindness to her—yes, your kindness—when she was a shy child from the country."

Reed's comment was a terse one.

"Shy! She!" he said.

"You sound like an Indian dialect. However—And that she should claim a place among your earlier friends, when the time came when they could sit with you."

Reed squirmed.

"Sit with! Oh, Lord! That settles it, Olive. In spite of all your polite evasions, the town does look upon me as a moral asset, a chronic case to be put upon a par with other charities," he said, with sudden bitterness.

Olive's colour came, though not from annoyance.

"Don't be a dunce, Reed," she besought him. "You merely are the latest sensation in returning prodigals; you haven't sufficient staying power to become a charity, or even a fad. Then I shall tell the sympathetic lady—?"

"To go to everlasting thunder," Reed growled ungratefully. "Hang it all, Olive, does she think I want a row of hens coming to cluck above the ruins?"

"Which reminds me," Olive rose; "when do you look for the conjugal rooster?"

"Brenton? Sit down again; you're not in any hurry," Reed urged her.

But she shook her head.

"No; but I am a hen, and nobody knows when I may forget myself and begin to cluck. No. Truly, Reed, my feelings are injured and I'm going home."

"What's the use? You've nothing in the world to do."

"I beg your pardon, I have domestic cares. My blessed father has to go to Boston at two-twenty. If I don't go home in season to arouse him to the practical details inherent in the fact, he'll be starting off in slippers and without his evening clothes. Really, Reed, I've got to go."

"What are you going to do, this afternoon?" Reed's eyes were wishful, for the time was hanging heavy in his idle hands. "Of course, though, there's no sense in my being selfish."

Olive saw the wishfulness; but she ignored it. Both Professor Opdyke and her father had told her that Reed's sentence was a long one, long and heavy. Both Mrs. Opdyke and her husband had begged the girl to do what she could to keep it from seeming too much like solitary confinement. Olive was fond of Reed, though without the consciousness of a single vein of sentiment to blur their friendship. She enjoyed his society as much as she admired his virile, easy-going manliness. All the more, on this account, she was sure that the only way of keeping their friendship and their enjoyment keen would lie in avoiding any surfeit. For herself, she felt no uneasiness. Reed's society, under no circumstances, could become cloying. But for Reed she did not know. The idler the hands, the sooner they weary of any toy. And poor Reed's hands, in all surety, were very, very idle. Moreover, unless she went out greedily in search of fresh variety, how could she bring it into his present prison? If she spent too much time with him, inevitably they would exhaust their fund of gossip. Then they would be driven into becoming autobiographical, and that would be the finish of their present friendship. Therefore,—

"Sorry, Reed," she told him; "but there's a tea on at the Prathers'. Earlier, I'm taking Dolph Dennison canoeing."

"Olive!" Reed's accent was remonstrant. "How can you stand that little duffer?"

Olive rose to the defence.

"He's not such a duffer. Of course, he's young and callow; but he's good fun."

"Yes; but an instructor, and only rhetoric, at that." Reed's voice showed his scorn.

"You're jealous, Reed. You think he will do better metaphors than you; but you needn't worry. Dolph doesn't talk shop. Besides, he may get to be a real professor, if he keeps at work; and," Olive's glance, merry and not uncomfortably pitiful, rested upon the long-limbed figure lying so flat beside her; "even you must admit it, Reed, that rhetoric is a much safer means of livelihood than engineering. Good bye, boy, and keep out of mischief till I get here, next time."

As it chanced, it was that afternoon that Brenton came to see him, for the first time since Reed's return. Whatever Brenton's thought about the matter, it must be confessed that Opdyke, albeit healthy-minded and as philosophical as a surgical case can ever be, had felt a good deal of dread of their meeting. In the old days, he had been the strong one and the masterful, Brenton the weak. The present reversal of the situation went upon his nerves.

He had remembered Brenton clearly, all these intervening years. More than once, in the intervals of his strenuous life, he had found himself wondering what the gaunt young countryman had become. In the time of it, Reed had had no notion how thoroughly he had liked the fellow, how thoroughly he had believed in his latent possibilities. Looking back upon them now, judging them by the broader standards of his own wider knowledge of the things that really count, Reed had felt his old-time interest grow and quicken. It had caused him no especial surprise, then, when a letter from his father had brought him news of the rector of Saint Peter's. Neither had it caused him any more surprise when his father's later letters recorded bit by bit the intimacy slowly growing up between the scholarly young rector and his father's critical self. Instead, Reed took a certain comfort in reflecting that he had foreseen it all along. However, he had felt an undeniable curiosity to see the shabby, under-nourished Scott Brenton, a thing of shambling feet and knobbly joints, transmogrified into the well-groomed, easy-mannered type of rector which had become traditional at Saint Peter's.

Nevertheless, now that he was at home once more and, to all seeming, candidate for

churchly ministrations, Reed found he drew back a little from their meeting. At the start, even though his bodily strength allowed it, his nervous energy shrank from the ordeal of seeing people. It seemed to him that there would be so many things he ought to explain to them to make his position clear. Of course, with his family and the Keltridges and even the despised Dolph Dennison, it was different, although even the irresponsible Dolph had floundered and struck bottom on a conversational reef or two, and it had taken all Reed's grip to haul him off and steer him into deep waters and consequent safety.

Left to himself and thinking the matter over at his leisure, Reed admitted, with an impersonal candour, that it was very easy for his guests to err in tact. A man in his predicament was bound to be a trifle flooring; it did not affect the question in the least that he was in no wise responsible for the predicament. It had resulted, quite simply, from his natural instincts, not from any conscious thirsting for fame and for consequent Carnegie medals. However, the average visitor could not be expected to be aware of that; and therefore he would be more than likely to feel it incumbent upon him to say gracious things in a tremulous falsetto voice. In the present case, the question concerned itself with the problem whether or not Scott Brenton would prove to be the average visitor.

When at last Brenton came, he proved himself to be quite apart from the average. He neither floundered, nor did he err in tact. He even forgot about any proper greetings, so promptly did he fling himself into a tide of reminiscent gossip. Of course, the gossip straightway led to a demand to be brought down to date in Opdyke's history, a demand which concerned itself quite as much with the technique of mining as it did with the more personal aspects of an engineering life and of the final accident. They reached that in course of time, however; and Reed told his tale willingly and without too much reservation, grateful alike for the sympathetic interest and comprehension it evoked in Brenton, and for the half-dozen downright words with which Brenton spoke his sympathy.

"Of course," he added thoughtfully, his eyes on Opdyke's face; "it's bound to be all sorts of a bore for a man like you to be lying up, to say nothing of the waste of time for your profession, and of the purely personal issue of the aches of it. However, I can't be altogether sorry for the chance that strands you here in the edge of my own puddle. I mean to have all the good of you, while you're in range. You remember how the boys used to call me Reed's parson?"

Reed laughed.

"You knew it at the time? I must say you had the trick of looking totally unconscious. Well, it's your turn now. Going, man? Sorry you must; but you'll be coming in again, to-morrow? No; hang it all! You're a parson, and to-morrow is Sunday."

To-morrow was Sunday, and the first one in the month. That meant three services for Brenton, plus a Bible class at noon. Nevertheless, between the services, he contrived to drop in for a look at Opdyke; not that the look, taken as itself, was needful. All that morning long, and a good share of the night before, there had not left him the picture of the long, straight figure on the couch, and of the face above it, the same face he recalled so well, and yet so curiously altered, strengthened. The picture never left him; it was most distinct of all, while, with an unwonted throb in his voice, he slowly read from the open book before him,—

"Thou dost not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men—In Thy wisdom Thou hast seen fit to visit him with trouble—"

Wisdom! Thy wisdom. Brenton's mind lingered on the words, even after his tongue had passed on to the closing phrases of the prayer. Thy wisdom? Yes. But what especial wisdom, what ineffable and divine purpose lay behind the swift blow which had knocked into prostrate helplessness a man such as Reed Opdyke? Was it quite honest and above-board for him himself, Scott Brenton, to kneel there in the chancel, praying aloud and fervently for the sanctification of a Fatherly correction to him whose life, from all accounts, had held no flagrant germ of error? And what especial sanctification was there, beyond shutting one's teeth and taking it quite pluckily and as it came?

Above the open book, Scott Brenton's eyes, wide open and very lustrous, were looking past the bounding walls before him, seeing the brave smile that Reed Opdyke had sent after him by way of parting. Brenton's voice, meanwhile, always flexible and resonant, was throbbing with thoughts which had no possible relation with the words now falling from his tongue,—

"Fulfil the desires—as may be most expedient for them."

He recalled his mind to the words he uttered, recalled it with a jerk. Was it expedient for Reed Opdyke to be overthrown and laid aside more or less indefinitely, just as he was about touching the fulness of professional success? Who ordained what was expedient, anyway? Providence?

And then, in the hush that followed after the benediction, there came into Brenton's ears the echo of Reed's voice, gay and indomitable rather by force of will than from conviction.

"No," he had said to Brenton, midway in their conversation of the day before. "No; it's not a chastisement of Providence. I have too much respect for Providence to lay off on it the result of some infernal fool's careless use of explosives. Providence, as a rule, doesn't go out gunning with black powder. Its ways are more ineffable than that."

And yet, if not Providence, or its equivalent, Scott Brenton asked himself above his clasped hands, then what?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was a month or two before he asked that question of Doctor Eustace Keltridge; but, in the end, it was bound to come. Whatever a man in Brenton's position might think inside himself, professionally he must talk of Providence, and of divine dispensations, and of all the rest of his ecclesiastical stock in trade. Far harder than the talking, though, was the assenting to others when they talked, for then he had no choice of modifying phrases; he must take it as it came. Of course, it never would have done for the rector of St. Peter's Parish to deny the Fatherly finger of correction as the motive power of Reed Opdyke's chastisement. None the less, the increasing number of hours he contrived to spend in Opdyke's room gave a decreasing heartiness to his assent. Even if he was a preacher, Scott Brenton was a judge of men. No man who was not a dunce could have studied Opdyke, through all those weeks, and come out from the study to deny the inherent cleanliness and uprightness of his life. Then, wherefore the chastisement? Study the case as he would through the lens of his ecclesiasticism, Scott Brenton could not discover any especial need of sanctification for the virile, clever engineer.

"And yet," he burst out to Doctor Keltridge over a cigar, one day; "we are bound by all our articles of indenture, we preachers, to prate about the hand of the Lord and special Providences, when all the time we know the trouble came out of somebody's running up against simple, scientific law. It's theology, not science, we poor beggars are set up to preach, even in funeral sermons of men like Opdyke, although it's not theology, but just plain science, or the lack of it, that's killed them."

"Well?" the doctor queried.

"Well." Brenton uncrossed his legs and, with a sudden snap, crossed them the other way. "What I want to know is this: what in the world is going to become of us fellows who go on preaching one thing, while we believe another?"

"According to the Book of Revelation, you'll become a sulphate," the doctor told him grimly.

Brenton tossed aside his cigar, thrust his fists into his pockets and rose to pace the floor.

"Don't joke, doctor," he said impatiently. "For once, I'm past it, past its doing me any good, I mean. A baby, frightened at the dark and howling for its nurse, isn't going to be diverted with a phosphorescent jumping jack. Now you see here. It isn't only the case of Opdyke, though God knows that is a flagrant instance of exactly what I mean. All week long, I am coming into contact with just such cases, cases where the physical cause and effect and the moral one can't possibly be stretched until they coincide. Somebody breaks one of the eternal laws, the laws laid down in Genesis and provable in any twentieth-century laboratory. He gets off scot free, and neither realizes what he's done, nor pays the penalty. The flying pieces, though, fall on some other man who is trudging along the trail of another law and keeping it at every point. He gets killed, or worse; and the first man never knows what he has accomplished. That sort of thing is happening all the time, somewhere or other. As a rule, too, the victim is a long way a better man than the original sinner who brought the ruin on him. Week days, we go to see him and, so far as our priestly vocabularies will allow, we help him to swear at the fate that has bowled him over. Nevertheless, on Sunday morning, we haul out our sanctity and our surplices, put them both on, and hold forth about Fatherly correction and a lot of other things that, in our heart of hearts, we don't believe."

"Don't you?" the doctor asked him suddenly, after a short pause.

"I do not."

"Don't you, as a priest, believe, for instance, that this whole trouble was sent to Opdyke for his betterment?"

Brenton halted in his walk, and gazed down at the doctor fearlessly.

"I do not," he said.

"You profess to," the doctor reminded him, with scant mercy.

Brenton's lips stiffened.

"Exactly. There is the trouble. I also profess, two or three times each Sunday, that I believe in the resurrection of the body. Nevertheless, any such belief is impossible for a man who has ever seen the equipment of a modern laboratory. As for Opdyke's case, why is it any more for his betterment than it's for the betterment of the little baby whose nurse accidentally gives it strychnine instead of squills?"

"Don't be archaic, Brenton," the doctor bade him. "One doesn't give squills nowadays. However—"

Brenton flung up his head impatiently. The doctor liked the gesture, liked the little angry glint in the gray eyes.

"You mean then," he persisted slowly, and Brenton, listening, was aware that he was talking as one man to another, not as the senior warden of Saint Peter's to its rector; "that you are saying things on Sunday that you're denying, all the week?"

Brenton nodded curtly.

"That's about the size of it."

Well as he had come to know the doctor, the next query took him by surprise.

"What have you been eating?" Doctor Keltridge demanded briefly.

"Eating!" Scott Brenton's voice was as blank as were his eyes.

"Yes, eating," the doctor iterated. "Doubts are generally more or less digestive in their origin. Caviar would have made a total agnostic of Saint John himself, and Saint Luke would have been the first one to tell him so, and order a blue pill." As he spoke, he gazed at Brenton critically. "You're running down, man, for a fact. Is this thing worrying you?" he asked kindly.

"Well, yes, a little," Brenton confessed. "It's bound to, doctor. I'm not agnostic in the least; I believe that any creed has got to be interpreted with more than a grain of salt, according to one's especial nature and its secretions. However, it's beginning to go against my ideas to discover that there's more salt than belief within me when I get up to recite my Credo."

The doctor laughed, in comfortable comprehension.

"It depends a little on how your salt analyzes out, Brenton. It may be much more harmless than you think, just a normal precipitate and not a deadly poison. However," and the doctor's face twinkled with humorous sympathy; "it's just about as well to keep it in solution for the present. Therefore, both as your medical adviser and as your senior warden, I'm going to give you a tonic to that end. Moreover, I want you to eat lots of underdone beef, to drink lots of good beer, and spend a good half your time out-doors. Then, if the doubts hang on, come back to me and I'll take another whack at them. They're harmless enough now, like most germs in their early stages of development; but nobody knows what they may turn into, if we let them go on working. Now come along into the laboratory and watch my latest bacillus increase and multiply. It beats the sons of Adam into a cocked hat; and it has more horns than all of your damned doubtings put together." On the threshold of the laboratory, however, the old doctor paused. His accent, when he spoke, was absolutely reverent, despite his words. "Brenton, you all of you admit, whether you believe in eternal law or in special creation, that God made man in His own image. Then, granted a proper ancestry for every germ, there must have been some place for doubtings, even in the original and immortal Pattern. If that's the case, why should we all of us set ourselves up to confound them utterly? They must have some worthy purpose; else they never would have survived."

Side by side, the two men hung over the bacillus and forgot the doubtings. Later, when Brenton went away, he took with him the prescription for the tonic and gave the doctor his solemn word of honour that he would straightway telephone for beef and beer. He kept his word so well, and so clever had been the doctor's diagnosis that Reed Opdyke, flat on his back through all the torrid heat of summer, felt moved to express his envious approbation.

"Hang it all, Brenton, what are you doing to yourself, these latter days?" he demanded, one morning after the four walls of his prison room had seemed closing in upon him and smothering him, during all the sultry night. "You look as fit as a fighting cock, when all the rest of us are grilly worms. How do you manage it? Whatever the state of your spiritual graces, at least you're growing in purely fleshly ones."

Brenton laughed at the accent of the compliment which unmistakably was begrudged. Nevertheless, the laugh stopped short at his lips, and his gray eyes were sober as they looked down upon his friend. The "puffic' fibbous" was distinctly worse for wear, that morning. His eyes were heavy, and his wavy hair clung limply about the temples where the hollows were showing more and more clearly with every passing day. He was growing whiter, too, with the uncanny waxiness of a surface lighted from within. The absolute

confinement and the pitiless heats of summer were telling on the "puffic' fibbous ", reducing him to the merest shell of his old-time self, and yet the shell was by no means hollow. Within it still lurked the old magnetic Reed, plucky, indomitable.

"You're positively waxing fat, you healthy beggar," he went on, before Brenton could speak; "and Keltridge had the nerve to tell me he had been giving you a tonic. What went wrong? Digestion, the scourge of parsons? Or were you pining for your customary adulation, denied you now those college girls have gone off for the summer?" The lazy voice was full of contentment in its own mockery. To hear Reed speaking, one would have been sure that the world was all before him, waiting at his idle feet.

Brenton's answer echoed the selfsame note.

"Adulation, Opdyke! I'm a hard-worked clergyman, and target for more criticism than you engineers have ever dreamed of."

"Much you are! But do sit down. You make me want to get up, too, when you rage around like that. No; not that stuffed chair. It's too hot. Try that cane thing, and, while you're about it, there's a siphon in that ice chest over there. So far as I've discovered, that's the one decent thing about being knocked out in summer; they're in honour bound to have an iced supply-place handy. But, about the adulation, I know whereof I speak. The average college girl hasn't a softly wooing voice, and I haven't spent my time lurking here invisible for nothing. The little dears have favoured me with their views of most things and all men, myself included. It has been done quite unconsciously; I know that because of the flavour of some of their remarks as concerned myself." And, contrary to his custom, Reed laughed bitterly. "As for you, Brenton, I wonder you're not as bad as Baalam's ass. If they could have their way, they would strip you of your clerical broadcloth and robe you in a full suit of angelic eider down. Still, you needn't look smug, while you deny it; it's nothing to be proud about. It's not your preaching does it, man; it's chiefly on account of your voice, and the way your hair sprouts from your scalp. For pure purposes of religion, a hairy baritone is a long way more potent than a bald and quavering tenor; at least, so far as the youthful student is concerned. But what's the tonic?"

Obediently Brenton had dropped down into the chair, the cane thing. First, though, he had deposited his hat and stick upon the nearest table and hunted out the siphon, as Opdyke had suggested. Then,—

"The doctor says it's for my spiritual doubtings," he answered. "Myself, I more than half suspect it's for my sense of humour."

"Hm!" Opdyke commented crisply. "They're only husband and wife—after the divorce. What's the row?"

The answer came only in a little sigh, curiously like a groan.

Reed half closed his eyes, and peered up at Brenton through the crack.

"Mental growing pains?" he queried. "Too bad, old man. I thought you had passed that epoch; it generally comes with the cutting of one's wisdom teeth. Anyhow, we all go through it sooner or later."

"Sometimes both," Brenton answered restlessly.

Reed's eyes opened, with a snap.

"You've been through it once before? Of course. I remember now; you started as an ultra-Calvinist, and came over with a flop. Whittenden of Saint Luke's told me. He always claimed he was the man who did the deed."

"You knew Whittenden?" For the moment, Brenton forgot all other matters in the question.

"Rather! And it's not the sort of privilege one is likely to forget. He is 'the whole state of Christ's Church Militant' in his own stubby, curly-headed little person." Reed's voice grew resonant with every syllable.

"I know." Brenton nodded. "Where did you run across him?"

"In Colorado. A cousin of his had lungs, and Whittenden put in his whole vacation, two years ago, helping the man keep from being too badly bored. We had an accident; a cage fell and smashed a dozen miners. Every single man of them was at the end of things, and they were Catholics. Most of them couldn't speak ten words of English. The nearest priest was across the divide, ten miles away, and the poor beggars hadn't ten minutes to wait. They knew that, according to their religion, it meant eternal hell for them. Whittenden heard about it, and came running, book in one hand, surplice in the other. The way he made that service for the dying hum was a caution; but he got it done in time, before the first man died." Reed's face was growing scarlet with the excitement of the memory. "It was

Protestant, of course; but they didn't know English enough to find it out, and they died happy in the certainty that he'd saved them. Then he yanked off his surplice as fast as he'd yanked it on, and went to work to help us lay them out decently, before their wives and children saw them. I tell you what, Brenton—" Lost to the present in the old, exciting memory, Reed forgot himself and started up. "Oh, damn!" he said, and fainted quietly away, cut out of consciousness of agony unspeakable.

An hour afterward, Brenton left Reed comparatively comfortable, and went his way. Like most men in such an emergency, he had been thoroughly terrified. The reaction from his terror left him thoughtful, even a little morbid. The fact of his manifest uselessness in the eyes of Reed's trained nurse led him to doubt his usefulness in the more legitimate fields of his own profession. For the rest, his friends were all of a piece. Opdyke and Whittenden alike had risen to the emergency with which fate had confronted them, had done their downright, obvious duty, regardless of any consequences beyond the simple one of fulfilling the immediate need. They were men of action and sincerity, men who really counted to the world. He—

He smiled bitterly. Reed Opdyke's chaff, meant in all good nature, had struck home to the very marrow of his self-distrust. He had clambered to a pedestal where he stood and preached banal things which, in reality, he doubted, and smiled at his congregation, and sniffed contentedly at the fumes of incense rising about him, incense of which he was but too well aware. He would have had no idea how to stop it; but, if the truth were told, he had had no especial wish to stop it, if he could. It had been a pleasant experience, this knowing himself the idol of a steadily increasing share of his congregation. He had known it, as a matter of course; he had done his best to convince himself that it came from the quality of the gospel which he preached, from the sincerity and fire with which he preached it.

Now, all at once, denying nothing of the popularity, the adulation, as Opdyke had called it, he forced himself to deny his former theory of its cause. It was as Reed had said. Indeed, it had been a constant marvel to Brenton, all those summer months, how much more clearly Reed, flat on his back inside four walls, did see things than the rest of them. Reed had told a truth as undeniable as it was unpalatable: that all of Brenton's adulation came, not from his priestly fervour, but from such personal details as eyes and hair and vibrant vocal cords. As for sincerity—Had he ever been sincere, in any of his preaching? Had any word of his, measured by the simple tenets of his creed, ever in reality rung true? Could he ever, knowing of a surety what he did, ever attain sincerity, so long as he remained the priest? He doubted.

This time, his doubts took hold of him. Indeed, it is a far more unsettling process to doubt one's self than it is to doubt the ultimate truths of a wholly impersonal system of salvation. For the next few weeks, Brenton shunned his fellow men almost completely, while he took his doubtings far afield and wrestled with them there. Moreover, despite the doctor's tonic and the ozone of the autumn-tinctured air, Brenton came in from tramping over the mountains, or up and down the valley, weary in mind, distressed in soul. He yearned acutely, in these weeks, for contact with his kind: for Professor Opdyke and the sturdy doctor, for Reed, for Olive whose clear eyes always saw the soul beneath the aura. Nevertheless, he kept away from them all absolutely. This was a matter he must settle with himself alone, a battle to be fought out in silence and with himself as sole antagonist. A ring of commenting spectators, applauding while they looked on, could only blunt the point of his attacks which, to be final, must be swift and sure.

It was a curious commentary upon Scott Brenton's domestic life that, shrinking as he did from contact with his kind, he yet felt no wish to withdraw himself from Kathryn. The statement of the fact contains its explanation. Kathryn was his wedded wife; he loved her. Nevertheless, she was not of his kind, nor ever had been. Such crises as his present one would have been incomprehensible to her. Therefore, Scott faced it, with Kathryn at his side.

Now and then, though, over their morning coffee, Scott had a wayward longing to open the day's arena to her, to force her to look in upon the fight he waged. Then he gave up the idea disdainfully. As well try to leave his hand-print on an iron bar or a gray granite slab as to seek to impress on Kathryn's mind the vital nature of the questions that were haunting him, taunting him, turning his life into a purgatory of uncertainties whether his choice of profession had been aught but a selfish wish for an easy and spectacular road to social eminence.

Just once, he thought he had impressed her.

Throughout this time, Brenton's sermons were prepared with a fury of devotion to which, of old, they had been strangers. As the autumn waxed and waned to winter, and the holy Advent season came to hand, he cast his doubts aside and sought to bury them beneath the glorious gospel of the Advent song: Peace to Men of Good Will. Indeed, there came one Sunday morning when the message of good will downed all the other voices, doubts, hopes, or fears, downed them beneath its brave promises of inheritance for him who lives according to its simple law.

Brenton, afire with his message, self-forgetful, thrilling with the greatness of his theme, felt his congregation taking fire beneath him. For the hour, at least, there could be no question of his sincerity, of his belief in the gospel he was preaching, a simple gospel of generosity and love and of hard, ungrudging work for universal betterment. Into his last sentences, careless of self, he flung the outpourings of his very soul, and the quick sentences fell, one, and one, and one, into the hush made out of many minds sharing a common mood. Brenton felt it, and gave thanks. Here and now was his vindication, here at last the proof that he had not chosen his calling meanly, nor in all selfishness.

One after another, then, his congregation yielded to his sway. Last of them all to yield was Kathryn, sitting in a front pew and, after her custom, smiling up at him in an admiration which he had come to find galling in its emptiness of any meaning. But, at the last passionately fervent words, her blank smile faded and, for the first time in all his preaching, her face became overcast, intent. His sermon ended, Brenton bowed his head in a benediction which, in his heart, he sent most earnestly upon his wife. Perchance the selfsame hour that saw his self-vindication should also see the rending of the veil of non-comprehension which had fallen down between the two of them.

The luncheon hour, however, brought with it disillusion. Over the luncheon, Kathryn spoke.

"Scott," she asked her husband; "did you see me frowning at you, this morning, just as you were finishing?"

He looked up from his plate, the light of happiness already dimming a little in his eyes.

"I saw—" He hesitated. Then he said quite simply, "Yes."

"Did you know why?" Kathryn took another olive, as she spoke.

In total silence, he shook his head.

There was a little pause, while Kathryn's teeth met in the soft ripe olive. Then,—

"Well, it was this: that final gesture of yours is awfully effective. You know the one I mean, your hands shut on your stole just at your shoulders? I hate to have you give it up; but, really, I'm afraid you'll have to. In the long run, it is bound to get your stoles shabby, especially the white one; and, now I have all the—the little things to make, I can't keep embroidering new stoles. After this, when you see me making up the face I put on, this morning, you'll please remember it must be 'hands down'. Another olive? Take them away then, Mary."

That same afternoon, Reed Opdyke was astounded to receive a long call from his recreant parson.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Where away?"

With the question, Dolph Dennison flung himself into step at Olive Keltridge's side, one morning in late January. Two inches of snow crackling under foot and a coating of hoarfrost on all the elm trees was answering as a fair substitute for winter; and the blood of both young people was tingling with even that unwonted sting. Nevertheless, though walking briskly, Olive had been lost in a brown study, and she started, as Dolph's genial hail fell on her ears. Then she nodded gayly.

"Ditto. Why aren't you in class?" she demanded.

"It's low-minded to be eternally talking shop," he told her. "Why can't you for once let me delude myself into the belief that I'm like a lily of the field, without a spinning wheel in sight?"

"A lily in a fur-lined coat!" Olive's accent was disdainful. "You ought to be ashamed to be rolled up like this, this splendid morning."

Dolph eyed her seal jacket accusingly.

"I am," he confessed. "I'm immensely proud of my fur lining, and I hate like thunder to go out, buttoned up. One might as well be lined with quilted farmer satin, with an imitation-mink shawl collar, for all the glory he gets out of winter. That's where you women score; you wear your wool outside."

"Yes; but we don't turn up our collars, a day like this," Olive mocked him. "Really, Dolph, you're growing soft. But you haven't answered my question. Why aren't you at a class?"

"You're so beastly insistent, Olive. What's the use? If you must know, I've given the dear children a cut, this morning. One of them came prowling into class, all broken out with mumps; that is, if you can call it broken out, when there is only one of it and as large as a camel's hump. Anyhow, I freely offered them a cut, and advised them all to go to their homes and to disinfect themselves with due discretion."

"And you?" Olive inquired.

"Me? I'm immune. I haven't cheek enough to begin to swell up like that. Accordingly, I am merely taking a walk, while I cultivate my muse."

"And I'm to be the muse's understudy?" Olive laughed. "Thank you, I'm otherwise engaged."

"You looked it, when I met you. What's doing?"

"Household economics. I'm going the rounds of the basement bargain counters, hunting dish towelling."

"What's the use?"

"To dry the dishes," Olive told him literally. "One doesn't want to eat things in a puddle."

Dolph stuck his hands into the pockets of his coat. Then he turned to face her rebukefully.

"What a concrete mind you do have, Olive! I wish you'd come into my classes; I'd teach you how to generalize, and give you some much-needed lessons in beauty of diction. You mean well; but you certainly do talk like a housemaid, and—Good morning, Mr. Brenton. Jolly sort of morning, too!" Then Dolph digressed. "What in thunder is the matter with that fellow, Olive?"

"Matter?" Olive tried her best to look surprised at the question.

"No use shamming. You are perfectly aware that something has gone wrong with the dominie, and he's on his nerves," Dolph told her coolly. "Besides, why should you be denying it? One only tells fibs about one's own responsibilities, and you aren't responsible for Brenton, as far as I know."

"Heaven forbid!" Olive replied, with hasty piety. "I have all the responsibility I can endure, with you and Reed."

"Best cut out Opdyke, then, and focus it all on me," Dolph advised her genially. "I need it, and I shall repay your effort, seven-fold." Then he digressed again, this time without a trace of humour. "Olive, for a fact, how is Opdyke?" he inquired.

"Haven't you seen him lately?"

"Yes, of course." Dolph spoke with some impatience. "That's the reason I am asking. I go in there, as often as I can spend the time and stand the strain."

Olive edged a trifle nearer to the fur-lined elbow.

"You feel it, too, Dolph?"

"Good Lord, yes! How could anybody help it, anybody with a nerve in his composition? It takes it out of one tremendously, Olive," Dolph frowned intently; "and it's a curious fact that it takes it out of me worse on his good days than on his bad ones."

Olive glanced up sharply.

"I didn't know he had any bad ones; at least, not to show them out."

Dolph shook his head at the street in general.

"That's the woman of you, Olive; the woman in you, I mean. Opdyke is morally bound to hold it all in, when you're in sight and hearing. No man that's half a man will squeak before a woman, and Opdyke's all man, fast enough. Yes, poor devil, he does have his bad days, like all the rest of us. However, the rest of us can arise and lick somebody, if the spirit moves us; and poor old Opdyke has to lie still and take it out in swearing. He does swear, too; and now and then his temper is positively vitriolic."

"Reed's?" Olive's voice betrayed indignation, incredulity.

"Rather." Dolph laughed. "On one or two occasions, it has risen to that level." Then he sobered. "Don't begrudge him the relief of it, Olive. It's his one salvation, his one road of escape from something that easily might be madness. Have you thought about the change

it's made for him?"

"Dolph! Do any of us ever think of anything else?"

For an instant, he eyed her keenly, apparently seeking to discover what underlay her words. Then,—

"Not when we are with him, I fancy," he assented. "And, of course, I never knew him much till now, so even I can't take it all in, the way you do. Still, I can imagine it a little, imagine what it must be, to an out-door man like him, to be shut up in that one room, packed in with all the frilly duds Mrs. Opdyke has stuffed in around him. Really, I'd feel exactly like a mutton chop in a tissue-paper flounce, myself. The frills add to the ignominy. Why can't she let him have the good of all the bare, empty space he can get, even if it isn't much?"

Olive interrupted.

"Dolph, you're not the dunce you might be. That's a good idea."

He nodded.

"It's common sense. Fancy, Olive, if you were laid low, which heaven forfend, and had to live mainly on the fruits of your imagination, wouldn't you grow more of those fruits on a bit of blank, sunny wall than on a perfect trellis work of messy little pictures and ruffled lace and calico hangings? It's worth your while to think it over, and then to summon Mrs. Opdyke to think it over with you. We men want space, not gimcracks. But, about his temper, do be discreet and forget that I told tales. I supposed of course you knew it, knew it was bound to come out now and then. He's got to have some sort of escape valve; now all the more, since your father has shut down upon his smoking. Really, Olive, that was beastly mean of him, I must say." Dolph turned on her accusingly.

"I didn't know he had. Reed always has smoked, I know."

"It was only day before yesterday. I suppose you'd set him down a baby, if I hinted that the water came into his eyes, while he was telling me. Olive," Dolph flung out the question with a certain desperation; "for God's sake, how long has this thing got to go on?"

"Dolph, I don't know."

"Doesn't your father ever say things?"

"Not of that sort. He never does. Besides, seeing Reed, as I do, almost every day, it's better that I shouldn't know."

"But you must think," he urged. "Really, Olive, the thing is going on all our nerves; anyhow, on mine. I can't see that great, strong fellow lie there, all these eight months, and keep steady as he does, and come to know him as I'm doing, know he has been, and is, more of a man than most of us are ever likely to be: I can't watch him, I tell you, and keep my grip on my sense of humour. I like Opdyke better than I like most men; I'd miss him more than most. Still, Olive," and the face above the fur-lined coat was suddenly grown grim; "watching him as I do, I can't help feeling that it would have been a mercy, if only he had been killed outright."

"Hush!" Olive turned upon him sternly; sternly she spoke. "That's not for us to say, Dolph. There's a plan back of things, you know, and Reed is only part of the plan."

There came a short silence. Then Dolph spoke, not angrily, yet with decision.

"Olive, I think I am just a little bit ashamed of you for that. I'm willing to be a fatalist, and say it was ordained from the beginning that Opdyke must be flayed and hung up for the crows of time to pick; but as for saying in a hushed voice that he is the especial object of some wholly beneficent and divine plan, I can't do it, and I won't. A thing like that would be enough to leave a trail of beastliness over the whole mass of revealed religion; in the end it would turn one to a veritable pagan. Is this the entrance to your bargain counter? Good bye, then. And, for heaven's sake, remember that sometimes the personal hurt of a thing may blind a man to the ultimate and underlying beneficence of the plan that knocked him over. Watch Opdyke, not when he is swearing picturesquely, but when his mouth shuts and gets white around the corners with the mental pain, not the physical; and then you will take in what I mean." And Dolph, his face uncommonly grave and overcast, nodded shortly and went on his way, his fists stuffed into his pockets and his grim face half buried in his cavernous collar.

And, meanwhile, the poor "puffic' fibbous" lay and fidgetted uneasily, while he wondered why Olive Keltridge had chosen that day, of all days, to delay her customary call. She was not ill. Ramsdell, his nurse, had seen her pass the house, that morning, walking with the swift, alert step which Opdyke knew so well, the step that, in the old days, had accompanied his boyish explorations of every by-path in the region. No; something had detained her. She would surely be in later; and Reed strained his ears, hour after hour, to listen for the buzz of

the front-door bell.

At last it buzzed, and the long form relaxed its stiffening. Half past five! That meant the shortest possible time for talk. Still, it would be better than nothing; the half-loaf would keep him from going hungry to bed. His eyes were eager, as he watched the door. Then the eagerness went out of them. The door swung open. Not Olive, but Prather, the fussy little novelist, came in. Opdyke's lean fingers shut savagely upon the rug that covered him. It would have been a relief if he could have torn it into tatters.

Later, that night, after Ramsdell had shunted him back into bed, and had covered him up as carefully as one covers a six-months baby, and had put the room in order for the night, and then had uttered his nightly query if that was "really hall, sir," left to himself, Reed Opdyke set out to become very philosophical as concerned his predicament. He merely succeeded in becoming very conscious of his utter, aching loneliness, the loneliness which only comes to those suddenly deprived of action.

Of course, he acknowledged to himself, a man of his training and experience ought to have untold possibilities of interest inherent in himself. He ought to be able to dip a bucket into his brain, and pull it up, dripping with all sorts of new and amusing thoughts which should keep him brilliant company for hours and hours. He ought to be able to lose the consciousness of the narrow present in the wide sweep of his past memories. He ought to be able to blockade his mind to any speculations as concerned his future usefulness by raising up a perfect barricade of past memories, and then by sitting down on top of the barricade and gloating because it was a little higher than that upbuilt by the next man.

Moreover, when those purely personal interests failed him, if purely personal interests did ever fail a man, he had only to summon Ramsdell and set him to reading aloud to him. To be sure, Ramsdell had a trick of chopping up his sentences into separate words, as the primary-school child spells its words by separate letters. Still, if it destroyed somewhat of the sense, it at least increased the interest, since only the most profound attention could discover the pith of any paragraph, when every syllable in that paragraph was uttered with the same deliberate stress.

And then there was his father. To Opdyke's certain knowledge, the good professor curtailed by hours and hours and hours his more congenial occupations for the sake of helping his son to work out the chess problems in which they both were taking a perfunctory delight. Reed did unfeignedly enjoy his father's company; but that was no reason he should reduce him to a captivity akin to his own. How long had it lasted, anyhow? May, June—nine months. And, in all that time, Olive never had missed, until to-day.

Opdyke made a wry face at the darkness. So he had come back to that, after all the fuss. What a kid he was, despite his six-feet three, and the time he had gone under the knife, unwincing, but fully conscious, because his heart was weak just then and the doctors were afraid of anæsthetics! Afterwards, when the affair was safely over, they had said things about his pluck. And now here he was, bewailing his fate because Olive had, just the once, failed to put in her appearance for her daily call. Pluck be hanged! And Olive had been wonderfully loyal, all these months. Knowing her popularity abroad and her busy life at home, he could not fail to be aware, when he stopped to think about it, that she must have given up any amount of pleasanter engagements, for the simple sake of coming to see him.

What made her do it, anyway? Liking? Conscience?

Opdyke gritted his teeth. One accepts liking with all due gratitude, however far it may be removed from any sentiment. It is a wholly different thing to feel one's self the object of a conscientious visitation. In the latter case, one longs to throw a whiskbroom at the head of the entering guest, longs to have it hit him, brush end on. Moreover, it is a peculiarity of self-communion in the watches of the night, to have the least lovely theory strike one as the more unassailable. Therefore, without delay, Reed Opdyke adopted the belief in Olive's conscientious devotedness to his welfare. Indeed, between the pangs where the points of his new theory pricked him sorely, he found plenty of room to wonder why the idea had not occurred to him till then. What an insufferable ass he was, to have been thinking that her frequent calls had been due to any other motive! He had been looking upon himself, in spite of his flatness, as being to all intents and purposes her social equal. Now, without warning, he was driven to relegate himself to the lower levels of a sort of all-year Lenten penance.

All-year! Yes, that was it. That was the secret of her failure to come in, that day. Or, rather, for Opdyke was nothing, if not accurate, the day before. It was to-morrow now. The clock had struck one, long ago. Or was it half-past? He always did lose count, in those three successive ones. Anyway, Olive's benevolent zeal had flagged a little, before the demands made by a chronic case. Opdyke gritted his teeth anew, as he acknowledged to himself that he was fast becoming desperately chronic. Then his breath caught at the word. The worst of his forecastings had never hit on anything so bad as that. And all the others knew it; perhaps they had known it for some time. That was the reason, of course, that the number of his calls had been falling off a good deal lately; their charitable courage had ebbed and then ended before so permanent a proposition.

Olive had known it, too; her father would have told her first of all. And, until now, her loyalty had still held good. Dolph, too, would know it. Indeed, they all of them had known it, all with the sole exception of himself, the victim. They had known it and had talked it over together, had talked him over, him, Reed Opdyke, late consulting engineer for the Colorado Limited—

And then, across the stillness of the dusky room, there came a sound, husky, strangled, a sound strangely like a sob.

Next morning, Opdyke faced the doctor, wan, but plucky.

"Doctor," he said; "I want those fellows to come up from New York again, to look me over."

The doctor stared at him, a moment.

"What's the use?" he said then.

Reed's smile was grim.

"That's what I want to know. It's time that they found out, if they're ever going to."

The doctor's glasses fell off with a click, and then hung, swinging, from their thick black cord. When their oscillation had all ended,—

"What has started up your curiosity just now, Reed?"

"Signs of the times, I suppose," Reed answered crisply. "What's more, doctor, I don't quite like them."

Bending forward, the doctor laid a steady hand upon the lean wrist beside him. As he had supposed, the pulse was leaping with a furious unsteadiness.

"Who taught a mere engineer like you to read the signs?" he demanded.

The pulse raced a little faster. Then Reed replied,—

"My inherent common sense."

"Your inherent self-conceit, you'd better say," the doctor retorted curtly. "What's more, you lay awake to read them? Three quarters of the night? Yes? I thought so. Next time, though, I'll trouble you to let your signs alone. You've got to learn their alphabet straight, before you go to work to get much meaning out of them. Anyway, they are my care, not yours." Then, as the pulse steadied down a little, the doctor spoke more gently. "Boy, what is it that you need to know?"

Under the strong, heedful fingers, the pulse gave one great leap, stopped, then fell to pounding madly. Meanwhile, there came a tightening of Opdyke's lips. Then he said, with a voice devoid of any intonation,—

"Doctor, I think it has come to where I need to know the outcome of all this."

"Reed boy, I thought so." The doctor's hand, leaving the wrist, came to rest upon the nearer shoulder with a grip which was like a benediction. "It has been a fearful time of waiting. I wish I could tell you what the end will be; but—Reed, I can't."

"You mean you won't," Opdyke corrected him a little sharply.

But Doctor Keltridge forgave the sharpness, as his eyes rested on the drawn, white face.

"I mean I can't," he iterated. "Reed, that's the damned cruelty of the whole position, for you and for us who care for you. It would have been any amount easier to have accepted things at their worst, months ago, than to keep on in this grilling indecision, fearing everything and yet hanging on to every vestige of hope for something better. Don't think I haven't been realizing that, my boy, ever since they brought you in and tucked you up in that infernal bed. It wouldn't have been one half so hard for you, then, or since, if you'd known that you'd step down and out of it at any given time, or even that you were there to stay for ever. It's the uncertainty that kills. And that—"

"Well?" Reed asked him steadily.

"Is just as great as ever."

"You mean?"

The doctor straightened in his chair, stiffening himself to administer the bitter draught.

"That the dozen best surgeons in the country never could agree on it, whether you will come out of this thing, or not. All we can do is to grip our courage, and leave the matter—"

"On the knees of Allah?" Reed asked a little bitterly.

The doctor's reply was grave.

"Yes, Reed. Upon the knees of Allah and within the hands of modern science. They are bound to work together, in a case like this."

The grip upon Reed's shoulder tightened for a minute. Then it fell away, and again the supple fingers shut upon Reed's wrist.

"It's no especial use to preach to you about keeping up your courage, Reed. You're bound to do that, being you. I only wish I could have given you a squarer answer to your question; but—I can't. Now, about the surgeons: you'd like to have them come up again?"

Reed shook his head, and the gesture was a weary one.

"No use, doctor. I believe you—now. I had thought you were putting me off, out of a mistaken sense of friendship, and that I'd be able to worm the facts of the case from them. However, now you admit that the present uncertainty is the worst thing of all, I'm ready to take your word—only—it hurts! All night, I've been bracing myself to take it, and now nobody knows when it will come, or how." For a little while, he lay quite still; and the doctor sat still beside him, waiting. At last, Reed looked up with a forced alertness. "How is Olive?" he inquired, quite in his ordinary tone.

Instantly the doctor's face changed, lost its look of waiting strain, grew frankly worried.

"Reed, I wish I knew," he said.

"Is she ill?" Opdyke's voice sharpened.

"No; she's all right, only something has upset her. Didn't she come here, yesterday? No? I thought she was in here, every day; and maybe that—" The doctor checked himself abruptly.

A ghost of a smile flitted across Reed's face, although the hair still lay damp upon his temples.

"That we had been fighting, doctor?" he inquired. "Your fatherly fears misled you. I haven't seen her for two days."

"Queer!" It was evident that Doctor Keltridge, as he rose, was thinking things out loud. "She was all right at breakfast, jolly as you please. Then she went out on some errands. I was out for luncheon, and so missed her. When she came down to dinner, she hadn't any appetite and was very feverish. What's more, if it had been anybody but Olive, I'd have vowed she'd cried her eyes out, all the afternoon."

"And this morning?" Reed's accent showed that he was profoundly worried. Tears, indeed, were out of all harmony with his experience of Olive Keltridge.

The doctor's reply came crisply.

"Apparently, she'd cried them in again." Then once more he bent above the couch where Opdyke lay. "Hang on to the tail of every sort of hope, Reed," he bade him cheerily. "It's not an especially amusing occupation; but it is about the only thing for us to do at present. I'll look in on you, in the morning, to make sure how you slept. By the way," he tossed the last words back across the threshold; "as long as you haven't much else upon your hands, I think I'll order Olive to come down here, and let you cheer her up a little." And, before Reed could answer, he was gone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

If Reed Opdyke had gained any inkling of the wide swath of woe and consequent spiritual doubtings that he was cutting among the closest of his personal friends, he would have fallen to plucking out his hair in mingled rage and shamed amusement. Mercifully, however, that humiliating knowledge was denied him. As a rule, one keeps that sort of questionings from their subject; as a rule, he is the last person in the world to be aware of them.

Reed Opdyke, then, was thoroughly perplexed, next afternoon, when Brenton walked in upon him. The change in the young rector, more than usually obvious, that afternoon, took Opdyke by surprise. He had gained no inkling that anything was going really wrong, in that direction. To all outward seeming, Scott Brenton ought to have been riding on the crest of the ecclesiastical wave. In worldly parlance, Saint Peter's Parish was on the boom. The administration of it had completely outgrown Brenton's time and strength, and a curate was

in prospect, with a deaconess or two lurking in the more remote perspective.

Brenton himself, meanwhile, had been too full of work for making many calls. He had telephoned to Opdyke, nearly every day, had sent him clever articles to read, and things of that sort; but he had not been to see his old friend, since the last day of the year. Pastoral conversation had never been especially popular between the two men; yet each of them was well aware that, all things considered, an old-year call was a more fitting visitation than a new-year one for Opdyke. At least one knew the worst of the old year, and some comfort could be taken out of that. Indeed, next morning, Olive Keltridge wished that she had followed out the rector's plan. However, Opdyke's courage was better than her own. When she stood up to go away, he wished her a happy New Year with a nonchalance apparently quite genuine and free from envy. Nevertheless, something in his accent brought the stinging tears to Olive's eyes. Another year, such as the past eight months—

"Ditto to you, Reed!" she answered gayly. "I do hope it will find you back in the field again."

He nodded. Then,—

"But think how lonesome you would be," he reminded her.

And Olive went her way, thinking. Indeed, she thought so earnestly about the fact that it was some time before she noticed that the phrase, still ringing in her ears, was in the optative, not in the simple future which she herself would have used in that connection. Was her father keeping things back from her, by way of helping her to maintain her poise? Did Reed himself know things of which she was in ignorance? Foolish, especially when they were friends and nothing more! It was a friend's place to know the worst of things, and help him bear them. The questions, though, stayed with her for many days. They had been, indeed, at the back of her abstraction, when Dolph Dennison had greeted her, that January morning.

Mingled with them, too, had been some other questions, questions akin to those lashing Scott Brenton's brain. However, in the case of Olive, they were incidental. With Brenton, they shook the foundations of his whole professional career.

Indeed, it seemed to Brenton, looking down upon the still, straight figure of his friend, that it was little short of the incredible that Reed Opdyke, the hilarious, the irresponsible, could be the present cause and focus of a storm which was bidding fair to make a shipwreck of his life. If only Brenton had been aware how, long ago, Opdyke had been detailed to show him life as it was, and to teach him what an ass he easily might become, there would have been a certain fitness, to his mind, in the later situation. Once more Opdyke had been detailed to show him life as it really was, life and some other things, to point out to him, not what an ass he might, but what a hypocrite he had, become.

Nowadays, it was that latter word which Brenton was using, as a spiritual flail, upon himself. Reed Opdyke's overthrow no longer filled the whole horizon of his doubtings. It was merely the starting-point whence he had embarked on a voyage long and perilous. At first, he only had felt a vague suspicion concerning the inherent justice and clemency of the manifestations of special Providence, a little wondering whether the God whom he had chosen to preach to all men was of necessity so much more merciful and fatherly in his dealing with the sons of men than was the irate God of all the line of Parson Wheelers. They would have laid down the law quite frankly that Reed Opdyke had been overtaken and cut down, in revenge for his more or less hereditary sins. He was holding forth to the effect that Reed had been smitten sorely, regretfully, in order that his spiritual betterment be effected with all due promptness, and with all due attention from his fellow men. To how much, after all, did the difference amount?

Sunday after Sunday during those interminable eight months when Reed had lain still and gritted his teeth to keep himself from waxing too profane, he himself, Scott Brenton, robed in the stainless garb of his holy calling, had stood up before his people and stained his conscience by uttering platitudes to that effect. Then, sermon over and the service, he had gone away and lavished upon Reed Opdyke a purely human sympathy that was totally unlike the exalted pity of the priest. In other words, as concerned Reed Opdyke, Brenton's attitude was two-faced, human, priestly; two-faced, and the two faces were mutually antagonistic.

Worst of all, the doubtings did not focus themselves upon the solitary instance. They spread and spread, until they honeycombed his entire belief. Was God sometimes a little bit vindictive? Did the All-merciful have moods that would have shamed created man? Did the All-Father now and then punish, out of sheer malevolence, or in an attempt to get even with man for the results of instincts He had put into him at first creation? Was that first creation final in its wisdom; or had it been a partial blunder, needing the interference of a heaven-sent, earth-born Intercessor to set the matter right? Could the All-Wise make a blunder? If not, then why the Atoning Son? In short, aside from some mysterious force which had set certain laws to rolling like mammoth, ever-growing snowballs down the slopes of time and on into a cold, bleak eternity where everything was swept up in their courses, was there ever any—

At this point in his never-ending circle, Scott Brenton usually started to his feet, seized his hat and stick and shut his study door behind him. All out-doors was too small to think in. Violent exercise was the one fit setting for such thought. In the end, though, the wish for exercise only took him down across the valley, and spent itself just as he reached the river's brink. There, on the long white bridge, he stood by the half-hour at a time, his arms folded on the rail, his eyes fixed vaguely on the wintry current, a steel-gray stretch of sliding, slipping water down which the rough white ice cakes came floating, drifting silently, relentlessly, unendingly, to crash against the stone piers of the bridge. In that same way, out of the gray, bleak perspective of his thoughts, the doubts came floating, drifting down upon him with the same relentlessness, to crash against the foundations of his belief. Between the two of them, however, there was this difference: the piers were never chipped or shaken by the ice cakes. He could not say as much as that for his beliefs.

It was all very well to choose, as he had done, a more elastic creed, to fling his life's allegiance into a communion whose tenets were so framed as to adjust themselves to the strain of purely individual interpretation. One must have tenets to interpret. What happened, when they became untenable? One might construe the Nicene Creed into a round dozen different 'ologies. A mere framework, a skeleton of belief such as the Apostles' Creed was capable of no such reconstruction. One either believed it, or one did not. Unless—Did anybody ever believe any one thing in its unmodified entirety? Did anybody ever give a categorical denial to any clause of any creed? That was the worst of the whole matter. Half-doubts and half-beliefs crisscrossed and interlaced at every point. One day's doctrine was the next day's error. It was well-nigh impossible to draw a straight line, no matter how short, and take one's stand upon it, and say out boldly *I believe*, and then add just as boldly *I shall keep on believing*.

After all, though, that was what he professed to do. The outward setting of his life, from the early celebration of a Sunday morning down to the virtuous reversal of his collar buttons, was the badge of his profession. In his secret heart, as the Advent season came and went, and as the Lenten penances drew near, Scott Brenton had no way of telling where in reality he stood; yet, day by day and week by week, he had to step forth before his congregation and toilsomely erect a platform of belief upon which, in the end, his feet refused to mount. Instead, with every semblance of priestly humility, he stood aside and assisted his hearers to clamber up ahead of him. Once there, he knew that he could count upon their smug enjoyment of their own eminence to make them forget to notice whether or not he took his stand beside them.

Of course, he despised himself acutely. Of course, he had hours and moods when he felt that he must lift up his voice and shout aloud to all men—What? That he did not know exactly what he did believe? For, in reality, that was all the whole pother was amounting to. What was the use in starting the alarm, when the whole great crisis might be merely a matter of imagination, of indigestion, even, as Doctor Keltridge had diagnosed it? In that case, the best, the only remedy was work.

And work Scott Brenton did. The parish was growing, month by month. The mere detail of its executive alone was enough to tax the strength of most men. Brenton managed it, however; he also contrived to get into the day's work as much of pastoral visitation as he could accomplish, without running into the adulation with which he was uncomfortably aware he was surrounded. The evenings and a good portion of the nights he devoted to his sermons which never had been so brilliant as now, never so vibrant with the essential truths of personal morality, of earnest service. Indeed, his professional life, just then, seemed rounding itself into a never-ending circle: the harder he worked, the more inspiring were his sermons, thus broadening and deepening his grasp upon his hearers. And this, in turn, put new vitality into his parish needs, and so increased his work past any computation.

It would have been no especial wonder, then, that this revolving circle should shut him in entirely from any chance to see an old chum like Reed Opdyke. Opdyke himself accepted the explanation. Brenton knew it was false, and flagrantly so. He longed acutely to sit down beside his old friend, to unburden himself to the very dregs and then to sort over the dregs, discussing them and judging them in the light of Opdyke's old, shrewd common sense and in the clearer light of Opdyke's new and illuminating experience. How could he, though, when the whole mental situation had evolved itself over his kicking against the pricks administered to his old-time idol? To discuss the matter with Reed Opdyke would have been equivalent to sticking a knife into him, and then inviting him to take a microscope and study the composition of the drops that oozed up around the knife blade.

And then, one day, he yielded to temptation, and went to call upon Reed Opdyke, not to indulge in theoretical discussion concerning the accident viewed as an exponent of universal truths; but for the simple sake of seeing his old friend and exchanging greetings. Indeed, where was the use of wasting the good material of friendship by seeking to convert it to a touchstone whereby to measure up one's theological beliefs? Reed was Reed, albeit flattened out upon his long, lean back, and not a culture-pan for psychological germs.

A good deal to his own regret, Brenton met Olive Keltridge on the Opdyke's steps.

"I'm so glad you've come, Mr. Brenton," she said cordially, as she gave him her hand in

greeting. "Reed has been wondering what had become of you. No; not that, exactly. My father and I both had told him that Saint Peter's was working you to death. Still, he has missed you, and his father is actually pathetic in his mourning. He told me, yesterday, that you had never seen his new hood. Really, it sounded rather feminine, his pride in that new hood of his. You'd have thought it must be a creation of chiffon and ermine, not of ordinary brick and mortar. How is Mrs. Brenton?"

"Quite well, thank you."

The maid was slow about appearing, and Olive chatted on, by way of filling up the time.

"I'm glad. It is two weeks or so, since I have seen her. She told me then that she hardly caught a glimpse of you, all day long. Indeed, she was almost as pathetic about it as Professor Opdyke. It really is too bad for the church to keep you quite so busy."

"But, if it is my work?" Brenton interrupted banally, for, in his secret heart, he was painfully aware that it was not the church alone which kept him so preoccupied that his preoccupation had come to be an occupation on its own account.

"Your work needn't be suicidal," Olive objected. "My father, even, says it is taking it out of you rather badly, and he insists that they must hurry about the curate. Seven hours a day is enough for any man, he says; and he declares that you are working twenty. In fact," Olive looked up at him to carry home her admonition; "he says that he has warned you more than once that you must slow down a little, or else stop."

"At least, that would be restful." Brenton spoke more to himself than Olive.

But she turned on him.

"Reed hasn't found it so," she said.

Brenton's face changed, clouded.

"That is an extreme case, Miss Keltridge." Then, with an effort, he changed the subject and became frankly personal. "How is Opdyke getting on?"

She shook her head.

"He isn't getting on, unless you count as the *on* a distinct gain in the beauty of holiness. No," she interrupted him with a sudden gesture; "I don't mean the kind of holiness you preach, on Sunday; but the kind we both of us admire, on Monday morning."

"Is there a difference?" he queried, while his gray eyes searched her face.

She met his eyes unflinchingly.

"Isn't there? Preacher that you are, I defy you to deny it."

And then the maid opened the door before them, and they passed in.

Once in the hall, however, Olive changed her mind about going up to Reed's room.

"I think I'll wait, Mr. Brenton," she said suddenly. "Really, I have nothing much ahead of me, to-day. I can come in later, just as well; and you are a novelty, in these latter days. Go on alone, and talk man-talk to Reed. It will do him any amount more good than dozens of my visitations. Just don't tell him I was here, and then he won't have any qualms about holding on to you till the last possible minute. I'll come in again."

"But—"

"No *but* about it. I tell you he needs men. In fact, we all do, now and then, no matter how we try to veil the fact. If you want proof, ask any sane woman whether she would rather go out to luncheon or to dinner. Granted her sincerity isn't complicated with questionings about a frock, she will declare for dinner, every time. Go in, though. This is most irrelevant. Moreover, by way of living up to my own theory, I'm going to take the time when you are out of the way, to drop in on Mrs. Brenton. Good bye, and—be very good to Reed."

The door shut behind her, and Brenton went on up the stairs, wondering, at every step, what had been the meaning of her final phrase. Meaning it obviously had. Olive rarely talked at random to any of her acquaintances; never at all, it seemed to Brenton, in thinking backward over the way, from point to point, her mind apparently had been marching on beside his own. Did her intuitions never fail her, in the case of any man? Or was it that her clairvoyance focussed itself on him? Did she, indeed, actually comprehend her old friend, Opdyke, one half so clearly as she did himself? Priest though he was, the man in him had an instant of hoping not.

It was now two years and more, since Olive and Brenton first had met. In the forced intimacy of a narrow social circle, they had been thrown together often; the churchly

relation between Brenton and his senior warden had increased the frequency. As a rule, the meetings had been at the Keltridges'. The doctor liked Scott; Kathryn did not like Olive. However, though the invitations had been nearly always upon the one side, in any case, hostess or guest, there had been no way of eradicating Olive.

Olive and Brenton, then, had met almost constantly, during those last two years. They had discussed together quite impersonally all things under the sun and above the moon. Their personal talks had been few and very short. None the less, Scott Brenton was quite well aware that no one in the world knew his real self so well as Olive Keltridge. Aware of it, however, he was fully conscious that the fact caused him no regrets at all. Catie, as he still called her on occasion, should, of course, have been the one to comprehend him; but, like the cicada, he merely iterated "Catie didn't." And comprehension is the primal need of every man.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Olive found Kathryn Brenton in the extreme of disarray. The littered room was as unlovely as the careless costume, and Kathryn's personal grooming matched them both. It really was not her fault, she explained in fretful apology. She had not expected to see a soul, that morning; but the maid had given warning all at once, really apropos of nothing, and was upstairs, packing. They were such selfish creatures. It was up and out, at a minute's notice, and you can take care of yourself as best you can. If she had behaved herself, and not gone off in a tantrum, she would have been there to open the door, and then Olive wouldn't have caught her in that old dressing gown she had put on just for breakfast.

All this was delivered volubly in the front hall, while Kathryn closed the door behind her guest and then drew down the blinds, by way of hospitable intimation to any later comers that she was not at home. That done, she led the way into the living-room, while Olive, at her heels, registered her impression of any woman who would be willing thus to present herself above the breakfast table to any man, least of all her husband. However, it was plain that, with Kathryn and her husband, the least of all had become the most, and that, too, at an epoch when, if ever, Kathryn needed to take the very greatest care to fix upon herself the seal of lifelong and admiring devotion. Of course, there might be such a thing as a devotion void of any admiration. Olive Keltridge, however, was not a woman to accept that sort of thing. Neither, she reflected swiftly, was Scott Brenton quite the sort of man to offer it.

Meanwhile, Kathryn, seated in a chair a good deal lower than the laws of perfect grace dictated, huddled her shabby dressing gown about her, ran a vaguely apologetic hand through her puggy pompadour, and went on with her domestic narration.

"It's so queer what sets them off, Miss Keltridge. One never knows when they will fly up in a temper; at least, the kind I seem to get. I never have the luck you do. Why, you have had the same second girl, ever since we moved here."

"The? Oh, Margaret? Yes, she has been with us about nine years." Olive smiled. "She seems almost like a member of the family, by now."

Kathryn shook her head in self-pity. The self-pity loosened a little tail of hair which arose, rampant, from the exact middle of her crown. However, Kathryn lacked a mirror within range, and so she talked on quite as contentedly, despite the waving, waggling tail.

"Yes, so many other people seem to get that kind of girls, so devoted and such competent ones; but, for my part, I don't see where they find them. I pay the very highest prices, and I always look up their references; but they all are just alike. I have had nine different cooks, the last five months, and each one was a little worse than—"

"I met Mr. Brenton just now," Olive cut in, with decision.

"Did you?" his wife inquired indifferently. "I didn't know he had gone out."

"Yes." Olive's decision increased a little. "I thought he wasn't looking very well."

"Scott? Oh, he's well enough. What should ail him?" Kathryn loosened her soggy draperies for an instant, then tightened them in the reverse direction. "He hasn't a worry to his name, hardly a care."

Struggle as she would, Olive knew her accent was becoming more dry with every sentence that she uttered.

"I should have supposed the church—"

"Church? That's nothing. At least, it's only in his line of business, the thing that he set his

heart upon and trained for. I wonder what he would say, if he had the care of this great house."

"It is larger than most rectories," Olive made polite assent.

But swiftly Kathryn retrieved her blunder.

"Of course," she added; "I always have been accustomed to a large house. It is only that this one seems to me inconvenient. The back stairs are so very central, and the telephones are so badly placed, one in the study, and the other away out in the back of the hall. Really, you would think, to see them, that the rector and the servants were the only ones to be considered, and not the housekeeper at all."

Stolidly regardless of the criticism, Olive returned to her former theme. She did this of a distinct purpose, too. It seemed to her to be quite incredible that the woman before her could be blind to her husband's haggard face. None the less, watching Kathryn, she could not in sincerity accuse her of any shamming.

"It really has worried us, my father and me, that Mr. Brenton hasn't looked quite as strong lately, as when he came here," she insisted.

"Oh, I think he is quite well. Men," Kathryn gave a vindictive sort of flap to the front breadths of her dressing gown; "never know what it is to be really ill. I tell Scott, if he were in my place—"

In mercy to probabilities, Olive interrupted.

"Saint Peter's has grown so fast, since he came here," she said.

Kathryn promptly took umbrage at the singular number of the pronoun.

"I'm sure we've done our best," she answered tartly. "It has been hard work, though, in such a dead old town as this."

"But, with all the college girls—" Olive was beginning.

Kathryn cut her short.

"They count for nothing in the parish. They just come to church, when they get up in season; that's about all. Of course, it would be a good thing if they did count for more. The poor old church is in need of something young and lively; now and then it seems to me to be fairly doddering. Poor Scott feels it, too. He can't help it. Every man and woman in the congregation was born, ready made, with a whole set of prejudices, born in a rut that nothing can break down. I tell him—"

Once more Olive interrupted. Indeed, it was her only method of driving in an entering wedge of speech.

"That is what we old New Englanders love, Mrs. Brenton," she said, with a sweetness that was almost acid. "Remember that we and our ancestors have lived in these same houses since King George the Third's day, and then you will forgive us for some of our ready-made prejudices."

Kathryn glanced up suspiciously. Then she sought to flay her guest with all discretion.

"Really? How very tiresome you must have found it!" she made answer.

"Not at all. It's the other thing that we find so tiresome," Olive assured her, not without some malice.

"Where did you see Mr. Brenton?" Kathryn asked her quite abruptly.

"He was going to call on Mr. Opdyke."

"Reed, or the professor?"

This time, Olive's accent was not to be mistaken.

"Mr. Reed Opdyke," she said.

Kathryn ignored the rebuke completely.

"How is Reed?" she queried.

Then Olive gave it up, and left her to her chosen methods.

"About the same."

"Isn't there anything I can do for him yet?" Kathryn inquired, with an abrupt letting down

of her terse dignity. "It does seem a shame I can't do something to help the poor fellow along, especially when it is so many years that I have known him. It's not as if he were a mere acquaintance, of course, and I want him to feel quite at liberty to send for me, whenever he wants me."

"I am sure he does, Mrs. Brenton," Olive assured her, with gentle malice, for not in vain was "the poor fellow" phrase rankling in her mind.

"Then why in the world doesn't he send?" Kathryn asked rather injudiciously.

Olive dodged the only direct answer she could have made.

"Perhaps he shrinks a little—" she was starting.

Kathryn, still regardless of the waggling little tail, shook her head in vehement negation.

"Oh, he wouldn't be shy with me, Miss Keltridge. Remember, I'm quite an old married woman now; there's no reason he should feel at all—Besides, he sees you," she added, her voice sharpening with the sudden recollection.

Olive laughed.

"Me? Oh, I'm totally amorphous, Mrs. Brenton, a mere lump of old associations. It's good for Mr. Opdyke to have somebody to giggle with occasionally."

Kathryn's voice betrayed her dislike of the flippant answer.

"Poor dear man! I guess he doesn't giggle very often. Really, Miss Keltridge, I sometimes wonder if you realize how very sad it is."

"Very likely not," Olive said dryly.

"No; that's what I say. You see him so often that you get used to it. It is so easy to take such things as a matter of course."

"You think so?" The dryness was increasing. "It never had occurred to me to feel like that."

"No?" Then all at once Kathryn dropped her antagonisms and smiled across at Olive. "Dear Miss Keltridge, I don't want to gossip; but, between old friends like ourselves, one can speak out. Has it ever seemed strange to you that we none of us know just what is wrong with Reed Opdyke? Or do you know?"

"I have no idea at all."

"But don't you ever wonder?"

"No; it's not my business," Olive said curtly. Then her sense of downright honour undermined her curtness. "Yes; after all, I suppose that, being human, I do wonder now and then."

"Then you don't know, either?"

"How should I?"

"You see him so very often."

Olive stiffened.

"Really, Mrs. Brenton, it's not a thing one talks about."

"Oh?" Kathryn's accent was indescribable. "I supposed he'd talk to you. Or haven't you ever asked him?"

"I have not."

Kathryn leaned a little nearer.

"After all, Miss Keltridge, doesn't that seem a little bit—"

Olive waited.

"Self—er—centred?"

"I don't see how. Mr. Opdyke would tell me, if he cared to have me know."

"Unless he thought you would find it out by intuition," Kathryn suggested balmily, as she leaned back in her chair and smoothed her dressing gown.

It was with difficulty that Olive downed her amusement.

"Intuition, as a rule, doesn't count for much with spines and internal injuries," she said.

Kathryn once more became eager.

"Then it is his spine, poor dear man?"

And once more Olive became dry.

"I should think it highly probable from the way they are treating him."

"Terrible; isn't it?" And Olive almost forgave her hostess all things, for the sake of the one word of honest and spontaneous pity, devoid of all "poor dears." Then her forgiveness waned. "However, if I were in your place, I'd ask him outright what is the trouble. I think the Opdykes owe it to their friends to speak out and end the mystery, and put a stop to all the gossip."

"Is there gossip?" Olive queried disdainfully, as she arose.

Still seated, Kathryn stared up at her with eyes that were determined to lose no flicker of an answering confession.

"Of course. In a case like this, there's bound to be. There's every sort of story floating about. Some people even go so far as to say that they only brought home the top end of him; that all that shows below his waist is only a padded roll of blankets. That's one reason I want so much to see him; I know I could tell whether there was any truth in such absurd stories." She pulled herself up short; then went on with a change of tone. "Of course, though, what I really want is to help him pass the time, if I can. He must be very lonely for thoroughly congenial people. Must you go? Be sure you give the poor dear man my message. And good bye. Next time, I do hope I shall have a respectable maid to let you out. I'm quite ashamed—Good bye."

Out on the steps in the clean February air and sunshine, Olive drew in a deep, full breath.

"Poor, dear old Reed!" she said. And then, in quite another tone, "Poor Mr. Brenton! How totally impossible she is!"

And, meanwhile, the "puffic' fibbous," quite unaware of their discussion of his personality and its injuries, lay smiling mirthfully up into the eyes of his old friend.

"Spit it out, Brenton! Rift it aff yer chist!" he adjured him. "Something has gone bad inside your Denmark, and I'm so far kindred to the blessed angels that I don't tell any tales."

Brenton squirmed with a physical uneasiness that was an outward and visible sign of his spiritual one.

"What's the use?"

"Ease your mind. It's a good thing to get rid of waste matter, if 't is waste. Else, if it's any good, it will gain value by being set forth in order. Go ahead with your firstly. By the way, why don't you smoke?"

"Because I have a conscience," Brenton told him bluntly.

"Approaching Lent; or on my account? Don't mind me. I rather long for the smell of the stuff, even if the taste of it is forbidden me. Really, Brenton," and Opdyke looked up at him with singularly unclouded eyes; "that's about my present life in epitome. I offer you the idea for your next sermon."

"Sermon be hanged! I don't serve up my friends, by way of garnishing my theoretical beliefs," Brenton objected shortly.

Opdyke made a wry face.

"That's where you miss your innings, then. I understand, by way of Ramsdell, that the Methodist incumbent lately preached a sermon upon resignation, and did me the honour of taking me, quite specifically, to illustrate his climax. That is what I call fame, Brenton, a greater fame than any I ever could have garnered in by way of engineering."

"Beastly thing to do!" Brenton made brief comment.

"Wasn't it? When I get on my legs again, if ever I do, I'll call him out and lick him. By the way, the last of my cigars are in that drawer. Don't let them spoil. Well, as I was saying, what humbugs you parsons are!"

Brenton, digging in the chaos of the drawer before him, lifted up his head.

"Aren't we, though!" he said, with sudden energy.

"Hullo!" Reed stared at him in astonishment. "You've found it out?"

"I have."

"How long since?"

Brenton hesitated.

"Six or eight months."

Reed laughed unconcernedly.

"Coincident with my home-coming, Scott? I hope I didn't bring the seeds of disaffection with me. But, for a fact, is that the present row?"

"Yes."

There came a long silence. Then Reed spoke.

"Brenton, you always were a curiously constructed creature mentally. What is the matter? Is your present ecclesiastical harness galling you?"

"Yes." Brenton lighted a match with exceeding awkwardness.

"Bedding is inflammable, Brenton," Reed warned him. "Therefore I advise you to keep a steady hand. I'm too big a brand for a slim chap like you to pluck from the burning, to our mutual comfort. Apropos, there's another grand idea for your sermon. You can suppress the naughty nicotine motif for the theme, if you choose. But what in thunder, made you put on the harness, in the first place?"

"Filial devotion."

"Exactly. I remember. But you chose another pattern, sloughed off the work-horse collar of Calvinism in favour of the lighter ritualistic bridle, if I may speak picturesquely. You made your choice. Now what's the matter? Hitched up too short; or have you kicked over the traces?"

"No; not yet." Brenton spoke grimly, his overcast gray eyes offering a curious contrast to the sunny brown ones of the man lying flat and still before him.

This time, Reed looked anxious.

"I wouldn't, Scott," he said, and a little note of affection came into his tone. "You'll sure be sorry."

"But, if I can't help it?"

"You can." Reed spoke crisply.

"I can't. The whole thing is galling me, I tell you, the whole—" Brenton hesitated; "infernal sham." The last two words he flung out with a heavy defiance.

"*Sham* isn't a polite word for that sort of thing," Opdyke answered swiftly. "You're the parson, Brenton; I am nothing but a sinner cut down in my prime. Still, in your place, I think I wouldn't call it all a sham. There's too much good inside it. When one has all the time there is, one thinks it out, good and bad, to the bitter end. And there's any amount more good than bad in the whole combination."

Brenton nodded; but the nod implied more denial than assent.

"Perhaps," he said slowly. "Still, it's any amount less provable."

"Proof be hanged! You'll never succeed in reducing the moral universe to a set of molecular equations, Brenton. Best give it up, and take what's left in the most thankful spirit that you can, not let the unprovable part of it get on your nerves like this."

Brenton chewed the end of his cigar, as if it had been the cud of his spiritual discontent.

"But, by my profession, I am here to preach the truth," he burst out at length.

"Preach it, then," Opdyke advised him calmly.

"According to my notion, truth can always be proved."

"Prove it, then," Opdyke advised him, with unabated calm.

"It won't." Brenton spoke with the curt elision of his country ancestry.

Opdyke watched him steadily for more than a minute. Then,—

"Brenton, don't make an ass of yourself," he besought his friend. "You have befuddled your brain with such big words as *truth* and *proof*; but don't go on your nerves about it. You are doing any amount of good, from all accounts, here in the town. If you keep steady and sane, you'll come to where you have an influence with a big, big I, and end by really counting for something in the place you've chosen. If your harness galls you, then pad it up. You can make it fit, if you spend a little time on it. But, if you go restive and kick over the traces and bolt, you'll do a lot of harm, not only to yourself, but to the people who'll go plunging after you, without having brains enough to know just why they do it. Yes, I know I am preaching; but what of it? I got the habit, years ago," his smile was strangely gentle, strangely full of such love as is rarely given by one man to another; "when old Mansfield put you in my care. No; I know you weren't aware of it, but he did. Anyhow, it has given me a sense of responsibility over you, and I hate the notion of lying here on my back, and seeing you preparing to make a mess of your whole life, at just this stage of the game."

"Thanks, Opdyke." Brenton shut his hand on the long, nervous fingers, shut it and left it there. "But would it be a mess?"

"For the present, yes. Later, it's another question. You've put yourself under fire, and you've gone panicky; I know the feeling. I had it, first time I saw a premature blast go off and hurt a man, and I nearly chucked the whole profession and went into a banking office. Later, I steadied, found out that even an occasional killing," he winced at his own words, even as he spoke them; "doesn't count for much, beside the good done by the total output of a mine. Therefore I kept on, studied the mine and shut my eyes to the victims. In the end, I steadied, and so will you. However, Scott," and the long, nervous fingers shut hard about the hand above them; "I am quite well aware that the intermediate stage of funking the side issue is bound to give us an occasional bad half-hour. Still, as you love your profession, hang on to it by the last little corner, until you steady down."

"Yes." Brenton spoke slowly, while there flashed before him in swift alignment all the details for which his profession stood: place and popularity and influence, the best of human and social ties, the fulfilled ambitions, the closest sort of contacts with his kind. All these he saw, as rounded out to their fullest measure. Beside them was himself, outwardly active, spiritually as stark and still as was the broken body of his friend before him. In that instant, it was given to Brenton to measure himself beside his possibilities, and the measure was not wholly reassuring. "Yes," he repeated slowly; "but what is going to be the final good gained by my hanging on, in case I never steady down?"

Reed compressed his lips. Then, out of his own experience, he spoke.

"In that case, at least you'll have had the satisfaction of finding out that, science and theology to the contrary notwithstanding, in the final end it's solely up to you."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"But, really, she wasn't always so impossible," Olive argued above the coffee, that night.

"All things are possible to an open mind," her father rejoined placidly.

Olive changed her phrase for one more downright.

"Then, if you must have it, she wasn't always so totally vulgar as she is now."

"Time always brings development," Doctor Keltridge reminded her benignly, while he thrashed about in his cup with a spoon, much as he might have wielded a glass rod in a delinquent mixture. Then, his spoon poised in mid air, he asked, with a sudden show of curiosity, "On what do you base your theory, Olive?"

Olive's reply was feminine, and very convincing to herself.

"Because, if she had been, she never would have been asked out to dinner."

"Duty," Doctor Keltridge suggested.

"Well, not twice at the same place, then."

"She doesn't eat with her knife," the doctor responded hopefully. "Therefore she must be evolving just a very little."

"How do you know?"

"Because she used to—evidently. That type always does."

Olive laughed.

"Father, I don't believe you ever have really admired Mrs. Brenton," she said.

"No." The doctor spoke with slow decision. "There is no especial reason that I should. She is a totally brainless little cus—"

"Father!"

The doctor shot one expressive glance at his horrified daughter. Then, with exceeding deliberation, he continued his interrupted word.

"—tomer, and her only place in the moral universe is to act as a leech on Brenton's nervous system. The worst of it is, when her beneficent work is ended, he'll find out that he is powerless to shake her off. It's enough, the watching them, I mean, to make one believe in a tentative marriage system, at least within the rural districts. The bumpkin comes up to marriageable age, and takes the first—"

"Father!" Olive remonstrated once more. "Mr. Brenton isn't a bumpkin. He never was."

"My dear," the doctor set down his empty cup; "who mentioned Brenton, anyway? I was merely talking about Brenton's wife."

Olive went a step backward in the conversation.

"She may not literally eat with her knife," she said; "but, at least, she does it metaphorically, and then, at the end, she licks it. Yes, that's very vulgar; but it is true, and there's nobody but you to hear it. Listen. I haven't told you the worst yet." And Olive recounted to her father Kathryn Brenton's catechism concerning Opdyke, her manifest and merciless curiosity, so thinly veiled behind her avowed desire to administer consolation.

When she had finished, the doctor shook his wise gray head.

"Some women are merely pussy cats, Olive, and some of them are panthers," he said gravely. "I am glad you told me. I'll put the Opdykes on their guard. Reed has seemed to be gaining lately; more depends on his nerves than those New York butchers of his are quite aware. I do know it, because I've taken care of his mother ahead of him; and there are some cases when an old-fashioned doctor with common sense and a closet full of family traditions is worth a dozen modern surgeons. Reed has been doing a little better lately; you and Dolph Dennison, with all your nonsense, are steadying him wonderfully. But that she-gargoyle! Olive, she'd have Reed in his coffin, inside of half an hour. I'll see that she's kept out on the steps. If she wants to kill her husband, I can't help it. She's got her grip on him. I'll be hanged, though, if she gets that nose of hers inside Reed Opdyke's room."

"I wonder," Olive rested her elbows on the table, and spoke down at her interlaced fingers; "wonder why it is we both of us dislike her so."

"I've been her doctor," Doctor Keltridge observed, as if that one fact were sufficient explanation.

"But she must have lucid intervals."

"Precious few," the doctor growled. "What's worse, they are getting fewer, every week. If I were in Brenton's place, I'd take to drink, and use that as an excuse for beating her. He's denied that luxury, though, by what she calls his cloth. To hear her talk, you'd think we laymen dressed in tissue-paper napkins."

Olive disregarded the digression.

"And yet, she isn't really bad to him."

"Depends on what you call being really bad," the doctor growled again. "Of course, she doesn't put senna in his tea, nor take tucks in his Sunday trousers; but she does nip off the tips of all his best growths with that temper of hers, or else freeze them with her lack of comprehension. She's a pachyderm and she's a pig; and, if she keeps on, she'll drag her husband to her level. Brenton's got yeast in him, Olive, fine, lively yeast. There is no telling what he would rise to, if only we could succeed in abolishing her."

"If only she wouldn't allude to him in public as His Reverence!" Olive sighed. "It is almost as bad as her coy flirtation with him, during sermon time. If I were in his place, I'd brain her."

The doctor pushed his chair back from the table.

"You couldn't," he said concisely. "It's not according to the laws of nature."

He started for his laboratory. A moment later, he came back again, his coat under his arm, his hair rampant and his tie already gloriously askew.

"She can 'Reverence' him all she wants to," he said, casting the words at Olive as if they had been an iron projectile; "but she doesn't care one grain for him. In fact, she only cares for the materials shut up inside her skin. She's a monstrosity of selfishness; that's what she is, no more fit to be a rector's wife, wife of a man like Brenton, than a tin can of corned beef with a crack in it. She's poisonous, Olive, poisonous! Ptomaines aren't in it, by comparison. At least, they're sudden; and she drags it out to all infinity. Poor Brenton!" And, with a gulp of sympathetic ire, the doctor vanished, this time to be seen no more.

Whatever were the doctor's forms of speech, his facts were sound. Not in vain had he been Scott Brenton's senior warden, all these months; not in vain Kathryn's medical adviser and unwilling confidant, during the recent weeks of her approach to motherhood. He had learned to know the fineness of the man, the reverent housing he gave to his ideals, the care he lavished on their betterment; and just so surely he also knew the sordid selfishness of the woman, her lack of any ideals beyond the petty ones concerning food and raiment and mere personal advancement, her ruthless disregard of all that related to her husband's individual or professional welfare. Scott Brenton spoke even of his doubts with a reverent reticence. Kathryn Brenton vaunted her supposed beliefs in phrases which, even to the bluff old doctor's ears, amounted to the extreme of blasphemy. The rector, even in the richness of his humour, treated as somehow fine and sacred matters of every-day routine. The rector's lady took the very materials that went into her husband's Sunday sermons, and used them as themes for joking of a species which passed the limits of the doctor's comprehension. To Scott, the very religion that he sought to question, was a pure white lily reverently to be placed beneath his microscope. To Kathryn, it was a red, red rose to be worn flauntingly upon the apex of her Sunday hat. On week days, she was developing a cheap irreverence which never could be in danger of turning into anything more vital. It needs some brains and no small amount of reverence in any man, before he can become an honest agnostic; in both brains and reverence, Kathryn was supremely lacking.

How far this lack of reverence resulted from her husband's vacillating viewpoint, the doctor could not fathom. More than a little, he surmised. Had Brenton never wavered in his theology, Kathryn would have clung like a limpet to the bed-rock of her congenital Baptist faith. And yet, the doctor could not hold Brenton altogether responsible for Kathryn's development. The germs of mental cheapness were in Kathryn's nature, as were the germs of more or less illogical doubtings just as surely inherent in Scott Brenton's brain. He had increased the tendency, not created it.

Neither could the doctor quite make up his mind whether the two of them were conscious of the growing gulf between them. To begin with, he could not decide whether, on their wedding day, there ever had been any real spiritual tangency between them. Reed said not; but Reed had been young, at the time of his earlier acquaintance with them, and so incapable of forming any stable judgment. Knowing Brenton, it seemed incredible to the doctor that he could have been so supinely idiotic as to have allowed himself, against his will, to be gobbled up by Kathryn—for it was thus that Doctor Eustace Keltridge diagnosed their entrance into matrimony. However, the doctor lacked some knowledge of the determining factors in the case. He had no notion how Kathryn had spread her net before the idealistic young student who was too intent upon his personal problems, as concerned his choice of a profession and his duty to his mother, to heed the matrimonial pitfalls laid at his unwary feet.

However, that there was a gulf, and that an ever-widening one, between them was a fact to which the keen-sighted doctor could not blind himself. He was seeing much of the Brentons, during these winter weeks. Kathryn telephoned to him, almost daily, to consult him about her many ills, real or imaginary, about every ill, in short, to which feminine flesh was heir, from nervous palpitations of the heart down, or up, to housemaid's knee. The doctor longed to give her a downright piece of his mind. Instead, he gave her unmedicated sugar pills and as courteous attention as he could pull together. His old-time instinctive dislike of Kathryn was gathering point and focus, in these days, by reason of her increasing references to Claims, and the All-Mind, and to the fact that the pain in a neglected tooth was only a manifestation of cowardly unbelief. The doctor scented mischief in the glib phrases. He held his peace heroically, though, albeit now and then he longed to shake his babbling patient as the terrier shakes the rat.

Brenton also he saw constantly. Indeed, he made a point of it, urging the young rector to drop into the laboratory in his few off-hours, or waylaying him in the midst of a round of pastoral calls and dragging him out for a tramp across the ice-white fields. The river, after a time or two, he avoided. He did not like the metaphors which the sight of it called into Brenton's conversation. Indeed, it was far better for any man to go scrabbling up an icy slope, breathless and upon all fours, than to stand in a bleak up-valley wind and meditate upon the sliding ice cakes in an iron-gray stream. Health and a feeling for the picturesque by no means always walk hand in hand; and it was health the doctor sought for Brenton, during those winter walks, a mental health that could best be evoked from hard bodily exercise, rather than from communings with what Kathryn glibly termed the Great All-Mind.

Between the doctor and the increasing demands of parish work, Scott Brenton had very little time to spend at home. He would have mourned for this the more acutely, had Kathryn given any evidence of mourning on her side. Kathryn, however, was quite too busy sewing on preposterously small and preposterously frilly garments, quite too busy receiving pre-congratulatory calls from the women of the parish, to have any leisure left to bestow upon her husband. They met at meals; now and then they had an evening hour together, an hour when the chain of talk sagged heavily, broke, and fell into a sea of silence. Then either Kathryn wiped her eyes with ostentatious secrecy, arose and went away to bed; or else Brenton, after a furtive glance or two in the direction of her head, bent down above her sewing, stole out of the room as noiselessly as he was able and betook himself to the study where, often and often, the light burned almost till dawn.

At the table, it was rather better. They could offer each other things to eat, and talk about the vagaries of the present cook who, under the best of circumstances, was bound to be the past cook within a week or so. Scott could ask Kathryn if she had seen the morning paper; Kathryn could ask Scott if he knew old Mrs. Swan was likely to die, before the day was at an end.

Of any real talk about their personal relations to each other, of any but the most trivial reference to the great responsibility which now loomed close ahead of them: of this, there was nothing, nothing at all. Brenton would have loved to talk about it, to discuss it with his wife in perfect frankness, to show out to her in some small measure the overwhelming happiness that the outlook brought him, the wonderful and awful increase of personal responsibility. It would have given him untold pleasure to have gathered his wife into his arms, tight, tight, and held her there while, cheek pressed to cheek, they talked about the little stranger coming to their home, about the way they best could welcome him, and make him happy, and bring out all the best in him until his tiny person should become a hallowing influence within the home, a strengthening bond between them, man and wife.

Just once he had tried it, never afterwards. Kathryn had laughed self-consciously, had bade him *Sh-h-h-h*! Then she had given him a pecking sort of kiss, and had wriggled out of his arms. While she had rearranged her dismantled pompadour, suspiciously awry since her husband's unwonted caress, she had explained quite carelessly that he need not worry. Doctor Keltridge was looking out for her, and people said he was wonderful in cases of that kind, even if he was a gruff old thing. The nurse was all engaged. She was very old, too; but people said that she was the best in town. But, of course, a woman in her position would have everything possible done. Really, he need not worry in the least.

Brenton took the lesson to his heart; but he took it hard. It seemed to him a pity that all share in the great anticipation, full as it was of mingled fear and rapture and vast, vast responsibility, should be denied him. At the first, even knowing Kathryn as he did, he had looked for something else, had hoped that their loosening ties would tighten under the stress of the coming crisis. For Scott, beneath his proud reticence, his seeming blindness to the situation, was painfully aware of the gradual severance of interests between himself and Kathryn. This final lesson, though, rendered it unmistakable. Under its blow, his lined, lean cheeks whitened, his shoulders stooped a little more than usual when, after gently letting his wife go from his impetuous embrace, he turned away and sought his study. There, alone among the working tools of his profession, Scott Brenton first faced the realization that the extremest sort of separation is the one that goes on within the same four walls.

Drearily Brenton sat himself down in his cane-bottomed desk chair, shut his hands upon the edges of his blotting pad and stared the situation in the face. Life, to phrase it most unclerically, was distinctly a mess. It was going bad, going all the worse, apparently, because of the good intentions with which he himself had faced it. He really had meant well. He had chosen the profession on which his mother's hopes of happiness had been set. He had chosen the wife that she had put in his way; had been loyal to that wife in thought, and word, and deed. In short, he had done his crude, but level, best to keep at least two of the ten commandments, to say nothing of his less conscious struggles with the others. And what had happened? He and his profession were becoming incompatible. He and his wife were also becoming incompatible. The laws of science demanded that he seek the common factor, as source of the whole trouble. Therefore, he himself must be the sole cause of the wretched bungle Fate was making of his well-intentioned life. Was he so malevolent, or just futile? And which was the worse of the two alternatives?

Anyway, the fact was that he felt himself an outcast, a negligible bit of driftwood upon the tide of opportunity. His profession had found him a useless unbeliever. In the end, it would cast him out completely, a tattered remnant of a soul, riddled with doubts. His wife would be quite too well-mannered to do anything so radical as to cast him out; but she was finding him devoid of interest for her, was holding herself aloof from him, shutting him away from any real spiritual intercourse with her, and reducing him to the bread-and-butter level of a table-mate and nothing more. In the end, even, it might— Then Brenton shook his head, as he faced the fact that, in the end, it could not possibly be much worse than it was getting to be now. Of course, there was publicity to be avoided; but, on the other hand, publicity would bring a freedom from the strain of smiling jauntily at life, as though nothing really were amiss.

For Brenton realized with a disconcerting clearness that something was amiss, much, much amiss; realized, moreover, that he had known it vaguely all along. The trouble, albeit still nameless, had been there all the time, from the first day that he, smarting from the impact of the maternal slipper, had smarted yet more keenly beneath the lash of Catie's young disdain. From that time onward, whether she was Catie, Catia, or Kathryn, her attitude had been the same, always disdainful, always a little uncomprehending of his point of view. She had used himself and his profession as a sort of social ladder whereby to clamber upward. Always she had disdained the material of which the ladder was constructed. Now that she was successfully landed upon the desired level and needed its support no longer, would she kick it aside entirely, with one flick of her slippered foot? As for their marriage: what had it really been? A delicately hand-wrought bond? A machine-made manacle? Indeed, the latter, and unbreakable.

Brenton pulled himself up short, horrified at the abyss upon whose verge he found himself. He, the priest, vowed, despite his honest doubts, to the preaching of God's holy word and commandment, to be applying questions such as that to the marriage ties between himself and Catie! For, quite unconsciously, the swift revulsion flung him back upon the use of the old, almost forgotten name.

No marriage, honestly entered into, honestly lived out, could be a machine-wrought manacle. If it seemed one, then the greater shame to those who wore it, the greater shame to him, the husband, that his more crass nature could throw doubt upon the fineness of the texture of the bond. Besides, Kathryn was his wife, his lawful, loyal, albeit sometimes uncomprehending, wife. That fact alone was quite sufficient. Beyond it, there was no need to probe. Kathryn and he were one; the sacred seal of joint parentage was soon to be placed upon their union, rendering it more permanent, more holy. If they had their trivial disagreements, what then? It was the place of him, the stronger, the steadier, to end them for all time. Even while they lasted, he was a priest and bound to patient service, not a fiction-monger, like little Prather, nosing about in every situation that arose, with the faint hope of picking up an occasional crumb of melodramatic copy. He was a priest, a man not so much of words as of holy life. And the way to priestly holiness did not lie along the hummocks of domestic squabbles.

Brenton lifted his head, shut his teeth a little sidewise, straightened his shoulders, and went in search of Kathryn.

But Kathryn, going off to bed, had locked her door behind her. However, had the priestly eye been properly applied to the keyhole, it would have made out the reassuring fact that Kathryn, sleeping, showed the unruffled countenance of a contented babe.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

In the fulness of time, the Brenton baby came, a sturdy little youngster who, from the start, kicked lustily and lifted up his voice out of a pair of brazen lungs that made the domestic welkin ring. Kathryn, somewhat weak and very languid, opened her eyes listlessly, when the nurse approached the bed, the new-born heir, swaddled and shrieking, in her capable arms.

"Here's the baby, Mrs. Brenton!" she announced, and there was as much triumph in her tone as if it were the first child of her forty years' experience in nursing, not the last.

"Thank you, nurse. I'm sure she's very nice. And will you please tell Mr. Brenton," for Scott still was rigidly barred out from the room; "that I think we'll name her Katharine—"

"But, ma'am—"

Imperious in spite of her weakness, Kathryn ignored the attempted interruption.

"—Katharine, for me and for my grandmother."

"But, Mrs. Brenton, it's a boy."

Kathryn gave a start of indignation.

"Nurse, how stupid! Of course, it is a little girl."

But the nurse responded stolidly,—

"It aint, though; it's a boy."

Kathryn's eyes drooped wearily.

"Well, never mind about that now. There must be some mistake, though, for my heart was set on having a little girl. Anyway, you can tell Mr. Brenton it's all right. And now, nurse, I think I'll try to take a nap."

"And shall I leave the baby, ma'am?"

Kathryn, already settling her cheek upon her hand, stirred wearily.

"Certainly not, nurse, if he's going to cry like that," she said, with querulous decision.

That was late at night. Next morning, she aroused herself to some slight show of interest as concerned the child.

"It's such a disappointment to have him a boy," she still lamented. "Boys' clothes are so very ugly. However," lifting herself up upon her elbow, she stared down at the puckered face in the nest of soft white flannel; then she fell back again with a little shiver of disgust; "for the matter of that, nurse, he's very ugly, too."

This time, the nurse felt herself justified in indignant remonstrance. Indeed, in all her forty years of nursing, she never had been in contact with a mother who was so unappreciative.

"Ugly, Mrs. Brenton!" Her voice gathered force and fervour, as she went on. "How can you say so? He's a puffic' fibbous."

This time, however, the nurse's zeal outran discretion. "Fibbous" or no, the baby certainly was red to a fault, his infant brow was crowned with a rampant thatch of jet black hair, and no nonagenarian ever was one half so wrinkled as this small stranger in the halls of time. Even Scott Brenton, his heart thrilling and throbbing with the fearful new joys of his paternity, experienced an unmistakable chill, when first he gazed upon the countenance of his new-born son. Of course, he must be beautiful. Every young baby is that, ex officio. Nevertheless, Scott Brenton, looking at him, was fully conscious that he would become yet more beautiful, once he had been bleached a little, to say nothing of having had some of the puckers straightened out. And, besides, he was so curiously invertebrate, had such a tendency to coil himself to the likeness of a shrimp. In time, beyond a doubt, he would come out all right. For the present moment, though, he was a trifle problematic in his attractions.

"What shall we call him, Catie?" Scott asked her gently, the second night after the boy was born.

Her frown was petulant.

"Catie!" she echoed. "Why can't you call me Katharine, Scott? It is so much more dignified than that old baby name. I'd meant to call our baby by it, really call her by it, not by some uncouth nickname. Yes. I know I was baptised Catie; but so you were baptised Walter. We both of us, you see, have something to forget. Any way, I am determined to save the baby so much, so I want to take plenty of time to choose a good name for him. There's no hurry, for the present." She was silent, for a moment. Then she added, with rare tact, "I do so hope that, in course of time, he will improve a little in his looks. Nurse says that now he is just the image of you. No, nurse. I don't believe I want him in here. Really, he does make the bed very warm."

Indeed, from the first hour of his advent, that was her attitude towards the baby boy. As a piece of her own property, she tolerated him; she assumed it, as a matter of course, that in herself alone should be vested all rights of dictatorship over him. But when, in any way, he interfered with her personal comfort, she handed him over to the safe keeping of his nurse. And the nurse received him with a gratitude unblunted by her forty years' experience of similar babies. She coddled him, and dandled him, and rubbed his little backbone, and whispered into his disregarding ears over and over again that he was a itty-bitty puffic' fibbous, whatever that mamma of his might think about it. He was a puffic' fibbous; and she knew.

Despite what seemed to Brenton the exceeding ugliness of his small son, he took an infinite delight in his society. From the first day on, he persecuted the nurse with inquiries as to the child's condition, persecuted her, too, with insistent offers of help in administering to the baby needs. By the half-hour at a time, the rector of Saint Peter's, leaving his parish in the hands of the new curate whose advent had been simultaneous with that of the baby boy, hung above the frilly basket in which his small son either lay in a placid doze, or else contorted himself and shrieked discordantly.

It was a great day for Brenton, a red-letter day, when first the child was laid across his blanket-covered knees, while the nurse stood by, uttering many cautions and forcibly adjusting the angles of the clerical elbows, the better to support their tiny burden. Then she backed off, and stood gazing down upon the two of them adoringly.

"A puffic' fibbous!" she ejaculated. "And, what's more, the puffic' image of his popper!"

But, by this time, Scott Brenton felt no chill at the suggestion of the likeness of this pink and curly little being to himself. The baby was four days old; already he seemed to Brenton to have curled his rosy little self into his father's inmost heart. Already, too, the father was learning the mingled joy and pain of looking towards the future: the joy of anticipating all that his boy might become, the pain of knowing how fast and how irrevocably the baby days were passing on. He longed to see his child a full-grown man, a happier, better man than he himself had ever been. He also longed to hold fast to each one of the hours of babyhood, to keep them from slipping out from actual existence into the vague horizon of more or less distant memory.

And then, one day, a new thought struck him. What if, in time, the child slipped, too? That night, he walked the study floor till dawn. Next day, he went to see Professor Opdyke in his private laboratory. All this time, he had been lavishing his entire stock of pity upon Reed. He knew better now, saw things by far more clearly. The almost imperceptible weight across his blanket-covered knees had been enough to open a new vein of understanding, a dawning realization of just what it was that the past year had brought to Professor Opdyke, as much, indeed, as to Reed, his son. He went to see Professor Opdyke and, after blundering through the inevitable vague preliminaries, he came directly to the point and, out of his six days' experience of fatherhood, he gave to the professor a sympathetic comfort hitherto denied him.

It was the first of many similar lessons Brenton received from the warm contact of the shrimp-like bundle on his knees, the first and therefore memorable. It was also memorable for quite another reason: the renewal of his intimacy with the professor and the private laboratory.

Of late, this intimacy had been dropping out of sight a little. Whatever time that Brenton took for visiting the Opdykes, quite as a matter of course he had been lavishing on Reed. It never had occurred to him till now that, quite as much as Reed, Reed's father might be needing the tonic of outside visitations, the stimulus of contacts alien to his daily cares, the sympathetic comradeship of an individual able to arouse him from the alternate contemplation of his official duties at the college and of the sombre cloud hanging above his home. All at once, it came to Brenton that the professor himself might also be a candidate for sympathy, a grateful recipient of diverting conversations which did not focus themselves entirely upon Reed. The first experimental visit to the private laboratory proved to be such an entire success that others followed it until, by degrees, Brenton slid back into his old fashion of spending many of his odd hours among the balances and test-tubes, among the old, familiar sights, the smells so wholly unforgettable.

At any other time, under any other circumstances, the spell of the place would not have been one half so potent. Now, in the intimacy evoked by hour-long discussions of their sons' possible futures, the professor was coming to take a dominant place in Brenton's life. After preaching what he felt to be unprovable futilities, it was no small satisfaction to Brenton to come into contact with a man whose sane and practical working creed was supported by a perfect trestlework of interlocking equations based, in their turn, on fundamental and well-proved natural laws. After attributing the erratic courses of humanity to the caprices of an all-wise, but slightly captious, Creator, it was very good to sit and discuss them with a comrade who insisted upon reducing them all to rule and order, who declared, and also proved past all gainsaying, that nothing ever really happened, that the very thing which man calls chance is only another name for his blindness to some link connecting the event and cause. Even the shrimp-like propensities of his small son. Even the flat, flat figure stretched out on the couch, up-stairs at home. The Creator did not do just the thing itself, in sheer and potent wantonness. He merely laid down the laws. One followed them implicitly; or else, like every law-breaker, got punished.

And the look of the place; the old, old fascinating reek of it; the click of glass on glass; the whirring flare of freshly-lighted Bunsen burners! In vain Brenton tried his best to deaden his senses to the lure of it; but it was of no use. The charm was in his blood; it would not down. The smell of hydrogen sulphide was dearer to him than any incense; his fingers shut upon the test-tubes with a greedier clutch than any they had ever given to The Book of Common Prayer. And yet, by some curious mental process, that book of prayer, its age-old liturgies, never rang more sonorous in his mind than when they echoed in his ears above the whirring of the Bunsen burners. Science was his passion, not theology; but science aroused in him a spirit of reverential worship for his Creator as mere theology had never done. He caught himself, one day, even, with his eyes glued fast to the professor's deft manipulations, while he himself was saying, half aloud,—

"The Lord is in His holy temple." And then, next in line, "When man doeth that which is lawful, he shall save his soul alive."

Law everywhere! And then, quite as a corollary, life! But how dared he, how dared any man, preach from a pulpit, when it was given to him to toil in a laboratory, instead? Which was the greater reverence: to exploit one's own belief; or, open-minded, to be searching for a clearer outlook upon truth? And so, bit by bit, the lure of the laboratory beckoned to Scott Brenton, just as, bit by bit, his wife and his profession lost their hold upon him; lost it, to his regret, lost it by their own failure to supply his highest needs. As to the laboratory itself and

all it offered, it was no mean achievement for it to make good to Brenton all the other lacks, whether in his professional career, or in his wife herself. Indeed, he turned to science, his first great love, as some other men might have turned to the wooing society of a stage soubrette. As the weeks went on, and the tentacles of his priesthood, coming into contact with his doubts and failing to penetrate them, by slow degrees relaxed their grip on him, by those same slow degrees, he felt his manhood yielding to the insistent demands of nature's law upon her votaries. As yet, however, he had no realization that now the ultimate result was but a matter of time. Professor Opdyke realized it, though, quite clearly; and he laid his plans accordingly.

Meanwhile, between the insistent interests that centred in his son, and the persistent efforts of the professor to make good all other lacks, Scott Brenton was finding life a saner and a happier thing than he had ever dreamed. Even his doubtings almost ceased to sting him, nowadays. A Creator whose achievements ran throughout the gamut from the actions of a bit of sodium flung into a dish of water, up to the intricate brain processes of a baby just beginning, as the phrase is, to take notice: surely a Creator capable of that was not likely to bungle His plans and be driven to reconstruct them now and then, either by miraculous intervention, or by thrusting a brake between the cogs of the revolving wheels of everlasting law. If the baby boy absorbed the contents of his bottle too fast for his good, he had a wholly consequent stomach ache. If Reed Opdyke tried conclusions with black powder and with lumps of loosened rock, he was laid on his back, with uncompromising promptness. In neither case was there a question of bringing distress upon the children of men, willingly or unwillingly. They brought it on themselves; theirs was the fault. As well blame a railway engine for running over the well-meaning individual who lies down on the track to rest and meditate on higher things, as blame the natural law with which men tamper. The All-Wise shows His goodness to His creatures in that He has laid down law of any sort, not left the universe to chance and wilful freakishness. As for gospel, the essential thing to preach was the duty of living according to the law. After all, it was living, not belief, that counted in the end of everything.

And, all that spring and early summer, it was living that Scott Brenton preached. He left to his new curate all the insisting upon proper points of doctrine. He himself took as his sole concern the thing he felt most vital, life itself. And, as the weeks went on, perchance in consonance with his new doctrine concerning man's grip on life eternal, perchance by reason of his greater enjoyment of life temporal, Brenton grew stronger, infinitely more alert, infinitely more virile in his magnetism. The old, limp husk, partly of heredity, in part of starved existence, was falling off from him. More and more plainly, as it fell, there stood revealed to all who had the eyes to see, the nervous figure of the man within.

Even Katharine felt the change instinctively, although, nowadays, she was too absorbed in realizing her identity with the All-Mind, with proving that suffering was nothing in the world but absent-minded sin, to pay any great attention to so concrete a matter as her husband's improved appetite and better sleep. Katharine, by now, had come to the point where she was beginning to dispense with the services of Doctor Keltridge in any minor crisis; and, instead, to sit and meditate upon the crisis, with a black-bound, fine-print, much-begilded volume open on her knee. As always, Katharine reckoned shrewdly. If an ordinary five-dollar copy of her new spiritual check-book upon the bank of health were potent to subdue any sort of pains from indigestion to a raging tooth, then a ten-dollar binding super-added ought, of a surety, to be able to cope with tuberculosis or the hookworm. Therefore she had chosen to fortify herself once and for all.

Meanwhile, the little table beside her bed-head was fast heaping itself with small books of devotion, books from which the old-time cross was conspicuously absent. At present, it was taxing all her ingenuity, all the fervour of her new belief, to make its tenets tally with her young son's attitude concerning colic, doubtless because, at some point or other, he had escaped from perfect contact with the All-Mind, the Healer. Some noxious claim or other still held good over him, despite her efforts to eradicate its malignant influence. It was disappointing. Still, as yet she was merely a novice in the great order of the new religion; and she only wondered at the swift hold her untrained mind had gained upon the pliant body of her husband.

Katharine smiled contentedly above her open book. Strange that she ever could have cherished the false notion that she and Scott were alien in their natures! Rather not! They both were ultra-scientific, fundamentally alike. As yet, of course, Scott did not spell his science with an X; but that was bound to come. How could it be otherwise, indeed, when his mere carnal appetite for bacon and dry toast had multiplied itself by ten, as result of her devotion to the book now lying open on her knee? It would be so very good, when she had brought her own husband to her way of thinking. For Scott was still her husband, still in a sense her property; therefore he still was dear to her, after her selfish fashion. His acceptance of her standards would be infinitely good; infinitely better would be the knowledge that she herself had converted him to their acceptation. And after Scott?

Katharine's prominent and shallow eyes grew hazy with the greatness of her thoughts, the while she meditated upon the wider field of labour offered her in the person of Reed Opdyke. Glorious indeed would be the conversion and the consequent cure of a desperate case like that! It would be a brilliant vindication of her science from the slanders of that

decreasing number who persisted in ignoring the prefatory X.

Katharine's eyes grew yet more dreamy, above the open pages of her book. If courage were only hers, and patience, it all would come to her in the fulness of time.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The new curate, meanwhile, was having, in vulgar parlance, the time of his whole life. He was young, ritualistic, and he had a tendency towards being lungish. Therefore his devoutness was excessive. His rector, moreover, had a trick of preaching upon the practical issues of the day, while he left to his assistant the driving home the points of doctrine. And the assistant did drive them home most lustily and with resounding whacks, until the sedate walls of old Saint Peter's echoed with the blows, and the congregations gathered in old Saint Peter's danced with the pain of the prickings. The mere presence of a pin is not sufficient to produce any callousness of mind or body. Saint Peter's had never doubted the force or the efficiency of its doctrines; but it was at least a generation since it had been so rowelled with their points.

One such rowelling had just been taking place when, on the Sunday morning following the Easter holidays, Dolph Dennison dropped in to see Reed Opdyke. As he more than half expected, he found Olive Keltridge there ahead of him, and it was upon Olive Keltridge that, after a most unceremonious greeting to his host, Dolph turned the fire of his interrogation.

"Who is the expensive-looking gentleman in the bunny hood, Olive, the one that sat back in the corner and kept tabs on Brenton's reading of the lessons?"

Olive laughed at the undeniable accuracy of the description.

"That's the new curate, Dolph. You must have seen him before."

"Not," Dolph responded briefly. "It wouldn't be possible to forget him. What's he for? Ornament? I must say, Saint Peter's is getting frilly in its hoary age, and frills like that come dear."

"Not so dear as he looks," Olive reassured him. "In reality, he comes cheap. He is just up from nervous prostration and ordered to a more relaxing climate, so we got him at a bargain."

"Damaged goods. I see. Seen him, Opdyke? Hood and all—it's of white bunny—he looks like the tag-end of an importer's mark-down sale, and his idioms match the rest of him. Where'd they get him, Olive? Not your father?"

"My father didn't get him, if that is what you mean, Dolph. Mr. Prather, I believe it was, who recommended him."

"Prather for all the world! Just like the man; he is always on the still hunt for something a little bit exotic. Next thing we know, we'll be having the reverend gentleman served up to us in a novel. But why the bunny? It is no end unmerciful, a day like this, as hot as ermine, and without any of the glory."

"What does a curate do?" Reed queried. "Besides putting on the hood, I mean, and lugging round the cakes for tea, in English novels."

"This one leads all the responses, and sometimes he leads them a little bit ahead of time," Dolph enlightened him. "Besides that, he keeps his lean forefinger on the word that Brenton happens to be reading, ready to help him out on the pronunciation, if it is necessary. Between whiles, he counts up the congregation and divides it by ten, to make sure that he gets the right amount of offertory. Really, he works hard."

"You might also mention that he preaches," Olive added.

Dolph chuckled.

"I wasn't sure that's what you'd call it. It seemed to me a long way more like administering a verbal spanking. Is that his chronic method, Olive?"

But Reed cut in.

"I can testify on that score. Sometimes he is only tenderly regretful, and that is any amount worse. He came prowling in, one day; I suppose he thought it ought to be his proper function, and the maid took fright at his canonicals and let him up. Usually she heads off strangers; but this fellow was too much for her."

"And you let him stay?" Dolph's voice was incredulous.

"What could I do? I couldn't very well arise and escort him to the door; neither could I fling a boot at him, when he came in. No; I told him I was very well, I thanked him—in reality, it was one of my grilling days—and then, as soon as I heard his accent, I had the brilliant inspiration of shouting to the maid to bring some tea. The creature poured it for himself, with any amount of cream. Then he sat down, with his toes turned in, and took his cup on his right knee and prepared to make merry."

"And you joined in?"

"*Sotto voce*, as it were." Reed laughed at the memory. "You see, I had to be properly lugubrious, to tally up to his impressions of what I ought to be. He had been here just a week, then, and he had me down pat. Somebody must have coached him grandly, and he's the sort who revels in woe and in consequent and ghostly consolation."

Olive's eyes were fixed upon the view outside the window.

"Poor old Reed! And then?"

"Then?" Opdyke shot her a glance of merry mockery. "That night, after he had trundled me off to bed, Ramsdell stood and gazed down at me with a new respect. 'I must say, Mr. Hopdyke,' he told me; 'you 'ave been in grand form, hall this evening. I never 'eard you do any finer swearing in hall the time I've been with you.'"

"And that comes of a moral influence!" Dolph laughed. "If that's the way he is going to affect sinners, Brenton will have his hands full, following up his curate's trail."

"Brenton is of different stuff," Reed made crispy comment.

"Have you noticed the change in Mr. Brenton since the baby came, Reed?" Olive inquired abruptly.

"I've hardly seen him. From all accounts, he is devoting most of his spare time to my father. What is the baby like, Olive?"

"Ugly as sin; but Mr. Brenton believes him an Adonis."

"What about the mother?"

"Eddyizing fast."

"What?" The word burst simultaneously from both the men.

"Didn't you know? Yes, it is a malignant case. I only hope it won't go round the family."

"Babies are holy, and therefore immune; Brenton has too much sense. But is it a fact, Olive?" Opdyke questioned.

"It evidently is a fact that you are a poor, shut-in invalid, and not brought up to date in local gossip," Olive told him tranquilly. "I can't see how you have missed hearing of it, Reed, even if it did escape my mind. Yes, it seems to be a fact that everybody is questioning and nobody is disputing. Of course, though, nobody is in a position to testify absolutely."

"Your father?"

"She has dismissed him. At least," and Olive corrected herself with ostentatious care; "she says that her health no longer needs him, although she always shall value him greatly as a well-tried friend."

Opdyke pondered. Then he said,—

"The d—"

"Arling!" Dolph made hasty substitution. "But I fancy he is well-tried, all right, if he has had to dance professional attendance on her. Where'd she catch it, Olive?"

"Nobody knows. My father says it is like any other germ, floats around in the air and is harmless, until it lights on some degenerate tissue. But then, he never did like Mrs. Brenton."

"The question is," Dolph said, with sudden gravity; "will Brenton get it? I'd rather he'd be afflicted with curacy than with this other thing."

"Curacy?" Olive questioned. "What's that?"

"Acting like this curate chap, and giving his congregation red-hot pap for their Sabbatic food. At least, that's curable; the other isn't."

But Reed shook his head. Despite his unvarying point of view, he knew Scott Brenton better.

"You don't need to worry about Brenton," he assured them. "He has some common sense and a little logic; both things render him immune."

Dolph settled back in his chair and crossed his legs.

"Yes, Olive, I intend to outstay you," he said, in answer to her glance. "You were here first; it's your turn to go now. But about this latest freak of Mrs. Brenton: where do you suppose she picked it up?"

"Evolved it from within."

"Doubted. I've talked to her, Opdyke; she's not the kind to evolve anything, certainly not a full-fledged case of—"

Olive interrupted.

"There is some good in it, though," she persisted.

"Where?" Opdyke asked her.

"The complexion; it's better than any amount of massage. One never wrinkles, when one is convinced that nothing can go wrong."

"What about measles?" Dolph demanded pertly.

But Reed objected to the trivial interlude.

"I wish I knew how Brenton really would be taking it," he said, rather more insistently than it was his wont to speak. "The poor beggar has had bad times lately with his Ego; always has had, in fact. He has an enormous conscience, linked with an insatiate desire to put the whole universe under a blowpipe, and then weigh up the residue. That's infernally bad for a preacher, especially when he has a wife who is strong neither in her cooking nor in her sense of humour. Yes, I know something about Mrs. Brenton, even if I haven't seen her lately. Besides, I shall see her, some day. She is still clamouring at my portal; it's only a matter of time now, before she downs the outer guards and gets in."

"Reed, you won't allow it!" Olive said quickly, for she thought she was aware what such a call portended.

Opdyke's smile was grim.

"The inner fortress is invincible, Olive, so don't worry. I sha'n't encourage the maid to let her in. Still, if she breaks through, at least it will keep her out of mischief in other quarters, and I am a long way more invulnerable than Brenton."

"They say," Dolph remarked at the opposite wall; "that it is a perfectly grand thing for the temper."

Olive answered without a trace of malice, so intent was she upon the question at issue.

"Really, Dolph, I think she isn't cantankerous. Quite selfish people never are; they just grab everything in sight, with a total serenity and regardless of any consequences. That is the reason Mrs. Brenton is such a good subject for her new religion."

Reed roused himself from a brown study.

"If you meet Brenton anywhere, Olive, don't you want to ask him to come in to see me soon? I've some things I want to say to him; not about this, of course. Yes, I could telephone, Dennison; but I hate to interrupt him, when he is in his study at the church; and, at the house, there's always the danger of calling out Mrs. Brenton. Going? I wish you wouldn't. Still," and the brown eyes sought the window; "I can't blame you, such a day."

"Oh, Reed, don't!" Olive said hastily, as she bent to take his hand. "It makes us seem so selfish. When will the time ever come that you can go, too?"

Reed shut his lips. Although, of late, both he and Olive had dropped their reticence and faced squarely and without evasion the facts of his long imprisonment, even with Dolph, the mention of it hurt him acutely. Dolph, that day, was so astonishingly alert, so scrupulously charming in his Sunday trim, such a contrast to himself, flattened out under a plaid steamer rug whose fringe persisted in getting into his mouth at times, and with his wavy hair a little disarranged across his forehead. Ramsdell was invaluable; but, after all, he was nurse primarily, not valet. But, as for Dolph, he was a thing of beauty and, what was more, a thing of life, not a soggy bundle like himself. Indeed, he was a fit comrade for Olive.

Despite his blithe farewell, Reed's brown eyes drooped heavily, after he had watched the

two of them pass out of sight around the corner of the doorway. Good comrades? Yes. The thin lips lost their steadiness, quivered a little, then opened, to send an answer out to the final hail that came back to him from the hall below. A moment afterward, the chin quivered, even as the lips had done, and something glittered on the long brown lashes.

"Ramsdell?" Reed said, a little later.

"Yes, sir."

"How long have you been working on this thing?"

"Eleven months and a 'alf, sir."

"Have I made any gain at all?"

"Ye—es, sir. Oh, yes."

Reed smiled grimly.

"How much am I going to keep on gaining?"

"Well, sir," Ramsdell's accent was supposed to be encouraging; "you see, there's always 'ope, sir."

"I'm glad of so much. Well, never mind about that now. I want to send a telegram. Please get the blanks."

With Ramsdell seated by his side, blanks in one hand, fountain pen in the other, Opdyke paused to consider.

"Well, there's no use beating about the bush. I may as well go straight to the point. Ready, Ramsdell? All right. *To H. P. Whittenden, Seven, Blank Street, New York City.* Sure you've got that right? All right. Then: *Getting badly bored and losing grip fast. Come pull me out. Opdyke.* That's all, Ramsdell. Send it off, to-night."

Next afternoon, Whittenden came, to all seeming the same unspoiled, curly-headed youngster who had helped to open Brenton's eyes, so long ago, to the real good there was in life, despite the melancholy teachings of his early Calvinism. The professor was busy with a class, Mrs. Opdyke had a cold; and so it came about that Olive, dropping in, that morning, and hearing of the dilemma, offered to drive down to meet the guest.

"You always were a comfort, Olive," Reed assured her gratefully. "You've a general-utility sort of disposition that seems to balk at nothing, and therefore we all impose upon you. Sure you don't mind? You can't miss Whittenden. I've told you too many things about him, and he looks exactly the sort of man he is."

Olive did not miss him. More than that, she used the fifteen minutes of their drive together to impress upon the guest's mind the salient facts of Reed's history during the past eleven months, facts largely of the spirit, not a mere physical chronology.

"And the worst of it all is," she said, as she drew up at the Opdyke gate; "we none of us, however much we care for him, however hard we try, can get inside the situation and share it with him. He is bound to go through it, all alone. That is the most maddening phase of the whole thing."

But Whittenden, looking into her brown eyes, had his doubts of that. Before he went to bed, that night, his doubts were even greater.

As a matter of fact, neither Reed Opdyke nor his guest slept very much, that night. Indeed, they scarcely went to bed at all. Ramsdell, dozing in the next room, fully dressed, to be in call when Opdyke needed to be put into bed, had a hazy idea that the evening was eighteen hours long and that both the men talked throughout it, without pause. The truth of the matter was, however, that the pauses were both long and frequent, those quiet times which come across a conversation full of mutual understanding. At the start, there had been a good deal to say on both sides. It was the first time the two men had met since Opdyke's accident; an experience such as that can never fully be explained by letters, especially when, on one side, the letters have to be dictated to a man like Ramsdell, sounder of heart than of orthography. Reed slurred over most of the details of the accident, even now. What he did not slur over, what he had summoned his friend to hear, was the record of the months that had come after, a record which, for just the once, he allowed himself to paint in its true colours, dull, dun gray, and deep, deep black.

"That's all, Whittenden," he said abruptly at last. "I suppose I might have gone about it a little bit more tersely; but, the fact is, I haven't been letting myself rehearse it often. It's bad for the audience."

"And almighty good for you," the curly-headed rector said tranquilly. "Mind if I smoke, Reed?"

"Of course not. Sorry I can't join you. It's forbidden fruit, like most other things, these days." He lay very still, for a while. Then he looked up, with the ghost of his accustomed smile. "Well, what do you make out of it all, Whittenden? You've heard and seen the worst of me. Now what next? Is this losing my grip the final stage of the whole bad matter?"

Whittenden flung up one lean hand to grasp the chairback above his head. Then he smoked in silence for a time, his clear eyes fixed on Opdyke's face. At last, he spoke.

"Reed, it sounds infernally like preaching, and you know I draw the line at that, except from the pulpit. However, I don't know why, even if one is a preacher, it's not as decent to quote Bible as to quote Shakespeare; and there's one sentence that keeps coming into my head, while I watch you, about losing your life and finding it again. You may think you've lost your grip on yourself; but, from your own showing, you've gained a lot of grip on your friends, and I'm not sure that may not count fully as much, in the long run. As for the bore of it, I can't much wonder. I'd go mad, myself, laid out here like a poker, and left, half the day, to ponder on the things I hadn't had time to finish doing. But, for the rest of it—Reed, I knew you in what you are pleased to call your palmy days. They were palmy, too; it must have hurt like thunder to be plucked out of them. And yet," the clear eyes swept from the topmost wave of brown hair down across the intent face, so curiously alive, down across the inert body, so curiously dead; "and yet, I'll be hanged if I don't believe you are more of a man, more of an active force, than you were then."

"Impossible." Reed spoke briefly.

"Why?" The answer was as brief.

"I don't see a dozen different people in a month, Whittenden. You've no idea how few there are who—"

"Who take the trouble to come up your stairs? Exactly. Of course, there are some others who'd be glad to come, and don't dare. There are also some others who would be glad to come, and who probably would kill you, if they did. Still, granted the solitary dozen: force isn't a thing one measures by the acre, Reed. It is deep, not wide. Therefore your dozen are enough."

"But why the dozen? They come to play with me. I don't do anything to them."

"No?" Whittenden spoke with his eyes on his cigar. "Ask Ramsdell. Ask Brenton. Ask—" he turned his eyes on Opdyke; "Miss Keltridge."

With a sudden gesture, Opdyke flung his arm across his brow and eyes.

"Don't!" he said, and his voice sounded stifled.

Deliberately his friend bent forward, took away the shielding arm, and looked down into Opdyke's eyes unflinchingly.

"Reed, you must not let yourself get morbid," he said steadily. "God knows there's every reason that you should; and yet, once you do, the game is up. This is a thing you must face squarely, and remember, while you face it, that not one life is concerned, but two." Then he let go the arm, which went back to the old position, and, for a time, the room was very still.

"Old man," Whittenden said, after a longish interval of smoking and watching the shielded face; "I know I'm not much use; but doesn't it help a little to know I'm here, and sick with the seeing for myself all that this thing means to you? Of course, I had the letters; but they didn't go far. One has to come and talk it out; and—Well, I'm here."

Then the arm came down, and the heavy eyes met Whittenden's.

"That's why I sent for you," Reed said. "I wanted you."

Ramsdell, in the next room, had quite a little doze, before once more the voices waked him.

"You see," Reed said at last, as if there had been no pause at all; "I was a little in the state those fellows were in, up at the mine. I needed something equivalent to their extreme unction. The cases are analogous; though, after all, I am not sure it would be quite as hard to die into the next world as I'm finding it to die out of this."

Whittenden's clear eyes flickered. Then he braced himself and asked the direct question to which his friend, for two long hours, had been so plainly leading.

"Reed, do you mean this thing is—permanent?"

"Yes."

"You know it for a fact?"

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"A month or so."

"They told you?"

"No. They still keep up the fiction that they can't predict anything with any surety."

"Then how do you know?"

"How does anybody know it, when more than half of himself is just so much dead matter; when the division line between the dead part and the alive doesn't move along by so much as one hair's breadth; when the dead part is dead past any resurrection? It is my body, Whittenden. I know it for a fact."

There was no especial answer to be made. Whittenden had the superlative good sense to attempt none. After a silence, Reed spoke again.

"I haven't told anybody of it yet, till now. There was no use, and I dreaded the row they'd be sure to make. Besides, I wanted to tell you, first of all, because you are the one man in reach who has seen me in the thick of things, and I knew there would be any amount of detail you would take in, without my having to explain it to you."

The rector nodded. Through his curling smoke-trails, it seemed to him he caught a glimpse of the rugged, ragged Colorado mountains, of a shabby mining camp centring in a group of shafts, of squads of rough-faced miners, and of Reed Opdyke, smiling and alert, striding here and there among them, laying down the law superbly, a king among his loyal and adoring subjects. And now—Whittenden flung back his head, and his clear eyes glowed with his belief. Never more a king than now, as he lay there, quiet, but very potent, establishing his throne above the level of the powers of darkness who murmured threateningly about his feet! And, meanwhile,—

"Queer thing about our bodies," Reed was saying; "queer and almost a little cruel. We drive them at top speed and never think a thing about them, as long as they go on all right. It's when they snap, that we begin to realize all the things they've stood for."

Again there came the silence, while the eyes of the two men rested on each other, more eloquent than many words. At last, Reed spoke again.

"It's all hours, Whittenden. I've been a beast to keep you up; still, it is a relief to have it out and over. Now go to bed. Before you go, though—for now and then we all of us want something we can hang on to, and this is one of the times—I don't mean to funk my own share in the main issue; but, Whittenden, before you go off to bed, would you mind just saying the *Our Father*? It's some time since I've heard it, and, in this present muddle of my universe, I've a general notion it might be of help."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It was not until well on in the next day that the two men spoke of Brenton. Indeed, all their talk, next morning, was plainest platitude. Instinctively each of them realized that the other needed a little time to rally from the strain of the night before. Accordingly, though eight o'clock found them breakfasting together in Opdyke's room, Ramsdell, in attendance on his patient's numerous needs of help, acknowledged to himself that he never saw a patient and a priest act like such a pair of schoolboys squabbling over jam. Afterwards, Ramsdell dismissed and sent off on an errand, Whittenden smoked, and Opdyke lay and watched him in a contented reverie too deep for words. As he had said to Brenton, once on a time, it was a relief to get even a bad matter out and over. Later, he was quite well aware, he would take up the subject with his friend once more; but the week was nearly all before them. They could afford to rest a little, and let the healing silence fall between them.

Indeed, in all the morning, they exchanged a scanty dozen sentences. An occasional questioning glance, an inarticulate grunt of comprehension: after their long night vigil, this was all for which either of them felt inclined. In the meantime, Reed's face was losing somewhat of its look of strain; Whittenden's clear eyes were growing gentler, yet infinitely more full of courage. To both of them, the future was less of a blank wall than it had seemed, the night before. Already, they both were gathering a little more perspective.

Towards noon, though, Opdyke roused himself and spoke.

"This isn't going to do for you, Whittenden," he said, with decision. "If you sit about like

this, I'll have you tucked up beside me, within the week. You've got to have some exercise. I'll set Ramsdell to telephoning on your behalf, if you will call him. Yes, I can telephone; but it's not too easy, so I generally pass the job on to him. Who'll you have for your escort: Olive Keltridge, or Brenton?"

"Brenton?"

"Scott Brenton. Surely, I wrote you he was here."

Whittenden laughed.

"If you did, it never got put in. Most likely Ramsdell balked at the spelling. You mean the Brenton that I married?"

"Yes, worse luck!"

The rector nodded.

"It's come to that; has it? I'm not too much surprised. What is he doing here?"

"Preaching, of course."

"No of course about it. He was more a physicist than anything else, it seemed to me. I had an idea he'd have gone in for teaching before now."

"Give him time."

"What do you mean?"

"I'd rather you saw for yourself. In fact, I think we'll give up any idea of Olive, for the afternoon, and telephone to Brenton to come and take you for a walk. Telephone him yourself, for that matter."

"He may be busy."

"Not he. He has a curate now to do his routine work, and he frisks about, a good deal as he pleases. Poor beggar! He takes his very frisking sadly, nowadays. And then, after you've nailed him, would you call up Olive, nine-two-three, and tell her I'm to be abandoned, all afternoon. She may take the hint."

"Shall you tell her things, Reed?"

"Not yet?" Reed spoke crisply.

"Why not? I fancy she'd be one to understand."

"So she would. She always does, always has done, ever since she was born, and we all take it out of her accordingly, a good deal as we take it out of you. However, I don't want her to know it, yet awhile. I'd prefer to understand the thing a little better, myself, before I pass it on. And, of course, you won't speak of it to Brenton?"

And Whittenden shook his head. He shook it with the more surety, because of his old-time memories of Brenton, the lank, ill-nourished youth with the crude manners and the lambent eyes. One did not tell things to a man like that; one merely listened, and then gave advice. That was really all. And then, his telephoning finished, Whittenden fell to wondering into what sort of a man Scott Brenton, the embryo, had turned. The voice was reassuring, also the accent. Both spoke of vast improvement in their owner.

Two hours later, Whittenden, balancing himself on the window sill at Opdyke's side, glanced down at the walk below him, as he heard a step draw near.

"You don't suppose that can be Brenton!" he exclaimed. "It looks like him; but, ye immortals, how he's changed!"

"Haven't we all?" Reed queried dryly.

"Not so much. Why, man, he's actually groomed, and he walks without stepping on the edges of his own boots. Brenton!" He leaned out of the window, calling like a boy, "Hi, Brenton! Is it really you?"

And so they met, after the years. Moreover, meeting, it was as if the years they had spent apart from each other, instead of increasing the distance between them, had brought them to a closer contact than any of which they hitherto had dreamed.

According to their former custom, they tramped for miles, that afternoon, and talked as steadily as they tramped. At first sight, Whittenden had been delighted at the change in his companion; at a second, the delight increased, and the wonder mingled with it. It was little short of the marvellous to the rector of Saint-Luke-the-Good-Physician's that the raw, eager-minded youngster he had known as clerklet in a mountain inn could have developed into this

personable man, a good talker, a good critic of this world's valuations, and, withal, not a little magnetic in his personal charm. At the first glance and the second, Whittenden rejoiced at what he saw. At the third, he doubted. The eyes were lambent still, but far less happy; the lips were more sensitive, albeit firmer, and every now and then there came a tired droop about their corners, as if life, even to the prosperous and popular rector of Saint Peter's, were just a degree less full of promise than he had fancied it would be. The raw young stripling had hoped all things; the mature, seemingly well-poised rector was having some little difficulty to prove them good.

What was the matter, Whittenden asked himself. The ineradicable germs of pessimistic Calvinism? The uncongenial wife? Some lurking weakness in the man himself, that forbade his ever coming to a full content? Some residuum of jealous self-distrust, left over from his primitive beginnings, and causing him to look on every prosperous man as on a potential foe? The alternatives were too many and too complex to be settled by a two-hour study of the man beside him. Therefore Whittenden, being Whittenden, ended by putting the direct question.

"In the final analysis, Brenton, what are you making out of your life?"

The answer astounded him by its terse abruptness.

"Chaos," Brenton said.

Whittenden's mouth settled to the outlines of a whistle, albeit no sound came out of it.

"*Chaos* is a good, strong word, Brenton," he said, after a minute. "Exactly what is it that you mean?"

Brenton stated his meaning, without mincing matters in the least.

"I mean that I have no more business to be preaching in Saint Peter's than I would have to be holding forth upon the eternal fires of the most azure Calvinism."

"But you made your choice deliberately."

Brenton turned on him with some impatience.

"What if I did? What is the choice of a boy of twenty, anyway? Of a cocksure, ambitious boy just breaking out of leading strings? I did choose—and yet, not so freely as I seemed to do. There was my mother in the background."

"Of course," Whittenden assented quietly. "Who else, better?"

"No one. Only—" Then Brenton curbed his rising excitement. Just as of old, he felt the overmastering wish to talk things out with Whittenden; but his maturity shrank from the idea, as the untrained boy had never done. "Anyway," he went on quietly; "I made my choice. I still believe it was the best choice open to me at the time. The only trouble is that I outgrew it."

"Or it outgrew you," Whittenden suggested coolly.

The dark tide surged up across Scott Brenton's lean cheeks.

"Perhaps," he assented curtly. "Still, Whittenden, it doesn't seem that way to me. I feel myself tied down at every point."

"What ties you?"

"Creeds." Then Brenton laughed a little harshly. "Doubts, rather."

Whittenden looked him in the eyes.

"What is it that you're doubting, Brenton?" he inquired.

"Everything. All the old landmarks of the ages," Brenton told him restively.

Whittenden smiled.

"You had parted with some of them, when I last said good bye to you," he reminded Brenton. "You had quenched the sulphurous flames, and explained the more surprising of the miracles. You even had a doubt about creation's having been achieved in one hundred and seventy hours. What else has gone upon your conscientious scruples?"

"Most things, including a good share of the Thirty-Nine Articles," Brenton made curt answer. "Moreover, I have rewritten my early chapter in the Book of Genesis, until it says *Like unto God, knowing*, not *Good and Evil*, but *the Law*."

"Hm-m-m!" Whittenden said slowly. "That isn't quite as original as you may think for, Brenton. A good many of us others have employed that form of the phrase before. Still,

there's no use in taking it for a sort of cudgel, to knock down the people who still cling to the dear old phrases. And they are good phrases, too. They deserve to be revered for their antiquity, and for the hold they have kept upon all mankind; still I don't, myself, see why you need to take them any more literally than you do some of those old resonant lines of Homer. It's the spirit of the thing we're after, not the barren phrases."

"Then what's the good of all your creed?" Brenton demanded shortly.

"Our creed," Brenton corrected him quite gently; more gently, even, than he had spoken to Reed Opdyke on the night before. Indeed, Scott Brenton seemed to him vastly more in need of gentleness than did Opdyke. His trouble was as deep-seated; moreover, it was complicated by a curious ingrained weakness which, Whittenden judged, it would be hard for him to down. In Opdyke's place, Brenton would have turned his face to the wall and made a long, long moan. In Brenton's position, Opdyke would have kept his flags flying gayly, as long as there was a tatter of them left.

Now, Brenton's accent showed that he resented the correction.

"Ours, if you will; at least, for the present. But, after all, what is the good?"

Whittenden's reply came promptly.

"A common platform, where we can stand side by side, while we are doing our individual work."

"But, if you don't believe in it?"

A sudden gleam of mirth came into Whittenden's clear eyes.

"Do you expect to put your foot on every single plank in any platform, Brenton? If you do, you'll need to have it built just to your measure. It seems to me that, in course of time, you'd find it a little lonely, to say nothing of the minor fact that people work together all the better for being on some sort of a common basis."

"But is work the only thing?" Brenton queried rather absently.

And the curly-headed rector by his side made swift, emphatic answer,—

"Yes."

"Then why—"

Whittenden interrupted him.

"What do you believe, Brenton? For any man is bound to have some shreds of belief; that is, as long as he keeps out of the nearest asylum for the incurable insane."

"My belief, or my profession?"

"Hang your profession!" Whittenden said impatiently. "Or else, hang on to it, and keep still. But it's your belief I want, your creed, your working platform."

"How do you know I have one?" Brenton asked rather irritably, for Whittenden's attitude was distinctly less satisfying to him than it had been of yore.

"Because I know the kind of men Saint Peter's has been accustomed to demand. Also because I have talked to Reed Opdyke."

"And Opdyke told you—"

"Nothing; beyond the mere fact that he is very fond of you. Opdyke doesn't care for many people; his very affection tells its story. Still, that is beside the point. What tag ends of belief have you got left?"

Even in its kindliness, the voice was masterful, the voice of the thoroughbred, when he gets in earnest. Brenton longed to stiffen himself against the mastery, but he could not. His ineffectual effort lent an edge of sarcasm to his tone.

"When the eye of the parish is upon me, I read out the Nicene Creed in the deepest voice at my disposal. When—"

"This is rather beneath your customary methods, Brenton," his companion interrupted him. "But go on."

Brenton's lips shut hard together for a minute. Then he did go on, and in a totally different voice.

"When I look myself squarely in the face, Whittenden, I find I can assent to just two points, no more."

"And they?"

"God. Universal law."

"So far, so good. And man?" Whittenden queried.

"Their corollary."

"Exactly." Whittenden walked on in silence for a little way. "Well, what else do you want, Brenton?" he inquired.

"Nothing. My people, however, want a great deal more."

"How do you know?"

"Our ritual."

"Can't you interpret it with any common sense?" The impatience again was manifest.

"Not in common honesty." And Brenton lifted up his chin.

A little laugh came to his companion's lips and eyes.

"Why not?" he queried. "You don't expect our public schools to abandon the Aeneid and Homer, because they don't consider the old mythologies accurate history. You don't expect to give up the best of Hafiz and Omar, because you also come in contact with the worst of them. We'd be poorer, all our lives, by just so much. In the same way, why can't you take the best of our theologies as fact and love it, and, at the same time, keep a certain respect for the rest of them that you don't believe, the sort of respect you give an aged ancestor, a respect for what they have been to the world at large, not for what they are now to you? Belief, in the last analysis, is nothing but well-applied common sense."

It was a long time before either of the men spoke again. In the end, Whittenden broke the silence.

"Brenton, I'd have given a good deal to have known your parents," he said.

"To weigh me up?" Brenton smiled. "You saw my mother: a strong, self-reliant, self-willed character, threaded through and through with Calvinism. She was totally unselfish, yet totally self-centred. In the same way, she was always on a battleground between the claims of her own rampant freewill and her sanctified belief in predestination. It's not an easy thing to analyze her."

"And your father?"

Brenton coloured hotly.

"I was only ten days old, when he died, Whittenden; but the tradition has come down to me. If he hadn't been so weak, so totally self-indulgent, he'd have been a genius. Even in the worst of his self-indulgence, he had ten times my mother's logic. If he had had one tenth of her will power, he'd have counted. As it was, though,—utter annihilation. He died, and left no record. My mother helped it on, by never mentioning him, up to the very day she died."

"Hm!" Whittenden said thoughtfully. "Perhaps she knows him better now."

Brenton glanced at him curiously.

"You still believe it?"

"Of course. No; no use arguing from the point of view of the biologist and chemist, Brenton. It won't do you any good, nor me any harm. It's in me; I don't know whence or wherefore, so save your breath and use it on other things. I think your ancestry is all accounted for. As to environment: what does your wife say about it?"

"The environment?" Brenton asked, a little bit perversely.

"No; the highly individualistic platform you are erecting for yourself? Are you to leave room there for her?"

"Hardly. She wouldn't mount it, if I did."

"Doesn't share the doubts?"

Brenton shook his head. As yet, he was loath to put into words the fact of his wife's adoption of her new creed. Appearances and his own forebodings to the contrary, it might be but a passing phase of her experience. The label of it, though, once affixed, would be well-nigh impossible of removal.

"Katharine has never come so very much inside my professional life," he paltered.

Whittenden pricked up his ears, partly at the statement, partly at the unfamiliar name. He had felt sure that he had heard "I, Scott, take thee, Catia." In his more mellow New York life, such transforming evolution was less common. However, names were a detail. It was the fact he challenged.

"Your wife? But how can she stay outside it, Brenton?"

"Oh, she's not outside it, in a sense. Before the boy came, she was in all the guilds and parish teas and that. Really," Brenton spoke with a blind optimism; "she was very popular. But, in the vital things one thinks and feels—Whittenden, I don't imagine any woman ever really can share those things with us men. We are created different. We can't go inside each other's shells."

And in that final utterance, it seemed to Whittenden, Scott Brenton voiced the saddest phase of all his present unbelief.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Still, Reed, I rather grudge the time," Whittenden said to his host when, dinner over, that same night, he flung himself into a chair at Opdyke's side. "For all practical purposes, it was a wasted afternoon. I'd much rather have been here with you."

"You'd have been quite *de trop*, old man. Olive Keltridge was here, two hours, and filled me up with all the gossip of the town. Besides, you were filling yourself up with ozone, and preparing to make a night of it. Apropos—Ramsdell!"

"Yes, sir?" Ramsdell appeared upon the threshold of the outer room.

"Go to bed, like a Christian, when you get ready. No need for you to become a martyr, because Mr. Whittenden and I wish to carouse till all hours. When I need you, Mr. Whittenden will come to wake you, and you can appear in your pajamas, if you choose. Isn't that all right, Whittenden? Good night, Ramsdell." Then, as Ramsdell vanished, Reed settled himself with a little sigh. "It's a fearsome responsibility, Whittenden," he said; "to win this sort of sheep-dog devotion. Ramsdell, on my grilly days, would like nothing better than to stand and let me shy things at his head. It is beautiful; but it gets a trifle sultry. A little downright cussedness helps to clear the air occasionally; but cussèd is the one thing Ramsdell isn't. I suppose it is because he is the product of the ages; it goes with his misplaced aspirates."

Whittenden struck a match.

"The sheep-dog thing is worth the having, though. Best hang on to it, Reed. It doesn't come to most of us too often."

Opdyke eyed him rather mirthfully.

"What's the matter, man?" he queried. "Did your own sheep dog growl at you, this afternoon?"

"Mine?"

"Brenton. He counts you as the great formative influence of his life, and adores you accordingly."

"Not now. I knew he had been through the phase, Opdyke. In fact, I had rather counted on its lasting; but it hasn't."

"From which I infer that he showed his teeth, to-day. What was the matter? Did you try to stroke his head, and accidentally hit him on the raw?"

"Not consciously. It's only that I've lost all my helpful grip on him."

"How do you know?"

"Because—to carry out your sheep-dog metaphor which, in reality, doesn't fit the case at all, Opdyke—he put his paw in mine, and then growled at me when I shook it."

"I'm not so much surprised. Brenton has been on his nerves lately. I can't just see why, though."

"Has he talked to you, Opdyke?"

"Good Lord, yes! A man on his nerves is bound to talk to something, whether it's a

responsible person like yourself, or a mere bedpost like me. It's the talking that's the main thing, the sense of exhilaration that comes with the discussion of depressing personalities. We're all alike, every man of us, Whittenden. Didn't I take my turn, last night?"

"That's different."

"Not a bit. Spine or conscience, it's all one, once it begins to raise a ruction. But about Brenton: how do you diagnose his disease?"

Whittenden's reply came on the instant.

"Trying to believe too many things too hard."

"Hm!" Opdyke appeared to be considering. "Well, I think perhaps you've hit it. However, there are some extenuating circumstances. Give a man a dozen years or so of the mental starvation of a New England wilderness, and then all at once fill him chock full of new ideas, and he gets a pain within him, just as painful a pain as if it were in his tummy, not his mind. In time, it leads to chronic indigestion. That's what Brenton's got."

"Yes; but that is cause, not extenuating circumstance," Whittenden objected.

"It's extenuating, just the same. And then the wife! She is—"

"Well?"

"A pill," Reed said briefly.

"What sort?"

"Born common and dense. Grown self-centred and conceited. Lately turned from ultra-ritualistic to incipient Eddyism."

"That's bad."

"Isn't it? No wonder Brenton's down and out, for the time being. The question is how we are to prevent its becoming chronic. Of course, this is the bare outline; you can fill in the details out of your own experience."

"Praise heaven, I haven't any!" Whittenden responded piously.

"So much the better for you, and so very much the worse for Brenton. I had counted on your being here to haul him out of his present mental Turkish bath, and hang him out on the line in the fresh air and sun. I can't." Reed made an expressive grimace at the couch. "Besides, I'm a little bit like old Knut on the seashore; my own toes are getting very wet. The worst of that matter is that Brenton knows it."

Whittenden spoke tranquilly, his eyes on Opdyke's face, sure that he could rely upon the sense of humour in his friend.

"Yes, Brenton does know it. Do you realize, Opdyke, that you're the fellow who heated up his Turkish bath, in the first place?"

"What!" The word exploded with a violence that brought Ramsdell's head in at the open doorway.

"Yes, you."

Opdyke smiled at Ramsdell, in token of dismissal. Then,—

"Not guilty!" he protested.

"Yes, you are. I wormed it out of Brenton, in the end, in spite of his growling. It's too bad of me to tell you; and yet it seems only fair that you should get at the truth of the situation. Besides—You know you are a fearful egoist, Reed; we all are, for that matter. Besides, it may make you a little bit more tolerant of Brenton, may lead you to smooth him down where I have been rubbing him the wrong way. In fact, you owe it to him, to atone for the volcanic effect you have had on his theology."

"Dear man, I haven't upset his blamed theology," Reed objected. "I'm sound enough; I wouldn't upset a mouse. Ask Ramsdell if I've ever argued against his belief in the literal greening apple, 'a wee bit hunripe, sir,' upon which Adam feasted."

"Not in words. It's the fact of you that's so upsetting."

"I've been accused unjustly of a good many things in my time, Whittenden. Besides," again there came the grimace at the couch; "it rather seems to me that I'm the one who has been upset."

"That's the whole row. You are the first brick in the line. You bowled over Brenton; now he

appears to be bowling over his wife. Yes, I mean it. If Brenton had held steady, she never would have wobbled, much less bolted off to Christian Science. She was keen enough to feel him tottering, and she evidently made up her mind to save herself from the impending ruins by taking refuge upon the other side of the street. I must say it was rather prudent of her. She had the sense to choose a new house built on a totally different stratum from her old one. If one collapsed, it couldn't well jar the other."

"Hold on, Whittenden!" Reed broke in, after long waiting for a pause. "I am willing to take my share of blame for most things; but I'll be—"

"Sh-h!" Whittenden warned him indolently. "Remember I'm a rector in good standing."

"Then bring me a book of synonyms. Anyhow, I'll be it, before I'll take the responsibility of that Brenton woman's vagaries. Ask Olive."

"I don't need to," Whittenden remarked at his cigar. "I married them. Likewise, I have seen Brenton, this very day. After collating those two references, I don't need Miss Keltridge for a commentary. As for Brenton—"

Opdyke interrupted.

"How do you figure out that I've been upsetting him?" he queried.

Whittenden settled himself in his favourite position, low in his chair and with one hand flung upward to grasp the chair-top above his head. His eyes, fixed on Opdyke, were full of merriment.

"Let's go back a little. When you first knew Brenton, he was a bit uncommon, the ordinary product of Calvinism flavoured with something vastly more hectic. That was inside him, that hectic splash in his blood; it made him imaginative, greedy of new ideas, greedy to prove that they were good. Moreover, he had been trained to believe that an irate Deity of unstable nerves presided over the universe; that He had created the world and beast and man in a series of experiments which had come off well, until it reached the last one, man; that man had gone bad in the making, and must be pursued and thrashed for all eternity on that account, unless he made an umbrella out of his acknowledged vices, and sat down underneath it and sang hymns to a harp accompaniment. Else, he was grilled eternally. But the gist of the whole matter was that man had gone bad in the making, and that his Maker was angry at him to the end of time. And that same blundering and angry Maker was the God one had to love and honour. Naturally, being constituted as he is, Brenton, once he had cut his wisdom teeth, turned balky, refused to see why he should love a God who behaved like a bad-tempered child that spites the toy he has broken and beats the wall where he has bumped his head. Meanwhile—"

"Do I—" Opdyke was beginning.

Whittenden waved aside the interruption.

"No; you don't come in yet. Be patient. As I was going to say, meanwhile he went into his first laboratory and made the prompt discovery that nothing ever happens, that causes are set in motion ages and ages before they ever materialize into effects. That set him to thinking, set him to wondering why the thing that he was trained to call revealed religion should be the only lawless thing in all the universe. Why the same Deity should have created law, and then set Himself up in opposition to it, should have started the wheels to running, and then, every now and then, stuck a mighty finger in, to pry them apart and make them slip a cog, in deference to some later modification of His original plan. It was just about then that I found him. He was floundering in a perfect mire, composed of the dust of conflict mingled with penitential tears. Really, he was knee-deep in the muck; and I put in a good share of my vacation in trying to haul him back to solid ground."

Opdyke nodded.

"He has told me."

"His side, only. Mine was a degree less serious, Reed. Sorry for him as I was, I couldn't help a certain amusement at seeing him get himself into such a mess over nothing. How any person with a fair share of common sense can—Well, I toiled over him, all summer. Talk about mines! I mined in him. I sank new shafts and I dug out new veins, and I presented samples of ore for his inspection. By the end of the summer, I'd got him to where he admitted that a law-abiding God was an improvement on his old, erratic, lawless, irate Deity; that it was treating Him with a long way more respect to endow Him with the attributes of a high-minded gentleman than to consider Him a mere purveyor of red-hot discipline for sins He had specifically created. Then, in the end, I put it squarely up to him: if he must preach at all, why not choose a church that stood for law and order in the universe, a church that, hanging to the old traditions, yet held out her arms to the new interpretations of the law and gospel, instead of sticking to the cast-iron, white-hot Calvinism which hadn't marched an inch, hadn't so much as changed the focus of its spectacles, since the pre-Darwin days of the very first of his ancestral parsons."

"Well?"

"Well." And Whittenden pulled himself up short. "This is where you begin to come in on the scene, you reprobate. I had just got him on his legs, marching sanely along, to the tune of 'All Thy works shall praise Thy name,' when the doctors came lugging you home into his very parish, laid you down underneath his very nose. No wonder you upset him, completely bowled him over off his theological pins. His God was just and loving and logical, even if a little bit more given to personal interference than any but a Calvinistic God is supposed to be. And here were you, from all accounts a law-abiding citizen—of course the theologian in him failed to take the black powder into account—smitten down in your prime by what he was electing to call the hand of Divine Providence. Of course, it tousled up all the notions I had been stroking down so carefully. He came on a knot—from his own story, I think it was the question as to why a purely innocent Opdyke was chosen as an object of wrathful vengeance. Then he immediately went panicky. That's the erratic strain in him. Up to a certain point, he's logical; then he gets into a seething mass of mismatched syllogisms. In this case, if Providence was good, and you also were good, then Providence wouldn't have knocked you into a cocked hat. No matter now about the sympathy of my phrase; I want you to get the gist of the whole situation. Well, he turned and twisted that around into form *AAA*, *EAE*, and so on down the line; and, worse luck, he twisted himself with it till he lost all his point of view, got dizzy, and missed his footing utterly. The original trouble lay in his sheer inability to tally up you and a benign Providence into any proper sort of a sum. Therefore, one of you must be improper and, hence, must be abolished. Therefore, as you were very weighty and manifestly refused to budge, he proceeded to abolish Providence."

"Hm. Well." Opdyke spoke thoughtfully. "I begin to see. However, even if I am to blame, I still insist upon it I'm not guilty. Meanwhile, what now?"

"Meanwhile, he's become so enamoured of the abolishing process that he's keeping on. Unless we can contrive to break up the habit, in the end he will analyze himself into his original elements, and then abolish those."

Reed laughed. Then he said slowly,—

"Poor beggar!"

"Yes," Whittenden assented, with sudden gravity; "that is just it. Poor beggar! And now, the worst of it all is that, unless we break it up at once, it will have to run its course, like any other disease."

"You call it a disease?"

"In his case, I do. Brenton isn't after any working truth to help along the rest of us; he's started hunting the *ignis fatuus* of abstract verity, provable to its utmost limit. Taken as mental gymnastics, it is doubtless a fine exercise. Taken as a spiritual tonic to a lot of world-tired fellow mortals, I confess I doubt its inherent value."

"You told him so?"

"In all honour, as an older man inside the same profession, I couldn't do much else."

"And he?"

"Resented it, exactly as you or I would have resented it, if we had happened to be standing in his spiritual shoes. I couldn't blame him, Reed; and yet I'm sorry."

Reed nodded.

"I know. Those things always take it out of one. Besides, it's hard lines to help in upsetting your own pedestal. I'm sorry that Brenton took it badly, Whittenden. I didn't think it of him; you have counted so much to him, for years."

Whittenden spoke a little sadly.

"He thinks that he has outgrown me, Reed; therefore he won't feel the hurt of it, one half so much."

Opdyke looked up sharply, a world of comprehension in his brave brown eyes.

"But it has hurt you, Whittenden."

"Yes," his companion confessed. "It has. It has hit me hard on my besetting sin, Reed, the liking to know that I'm of use to people. And I was of use to Brenton; I'd hoped to keep the old relation to the end; but it's impossible. I found that out, to-day."

"It depends on what you call being of use," Opdyke retorted. "You may not have coddled up his Ego, and patacaked his nerves; but there's sometimes a long way more helpfulness in a good thrashing than in all the coddlings since the world began. And Brenton has had an infernal amount of coddling lately; there's no denying that. It's not alone the women; it is

sensible men like Doctor Keltridge and my father, men who ought to be filing his teeth, not softening them up with goodies. However, that's as it is. What will be the end of it, do you think?"

"Smash; unless you hold him, Reed."

"Me? I?"

"Yes, you. I don't mean—I'm in earnest now; I hate to see a good man chucking a good profession, and, unless he steadies down, he is bound to chuck it—I don't mean any nonsense about your owing it to him. I mean that you can hold him steady longer than anybody else."

"Not you?" Opdyke's accent was incredulous.

"My grip on him is gone. In the past, I may have helped him. All I could say, this afternoon, only rubbed him the wrong way, and increased the notion that he's cherishing, the notion that he's an uncomprehended genius. In heaven's name, Reed," and Whittenden's fist came crashing down on the arm of his chair; "is anything in this whole world more hard to fight than that same pose of being misunderstood? Nine times out of ten, it is mere pose. The tenth time, it is mere paranoia, and hence more manageable. No. My hold on Brenton is all gone. As I say, he has outgrown me; I still believe in my immortal soul, and a few such other trifles that no laboratory can prove. To be sure, you believe them, too; but, if you're going to manage Brenton, keep the beliefs tucked out of sight."

"Where's my hold on him, then?" Reed queried.

Whittenden, bending forward, laid his hand across the rug.

"This," he said quietly; and, strange to say, the words brought no sting to Reed Opdyke's mind.

Nevertheless, he objected to the fact.

"It seems so much like gallery play, Whittenden," he urged. "It's a bit nasty to be making capital out of a thing like that."

Whittenden shook his head, as, settling back again, he flung his hand up into the old resting place.

"Not if it's given you for just that purpose," he answered then. "No, Reed, hear me out. It never has been your way to dodge responsibilities; in the end, you're sure to buck up against this one, so you may as well take it now as ever. This thing appears to be your present asset. Properly managed, it can bring you no end of influence. Your friends, who really know you, will watch you hanging on to yourself like grim death; and, in time, they'll come to where they'll trust your grip to pull them out of danger, too, when they get to funking. It's an almighty hard job you've got ahead of you, and an endless one; still, knowing you, I know you will put it through and come out of it with your colours flying. Meanwhile," the clear eyes came back to focus; "hang on to Brenton."

"If I can."

"As long as you can, I mean. The time may come when, like myself, you'll have to let him go. In the mean time, though, he is worth the holding."

"Brenton is pure gold," Reed said quietly. "I have known him for many years."

But his companion shook his head.

"Gold, if you will; but not the purest. There is a dash of alloy we may as well admit, at the start. Else, it will only muddle things, later on. Brenton is good stuff, but a little weak. There's something in him that always will make him stumble and fall down just short of his ideals."

"Naturally, being human," Opdyke assented rather dryly. "For that matter, Whittenden, which one of us does not?"

But Whittenden made no answer. His hands clasped now at the back of his head, his eyes were resting thoughtfully upon the bright, brave face before him, a thinner face than it had been used to be, more hollow about the temples where the wavy hair clung closely; upon the swaddled figure which, only a year before, had tramped the Colorado mountains, lording it over many men. And now, to the burden of his own that Reed was bearing, he had added the responsibility of watching over Brenton, of guarding Brenton's weakness with his own great strength. Was it just and right to thrust this second burden on to Opdyke? However, self-forgetfulness comes best by focussing all one's energy upon the victim next in line; and Reed Opdyke, just at the present crisis, needed nothing else one half so much as self-forgetfulness. Nevertheless, the pity of it all, the seeming heartlessness, surged in on Whittenden. It would have been far easier for him to have tried to lighten Opdyke's burden

than to increase its heaviness. But ease was not the main thing, after all.

Suddenly he flung himself forward in his chair, and put his two hands down upon the straight, lean shoulders underneath the rug.

"Reed," he said, with an abruptness he did not often show to any one; "if one man ever loved another, it's I with you. For God's sake, then, don't let the time ever come between us when I must stop being of some little use to you, as I've just had to do in the case of Brenton."

But, even while he spoke, he knew there was no need for Opdyke's prompt reply,—

"I fancy it never would come to that between the two of us. We've faced too many bad half-hours together. If only I could—"

Whittenden understood. He rose, thrust his hands into his pockets, turned away and tramped across the room.

"You always have, old man; now more than ever. And, every now and then, we parsons need it, need to be plucked out of our studies and set down face to face with life. It's because I'm owing you so much that I'd like to square up the account a little. Reed, I'm glad you sent for me, no matter if the reason was an ugly one."

And then, quite of his own initiative, he went away in search of Ramsdell. All at once there had swept over him the memory of their talk, the night before, and the memory overwhelmed him with its tragedy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"Yes, he sent for me, about nine o'clock." Doctor Keltridge, sitting in the window seat beside Opdyke, swung his heels like a boy, in gleeful recollection. "Of course, it was *sotto voce*, as it were, for he's the king pin of the Christian Science row, and it never would do to let it get about. When I got there, I found him all doubled up with asthma, wheezing like a grampus. 'Damn it, man,' he said, as soon as he caught a glimpse of me; 'I've been praying since six o'clock, and I'm getting worse, every minute! Give me something, quick, or I shall die.'"

And then the doctor went off into a roar of laughter over this latest victory of medicine.

"He came out all right?"

"Of course. People don't die of asthma; at least, not in his stage. They only get beastly uncomfortable. I had him asleep, within an hour."

"Yes, and next time?" Opdyke inquired.

"He'll go through the same rigmarole again. I suppose, when the fit comes on, he will telephone to headquarters for some sort of absent treatment. What charms me is the way those fellows seem to turn on the same tap, whatever the disease. A child down in Oak Street fell into boiling water, only just the other day. The neighbours heard him shrieking, and finally they telephoned to me. When I went into the house, the poor little sinner was writhing all over the bed and howling with the pain. Beside the bed, knitting a purple tippet, sat a healer, giving treatment, while she worked."

"Fact?"

"I can produce affidavits," Doctor Keltridge answered grimly. "What's more, I am going to do it soon. They can make fools of themselves, if they choose—only the dear Lord got ahead of them, and did it first; but, while I live to fight, they shall not butcher their little babies."

Reed nodded his approval. Then,—

"What did you do in this case?" he inquired, with more than a show of interest.

"Called in a policeman to see fair play. As it happened, he had a child of his own, so he fell to work in earnest. We turned out the woman, packed off the family into the next room, and went to work with oil and cotton. I'm afraid it was too late to do much good. If it was, though, I'll promise you I'll make Rome howl."

"Can you?" Reed asked practically.

"At least, I can try. As I say, I'm fond of babies; they have so much potential humanity bottled up inside of them. I will not have them slaughtered, if I can help it." Then, to all

seeming, he digressed sharply. "By the way, Reed, have you seen the Brenton baby? No; of course you haven't. It's five months, now, ugly as sin, and the brightest little youngster you ever set your eyes on."

Opdyke stirred himself to a show of interest that was far from genuine. He never had felt himself especially drawn to babies; they seemed to him mussy and invertebrate. In fact, he realized with disconcerting suddenness, they shared some of his own least lovely attributes. However, whether the subject interested him or not, he would keep it up as long as he could, for the simple sake of lengthening out the doctor's visit. Therefore he said,—

"Brenton is immensely pleased with it."

"Well he may be. The baby is a charming little beggar, full of ingratiating tricks, and anybody knows Brenton needs everything of that kind he can get." Then swiftly the doctor brought his digression to a focus. "Well, that's just a case in point," he said triumphantly.

Opdyke laughed.

"Really, doctor, I'm afraid I don't quite follow," he said.

"Your fault, boy. You've not been paying proper attention to me; you were off on a sidetrack of your own laying. I was talking about the Brenton baby and its chances to get fair play, especially when it comes to teeth."

Light dawned on Opdyke.

"Oh, I see. You mean Mrs. Brenton may take a hand?"

"Morally sure. It's her child, too, worse luck! There is no legal help for the bad matter—yet. She will insist upon it that sin has a claim upon the child, and advise it to hoist itself above the sin."

"Is she such a—"

The doctor interrupted, less out of charity for Mrs. Brenton than from his own impatient testiness.

"Wait and see, boy. Wait and see. It is quite evident that she's a gone case, that nothing can save her. Sometimes, I even shudder for her husband."

"Brenton? He's immune."

"There's never any telling. She and her friends probably have been at work with pick and shovel, for months, trying to undermine his foundations. They are an insidious crew, Reed, totally insidious. If a man is the least bit nervous, their absent-treatment methods get in their work with a fatal effect sometimes. I've been watching them for years. They mine and countermine, until it isn't safe to predict who is immune and who isn't. For all either of us know, you may be doomed to be the next victim. If you are, though, send for me. I'll cure you of it, if it takes a dose of lysol. Well, good bye, boy. I'll drop in again, within a day or so."

The doctor went his way, flinging back a trail of chaff as long as his voice could carry to the room above, a room curiously dim and still, it seemed to him, as he came out into the strident sunshine of the July day. Once in the street, moreover, and safely out of range of Opdyke's windows, his fun dropped from him, and he shook his sturdy shoulders, as if he were trying to shake them free from an ugly, yet invisible, burden.

"There's a change there," he muttered to himself; "and I'll be hanged if I can analyze it. It's a curious sort of settling down of the boy's whole nature, as if he had thrown off some maddening strain or other, as if he were getting some new sort of grip upon himself. I wonder what it is. He's not better, nor worse; it can't be his health, then. Bodily, he is just about holding his own; nervously, he is steadying. I believe I'll talk it up with Olive; he may have given her a clue."

Olive, however, questioned, had no ideas upon the subject. She too had noticed the change, had felt it, rather; it was too slight really to be noticed. She had wondered at it. It was as if Opdyke were slowly tightening all his contacts with what of life there still was left to him, determining to make the best of a bad matter, and to extract all the enjoyment he was able out of his narrowing surroundings.

Reason about the cause of this as Olive would, she could not fathom it. Was Opdyke merely sickening of the individual members of his scanty calling list, and seeking to increase its variety? Or was he slowly gathering up some of the broken ties, ready for the day when once more he should leave his prison and walk out among them, a free man? Of two things, though, Olive was assured. The change had started a good two months earlier, had dated, as nearly as she could reckon backwards, from the time of Whittenden's brief visit. And the change, whatever else its alterations in the life of Opdyke, had made not one grain of difference with their friendship. Indeed, it seemed to Olive now and then that Opdyke turned

to her society the more eagerly after a protracted season of receiving varied calls. However, well he might turn to Olive! It was fifteen months, now, since his accident, fifteen months that the brace of New York surgeons had professed their inability to predict a future. Uncertainty like that is bound to tell on any man; and, throughout it all, Olive Keltridge never once had failed him.

That Opdyke was renewing, after his limited fashion, many of his old associations was a fact evident to the whole town. The knowledge that he was lowering his year-long barricade, as a matter of course, brought to his door a horde of visitors bound to be more or less unwelcome. As a matter of fact, on one pretext or another, nine tenths of them were turned away. Ramsdell saw to that. Despite his misplaced aspirates, he possessed a perfect genius for uttering gracious fibs with a totally impenetrable smile of deprecation. Moreover, he knew from long experience Reed's choice in people, and he read strangers keenly. Therefore more than one potential visitor, moved by a combination of curiosity and benevolence, was assured that "Mr. Hopdyke 'as 'ad a very bad night, and is just gone off to sleep," although Dolph Dennison's coat tails or Olive Keltridge's linen skirt might have been vanishing through the doorway as the less welcome guest came in at the front gate. In spite of the moral certainties of the later guest, it was impossible to prove that Ramsdell was lying flagrantly. One could only smile, and hand in a card, with the agreeable surety that it would be referred to the upstairs potentate and pigeonholed in Ramsdell's retentive memory as ticket for admission later on, or else a permanent rejection label, past all argument or gainsaying.

Prather, the novelist, was one of the first names on the lengthening list of those who were to be admitted at all sorts of hours. Reed Opdyke accepted him in mirthful gratitude to the Providence which had arranged so equable a *quid pro quo*. Prather was manifestly out for copy, despite his constant disavowals of what he termed an envious slander hatched by Philistine minds. Reed Opdyke's sense of humour was still sufficiently acute to assure him that there was every possibility that, at some more or less remote period, he would find a full-length portrait of himself in Prather's pages, a portrait all the more easily recognizable by reason of the disguises which would draw attention to the essential human fact hidden behind their veils. On the other hand, however, Prather himself was offering to Reed no small amusement. To a man used to the wide spaces of the mountain landscapes, to the vast secrets hidden within the bowels of the mines, it seemed little short of the incredible that any human being at all worthy of the name could be so infinitely fussy over trifles, could wear himself to shreds over framing a bit of repartee, could spend a tortured morning, reducing to the limits of a rhythmic paragraph the illimitable glories of the earth and sky. And the ways by which he sought to carry out his achievement! These baffled any comprehension born of Opdyke's brain.

The day after the doctor's expressed anxiety as concerned the Brenton baby, Prather, coming to call, was more than ordinarily specific.

"My dear fellow, I am tired to death," he said, as he sat down at Opdyke's side, hitched up his trousers to prevent unseemly bagging and smoothed his coat into position.

"Working?" Reed queried.

"Like a dog. At least, that's the accepted phrase. The fact is, my terrier snored aloud, all the time I was about it. No. I assure you, I didn't read my stuff to him, as I went on." And Prather paused to laugh merrily at his own humour. Indeed, it was his own appreciation of his humour which led him to his frequent calls on Reed, for the little man was generous at heart, and loath to waste a really clever thing, when it might be doing untold good. "But still," he went on; "it shows the fallacy of the phrase. I work like a dog, and the real dog slumbers. Good joke, that! But, for a fact, I have been working."

"Another novel?"

"Yes. I tell the publishers it must be my swan song. Really, I am getting an old man. But they refuse to see it; I expect they will keep me in harness till I am—in my dotage," he added, with a reckless disregard of any possible comment which the phrase might call up in Opdyke's mind.

Opdyke was proof against temptation. Instead,—

"How are you getting on?" he asked.

"Very well; very well indeed, considering my breakfast," Prather responded unexpectedly. "I have done seventeen hundred words, to-day."

"Really?" Opdyke's accent concealed the fact that he had no idea whether the record was great or small. Then he yielded to his curiosity. "But what has your breakfast to do about it, Prather?"

The little novelist settled himself more deeply in his chair, and caressed his small mustache with two small hands which totally failed to conceal the smile behind them.

"I was hoping you would ask the question, my dear fellow. It's a new idea of mine, and, really, I am not at all ashamed of it. Clever, I call it, do you know," he added, with rising enthusiasm. "In the old days, when I was a callow beginner, I used to eat at random. Deuce knows the messes it kicked up, too, with my plots! Now I know better. I fit my meals, my breakfast above all, to the kind of chapter I have ahead of me. When I need to be analytic, I eat beans and certain cereals, and drink black coffee very hot and very fast. Before a love scene, I eat curried things or else put on the stronger kinds of sauces. For the final parting of the lovers, I even have used both. And then for tragedy, for utter grief, I take to cold things, cold things rather underdone, if possible. My wife is a great help to me, in all this planning. She admires my work tremendously; most women do, and she has helped me work the theories out." Suddenly he brought himself up with a round turn that left him facing Opdyke. "Opdyke," he said abruptly; "you ought to have a wife."

"But I don't write any novels," Reed protested, a trifle blank at the swift attack.

"No; but you may. You've had experiences, and you've any amount of time," Prather argued kindly. "I'd help you get a start, you know. And then, besides, you would find it so very comforting."

"The novel?"

"No; the wife. She could take Ramsdell's place, you know."

Reed chuckled.

"She would need to be a lusty Amazon, Prather, if she took the contract of lugging me about."

But Prather waved his hand in circles that were intended to be explanatory.

"Not a bit, Opdyke; not a bit," he said, with effervescent cheer. "It would take you a little while to get her, don't you know; and, by that time, you'd be up and about, really almost as well as ever. And there are things, you know, things about your buttons and your meals, that nobody but a wife can ever manage properly. Take my advice, Opdyke, the advice of a veteran, and go about it. Then, when you're on your feet again, you'll have her ready to look out for you."

Reed smiled rather inscrutably to himself.

"Plenty of time, Prather," he said.

"No, no." Prather rose. "Best be about it soon. You'll find it makes the greatest difference with you. Besides, as I say, it is time you went about it, or you will get on your legs, the same lonely bachelor you were when you went off them. And Doctor Keltridge says that you are gaining fast."

Reed looked up suddenly, incisively.

"Did Doctor Keltridge say that?" he demanded.

"Well, not in those exact words; but that was the burden of his song, the motif of his story, if I may speak so shoppishly." Again Prather's hand sought his mustache. "It is quite evident to everybody, Opdyke, that you are on the gain."

Reed Opdyke watched him out of sight. Then,—

"Is it?" he said a little bitterly. "I wonder why his *everybody* must needs exclude me."

Next day, Olive gone and no one else in prospect, Reed lay staring out through the open window into the green trees on the lawn, staring listlessly, with no especial thought of envy for the birds hopping among the branches. Indeed, even to Reed himself, that was the most tragic phase of the whole tragic situation: that his hours of restless longing seemed to have come to a final end. Always too sane to waste regrets upon futilities, he had come now to a point of passive acceptance of the immutable bad in his surroundings, an active effort only to snatch at whatever good remained. It did not affect his attitude in the very least that, nine days out of every ten, he had to take a spiritual microscope to hunt the good. One of the longest lessons is the learning to pick up the crumbs of comfort, when one has been used to munching the whole loaf. However, Reed was conning the lesson steadily, learning it by slow degrees.

This time, however, he was more occupied in studying how best to face certain inevitable bad half-hours before him than he was in picking any crumbs of comfort from their prospect. It seemed to him a little bit unfair, now that he knew past all gainsaying what the future held for him, to go on allowing his parents and some friends—well, Olive, if one must be so specific—to continue hoping against hope that he would ever be well, and on his legs, and walking. Out of his own experience, Opdyke knew that it is uncertainty which kills. Had he any right to go on in silence, and not end the suspense once and for all? Of course, it was the

place of the surgeons to utter the decree of condemnation. However, as long as they were not sufficiently astute to find out the truth of the prospect, then, in all honour, was it not up to him?

There was no longer any hope of his recovery; that he knew of a surety, knew as, every now and then, one does know things unprovable. He had taken the knowledge pluckily, albeit it had told on him more than he would have been willing to confess. It would have told on him still more, though, had it not been for his week with Whittenden. All that week, he had clung to Whittenden, as the drowning man clings to the life raft. In the end, Whittenden had dragged him to the shore. And now it was his own turn to do as much for his parents, and for Olive. Yes, for Olive. Poor Olive! Yes, she was bound to take it hard.

So lost in thought of Olive was he that he started violently, when he heard coming up the stairway to him the unmistakable rustle of feminine skirts. He forgot the tree tops instantly, forgot his questionings. Olive was coming back again. Doubtless, after her frequent custom, she was returning to tell him something that she had forgotten. He turned his head expectantly. Olive would have been welcome, a dozen times a day; she was the one person in the world who never antagonized him, never bored him, never tired him with irrelevant chatter. Now, without in the least realizing the fact, he was shaping his lips into a smile of eager welcome. Only an instant later, the smile had vanished, and there had come into his brave brown eyes a look astonishingly like consternation.

Not Olive, but Katharine Brenton, stood upon his threshold; and, as Opdyke was too well aware, for the time being that threshold was totally unguarded.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

With a rustle born of plenteous starch, a quiver of nodding roses on her hat and an ultra-evident aroma of violet preceding her coming, Katharine swept across the floor and halted beside Opdyke's couch. Even in the first instant of keen resentment at her appearing, Opdyke was conscious of no small surprise at beholding her so well dressed. In his crass ignorance, he had yet to learn that, in the minds of the elect, good clothes are an essential weapon in contesting the claims of sin-born disease. Indeed, he confessed to himself that, had Katharine only been a shade more self-distrustful, she would not have been a bad looking woman. It was very plain, however, that even the salary of the rector of Saint Peter's would not hold out long before the demands made upon it by the rector's lady's wardrobe. Moreover, it was a little bit surprising to find the country daisy expanded to the limits of a prize sunflower such as this.

"You must remember me, Mr. Opdyke," she was saying effusively. "Such an old, old acquaintance, you know! It must be at least seven or eight years, since I first knew you. I was only little Katharine Harrison then; I remember perfectly how shy and gauche I was, and how terrified at you. Shall I sit here? Thank you. And you were very nice to me. I often tell Scott how much it meant to me. Really, it was my first introduction to the big, big world."

Opdyke rallied swiftly to this unlooked-for demand upon his social instincts.

"No one ever would have suspected it from seeing you, Mrs. Brenton," he assured her, with manful falsity.

She crackled her starch at him, with a buoyant pleasure in his words.

"You have all your old ingratiating tricks of speech," she told him. "Really, nowadays, you ought to be steadying down a little, Mr. Opdyke."

"And thinking on my latter end?" he queried, although he flushed a little at her words. "It's not profitable to meditate upon a blank monotony, you know."

Swiftly she bent forward, resting her elbow on her white linen knee, her chin on her white silk palm.

"But why let it be monotonous?" she demanded.

Reed made a wry face, ostensibly at his own situation, actually at the brutally frank question from what was, in fact, a total stranger.

"I really don't see how I well can help it, Mrs. Brenton," he said quietly.

Lifting her chin from her palm, she clasped her gloves in her lap, and looked down at her host with manifest encouragement.

"Only by lifting yourself above it, Mr. Opdyke," she enlightened him.

Reed smiled grimly.

"I'm very heavy; it would take too large a derrick," he replied. "How is Brenton, to-day?"

"Quite as usual, thank you. Of course, we both are so busy that I see comparatively little of him," Katharine said serenely.

Reed caught at the digression.

"Of course. I suppose the youngster keeps you very busy, Mrs. Brenton."

"Oh, it isn't the baby. I have a wonderful nurse for him, some one Doctor Keltridge recommended."

Again Reed caught at the chance for a digression.

"Doctor Keltridge is a wonderful man," he remarked, a little bit maliciously.

Too late, he realized his blunder, for without delay, Katharine seized the opportunity to snap back to her former position.

"Yes, after his fashion. It is only rather sad to see so broad an intellect buried under the masses of old-time tradition. He gives a strychnine tonic when we others would merely pour ourselves into the gap, and fight disease with mind."

Opdyke's brown eyes became inscrutable.

"But do you think that mind can do the business, Mrs. Brenton?" he inquired.

"Yes, if we apply it in all earnestness. Of course, one must first believe; then the rest of it is easy."

"But," Opdyke's eyes were still inscrutable, although his accent was that of the eager student; "do you think that one's mind always matches up to the size of the disease? I should suppose that, just now and then, they might not fit."

"Dear Mr. Opdyke, there is always the Universal Mind on whom we are allowed to call, in time of need," Katharine assured him, with an unction that made Opdyke long to pitch her, head first, starch and all, through the open window just behind her. No wonder Brenton looked about all in, if this was the sort of domestic table talk dished up for him!

There was a short pause, broken only by the faint crackling of starchy petticoats. Then Katharine unclasped her hands, straightened her hat, and clasped her hands anew, this time slightly above the region of the belt.

"Mr. Opdyke," she said gravely then; "something within me, here, urges me to give you the message."

"The—?" Reed inquired politely.

"The message of our faith. When I came in, it was my only idea to drop in on you and cheer you up a bit; but now—"

During her impressive pause, Opdyke reflected that it was plain the woman was lying flagrantly, that she had come to see him with fell purpose. He loathed that purpose absolutely; he resented it most keenly. None the less, the one course open to him was to submit as little ungraciously as he was able. No moral force would be able to dislodge his guest; and Ramsdell could not well be summoned, to pluck forth the rector's lady and escort her, willy-nilly, to the outer door.

But Katharine's pause had ended.

"But now I feel that it would be wrong for me to neglect the chance to sow my little seed in the soil so plainly harrowed for its growth. Mr. Opdyke," and now the roses trembled with her earnestness; "do you realize at all the meaning of the word *disease*?"

Reed yielded to a wayward impulse left over from his boyhood.

"It generally is supposed to be connected rather intimately with germs, Mrs. Brenton," he assured her.

"By no means. And so you really do cling to the old, old fallacies? It seems too bad, and for such a man as you are. Most of us, you know, have cast them over. We now are quite convinced that disease is but another name for sin and unbelief; that the universal cure lies in the submission of one's will to the dictates of the Universal Mind."

"Really? How interesting!" Opdyke's courteous voice lacked none of the symptoms of

complete conviction.

Katharine leaned a little nearer.

"Mr. Opdyke, little as you may believe it, physical disease has no real existence."

"Indeed?" Reed queried politely, quite as if the question had no personal significance for him.

"Not at all. It only shows the inherent weakness of the one who believes himself an invalid."

This time, Reed felt himself suddenly turning balky.

"Oh, I say!" he protested.

Katharine laid a steadying hand upon the couch, and Opdyke eyed the steadying hand much as if it had been a toad.

"Mr. Opdyke, even in so sad a case as yours, the remedy is quite within your hands," she told him gravely.

Reed's sense of humour came back again to his relief.

"How do you make that out?" he asked her, taking his eyes from the potential hopping toad to rest them on the face before him, a face serenely smug with the consciousness of its own sanctification.

"If you would only trust and believe, would throw your whole nature into tune with spiritual law and order, you could get up off from that couch, tomorrow, and walk down to the post office and back again."

Reed lost the great essential fact, unhappily, in gloating over the finale. Why didn't the woman say the butcher shop, and done with it, since she was so set upon a rhetorical slump of some sort? However, he smothered his interest in the detail, and went back again to the central fact.

"It only rests with you how long you are to lie here, Mr. Opdyke," Katharine was reiterating solemnly, yet with the same carefully manufactured smile that had appeared upon her lips simultaneously with the first expressions of her creed.

Reed experienced a sudden wave of physical nausea, as he watched it.

"I wish that I could believe you, Mrs. Brenton," he said dryly. "Unfortunately, it is quite impossible."

Katharine did her best to make her smile more luminous.

"You think so, Mr. Opdyke? So long as you will not believe, you will not throw off your weakness of the body. You must face disease, not yield to it. You must lift yourself above it, must plant your feet upon it in firm disdain, and, using it as a footstool, arise from its ugly foundations to a perfect and sinless state of health." Again she paused, and fixed her rapt gaze upon his face which slowly was reddening and stiffening into something closely akin to a blinding rage. "Mr. Opdyke, believe me: your poor, broken body is only the outer guise of your erring mind. Dismiss your error; throw yourself unresistingly into the vast and placid pool of the Cosmic Ego, and you will arise from your bed of pain, a cured and healthy man."

A little vein beside Reed's temple swelled slightly and began to throb. It seemed to him that this impossible woman was tearing his nerves apart in a remorseless effort to get at the inmost secrets of his consciousness. By all the laws of self-preservation, he had every right to drive her from the room. By all the laws of chivalrous courtesy, he must lie there, prostrate, at her mercy, and listen to her with an unflinching smile, until the wheels of her enthusiasm should run down—if, indeed, they ever did.

"I am afraid, Mrs. Brenton," he was beginning as suavely as he was able.

Katharine, however, interrupted him.

"Mr. Opdyke," she demanded, with a sort of religious sternness; "have you ever faced disease?"

"I was under the impression that I had," he answered curtly.

"Looked it steadily between the eyes, I mean; sought to impress it with your mental dominance? Disease is a coward, we are told, a coward who leaves us, when it knows we feel no fear of it. If you just once would assert your manliness, not lie there, supine, and—"

"Mr. Hopdyke," Ramsdell's voice said from the threshold; "Doctor Keltridge is downstairs,

and is very anxious to see you about something most important. What shall I tell 'im?"

Reed, his temples throbbing now in good earnest, smothered a *Thank God*, and turned to smile at Ramsdell. Ramsdell met the smile with impenetrable gravity. None the less, a look in the tail of his eye set Opdyke wondering whether, indeed, the message from the doctor was quite the accident it seemed.

"Send him up, of course, Ramsdell. Doctor Keltridge is too busy a man to be kept waiting," he said briefly.

To his extreme surprise, Katharine took the hint and rose.

"And I must go, Mr. Opdyke. It has been such a pleasant time for me, this little talk with you. Some day, perhaps you will let me come again. Meanwhile, you really will be thinking over some of the things I've said?"

"Very likely," Reed answered rather shortly, as once more the hoptoad of a hand rested unpleasantly close to his shoulder. "It's not a thing one is likely to forget."

"I am so glad. How do you do, Doctor Keltridge?" she added archly. "You find me here, invading your province. I do hope you won't be too angry." And, with a nod to Reed, she rustled from the room.

It was plain, however, that the doctor was angry, very, very angry. With a gesture of complete disgust, he thrust aside the chair in which she had been sitting, drew up another and, seating himself, rested his long fingers on Opdyke's wrist, while his keen eyes searched the face, more flushed now than he had ever seen it, the veins about the temples filled to bursting and pounding madly, the wavy hair above them clinging tightly to the brow. As long as the rustling skirts were audible, the doctor sat there, silent, his face blackening more with every second. When at last the front-door screen had clicked behind her, he spoke.

"Boy, I'd have given a thousand dollars to have prevented this. That damned woman has been enough to put you back a dozen months. Yes, yes. I know she is a fool; but I also know that your nerves aren't in any state to stand her infernal diatribes. Been telling you it rested with you alone to choose the psychological moment for going out to walk, with your bed strapped on your back? Yes; I know, I tell you. No use for you to deny. No sense, either, for that matter. You owe the woman nothing; and, by thunder," he let go the wrist and gently laid his hand on Opdyke's throbbing head; "she is going to owe you a good deal. If she had kept on much longer, you'd have been a case for a hypodermic, perhaps worse. How the devil did she get up here, Ramsdell?"

Ramsdell, from the foot of the couch, was watching Opdyke with the dumb, anxious entreaty of a faithful dog.

"Really, I couldn't 'elp it, sir. Mr. Hopdyke 'ad sent me of an errand. When I got back, why, 'ere she was, a-going it as bad as any suffragette." Ramsdell checked himself abruptly, and gave a discreet little cough. Then, warned by something in the doctor's face that he could proceed with perfect safety, he went on once more. "As I came hup the stairs, I 'eard 'er telling Mr. Hopdyke that he must harise and leave 'is disease be'ind 'im; and hit seemed to me, sir, I'd best telephone to you, for fear he'd be doing a thing so rash, and 'urt 'imself for ever. I trust," he now addressed himself to Opdyke; "trust there was no liberty taken, sir."

Reed laughed, despite the fact that the encounter with Mrs. Brenton's new theology had left him feeling most ignobly weak.

"So that was it? Ramsdell, you're a wily fox. I'll see you don't regret it. And don't worry. I'm all right, and I promise you I won't try any gymnastics till the doctor gives me leave." Then, Ramsdell gone, he turned to the doctor in a sudden wave of self-surrender which the older man found exceeding pitiful. "Doctor, am I a futile sort of chap, or am I slowly going off my head? The woman talked the most utter rubbish; I know it's total rot. And yet—Doctor," and the brown eyes looked up into the keen eyes above them with an appeal before which the keen eyes veiled themselves. "Doctor," Reed added a bit unsteadily; "I thought I had succeeded in getting a firm grip on myself once for all; and now—it's gone."

In the end, it was a case for hypodermics, that night, the first time for almost a year. The doctor stayed with Reed till time for dinner; then, with an absolute casualness, he invited Mrs. Opdyke to let him stay and dine with her and the professor. Downstairs, his talk was cheery, careless; no one, seeing the doctor for the first time, would have suspected that anything was on his mind. The professor, though, knew his old friend better, yet he forebore to put a question. He knew that, when Doctor Keltridge was quite ready, he was wont to speak; but not before.

Doctor Keltridge's cigar, smoked in Reed's room, lasted long, that night; above it, the doctor was silent, indolent, and yet alert to every change in the face before him. At nine o'clock, he rose, dived into his breast pocket and pulled out a little case. An instant later, he had bent above the couch.

"Now, Ramsdell," he said cheerily, when he had once more tucked the rug in about Opdyke's arm; "you'd better get this fellow into bed at once. If he isn't sound asleep, inside an hour, you'll know what to do. A good night to you, boy, and many thanks for your educated taste in tobacco. Whatever you do, never allow your supplies to run low, or you'll straightway lose a good half of your social pull. Good night." And, with a nod to Ramsdell, he was gone.

Opdyke was not asleep within an hour. Moreover, although Ramsdell did know what to do, and did it, the stroke of midnight found him still staring at the dark with burning eyes, while the pillowcase underneath his head hissed faintly to the steady throbbing of his temples. The noxious, deadly poison of Mrs. Brenton's talk had made its insidious way through and through his system, loosening its carefully maintained tensions, overthrowing its balances, stirring up all the old, forgotten dregs of rebellious restlessness and turning them into his blood. It mattered nothing that Reed Opdyke recognized the fact that it was poison, mattered nothing that he despised it and fought against it with every antidote within his reach. The harm was done; it would take long and long to undo it, to bring him back to his old mental health once more.

Across the darkness, his life seemed to him to be marching, pageant-wise, a series of separated scenes. They started, according to his idea, in the faint shaft of light that crept in to him through Ramsdell's keyhole—for, despite all orders, the faithful fellow had flatly refused to put himself into bed until Opdyke himself should be snoring. They started, each one of them, in the narrow thread of light; they marched slowly across the blackness of the ceiling above his head, and then they ranged themselves along the opposite wall, and lurked there in the shadow, leering at him. In each one of them, moreover, he held the very centre of the stage.

He saw himself a student, loitering about the elm-arched campus, lounging above a table in the smoke-thick air of Mory's, sitting in Professor Mansfield's study and gravely discussing with him the possibilities included in Scott Brenton. He saw himself in his professional school, star of his class, pampered godling of his mates. He saw himself, his fists in his pockets and his nose to the tanging breeze, striding along the Colorado mountain sides, saw himself, lightly poised on any sort of a contrivance that could swing from a rope's end, going down into the darkness of the mine. Then he saw himself—and, as he looked, his eyes were steady—scrambling over the heaps of wreckage towards the stark form beyond.

And then he saw himself the centre of a group of white-coated surgeons, with Ramsdell's face beside him, Ramsdell's curiously gentle arm around his shoulders. He saw himself, again with Ramsdell, this time at home, and with the stanch old doctor at his other side. And then, all at once, the other figures faded, and he saw himself alone with Olive; saw Olive, daintily alive and eager, saw her merry mask of teasing fun which never really covered the pitiful comprehension underneath; saw himself, still, helpless, a wretched compromise between death and life, answering her nonsense with laughing lips, but with eyes which, however brave, yet were full of an insistent appeal for something that she alone could give him. And Olive was not slow of understanding. Oh, God—

He flung his arm, the arm scarred with the fresh pricks of the useless hypodermic needle, across his burning eyes, his throbbing temples, before he finished out his phrase. Oh, God have mercy! What had he, albeit dumbly, allowed himself to ask of Olive? What right had he, henceforward, to call himself a man, or honourable, or brave, or anything else but an insufferably selfish cad, that he had ever once allowed one such instant of supine appeal to scar the surface of their perfect friendship? A girl like Olive was not for such a man as he was—now. Once, it might have been; but, at that time, it had not occurred to him to think about it. In the fulness of his powers, he had had scant time for women. Now, in his utter weakness—And Olive—

The thread of light became a sudden flood. His hot, wet eyes shrank from the dazzle.

"Did you speak, sir?" Ramsdell inquired, from the nearer threshold.

Some sudden instinct of weakness made Opdyke long for the touch of any firm and friendly hand.

"No, you old owl," he answered. "Still, now you are here, do you mind trying to straighten me out a little? Thanks. That's very good. Now go to bed. I think I am beginning to feel sleepy."

Ramsdell obediently vanished; and Opdyke, shutting his teeth upon his mental agonies, lay silent and as if turned to stone. With a supreme effort at self-control, he drove the pictures from the shadowy wall; he banished Olive from his mind. Instead, he forced himself to think of Whittenden, of the charge that Whittenden had laid on him concerning Brenton. It had seemed a bit unfair at the time; now, looking backward, Opdyke could see that, as usual, Whittenden had been wise. Responsibilities, such as that one, would be very steadying. The need of holding the next man fast would tighten his grip upon himself. After all, it was grip he needed; else, he would be a futile frazzle of humanity, like Prather.

With an inconsequential snap, poor Reed's brain was off again, and on a fresh and open stretch of road. Then suddenly it came against another obstacle. Only the very afternoon before, Prather had broken off his babble to advise a wife, as spiritual plaster for all of this world's woe. A wife! And for him! That any man in his position and with his outlook could harbour for an instant an idea so selfish! And even Olive—

However, this time, Ramsdell did not hear.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Doctor Keltridge smoked for a while in silence. Then,—

"Opdyke is hunting for a new assistant," he said.

Brenton, who had been sitting with his eyes fastened to the rug before him, looked up at the doctor. Looking, his gray eyes were heavy, their light temporarily extinct. Indeed, the old doctor, watching him intently from above his pipe, wondered a little if that light would ever come again. He was quite well aware that it burns only in eyes bent hopefully upon a remote, receding, yet conquerable ideal. Once extinguished, it is well-nigh impossible to kindle it again.

"What is that for?" Brenton queried, with the utter listlessness of a man whose sole absorption is in himself.

"A variety of reasons, I suspect. To be sure, he himself only declares one: the insistent professional calls on his time from outside: books, magazine articles, lectures, and all that. It is wonderfully good for the college to have a man of his calibre on its list. As a trustee, it is my notion that they'd much better give him anything he happens to want, for fear, if they refuse, he'll go out altogether."

"He wouldn't," Brenton said quickly.

"You never know, in a case like that of Opdyke. He has done grand work; his record here is made and done with. He has outside calls enough to fill up his time to the limit of his strength; he has enough money to carry him in comparative luxury to the end of all things, even if he never—"

"Professor Opdyke is no pot-boiler," Brenton interrupted. "It's not money that he counts; it's the thing itself he's after."

"What thing?" the doctor asked, with seeming carelessness.

Brenton flashed into sudden fire.

"The finishing out his work. The trying to add one little bit to the sum total of permanent knowledge. The kind of thing you do yourself, doctor, once your patients give you time to get away from the trail of their beastly aches and pains."

The doctor eyed his companion with a sort of grim amusement.

"That last phrase sounds suspicious, Brenton," he remarked. "Are you also—"

Brenton did not wait for him to finish out the question.

"No; I am not," he snapped, with a testiness that would have been a healthy mental symptom, had it not betrayed the fact that his nerves were dangerously on edge.

The doctor, still watching him from above his pipe, judged it would be well to change the subject.

"Besides," he added casually; "I fancy that Reed may be an entering factor."

"Reed?"

"Yes, with his father. The suspense is telling on them all, telling badly on the professor. From the point of view of the family physician, I believe it is any amount worse than accepting even a surety of the worst."

"What do you call the worst?" Brenton asked flatly.

"That Reed would have to lie there on his back, till the remotest end of time."

For an instant, the old light flared up in Brenton's eyes. Rising, with a backward thrust of

his chair that sent it crashing against a table, he tramped the length of the room and back again.

"God help him!" he said, low. "You think that such a thing is possible?"

The doctor nodded curtly. He loved Reed as he would have loved a son of his own, and it hurt him to put into words even the possibility.

"It is in the limits of the possible," he answered.

Again the tramp across the floor and back again. Then Brenton burst out fiercely.

"And I can sit here and whimper about my fate, that I am the square peg in the round hole, while he—Doctor Keltridge, you don't mean it has come to that?"

"Not yet. I only said, what we all must know, that it is on the cards. No one can tell whether they will turn up, or down. Of course, the fact that the rallying comes so slowly is bound to make us fear that the injury was worse than we thought at first. On the other hand, it is almost out of the question to judge it with any accuracy. Do what we will, we can't get inside Reed's body, and see for ourselves just what reactions, if any, are going on in there. I wonder, Brenton," the doctor faced him steadily; "if ever it has occurred to you that, in the last analysis, pure science is often baffled by the personal equation which comes into it, which defies all analysis, and which upsets the whole of our calculations. If it were not for the fact that Reed's ego is his own property, not ours, we could have settled this point about his future, months on months ago. Beyond a certain limit, though, there is no way for us to tell how far he responds to our experimental treatment. If his muscles do twitch, well and good. If they almost twitch and don't, no mortal mind outside of his can reckon how wide the falling short has been. You can talk about pure, abstract, impersonal science, till the moon turns to an Edam cheese. You can no more grasp the initial fact of what that science really is, than you can follow the example of the athletic cow. There's always the distorting lens of one's own mind to be taken into consideration; quite often there's another fellow's: the eye-piece of the compound microscope, and the objective. Take them away, and what impression do you get?" The doctor pulled himself abruptly out of his harangue. "You can't get any science, without the muddling addition of an ego, Brenton; and, moreover, there's a tentacle or two of every ego that sticks out beyond the edges of the law, and demands a separate code for its own management. It is in framing that separate code that we all fall down."

But, to his regret, Brenton was deaf to his harangue.

"You think," he was repeating; "that it may end in that?"

The doctor ruffled his hair until it stood on end, rampant and tousled as a corn-husk mat.

"Good Lord, man! A doctor doesn't think things," he said, with sudden ire. "Moreover, if he did, he wouldn't say them out. Else, where would his patients be? You can frighten any man to death, by offering him a premature glimpse into the next decade. One day at a time is enough for most of us; more than some of us can manage. As for Reed, it is impossible to testify at present; in the end, I fancy, he will be the chief witness for the defence. Meanwhile, he's game. You don't find him maundering supinely about his latter end. No! Do sit down. That wasn't a back-hander, aimed at you, Brenton. I hit straight, or not at all. I wish I could give you a tonic that would take away a little of your blamed self-sensitiveness, if I can coin the term. You're as unselfish as the rest of them, until you get hold of a bit of impersonal slander. Then you seize it in your arms, and hold it on your mental stomach like a mustard plaster. It doesn't do any good, though. It hurts like thunder in the time of it, and it plays the deuce with your later digestion."

Obediently Brenton sat down; or, to speak more accurately, was borne down by the weight of the doctor's energetic denunciation. It was the first time that he had found the doctor in such a mood as that. Mercifully, Brenton had no inkling that he had brought it on himself by his prelude to the talk. It would have shocked him unspeakably, had it dawned upon him that Doctor Keltridge, within himself, was applying profane adjectives to the spiritual doubtings of his rector. It would have astounded him beyond all words, had he known how trivial to the doctor's seasoned mind had seemed his own juggling touch upon the rival claims of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Had Brenton held within himself one tenth of Reed Opdyke's staying power, all would have come out right in the end. The pieces of the puzzle would have fallen into their true places. Instead, Scott Brenton, in his impatience, was apparently determined to chop the pieces into smaller bits, and then to deface their surfaces almost past recognition. Therefore it had seemed to Doctor Keltridge the one way of escape from the whole pother had been opened by his words, which he now repeated with a fresh emphasis that he hoped would finally impress them upon Scott Brenton's ear.

"Yes; and so, with all this complication on his hands, the professor is hunting for a new assistant."

This time, Brenton looked at him keenly.

"Are you telling that fact to me, for any especial reason, doctor?" he demanded.

"Yes, to my shame, I am. By good rights, Brenton, I ought to order you into a sanatorium, until you get over the desire to make an idiot of yourself. I doubt, though, if it would do any good. I fancy that your case is chronic, that you won't be happy till you've muddled your intellectual salvation according to your own notions. If that's the fact, the sooner you go about it, the better. Your hanging on at Saint Peter's is only so much wear and tear upon your nerves. Ours, too, when it comes to that. One doesn't get much sanctification out of a sermon couched in glittering generalities and delivered by a rector with a crumpled brow. Therefore the trustee of the college has told tales to the doctor, and the doctor is hinting the gist of those tales to his patient."

"Do you think I'd fill the place?" Brenton's voice surprised himself by its unwonted quivering of eagerness.

"Depends on whether you get the chance," the doctor parried. "Moreover, your getting the chance depends on what you think about your taking it. There's another man talked about for the position; but I have a good deal of say in the matter, and Opdyke has more. He considers you rather a genius in his line, a wasted genius, and would jump at a chance to have you put in under him as instructor. What do you think?"

Brenton's reply came without an instant's hesitation.

"I will take it, if it's offered me."

"You know it will shut Saint Peter's door to you for ever? In a case like this, one can't go back again."

"I know," Brenton made brief assent.

"You realize all you are giving up?"

"I do."

"You know the world is full of potential Prathers; and you also know what your wife will say? Does she understand what you have been going through?"

Brenton's lips stiffened.

"I have not meant to keep anything back from her. How far she has grasped all it has meant to me—However, in honour, I have done my best."

And, despite the weakening drop of his voice on the final phrases, the doctor believed him. Believing and likewise knowing Katharine, he pitied Brenton from the bottom of his heart. After all, was the fellow quite so invertebrate as he had sometimes seemed?

"Well, I will talk to Opdyke first, and then bring the matter up before the rest of the trustees. There's a meeting, early in October. Best not do anything until that is over. Then, in all decency, you will have to give a little time to Saint Peter's. You can't well bolt off, like a cook in a tantrum. Prepare their Christmas diet for them; and then go into this other thing, directly after mid-years."

"But, feeling as I do, have I any right to keep on at Saint Peter's?" Brenton queried.

The doctor cut his query short.

"Business is business, no matter how you feel. That curate of yours is as futile as a Persian pussy in a ten-horse plough. It takes a little time to pick up the right sort of a new man for a church like this; you have no right to leave the whole plant at loose ends, while they are about it, just because your ego has a pain in its psychological digestion. People have got to go on being married and buried, even if you can't make a scientific assay of the doctrine of the Atonement. Well," the doctor rose and emptied out his long-cold pipe; "that's all. I wish you luck, Brenton, and I'll help you all I can. Whatever I think about your mental calibre, I do believe that you are honest; and, after all, that's the main thing we all are trying for. Now go along, and talk this matter over with your wife. By the way, how is the baby?"

"A little droopy still. It's not too easy to bring him out of it, as long as I can only give him your stuff on the sly, when Mrs. Brenton is out of the room." Brenton cast a hasty glance at his watch. "It's time he had it now. I must be going," he said hurriedly, and, an instant later, he had bolted from the room.

The doctor listened for the closing of the door. Then his face lost a little of its keenness, and he sighed.

"It must be the very devil and all to have a conscience," he remarked at the four walls around him. "Thank God for one thing: I'm immune."

Filling himself a fresh pipe, he sat himself down to its enjoyment. Half way through it, he spoke once more.

"That woman would beat the Devil in a game of poker, if she could get the immortal souls of men by way of chips."

But the only immortal soul in Katharine's hands just now was the one inside her baby boy, a flimsy, fragile little chip upon the tides of time. However, it would not be Katharine's fault, if time were not soon exchanged for eternity.

Not that Katharine abused the child, though; not that she exactly neglected it. She chose its clothing and food with a proper degree of care; she consulted more than one efficient matron of Saint Peter's congregation, before she accepted the references of the nurse. That done, she left the child's routine chiefly to the nurse; to the nurse exclusively she left all the more tender ministrations to the little, dawning personality. Upon one point, however, she stood firm. When the child was ailing, it should be brought at once to her for succour. It should be healed by the power of her mind, not poisoned by the nostrums of a man like Doctor Keltridge, good as gold, but slavish in his adherence to the foolish old traditions.

Therefore it came about that, when the cruel dog days fell upon the town, when baby after baby became a victim to their scourge until at last it was the Brenton baby's turn, then Katharine suddenly discovered that mind was a poor weapon against incipient dysentery. She fought the disease most valiantly; she even stayed at home for two entire days, holding the baby in one arm, a fat black volume in the other hand, reading and pondering by turns. Being human and feminine and, by this time, a little tired, it is not to be wondered at that occasionally her mind wandered a little from the child to the best amount of starch for muslin frocks. Still, as a whole, she held herself fairly steady; and, by the end of the third day, she was rejoiced to find the child was on the gain. Openly and aloud, she proceeded to give testimony as concerned this test case. To Brenton she talked of it incessantly, in the hope of assisting his conversion to her standards. Unhappily, Brenton, after talking with Doctor Keltridge, and heavily bribing the nurse to hold her tongue, knew more about the causes of the cure than Katharine did, and hence his conversion was not greatly expedited by it.

It was a good ten days afterward, a good week after his talk with Doctor Keltridge, that Brenton dropped in at the Keltridges', one morning, to make his report upon the child. It was the ending of the office hour; three or four patients still were awaiting their turns for consultation. Accordingly, Olive, meeting Brenton on the steps, took him to the library to wait.

"No use your going in there to sit with all the other germs," she told him lightly, as she removed her hat pins and took off her hat. "Come in here, and tell me how the boy is getting on. Better, I hope."

"Yes, better. Still, it is slow to get him up again. Babies are such frail little things; a breath can send them up or down. Of course, I am very anxious."

Olive took swift note of the singular number of the pronoun; its very unconsciousness made it the more ominous. It was really that which framed her answer.

"Yes; but you have a treasure of a nurse. Mrs. Prather tells me that she is a host in herself."

As Olive spoke, she flattered herself that she had bridged the chasm successfully. A glance at Brenton, though, assured her that he had been momentarily aware of the existence of the chasm. Hastily she changed the subject, too hastily, as it proved, to select her new theme with care.

"My father has been telling me a little bit about your future plans, Mr. Brenton."

"My plans?"

She mistook his question utterly.

"No need to worry," she said, with a sudden accent of hauteur. "Of course, I never should think of speaking of them to any outsider. But my father has a trick of talking most things over with me; we have been alone together for so long."

"Of course. There is no reason that you shouldn't know. Besides, it will be an open secret soon. As soon as things are settled with the trustees, I shall resign."

"I am very sorry," Olive said quite simply.

His colour came.

"It is the only honourable thing for me to do, Miss Keltridge."

"I know that," she told him, with a swift return to her old downrightness. "And I am sorry for you, yourself. You must have suffered, in this whole thing, a great deal more than any of us know."

For an instant, his gray eyes deepened, burned. He started to hold out his hand to hers; then he checked the gesture.

"I have. It's not an easy thing to do, Miss Keltridge, the sliding out of a concrete and detailed theology into a something that at best is—"

She cut off his final word.

"I know. Doubting isn't so easy as most people imagine it to be. And you—It must have been fearful."

"To have had such doubts?" he assented musingly. "Yes—"

Again she cut him off, this time rather unexpectedly. Brenton was conscious of a momentary wonder whether her sympathy was less than she had led him to anticipate.

"No; to have had such beliefs, in the first place. If only they had been a little milder, you never would have distrusted them. It's nothing but the rasping surface of a creed that sets the doubts to working."

He tried to conceal a slight sense of hurt beneath his laugh at the concrete image called into being by her words.

"Like ivy poison, when you rub it, and it spreads? Perhaps." Then suddenly his eyes went grave. "The curious fact about it all, Miss Keltridge, is that our beliefs never take half the hold on us that our doubts do. My inherited notions of original sin and a violent conversion never by any chance could have upset my worldly advancement. This last phase of my querying—to phrase it mildly—is going to overturn my—" And, for the first time in her knowledge of him, Olive heard his laugh ring bitter; "my whole scheme of domestic economics."

Bitter as was his laugh, though, Brenton's face was only sad. To Olive, watching him and suddenly grown aware of his weakness, it was plain that life was taking it out of him rather badly, plain that the man before her was hungering for comprehension, comfort. What did he get of that sort, at home?

Once again, at her own question, Olive felt the chasm widening between them, felt it and instinctively detested it. Still, she could not keep her mind from lingering an instant on the wonder whether, if Brenton's wife had been sensitive, unselfish, alert to supply, in so far as lay within her, the sympathy of which he plainly was in need, the present crisis ever would have dawned. She doubted. If ever there had been a case where a wife had muddled things by her total lack of comprehension, here it was. A blind intolerance would have been nothing by comparison.

Suddenly she threw back her shoulders and lifted up her head. It was morally and socially impossible to be heaping all the blame, even of a mental crisis, on the wife. She, as a woman, owed the other woman more sufferance than that. And Brenton was disappointingly weak. No strong man would have fallen down in such a muddle, by reason of a tempest in his spiritual teapot. Besides, if he had steadied to his strain, he might perhaps have held his wife also steady, might even have prevented her allegiance to her new creed. Olive's innate sense of justice demanded division of the blame.

Yet, as the girl pronounced her judgments on both Brenton and his wife, she was conscious of an immense wave of pity which spent itself entirely upon Brenton. Brenton was weak, was futile, disappointing; nevertheless, it was plain that he was suffering keenly. And, just because the nature of his suffering was so alien to all her own life's standards, it impressed itself on Olive as the grim, silent endurance of Reed Opdyke had never done. Reed was Reed, a solid fact past all gainsaying; his point of view had become one of the necessities of her daily life. Always she could predict with just how great a degree of manliness he would bear himself. As for Brenton—

To her extreme surprise, Olive's mind stopped short, and refused to continue the comparison.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The curate, after the manner of his kind, was having tea with a feminine member of his congregation. This time, the honour had fallen upon Olive, who had received it with temperate resignation rather than exuberant joy. Divested of his bunny hood, the curate was a weedy young man with painfully good intentions and a receding chin. Furthermore, he confessed to liking caraway seed in his tea cakes. In other words, the trail of his nursery was still upon him. Accordingly, to atone for the skim-milk quality of his conversation, Olive

habitually refused him cream in his tea, and squeezed in lemon juice until he cried aloud for mercy.

On this particular afternoon, quite as a matter of course, the talk had turned on Brenton. Indeed, it seemed to Olive, nowadays, that the talk invariably did turn on Brenton. All summer long, his matrimonial incongruities, to use no stronger term for the domestic ecclesiastical situation, had furnished talk for half the tea tables in town. Moreover, it was only when a man was present that any woman lifted up her voice in Katharine's defence. Left to themselves, they knew perfectly well that all the scholarly stoops and resonant voices and luminous gray eyes in all creation were not responsible for their universal sympathy for Brenton. The woman was a toad, a selfish and ambitious toad, hopping, hopping, hopping up across the surface of the human pyramid before her. However, in the presence of an occasional tea-drinking husband, one or the other of them embraced convention and talked feelingly of Mrs. Brenton's virtues. As a rule, though, she confessed to herself later on that she had been insistently harping upon a non-existent entity.

Of late, though, a new element had crept into the talk. Without a definite word of any sort having been spoken, there was a widening circle of belief that Brenton's days at Saint Peter's were coming to an end; that he had stumbled over some obstacle in his professional pathway; in short, that he had come an ecclesiastical cropper. Just the form taken by that cropper, just when his relations with Saint Peter's would cease, just why and wherefore, just what would be the next page of Brenton's history: all this was still an enigma past all finding out. For that very reason, it added untold zest to all the cups of tea. Indeed, it had quite ousted the subject of Reed Opdyke from the public mind. Reed, in his own time, had been the one great theme. As the months ran on, though, he presented very little variety to the general eye, and one's subject must show variety at any cost. Therefore Opdyke was abandoned, and Brenton substituted in his place.

Questioned, Olive would have found it hard to tell why the inveterate harping upon Brenton vexed her so. She had been frankly irate, earlier, when the talk had turned on Opdyke; more than once, she had freed her mind and departed on her heels. However, that had been very different; very, very different. Opdyke was an individual; his predicament was a purely personal matter, concerning himself alone. He did not talk of it, himself. Therefore it seemed to Olive that there was no especial reason that all the women in town, some of them total strangers, should be babbling unceasingly about it, with every degree of curiosity and of mawkish sentiment.

But Brenton, partly by virtue of his position in the public eye, partly by reason of something in his make-up which led him to clamour forth his intellectual hardships to any sympathetic ear that offered; by that same token, Brenton seemed to the girl to be the more in need of calm protection. Reed, shut away from all the clamour, was powerless to defend himself. Brenton, timing his steps to the rhythm of the chorus, even giving an occasional metronomic signal to that chorus, was equally powerless to suppress it. The fact that the lack of power was in himself, not in circumstance: this only made it the more piteous. And Olive, listening, did pity Brenton, pity him increasingly, albeit with the pity which is not at all akin to love. It was not his own fault entirely that his virile strength was crossed by the wavering, widening line of weakness that kept him from shutting his teeth upon the results of his spiritual manœuvres; not his own fault that his analytic logic was a long way sounder than his common sense.

"Two lumps, Mr. Ross?" Olive queried, over the second cup of tea. She knew quite well that the question would stamp her once and for all as a careless hostess. Nevertheless, she asked it, as her only means of deflecting the talk from Brenton.

The curate gave a soft and patient sigh.

"No sugar, Miss Keltridge," he corrected her gently; "and, if you don't mind, please not quite so much lemon. There!" He lifted his hand appealingly.

But Olive, smiling brightly back at him, gave the uncut half of lemon another squeeze in her strong and supple fingers.

"Oh, but you will learn to like it in time, Mr. Ross. Then you will wonder how you even tolerated it in any other way."

"I dare say," the curate murmured meekly, as he took the cup.

"Indeed, I know," Olive assured him easily. "When I was young, I used to take it with all sorts of cream in it; but now—" She shook her head. Then she added suavely, "You are sure it is quite all right, Mr. Ross?"

The curate took a courteous taste. Then he strangled a little, not so much, though, at the tea as at the coming falsehood.

"Oh, very!" he said politely, and then he took to stirring his tea with suspicious fervour.

"How strange it always seems to have the town fill up again!" Olive observed, still

determined to keep the talk away from Brenton. "And yet, we miss the girls, when they are gone."

"We miss them at the church," the curate answered with unexpected energy. "They increase the offertory at least twenty-five per cent, and they keep the choir boys from flatting on their upper notes. I had never seen a girls' college, till I came here; but I can't help thinking it has its own disadvantages. I like them in the aggregate, Miss Keltridge; but I can't seem to get on with them individually. They are so distressingly young. I leave all that to Mr. Brenton."

"He has been most successful," Olive assented tamely.

"Yes. He has a way with women, as they say; he manages them by the ears. At least—I mean—" The curate, confounded by the hideous mental picture that he had evoked, was floundering helplessly.

"Exactly," Olive assented once more.

The curate rallied.

"And yet, they all adore him," he concluded. "That is the strange thing about Mr. Brenton, Miss Keltridge. He manages most women grandly," the curate, sure that he had retrieved his error, in his self-gratulation promptly slipped into a second one; "but that suffragette wife of his—"

"Mrs. Brenton is not a suffragette," Olive interposed hurriedly.

"No? Well, she might as well be. She's Christian Scientist, and that is only the next thing to it. Besides, she is terribly masterful, is Mrs. Brenton. Take the case of the baby, for instance: no matter what happens to be the trouble with the little one, Mrs. Brenton won't allow a grain of calomel inside the house. I call it—"

"Olive!" It was the voice of the doctor, speaking from the threshold; and the voice was weighted with anxiety. "Can you be excused for just one minute?"

With a little gesture of apology, Olive left her place beside the tray, and went in the direction of the voice. She overtook her father in his consulting-room, where he was pacing the floor, fists in his pockets, hair awry and his face singularly dark and haggard.

"Olive," he said abruptly, as his daughter came in sight; "can you possibly send off that snippet, and go down to the Opdykes' for an hour?"

"I suppose I can. Is anything the matter?"

"Yes, and no. There's nothing new, exactly; but they all are—getting on their nerves. I've been down there, half the afternoon, trying to steady them; but it is a case where they need a woman. If you can go, Olive? And don't come back, until you can't do another thing for any of them. No matter if it does take it out of you; I can patch you up again, all right. And they all want you. Mrs. Opdyke asked if you would come." The doctor came to a full halt, his face very red, his eyes suffused, and fell to rubbing both hands through and through his hair.

Olive waited a full minute before she spoke. When she did speak, her clear young voice was steady and authoritative.

"Father, what is it? Something must be very wrong. Is Reed—worse?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

The doctor's face grew redder still. Then, of a sudden, the words flew from him in a great gulp of woe.

"He told me, early this afternoon, what he claims to have known surely for a long, long time: that there is no chance for him to gain; that the lower part of his body is absolutely dead; that all our treatment, all our experimenting on it has not affected it at all; that, till the day he dies, he's bound to stay there just as you see him now, half of him perfectly well, half of him a senseless log."

Olive whitened, whitened. There came a faint blue line about her mouth, and her eyes glittered, hot and dry. Nevertheless,—

"You believe it?" she asked steadily.

"I didn't, at the first. In the end, he made me."

The white changed into gray, and the blue line widened.

"I'll go at once," she said briefly. "Please tell Mr. Ross I have been called out on an important errand."

For Olive Keltridge would not flinch, even in this present crisis. If Reed was in this final, consummating agony, and needed her, it was for her to go.

Five minutes later, the curate safely shunted to the front door and through it, the doctor came back again to Olive, a wine glass in his hand. She told him with a gesture that she preferred to be without it.

"You needn't worry," she said quietly, as she settled her hat and gave a touch or two to her crisp white gown; "I promise you I won't disgrace you. I shall go through it better, if I rely just on my nerves, not on a stimulant."

"But it is going to be a bad half-hour for you, Olive."

"Do you suppose I don't know that? Reed and I have been chums since I was three years old; I don't want to watch—"

But the doctor interrupted.

"It isn't Reed you'll have to watch. He will be watching you, trying to let you down as easily as he can. It's like the boy to take in the fact that this thing isn't going to be altogether easy for a few of us others to accept. As far as he is concerned, he's very quiet; his main anxiety appears to be for the effect of the shock on other people. You won't have any scene with Reed; he'll look out for that. It's his father and mother who are the present problem."

"They are—" Olive hesitated for a word.

"The professor is crushed, stunned. It never once has seemed to cross his mind that this thing could be final; and now the fact has knocked him over. As for Mrs. Opdyke, I worry less. She has lost all grip on herself and is hysterical, with Ramsdell in attendance till I can send somebody in. That leaves Reed alone, to hear the echoes of the general unsettlement, and to think them over. Damn it all, Olive! It's bad enough to be knocked out, in the first place; but it's a long way worse to be out of it and to know that you are being wailed over. Mrs. Opdyke is having a veritable wake. For heaven's sake, hurry down there and see if you can't help Ramsdell to steady her down. If you can't, then let her wake it out to her heart's content, and you go up and talk to Reed. Else, he'll go mad."

And Olive went.

As the doctor had foretold, she found the house in psychological chaos. In the library, the professor sat alone beside his desk. Of a sudden, he had turned to the likeness of an old, old man, shrunken and bowed with a grief which, taking his vitality drop by drop, had left him in this present, final crisis, inert, passive, apathetic. He greeted Olive listlessly, answered a question so vaguely as to warn her that any effort on her part to rouse him would be worse than useless, worse because it would change his apathy into renewed despair. For a few minutes, the girl stood beside him, watching him silently, realizing that the shock had been so sudden that it had taken away the power to feel. Like a man knocked out in battle, he only had a dim realization that he had been shot down, pierced in some vital part. It would take him a long time to become aware of just the nature of his injury.

In the next room, Ramsdell was busy with Mrs. Opdyke, very busy, as Olive saw, once she crossed the threshold. She also saw that Ramsdell was as gentle as a woman in the crisis, as gentle and infinitely more strong. There was really nothing for her to do, nothing that Ramsdell, trained for such emergencies, could not do far, far better. And the hysterical sobbing, the moans of the mother's anguish, could be plainly heard through all the silent house. Olive pitied Mrs. Opdyke most intensely; but she was conscious of a sudden longing to administer a restorative box on the ear. It was unthinkable, to her young, elastic strength, that any one could be so weak as to throw over self-control completely; unthinkable that any mother could become so strident in her selfish agony of pity for her stricken son, when she could so much better be holding herself and him quite steady by her brave acceptance of untoward fortune. But then, Mrs. Opdyke was an older woman, and of more feminine mould. Besides, she had had an eighteen-month-long strain, and, moreover, she was Reed's mother, while she herself, Olive, was nothing but a rank outsider, and consequently callous. She did her best to dismiss her longing to smite the wailing Mrs. Opdyke; but the blue ring once more settled about her lips, as she went slowly up the stairs.

In Reed's room everything was curiously unchanged, curiously unlike the spiritual chaos below stairs. The September sunshine came sifting in through the tree tops to dapple with level spots of light the silky surface of the rug; the soft breeze stirred the curtains and then passed on to ruffle the curly mop of bright brown hair that gleamed like polished chestnuts in the sun. After the excitement and the tragedy of the lower rooms, this place seemed as quiet as a sanctuary; and Reed's face matched the quiet, as he turned his eyes to Olive.

"I suppose you know it, too," he said quite steadily. "I wanted to tell you, myself; but I couldn't seem to brace myself to the actual putting it into words. No; don't go to spilling any

tears, Olive; it is too late for that. In fact," and then, just for a moment, the hand outstretched on the rug shut till the nails bit into the softness of the palm; "there is a certain relief in having it out and over, and all settled. We both of us have known we were facing the chance of it. Now we know the worst, and can take it as it comes."

Despite the little quiver of his voice upon the final words, there was a curious peace in his face, the light like nothing else on land and sea. Olive watched it, for a minute, through the blinding, burning tears. Then, forgetful of her promise to her father, she flung herself down on her knees beside the couch, and fell to sobbing like a little child.

She steadied herself soon, however; but not until, with a greater effort than she ever knew, Reed stretched out his arm to its fullest reach and laid his hand upon her cheek, her hair.

"Yes, Olive," he said, very low. "I am glad it hurts you just a little. I wanted you to care."

Then sharply he withdrew his hand and put it out of sight beneath the rug. When once more he spoke, his voice had its old resonance.

"Don't take it too hard, Olive," he bade her cheerily. "I was rather a selfish beast not to have told you earlier, instead of letting you go on hoping for the unattainable. Feeling better? That's good. Of course, we were bound to make our moan together; we've been chums too long to miss that, and there's much more comfort to be taken in a duet of misery than in a pair of separate solos. Now just tell me once for all that you are infernally sorry, and we'll consider that matter settled for all time. Sure you're all right? There's some wine, over in that closet. No? Well, then I'd like to suggest that your hat is rampantly askew. Harrowing scenes aren't good for millinery. Yes, that's straight. Now do haul up a chair, and we'll proceed to talk this thing out to the bitter end. There's no denying that I've made a mess of life by my own recklessness; but apparently I've got to go on living, just the same. Therefore, if you don't mind, suppose we plan how I can go to work to pick up the pieces."

And while, below stairs, Reed Opdyke's parents were prostrate in their sorrow, it was in this fashion that Olive Keltridge, sitting by his side, tried to help him to face forward steadily, and to pick up the useful fragments left of his broken life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Saint Peter's Parish was fifteen miles and a consequent half-hour of time from the nearest fount of Christian Science teaching. Hence it resulted that only rarely had Katharine been used to refresh herself in the tenets of her new theology. In part, this came from her natural self-reliance, coupled with an indolence which made her shrink from the needful effort to catch an early train. In part, it came out of Brenton's heedful planning. Regretting, as he could not fail to do, his wife's allegiance to a creed so alien to the shreds of his own belief, not daring to oppose her absolutely in its observance, he contrived to strew her path with the accumulated petty obstacles which are so much more insurmountable than any single great one. He never set back the hands of the clock to make her miss her train; neither did he lock her in her room. He merely found out at the last minute that he needed one of the small personal services which only a wife can give.

And Katharine, by the very nature of her new and optimistic creed, was powerless to stand out against him. Earlier, fathoming his purposes, she would have raged, have burst into a passion. Now she could only minister to him with an impassive calm, while, in her secret heart, she was piously commending him to the attention of the Universal Mind for discipline. Unhappily for Katharine, however, the Universal Mind appeared to be engaged in some other direction, and Brenton, for the present, was left to go scot free.

This had been the state of the case, ever since the early spring, and Katharine felt the private and personal fount of sanctity within her to be running dry. She was just making up her mind to break away at any cost, when a new complication arose in the person of the baby. Not that Katharine's devotion to her child would have led her to any especial sacrifice, however. Indeed, there was no need for that. The nurse had proved herself an efficient substitute in any normal crisis; and any abnormal one, Katharine believed, could be controlled as well by absent treatment as by present. Unhappily, Katharine had reckoned without taking into account either Brenton's wilful allegiance to the old-fashioned notions of disease, or the nurse's abject allegiance to the father of her puny charge.

For, as the time ran on, no one could deny that the child was puny, that his birthright of health was dwindling fast. And, while it dwindled, the heat came on, and then the stifling dog days. It was a season when the lustiest of children wilted with the damp, depressing heat; and the Brenton baby, never lusty, wilted with them. Katharine treated him with conscientious regularity; but dog days and consequent dysentery proved too strenuous a

claim for her to fight alone, and more and more eagerly she longed for the succour of the nearest local representative of the Mother Church.

Nevertheless, the more she longed, the more she shrank from carrying into effect her longing. Three days before this time, Brenton had come in upon her, sitting beside the weazen child, her eyes on space, her lips moving in silent self-communion. Across the room, the nurse was sobbing into her handkerchief. Now and then, between her sobs, she lifted up her irate eyes to glare upon the placid face beside the little crib.

Brenton had asked a question. Before Katharine could answer, the nurse had cut in and given him a few facts: hours and amounts and consequent symptoms which she deemed disturbing. And then, in a voice which made a curious contrast to the agitation of the nurse, Katharine had urged them to wait, quiet, until she had put the little human creature, suffering from some hidden sin or lack of faith, into a more total communion with the Infinite, the Healer; had even begged them not to allow their ill-concealed doubts to delay the perfect cure.

The nurse, heedless of the Infinite, the Healer, had interposed with a few more facts; had pointed out that physical mal-nutrition can not be made good by a diet of compressed air, however theological that air may be. The baby needed, not the Infinite, but finite stimulants and predigested foods. It needed to be left in peace and quiet, not be stirred up to listen to what, in her increasing ire, the nurse termed mummery and flummery. As for sin, the poor baby wasn't the sinner. It hadn't gone and neglected its only son—

In mercy, less for the logic of the nurse and the consequent feelings of his wife, than for his own nerves, Brenton interrupted. Like most men between two women, he only made the matter infinitely worse. There was a discussion; then there were words. Then Brenton lost his temper and departed on his heels, leaving his wife, the nurse, and the fretful baby wailing aloud in a discordant trio. As a natural result, Katharine forgot the needs of the child and sought the healing contact of the All-Mind upon her own account, while the nurse, drying her tears in haste, seized the child in one arm, the opportunity in the other, and administered the simple remedies she always kept on hand. Brenton, meanwhile, sought Doctor Keltridge. Half an hour later, he was back again, the doctor by his side.

The old doctor, dragged helter-skelter from his laboratory, was in wildest disarray, and his eyes were still a little vague, as he followed Brenton up the stairs to the nursery. Across the threshold of the nursery, however, the vagueness vanished; the eyes grew keen as sharp-pointed bits of steel, yet strangely gentle, while he sat down beside the crib and laid one mammoth brown hand above the scrawny little claw. Then, for just a minute, the keen eyes narrowed to a line. A minute afterward, he looked up and smiled across at Brenton.

"Yes, the little chap is sick, this time; it is about as well you called me in. It's been a bad summer for the children; he's had to take his turn with the rest of them, and it has pulled him down. Poor little youngster!" And one huge forefinger gently hooked itself into the neck of the little gown, drew it away and disclosed the piteous leanness of the throat and chest beneath, the fragile leanness of the baby bird just fallen from the nest. "Poor little youngster!" he repeated. "He has had a hard time of it in this world. Sometimes it does seem as if they didn't start with quite a fair chance."

"Doctor," the word came with something that was very like a groan; "I have done my best."

The doctor stopped him instantly.

"Brenton, I know that. You've had a bad time, too. Don't think for a minute I am forgetting that, even if I don't say too much about it. It's extra hard, in this case, for the boy was perfectly strong, when he was born."

"You mean—" Brenton's mouth had suddenly gone so dry that he could not finish out the phrase.

The doctor did not falter.

"Brenton, if I am to help you keep the boy, I shall have to talk to you brutally. The baby was born all right, healthy as a child could be, tough and strong enough for a dozen children. However, every baby needs a little nursing, needs a little dosing now and then, even if he is healthy. That is what your baby hasn't had. Mrs. Brenton, with the best will in the world, has fed him any sort of milk from any sort of cows, and she has counted on the Infinite to sterilize the milkman's fingers. And, in all probability, the Infinite didn't do it. Too busy, likely, in sterilizing the youngster's mind. Then, when a dose of honest castor oil would have made good the trouble, she gave him a dose of *Science and Health*, instead. It may be all right in theory; in this practical case, she might just as well have rolled up the inspired pages into pills and have poked them down the baby's throat." And then the doctor pulled himself up. "However, that's done with. Now, if you'll stand by me and see that my orders are carried out, I'll fall to work and try my best to undo the harm. You'll see me through, Brenton? It will keep you on duty steadily; but it is the one thing that will save your child."

"Of course. Go on." Then Brenton shut his teeth.

"Nurse, have you been able to give—" And the doctor put her through a searching catechism. Then, "So far, so good. I am glad you kept your head; it was the one chance. Now, suppose we look a little closer."

To Brenton, watching intently, it seemed almost impossible that those great, acid-stained hands could stir, then lift, the little form so tenderly. Indeed, once on the doctor's knee, the baby nestled weakly to the curve of his rough coat sleeve, the heavy lids lifted and the weazen face lighted with the ghost of a tired little smile. Then the lids fell heavily once more; but once more, also, there was the faintly nestling motion of the wee, weary body against the strong, kind arm. And, above the little body, the doctor's face, intently bent over the child, was lighted with a swift reflection from the greater light of the All-Father, yet above.

"Poor little kiddie!" he said slowly. "It's a close shave for him, Brenton; but, if you'll stand by and help, please God, we'll save him yet."

And Brenton did stand by, all evening long and all the night. The nurse was with him, watching. Katharine, furious beneath her scientific calm, came and went at intervals; but the doctor's bottle and spoon were in the breast pocket of Brenton's clerical coat, the doctor's written schedule was set down in duplicate on Brenton's cuff. And Brenton, too tired to be really weary, never once left his chair beside the frilly crib.

Later on, he never could remember what were his thoughts, that night. Being human and very wide awake, he must have thought something; but, ransack his mind as he would, nothing coherent ever came back to him out of the half-forgotten chaos. Indeed, it was as if his whole nature, body, mind, and spirit, were focussing itself upon one passionate desire that his child might live. Not that he consciously prayed. What was there that he could pray to, or for? Laws did not stop their working, to prolong one baby life. Useless to ask for mere futilities. Useless and totally irreverent to insult the Deity by suggesting to Him, however prayerfully, that He had made a bad mistake; that, were His attention only called to the mistake, doubtless He would be glad to set it right while time still remained to Him. And, if the mistake were not set right? If—well—if the child did—die, what then? Did that weazen little body, that mind as yet unopened to any but the simplest of sensations: did these hold within themselves the germs of conscious immortality? Or would the tiny flake of snow upon the desert's dusty waste vanish within its hour or two, be gone? The bud, cut from the rose, may open a bit, when placed in water; then it fades, and dies, and leaves no seed behind. In the same way, the budding life, cut from the parent stem—Who had cut it, though: God, or Katharine, or merely inexorable law? Brenton smothered a groan. Then, because law was inexorable, he cast aside his wonderings, looked at his cuff, at his watch, and shut his fingers upon the bottle and the spoon.

As for Katharine, it would have been well-nigh impossible for any one outside the influence of the mysterious tenets of her scientific creed, to analyze all she felt, that night. Moreover, her insulted creed, had the truth been told, seemed to herself scarcely more to be considered than her insulted self. The child was her own property. She had given it birth; it was for her alone to dictate its experiences. It was her child; not in any actual sense the child of Brenton. And Brenton, too, was hers. Little as she might have come to love him—for by now Katharine had passed the epoch where she reckoned him as anything beyond a subject for critical analysis and consequent deploring—little as she might have come to love him, he was yet her husband and so, in a sense, her chattel. It was for her to rule them both, her husband and her child; she should be dominant, they humbly subject. And now, all of a sudden, they both of them had thrown off her dominance, the child unconsciously, Brenton of his full volition. Apart from any question of the theologic controversy, the household had cast aside her sway, had, in a sense and temporarily, deposed her from her domestic throne, she the strong one of them all. Only her stoically optimistic creed kept Katharine, alone in her own room, from biting at her carefully-groomed finger tips.

And, besides, there was the question of the theologic controversy. What right had Brenton, or the nurse, or the meddlesome old doctor with his hair on end and without his cuffs, to come inside her house and overset her religion? To elevate their own, instead? It was her religion, just as it was her house, her child. And her religion was good. Else, she never would have adopted it. What matter if their cruder minds must have the crass physical details of bottles and spoons with which to fight sin-born disease? What if their narrow blindness destroyed their vision of the all-embracing, all-compelling Mind, source of Holiness, and of Knowledge, and, by consequence, of Health? Should she, by reason of their ignoble interferences and persecutions, yield her own allegiance to the Higher Light? Not she! Rather would she fling herself, heart and soul, into the freshening tide of her own visible church. Out of its ritual only, could she gain new fervour to bear and endure and then, if need be, fight for her spiritual freedom. It was only what the martyrs of old had done; only the work which fell upon the upholders of any new religion.

Katharine, walking the floor of her own room, that night, forgot the holy calm born of the Universal Mind and its optimistic tenets, and by slow degrees lashed herself into a scientific replica of a nervous tantrum. Described in unscientific language, she was a mere shaking

bundle of injured and angry egotism. In the language of her creed, she was a suffering, striving martyr. Her martyrdom, moreover, led her to order breakfast served to her in her own room. It also led her to eat hungrily, in the intervals of making her toilet for the train.

She was already hatted and gloved, when Brenton discovered her intention.

"You are not going out, Katharine?" he asked, with the curious lack of tact which all men show at times.

"I am."

"But—the baby?"

"Baby is better. I have just been in to see him," she replied, as she buttoned her coat, and then flicked a grain of dust from its sleeve.

Brenton shut his lips for just a minute. Then,—

"Katharine," he said very gravely; "you must have seen that the baby is only just alive."

Katharine's glance was resting anxiously upon a drop or two of water on the fingers of her glove. She seemed not to have heard her husband's words. He repeated them.

"Katharine, can't you see that our baby, our little boy, is going fast?"

Katharine looked up.

"Nonsense, Scott!" she said, with perfect calm. "The baby is as well as he was, last night. If he is so desperately ill, the nurse wouldn't have gone away and left him all alone, as I found him. The nurse knows what she is about; that is," swiftly she corrected herself; "she would, if Doctor Keltridge would let her alone. If anything does happen to the child, it will be through you."

"Through me?" Brenton whitened.

"Yes," Katharine answered, reckless of her husband's hurt, reckless, too, of the probable state of his nerves, after his all-night vigil. "I could have cured baby, if you had kept out of it. Your doctors' poisons have done harm enough; but your fears, your distrust, have been the final touch. If you had let me alone, I could have saved him. Even now, it may not be too late." She turned, her chin in the air and her eyes bright with anger, although about her lips there lurked a little smile of pleasure in what seemed to her her own excessive self-control.

Brenton's self-control, though, was the greater. However much his voice might shake, the hand he laid upon her arm was singularly steady.

"Katharine, my dear wife," he said; "I must beg you not to go away from the house just now."

"Why not?" Katharine's voice was metallic in its hardness.

"I am afraid you will be sorry for ever, if you do. The baby—"

She shook his hand away.

"It is for the baby I am going, Scott. Here and alone, I am powerless to counteract the harm you do. I must have help."

"What help?" he asked her hoarsely, while his eyes, almost unseeingly, were busy with a thin trickle of water that clung to the front breadths of her pale-brown gown.

"The help of my church, of their combined prayers. Alone, I can do nothing. I must ask them all to help me, if my baby boy is to be saved from the consequences of his father's doubts."

"Katharine!"

But, with a flutter of her skirts, she had vanished from the room, smiling and self-reliant and very, very smug. To her belief, she had borne down the ignorant oppression of the unbeliever; she had given testimony to her indomitable confidence in her new creed; she was about to give still stronger testimony to the indomitable healing power of that same creed.

And Brenton, left alone, shut his teeth hard upon the ugly words that struggled to his lips. Then, white and wan, less from his all-night vigil than from the five-minute altercation with his wife, he turned away and re-entered the room where the child was lying.

It needed no eye skilled in watching the advance of death to be aware that the little life was ebbing fast. The look of waxiness had been increasing, all night long; the breathing was becoming fitful; the tiny figure seemed relaxed in every weakening limb. The eyes, though

heavy and lustreless, were wide, wide open, and the white little lips wavered into a ghost of a smile, as Brenton crossed the threshold. Then one little hand stirred ever so slightly, strove to lift itself in greeting, failed.

"Daddy's boy!" Brenton said, as bravely as he could.

The ghost of the smile grew a bit stronger, as Brenton sat down beside the crib and, after his custom of these later days, held out one brown forefinger. Instantly, the wan little claw closed around the finger, the baby nestled slightly, and then fell into a light doze.

The nurse's voice, when she spoke, failed to penetrate the doze.

"I called up Doctor Keltridge, and he said he had a broken hip to set at once. It may be two hours, before he can get here. He told me to keep up the stimulant."

"You have used it?"

"Once, while you were talking to Mrs. Brenton. It is nearly time, again."

"Did it——" Brenton's voice failed him utterly.

The nurse hedged.

"It is too soon yet to know. The second dose ought to show more."

But the second dose did not show, nor yet the third. After the fourth one, the nurse looked up.

"Can you telephone to Mrs. Brenton?" she asked.

"You think?"

"That she should be here. Can you get her?"

And then Brenton was forced to confess the truth. The nurse accepted the truth as mercifully as she was able.

"Poor little woman!" she said. "Isn't it wonderful the hold the thing gets—"

Her question was never ended. Instead, she laid her hand on Brenton's sleeve.

"Look!" she whispered.

All at once, the doze had ended. With its ending, all look of tiredness and suffering had gone away out of the baby face. Instead, the little eyes were eager; the little lips were breaking into a smile of utter joyousness; the little arms were up-stretched strongly, the hands wide open and shaking in happy recognition.

"Nurse!" Then Brenton steadied himself with a mighty effort, and bent forward to hold out his arms. "Daddy take boy?" he urged gently, in his accustomed phrase.

There came an instantaneous check upon the baby's eagerness. The head turned, while the eyes met Brenton's without a spark of response. Then once again the little arms shot upward above the brightening face where the eager look of recognition was changing fast to a happiness ineffable, to a glad surety that the vision opened to the baby eyes alone was far beyond the dreams which mortal mind could fashion.

Then the little arms dropped backward; but the ineffable happiness remained.

Gently, very gently, Scott Brenton folded the baby hands across the muslin nightie, and smoothed the ruffled baby hair above the waxy brow. Then, half unconsciously,—

"For Thine is the Kingdom," he said.

And then, a little later on, he wondered why he had said it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The opening of the second semester of the college year found Instructor Brenton busy with his classes.

Conservative old Saint Peter's had taken the upheaval badly, not so much the theoretic questions at stake regarding the soundness of their rector's doctrine, as the loss of their

rector himself. The older members of the congregation loved Brenton as a son, the younger ones as something a little dearer than a brother. One and all, they missed his pastoral visitations, his incisive sermons on the righteousness of honest living; above all else, they missed his voice. If they could have kept these personal marks of the man himself, their rector might have been welcome to believe anything he chose. He was their shepherd and their friend. His curate was there to supply theology enough to answer for them both.

However, Brenton, once his resignation was handed in, turned a deaf ear alike to argument and coaxing. The reason for his resignation he had insisted on setting forth downrightly: he was able no longer to affirm absolute belief in some of the main tenets of his church. The entire community loved Brenton. Now it gave proof of that love in a most loyal fashion. It neither gossiped, nor indulged in undue speculation; it merely did its best to accept the given explanation in all simplicity, and say as little about it as was possible. How well it lived up to its efforts was another question.

Of course, one little circle of Brenton's intimates, the Keltridges and the Opdykes and the Dennisons, talked of the matter freely among themselves, discussing causes, watching for effects. They regretted the necessity for change, doubted it, even. Granted the necessity, though, they rejoiced that Brenton could be transplanted from one calling to the other, without the need for their losing him from their midst. It was Brenton the friend they cared for; not Brenton the preacher and pastor of souls. Moreover, there was not one of them who, asked, would have hesitated to affirm that now at last Scott Brenton was entering upon his true calling. Indeed, had not Professor Opdyke the word of his old colleague, Professor Mansfield, to that effect? Had not Professor Mansfield, even, left his classroom, in the middle of the term, for the sake of appearing before the trustees of the college, and giving his vehement testimony to that same effect?

The college, that section of the college, at least, which dealt with the chemical department, rejoiced greatly, when once Scott Brenton was launched upon his lecture courses. Doctor Keltridge, trustee and medical adviser, though, had a double cause for his rejoicing. Not only did he believe that at last Brenton was the right peg in the proper hole; but he was overjoyed at the possibility of what the change might accomplish in the man himself. Brenton, on the morning that his child had died, had lost something which he never would regain. In more senses than one, his wife and he, henceforward, would be twain, not the one flesh ordained by matrimony. In the hour of his supreme need, Katharine had left him and had gone her scientific way. In that hour, moreover, his little son, pledge of their closest union, had been taken from him; and Brenton was only too well aware that now no second and similar pledge would ever be. In the eyes of the world and of the literal law, Katharine was still his wife. In the eye of the spirit, she was holding herself as far aloof from him as if their marriage had never taken place, so far aloof that, nowadays, Brenton scarcely felt the friction of her presence.

For the first month and the second, this aloofness came upon Scott Brenton's nerves, and drove him well-nigh mad. Night after night, he tramped the floor, asking himself in vain if such a situation could develop, without some fault upon his side. Day after day, he strove most conscientiously to renew the old relations with his wife. He might as well have tried to exhume his baby son and blow in the breath of life between the folded lips. The one was no more dead than was the other. Moreover, as he had been in no conscious sense the cause of either tragedy, so in no sense could he be the conscious cure. The forces culminating in his present trouble had been set in motion long, long before the hour when Catie had poked her curly head in at the gate. Critical, censorious and selfishly ambitious in her little childhood, her womanhood had strengthened along these well-marked lines, and the lines had led her infallibly into the net of the shallowest, most smug religion that ever has set forth a plausible excuse for total selfishness. Once she was landed in the net, the rest was simple. She was in growing harmony with Universal Mind. Whatever thing opposed her viewpoint was out of harmony, and therefore sinful and laden with incipient disease, curable only so far as it yielded allegiance to her scientific doctrine.

And that allegiance Brenton would not yield. In that one matter, he stood firm, albeit he realized but too well that his firmness jeopardized for ever his relations with his wife. After the funeral of their little son, there had been two stormy scenes between them, and then a silence more pregnant of disaster than any storm could ever be. Katharine smiled, and carried her chin high in the air. Brenton's head was bowed between his shoulders; he walked heavily, his eyes upon the ground. Indeed, the two of them were equally lacking in elasticity. Katharine's tension was too great to admit of any margin for spring. Brenton's relaxation was too complete to leave any one aware that a spring ever had existed.

As the weeks ran on into months, the spiritual separation between them grew more definite. There was no friction, no clashing. They were too remote from each other for that. They met at meals as usual; they dined out together; occasionally they sat out a concert side by side. Apart from that, however, they went their ways without discussion. Katharine was flinging her entire enthusiasm, nowadays, into her religious life, and into its interesting corollary, the beautification of her bodily temple for the Universal Mind. She prinked and preened herself just as industriously as she conned her morocco-bound books of devotion. She went to church on Sundays with a zeal that balked at no combination of storms and mileage. Between the services, she spent the greater part of her time in the society of

certain fellow scientists who lived not far away, and she emerged from their society so filled with zeal as to make small evangelistic forays into the borders of Saint Peter's Parish. Olive Keltridge was one victim. Ramsdell was another. Ramsdell, however, stated his own platform unmincingly.

"I beg your pardon for so speaking to a lady," he said crisply; "but I was born in the Established Church, and I don't go for kicking it over into a perfect slush of tommy-rot. Besides, my present job is to look out for Mr. Hopdyke, not to go off my 'ead, arguing about religion." And, with a salute more crushing than he was at all aware, Ramsdell swung on his heel and went striding away down the street.

All this was bound to tell upon a man of Brenton's calibre, the more so in that Brenton already was worn out with fighting his own personal battles of the spirit. For the first few weeks of this evident, though tacit, hostility, he suffered acutely, both from the hostility itself, and from his constant self-examinations to discover whether some fault of his had been the cause. In time, however, there came the inevitable reaction towards a sensible steadiness. Even the spirit can become callous in time, as Brenton was finding out, half to his own regret, half to his infinite relief.

Moreover, outside interests were daily growing more insistent; of necessity they crowded out a little of his personal and domestic worry. There were innumerable conferences with Doctor Keltridge and Professor Opdyke; there was one discussion with the assembled trustees of the college; there was one hard hour of explanation before the assembled wardens of the church. Last of all came the talk with his curate whom, despite his bunny hood and his archaic theological tenets, Brenton had grown to love. Up to the very hour of their talk, the callow little curate had gained no inkling of what his rector had been passing through. To his young mind, the experience was no less cruel to himself than it had been to Brenton. He had supposed that the belief of every man was cut out by a paper pattern outlined from directions in the Pentateuch, and washed in with dainty coloured borders taken from the Gospels and the Book of Revelation. It shocked him unspeakably to find that any man had dared to tear up that pattern and draft a fresh one for himself. However, as the talk went on, shock had yielded to an intense pity, born of his love for his superior officer. Brenton was mistaken, wofully mistaken; but the mistake had cost him dear. All the more, he was deserving pity upon that account. The tears stood in the little curate's honest eyes, as he gripped Brenton's hand at parting. He could not understand his rector in the least; but he could be perfectly aware that it was no small privilege to be admitted to the confidence of so upright a man.

These preliminary duties done, Brenton lost no time in making public the fact of his resignation. At the time, he was too busy with the practical details of his transplanting to pay any great heed to the storm of opposition which his resignation roused. Later on, it pleased him, just as the enthusiasm of his college classes pleased him, after it had ceased to be a fact and had turned into a memory. For the time being, though, he had stopped all feeling. Instead, he must preach his final sermons without flinching, must confine them so closely to the matter of mere practical living as to leave no loophole for dogma to creep in; he must make everything as easy as possible for his successor who, at best, was bound to have a hard time of it in starting; above all, he must help Katharine to choose exactly such a house as she wished, and to furnish it exactly as her taste should dictate. And so the pressure of outside interests fell on Scott Brenton's shoulders until, perforce, they straightened up to bear the burden. And the straightening was by no means wholly theoretical. It was an infinitely saner, sounder Brenton who faced his classes on the first morning of the new semester, than any one, watching him throughout the previous year, would have ever dared to hope.

And Doctor Keltridge, who had watched him rather hopelessly, gave great thanks accordingly.

"You've proved the wisdom of your change, Brenton," he remarked, one day.

"How is that?"

"The whole look of you. You aren't the same man you were, five months ago. Mentally and physically, you're sleeker."

Brenton laughed.

"Is that a sign of wisdom?"

The doctor met the question with composure.

"As a general thing, yes. The normal being is sleek by nature. It's only when he cramps himself that he gets wrinkled. Cramps himself, I say. Cramping from an outside source never has much effect upon him, unless he chooses to have it. No; that's not Christian Science; it's mere common sense. As a rule, the two things are incompatible. By the way, I hear that your ex-curate has been tackling your wife."

"No!"

"A fact. The boy told me. She started out to tackle him, and he clinched with her. I must say it was plucky of him, even if it didn't appear to do much good."

Brenton's gray eyes clouded.

"The only question is: what is good," he said thoughtfully.

"No question about it," the doctor blustered. "The only chance the idiot woman has—"

Brenton interrupted.

"She is my wife," he reminded the doctor.

"I don't care if she is your wife, twenty times over," Doctor Keltridge said vehemently. "We both know the infernal thing that she has done."

"But, if she believed it was right—" Brenton was beginning faintly.

The doctor bore him down.

"Because she is a semi-maniac, she's not to be encouraged in her destruction of the human race," he argued hotly. Then, as he saw the tightening and the whitening of Brenton's lips, he forgot his argument in swift contrition. "Damn it all, Brenton! I vowed I'd never mention the thing to you again, as long as I lived, and here I am again, off on the same old subject. I'm a garrulous old man; but——" his keen face softened, puckered into a score of wrinkles; "but I loved that baby boy. I brought him into the world, and I had spent no small amount of time congratulating myself upon the fact that you'd got him, at any rate; that you'd have him for a comforting little peg to hang your spiritual hat on, when you came home from preaching the gospel to a disgruntled and disgruntling world. Almost I think I felt his death more than—"

"Not more than I." Brenton faced him steadily.

"Not in one sense. And yet, I did feel it more, because, from the first, I saw how needless it would be."

But Brenton lifted up his hand.

"It's over now," he said concisely. "Why talk about it? Some memories are best off, left to perish."

And, in all truth, this was one of them. Now and then, it would stir in its grave, and lift up its ugly head for recognition; but, as a rule, the two men had done their best to heap the dust of time and forgetfulness upon its grave. And yet, certain scenes are so hideous that one never quite forgets them. It had been ordained for Brenton that the passing of his baby son should be followed by such a scene, by a discovery so tragic as to make the painless baby death sink into insignificance beside it.

It was the doctor himself who had made the discovery, made it just too late to have it do much good to any one. The nurse and Brenton were still bending above the frilly crib, smoothing out the muslin folds around the child and straightening the blankets, when the doctor came into the room, eager, his face alight with strength and purpose to do his share in what he knew too well could be only a fight to the very finish. The words of cheer died from his lips, though, as he caught sight of Brenton's face.

"Not yet?" he asked, with an abruptness far more sympathetic than any amount of tears.

"Yes. Just now."

"Impossible!" The single word was curt. Still more curt was the brief question to the nurse, "You gave the stimulant, as I ordered?"

"Three times."

"What effect did it have?"

"None."

"Impossible!" the doctor said, yet once again. "It is what we always use in such cases as this. There must be some mistake. Show me the bottle."

The nurse turned scarlet at the curt command. Then quietly she rose and fetched the bottle, now half empty.

"Let me take it." The doctor's face was now as scarlet as her own, the veins upon his brow were swollen and hard as knotted cords; but his hand was very steady, as he took the bottle, removed the cork, smelled, tasted. "Who has had access to this bottle?" he thundered then, and his voice boded little good to any meddler.

"Mr. Brenton and myself."

"Who else?"

"Nobody."

The veins about the temples began throbbing heavily. Brenton could see the skin about them tighten to the pulse-beat. Between them, the keen eyes gleamed like balls of polished metal surcharged with electricity.

"Think again, nurse," Doctor Keltridge said slowly. "And remember that your professional reputation is at stake. That bottle has been emptied and refilled with water. Where has that bottle been?"

"On the mantel."

"Who has been in the room?"

"Mr. Brenton, myself, and the baby."

"And Mrs. Brenton?" The doctor's eyes were fixed upon the nurse, as he put the question. He did not see the sudden whitening of Brenton's face; but his trained ear did make out the swift intake of Brenton's breath.

"She came and went."

"When you were here?"

"Yes."

"And you were here, you or Mr. Brenton, all night long?"

"Yes."

"And all the morning?"

"Except when I was telephoning to you."

"Hm!" This time, as casually as he was able, the doctor glanced at Brenton, and his glance caught Brenton stuffing a wadded handkerchief into his pocket. Above his forehead, his hair was damp and sticky. "You left the room, while you called me up? And, when you went away, the bottle was on the mantel? You are sure?"

"I am sure."

"Where was it, when you came back?"

"In the same place. I know that, for I went straight to it. You had just told me it would keep the child alive, until you came." Under the rapid fire of questions, the nurse's voice began to show defiance.

The doctor recognized the defiance, and lifted up his head.

"Steady, nurse," he cautioned her. "Don't get on your nerves now; there is too much at stake. Where were the others, while you were telephoning?"

"Mr. Brenton had gone downstairs to get his breakfast. Mrs. Brenton was dressing in her room."

"All the time?"

"I—I supposed so." The nurse turned to Brenton sharply. "You met her, Mr. Brenton, when she started down the stairs?" she asked him. "I am sure I heard you speaking to her, sure that I heard her answer."

Brenton wet his lips; then he passed his hand across his brow, palm outward. Both nurse and doctor could see the heavy streak of moisture gathered in the life-line.

"Forgive me, doctor," he said, after a minute. "I seem dazed by this thing; it has been a long and anxious night, and I am more upset than I had supposed. Mrs. Brenton? She has gone away to church; she felt that now, if ever, she needed the help and the prayers of her own people."

But the doctor was not to be put off with mere evasions. He pressed his question mercilessly, hating himself acutely, all the while.

"You saw her, as the nurse says, when she first came out of her room, this morning?"

"Yes." Brenton's voice had lost its resonance and sounded curiously listless, as he

answered. "Yes, I saw her then, and urged her not to go."

The doctor's eyes veiled themselves abruptly, and he turned away. The nurse, watching, felt he was satisfied that no blunder had occurred within the house. Brenton, though, knew differently. Watching the doctor, he was well aware that, in the doctor's mind, there were no more doubts as to the person who had made the fatal substitution than as if, like Brenton's self, his keen old eyes had rested upon the telltale drops clinging to Katharine's front breadths.

The doctor's eyes had veiled themselves; Brenton had turned away and sunk down in a chair. An instant later, both the men had rallied to a swift attention. Katharine, alert, smiling a little and stepping lightly, carelessly, it seemed, was coming up the stairs.

Doctor Keltridge turned to the nurse.

"You must be very tired," he said, with a kindliness which yet held its own note of command. "Go now and eat a good breakfast, and then lie down. I shall be here, for the present." Then he faced back to Katharine, who stood upon the threshold.

"You here, doctor?" she said jauntily, as she came in. "I'm sure it's very good of you."

"Yes, Mrs. Brenton. I am here."

His accent took a little from the jauntiness of Katharine's bearing.

"Has anything happened?" she asked swiftly.

"Happened?" The doctor's voice was grim with unphrased reproach.

"How is my baby boy?" she asked again.

Her well-considered flutter of agitation angered the doctor utterly. His reply came like a blow from a bludgeon.

"Dead."

"Doctor! My baby boy! When? How?" And Katharine, really startled now, hurried across the floor to the corner where the frilly crib shielded the quiet sleeper from her gaze.

Half-way across the floor, she was brought to an abrupt halt. The doctor's hand was shut upon her arm in a clutch of iron; the doctor's eyes were blazing down at her in a rage such as Brenton, watching, had never before seen upon the face of human man.

"Stop!" he bade her curtly, yet in a voice too low to give the servants below stairs any hint of the strife going on above. "Your baby boy is sleeping in his Heavenly Father's arms. It is not for any one like you to try to waken him; not for you, unrepenting, to look into his face."

"Unrepenting! Doctor!" Katharine tried to shrink away from the accusing face and voice; but the iron hand held her firmly.

"Yes, unrepenting," the doctor repeated gravely and, as he spoke, he loosed his hold upon her arm. "Mrs. Brenton, you asked me how the baby died. There is your answer." And he pointed to the row of bottles on the shelf.

Instantly she rallied. Neither, whether to her shame or credit be it said, did she make any effort to deny his wordless charge.

"Well? Suppose I did?" she said, with sudden calmness. "It was my only chance to save my child."

"Katharine—"

"Wait, Brenton." The doctor spoke as gently as if he had been talking to a tired little child. "Please leave this thing to me; it may save you something, later on." Then his voice hardened. "You admit it, then?" he queried.

Without a glance at her husband, Katharine faced the doctor, her head held high, her eyes and cheeks blazing with anger.

"I am proud to do so," she said, and her voice was hard as steel. "It is my one chance to speak out in behalf of my faith."

"Your faith has murdered your child," the doctor told her harshly.

She answered him with equal harshness.

"The murder lies at your own door. Left alone, I would have saved him. Your drugs have weakened him; your unreasonable doubts have killed him utterly. Between the two of you, yourself and—him," and the little pause was venomous with unspoken hatred; "you have

killed my baby boy. I did my best; I took the final chance. But I could not go to seek the help of my own church, and leave you, unguarded, to do your harm in your own way. I did the only thing left to me, when I emptied out your bottle and filled it with water. We are told that no healing can be accomplished, if drugs are being used at the same time."

"Who tells you?" the doctor queried stormily.

She stared at him disdainfully, before she answered,—

"The All-Mother of our Church." Then, still disdainfully, she turned to leave the room. "Scott, if you wish to speak to me, I shall be in my own room," she said.

And then, still smiling slightly, still a little bit disdainful, she went away and left the two men standing there alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"He isn't always such an ass," Dolph said, as he crossed his legs, preparatory to a long discussion. "It's only when he sets out to be bold and bad that he's so intolerable."

"Prather and the adjectives don't seem to match up very well," Reed objected.

"No. That is the whole trouble; he can't live up to his ambitions. The poor little beggar would like nothing better than to go the pace, as a sort of experimental lap for the instruction of his characters; but he always finds the pace too swift, and lags behind. As result, he isn't fast, but merely skittish. In the same way, he'd like to pose as a black-hearted villain. Instead, he gets to a point where he is just about as unsanctified as a Sunday edition of fruit salad."

"Sunday?"

"Yes, when they chuck in all the odds and ends of wine left from the dinners of the week. To the untrained tongue, it is a fearful pleasure to partake thereof. Prather makes up his iniquitous debauches after the same recipe: absorbing the yellow journals and the orange output of his fellow novelists, going down to New York for a week end, and then coming home to embody in a novel his consequent attack of biliousness."

"You've read his last one?"

Dolph nodded.

"And therefore I know whereof I speak," he added gloomily. "I wish the little beggar would leave off his moving picture shows of town society, and hie his muse once more in search of subjects from the woolly West."

"Knowing the West more than a little, I don't." Reed spoke with decision.

"What's the harm?"

"He doesn't get within a gunshot of the truth."

"No matter. He thinks he does, and the average member of his reading public doesn't know enough to realize the difference."

"All the worse. He ought to be sued for libel. By the way, did you know he has been having his professional eye on me?"

"For what?"

"Copy, of course. He got to calling rather often. I must say that I lured him on; I found his babble a distraction. Then, one day—Prather is nothing, if not transparent—he let out the fact that he was taking notes of me, for his next novel."

"Of all the—"

Reed interrupted.

"Not in my present ignominy, however; but as I must have been, he explained most considerately, in my prime. He must have had good confidence in his own imagination, though."

"Of course," Dolph said serenely. "He's always banked on that. I've heard him telling, after any number of different dinners, what a feat it was for him to write *A Portia of the Rockies*

when, for a fact, he never had been farther west than Toledo. But what is he going to do with you?"

"Nothing. I called him off."

Dolph nodded at the ankle he was nursing in both hands.

"Grand work, that!" he said. "It would be about as easy as calling off a flea that was starting on a cross-country journey to the nearest dog. How did you manage?"

Reed's brown eyes laughed; but his voice was grave.

"I invoked Ramsdell, and he did the deed. From all accounts, he did it thoroughly, for Prather hasn't put his nose inside my room, since the day that Ramsdell escorted him downstairs."

"I say!" Dolph looked up suddenly. "I've a patch to put over that hole. About three weeks ago? Yes? Well, at Olive Keltridge's last dinner, Prather came edging up to me. I saw he had things on his mind, and I wasn't busy, so I let him get them off. Else, I was afraid he'd strangle with the unaccustomed load."

"And the things were me?" Reed inquired urbanely.

"Yes. He asked me if I had heard that you were growing very nervous lately. That you—Well, never mind the rest of it. In the time of it, though, I supposed that it was his novelist's imagination that had got to work. Now I know it was only another manifestation of the almighty Ramsdell."

"He is almighty, Dolph. I'd be badly off without him."

"So I observe." Dolph chuckled. "At first, I was as afraid of him as if he had been a country undertaker looking for a job; but I'm slowly coming to the belief that the fellow is an actual wag. Really, you'd be badly off without him. He'll stay on, of course?"

"As long as I can keep him. He informs me daily that he'll see me through it till I die. From all indications, though, I'm a good deal more afraid of his dying, first."

"Rot!" Dolph remarked cheerily. "What you need, Opdyke, is to forego thoughts of dying, and get busy."

"What about?" Reed asked a little bitterly. "My present environment isn't particularly fitted for the strenuous life."

Dolph shut his two hands, side by side, around his ankle. When he spoke, though, his voice was unconcerned.

"Not unless you take your profession into bed with you," he remarked.

From behind Opdyke's courteous smile for a rather dull joke, there gathered interest, comprehension, eagerness.

"Dennison, you mean something or other, out of that," he said, after a little pause.

Dolph shot him one swift glance of scrutiny.

"Naturally. As a rule, I don't talk at random," he said then.

"What do you mean, exactly?" Reed sought to put the question steadily, but his voice throbbed with excitement.

Satisfied with the start that he had made, Dolph let go his ankle and sank back inertly in his chair.

"What idiots you specialist fellows are!" he observed indolently. "Once you get smacked on the head, you're all in. You think you are killed, and, instead of kicking around to find out the truth of the matter, you promptly proceed to turn up your toes."

Reed eyed him keenly, spoke impatiently.

"Interpret, Dolph. I may be dense; but I can't see what it is you're driving at."

"More fool you! I thought better of you, Opdyke, than all that," Dolph told him, with unabated serenity. "Didn't you ever hear of such a thing as a consulting engineer?"

"I ought, as it was my official title," Reed made curt answer. "What then?"

"Put your title into commission, man."

"Impossible."

"Not at all. Of course, you can't go raging around the mountains; but you may have heard of an old gentleman named Mahomet. Yes? Well, there you are. And you've a laboratory and a staff of chemists under your very elbow. Make your people come to you, instead of your going to them. Your reputation is all made by now. Sit back and get the working good out of it, not chuck it away as if it wasn't worth an uninitialled Lincoln cent."

Nothing more nonchalant and unconcerned than Dolph's drawling utterance could have been imagined. None the less, his words appeared to have kindled into new flame the burnt-out fires of Opdyke's professional ambition. For a minute or two, he lay quite silent, while two scarlet patches glowed upon his cheeks, and while the eyes above them seemed to fix themselves on distant vistas far beyond the limits of Dolph's sight. Then at last, he spoke, whimsically as far as his mere wording went, but in a voice which Dolph found scarcely recognizable.

"Dennison," he said slowly; "for a man who aims to be considered a genius by reason of the chronic mismatching of his socks and ties, and by his discordant metaphors, you once in a while do have an inspiration. Thanks. And now, would you mind it, if I asked you to go home? I believe I'd like a little time to think things over. Come in, to-morrow morning, though. Else, I shall send Ramsdell out to capture you."

Next day, Dolph did come in, and again the next. On the third day, Opdyke had a half-dozen letters to show him, a half-dozen bits of planning to submit to his shrewd young brain.

"I've rather got to count on you in this thing, Dennison," he said concisely. "My father is an older man, and the past two years have been hard on him; he's not so aggressive as he was, not half so optimistic. Doctor Keltridge will be watching me to see that I'm not overdoing. He means well; but now and then it's healthy to overdo matters a little. Brenton has all he can handle, with his wife. Therefore, in view of Ramsdell's scholarly attainments, and until I'm justified in setting up a professional assistant, I rather fancy that it's up to you."

"Thanks. I'm there, every time," Dolph told him crisply. "Besides, after yesterday, I'd walk on my ears for you."

"You might give a sample exhibition now. Have you said anything, yet?"

"No chance. Besides, I rather hated—Hang it all, Reed, I don't want to be in a hurry about shuffling off in your best shoes!"

Reed's eyes lost a little of their eagerness; but his smile was unfaltering.

"They never were my shoes, Dolph. Even if they had been, I couldn't wear them now; that has all gone by. And, if they had been mine, and I had had to pass them on to some one else, there is no one in the world I'd see walking off in them so contentedly as I would see you. Fact, man, so take it as it comes, and enter into your own kingdom."

"If it is mine," Dolph said gravely.

"I think it is. It is for you to find out, though. But remember this: you are not to feel for one instant that you're dispossessing any rightful heir. The chance is yours, Dolph. Most likely it never would have been mine, in any case. Now it is totally impossible."

Dolph attempted one last remonstrance.

"But why?" he asked vehemently.

The smile faded from Reed's lips, and the lines around the lips grew grim.

"Because," he answered tersely; "my common sense is in working order, even if my legs are not."

And, with this downright assurance ringing in his ears and with the tragedy of its brave renunciation crowding out somewhat of his own hopefulness, Dolph Dennison went away in search of Olive Keltridge.

Olive, however, was gone to a luncheon out of town, so Dolph was told by the maid who answered to his ringing. Therefore he went his way once more; and, feeling idle, unsettled, alternately depressed at the prospect of what he deemed his coming selfishness in seeking Olive again later on, and elated with a general zeal for altruistic effort by the success of his attempt to arouse Opdyke's dormant ambition: because of all these things, he suddenly decided that it would be the part of good fellowship to pay a visit to his former rector and present colleague, Brenton.

To be sure, Dolph had never had the habit of calling upon Brenton. From the first, his liking for the man had been a temperate one, a liking mitigated by his own regrets concerning the nature of Brenton's sense of humour. Moreover, he shied a little bit at Brenton's priestly calling, shied a little bit more at the idea of coming into closer quarters

with Brenton's wife. Now, from all accounts, the wife was somewhat in abeyance; and the sudden reversal of Brenton's collar buttons had turned him from the picture of a priest to at least the semblance of a man.

In regard to Brenton, Dolph Dennison saw no need to mince matters. His clear young eyes had made out the one loose thread that sagged and knotted across and across the texture of Brenton's mind. He saw it and, lacking knowledge of its source in Brenton's erratic father, he condemned it with the cocksure harshness of exceeding youth. Without it, Brenton would have been all man. With it, Dolph believed, he was predestined to futility. Indeed, what hope was there for a man who would get himself all waxy over such played-out doctrines as predestination, and then sit by, impotently calm, and watch his wife go off upon the Christian Science tangent, without a word to stop her and tie her down to reason? It was like finding cold, bare bones embedded in one's breakfast porridge. None the less, one did owe some social decencies to one's colleagues of the faculty. Therefore, despite his new-formed porridge metaphor, Dolph trudged away in the direction of the Brentons' home.

The new home was a smaller one than Saint Peter's rectory. It stood back a little from the street, under a trio of giant hemlocks which shaded the front verandah and the long stretch of gravelled walk. The shady walk was damp now, with the moisture of the early spring, and the wet little stones ground only softly underneath Dolph's heels, so softly that their murmur was quite inaudible inside the house, although a window, wide open to the front verandah, gave to Dolph, as he crossed the lawn, a full knowledge of the discussion going on within. It was a one-sided sort of a discussion, to all appearing. Moreover, from the pitch and the velocity of the voice, Dolph judged the discussion to be largely on the part of the Brentons' most recent cook.

"There's no use in my trying to please you," he heard the voice say, as he started up the strip of gravel. "You find fault with everything I do; you interfere with my rights—"

There came the low murmur of another voice. Then,—

"Rights? My rights to rule my life according to my own beliefs. My rights to seek the Universal Truth. I have my way to go, as you say you have yours. The two ways can never be the same. I have tried my best to make them so; but it is no use."

Again the murmur.

"And my best to live up to my share of a bad bargain," came the brutal answer. "My best to—" The voice choked with its own emotions.

"Tut! Tut!" Dolph remarked softly, at the invisible owner of the voice. "Steady, now; or you'll be crying, next thing you know."

His warning, though, was needless. No trace of tears came into the militant reply to the next low words.

"Yes, a bad, bad bargain. When we came together, I dreamed of a perfect union, a life of mutual opportunity. Oh, yes, I know. You say it's all on account of my beliefs, all because I have strayed away from the chalkline you marked out for me. But who else has strayed? Who else has thrown over his earlier creed? And you have thrown with it all belief in anything, tossed it aside as if it had been a worn-out rag. I have laid it aside, unharmed, and chosen out another creed of finer texture. And now you think I am going to stay here, inert, supine, and watch you tear that creed apart. Never!"

"Grand language, that," Dolph soliloquized, as he mounted the steps and came into hearing of the words. "Evidently, it's not the cook; she wouldn't be up to that level."

"Your fault? Whose fault, else? Who first took pains to teach me that the old creed of our parents was unbelievable? Who put the first questionings into my young mind? Who waked me from my mental sleep? It was you, yourself. Without you, I never should have known the peace which now I feel. For so much, I am grateful to you, Scott Brenton."

On the final sentences, the angry voice had lowered its pitch a little, as if to come into some slight consonance with the peace of which it boasted. The different cadence, coupled with the unexpected use of Brenton's given name, brought light to Dolph Dennison.

"Damn!" he remarked succinctly, letting go the knocker with which he had been hoping to put an end to the discussion. "It's Mrs. Brenton!"

And then, obedient to the town-wide impulse which never failed to come in times of trouble, Dolph bolted down the Brenton doorsteps on his tiptoes, and dashed away in search of Doctor Keltridge.

The pause which followed his departure, as a matter of course, had no connection with it. Rather, it was of two-fold purpose. Katharine needed time to catch her breath; Brenton needed time to rally his mind to meet the sudden strain. In the end, it was Brenton who spoke.

"Then, Katharine, what is it your plan to do?"

"My plan!" her voice bespoke her scorn. "At least, then, you are beginning to consider me a little."

"I always have meant to consider you, Katharine."

"When? In what way?" But she waited for no answer, except the one which she herself was ready to give. "None. You lived your life. You went your way. You gave me the crumbs of your time, of your mind. My share in your life came out of what your other friends left over. Did you consult me, when you turned into an Episcopalian? No! Did you consult me, when you threw it all aside, all your pretty broken toy that, once on a time, you had called religion, and went to teaching chemistry to a pack of girls? No! A thousand times, no! You made your life the way you wanted it. You say it was your right to do so. Then, in the same way, I claim it is my right, in searching for the truth, to make my life over into anything I choose."

"But, if your choice is not a wise one?"

She turned upon him fiercely.

"Who are you to judge? And is your own choice so wise? Your own choices, rather, for, if I remember clearly, there have been a number of them. And what good have they done to any man?"

"Too little good, Katharine," Brenton assented humbly. "At least, though, they have done no harm."

"How do you know that?" she taunted him defiantly. "How is any man to know the harm he can do by a wrong belief? No; I don't mean the harm you may have done to yourself. That is superficial. You can cure it easily; there are dozens of mental plasters that you can apply." Her voice grew yet more scornful on the phrase. "But what about the harm to other people? What about the harm to me from all your theological shilly-shally? The only wonder of it all is that I was given the strength to come out of it and into something better. And now—"

Brenton stayed her torrent of words by the very quiet of his brief question.

"Now, Katharine?"

"Now I demand my right to go out and make what I can of the little you have left me of my life."

"In what way?"

His quiet interrogations pierced her excitement as no opposition could have done. Her next reply, when it came, was almost devoid of passion.

"I wish to study. I must have my time for that, not fritter it away on managing servants and going to faculty dinners."

"To study what?"

Again she flung up her head, and her eyes glittered. Her voice, though, was now under perfect control.

"To study my religion, to learn to know it through and through."

"I thought you knew it now."

She looked at him as from a measureless height of wisdom and experience.

"Does one ever know the Infinite? Our belief can not be packed into a neat bundle and tied up in the Apostles Creed. It is deeper than that, and far, far wider. And then," and, to Brenton's astonishment, her face lighted with a smile which was curiously akin to one of happy peace; "and, in time, I shall do my best to prepare myself to be a Healer."

"Katharine!" Despite the peaceful smile which had heralded the announcement, Brenton felt his whole nature recoiling from the thought.

"Why not?" she asked him swiftly. "You mean I am not worthy? Of course not—yet. In time, though, it will come; in time, I shall be free from thoughts such as have dragged me down into to-day's discussion. Not, though, while I live with you as you are now. Not while I have the daily friction of your unbelief and opposition. While these confront me, I am tied down to the lower level; the hour has come when I know it is my higher duty to go free. For that reason, I have told you this, to-day. One has to make practical plans, even if it is to carry out spiritual endeavours. There are things to arrange, before I go."

There came a little silence. Then,—

"You are really going?" Brenton asked.

"I am."

"When?"

"I promised to be in Boston, early in the week."

Again there came the silence. This time, it lasted until, with an ostentatiously natural step, Katharine turned away and left the room. Then, for an instant, Brenton stood staring after her. An instant later, he had dropped down at his desk and buried his face within the circle of his clasped arms, covering his ears to shut out the echo of his wife's accusing words. He tried to drive off from his mind the ugly question how far he himself had been blamable for this thing; how far he might have steadied Katharine by forcing her to go with him into all the secrets of his life. Instead, he tried to fix his mind upon the approaching ruin of his home; but he only could succeed in thinking about the passing of his baby boy, about the way the weazen little arms had shot upward, waving in joyous and insistent recognition. After all their tedious, aching search for truth, Katharine's search and his, had it been given to that little child to find out and acknowledge the eternal verities, hidden for ever from their older eyes?

And, meanwhile, his world was waxing empty. First his beliefs had gone; and then his baby boy, his hope; and now, last of all, was to go his wife who should have been his final trust. The past was finished. Ahead of him was nothing but a lonely road which led nowhere and ended in nothing. Of what use for a tired man like himself to force himself up and on along it? Of what use to deny his share of domestic blame, merely because his intentions had been of the most unselfish? His head sank lower in his clasping arms.

It was so that Doctor Keltridge found him when, an hour later, he came marching in at the unlatched front door.

CHAPTER THIRTY

"The thing is amounting to an obsession," Doctor Keltridge told Professor Opdyke testily, two months later. "I never saw a case of such ineradicable dubiousness concerning all the things that do not count."

"But the fellow is sincere," the professor urged in extenuation.

"Yes; that makes it all so much the worse, as we doctors are aware. It's a species of disease, Opdyke, and when a patient takes his disease seriously, as a general rule it's all up with him. Just how far has Brenton gone?"

"From our standpoint, not very far; from the standpoint of the student mind, to the outer limits of agnosticism."

The doctor whistled thoughtfully.

"What a damn-fool he is, Opdyke!" he remarked, with stress upon the hyphen.

"Yes, and no. If I were going to analyze him, I'd write his formula as B{_3}M+ECo{_7}, thrice brilliant man plus—and, mind you, the plus is a serious handicap—an embodied conscience raised to the seventh power. Brenton is brilliant; but his mind works in a series of swift flashes, and the flashes dazzle him till they spoil all of his perspective. Instead of taking them for what they are, mere sparks flying from the ends of broken mental contact, he thinks that they are errant gleams of universal truth, vouchsafed to him alone. Then his seven-horse-power conscience goes to work, and bids him scatter the gleams across a darkening world. If he didn't mean so very well, he would do infinitely better. However, he —"

"Is Brenton," the doctor interposed quietly. "What is more, he will be Brenton till the end of time. He even may get worse, by way of natural reaction from the strain he was under with his wife. He steadied to that better than I hoped, steadied to the baby's death, and steadied to the reproaches she considerately heaped on him for her parting gift."

"Reproaches?"

"Yes. She told him that he was to blame for the whole situation; that, if he hadn't run amok, she would be jogging contentedly along the path of ancestral Calvinism. Moreover, the fact that there is more than a grain of truth in her contention doesn't lessen the sting that it has left behind. Now, as a natural consequence, the strain over, he is letting go entirely. He is made like that. Unless we want him to go to pieces utterly, we shall either

have to invoke the aid of circumstance, or else bring him up with a round turn, ourselves."

"How?" the professor queried flatly. "A man in his position is not amenable to discipline."

"I'm not so sure of that." The doctor chuckled. "I am a trustee, you know."

"Then he'll resign."

"Not a bit of it. He may threaten it, may talk grand and elevated nonsense concerning freedom of speech and all the rest of it. When it comes to resignation, though, he will draw in his horns. His life is in that laboratory of yours."

"And in his students?"

"No. There's the trouble. It's the idea itself he's after, not its growing grip upon the world at large."

"Then what makes him——" The professor paused for the fitting word.

The doctor supplied it, and remorselessly.

"Explatterate? Because it's a part of him to talk forth his imaginings, and, just at the present hour, he lacks all proper outlet but his class. Something has gone bad inside the man; no wonder, though, when one thinks of all that he has gone through. Even you, Opdyke, will never know the worst of that. Still, we shall have to put some sort of brake upon him; he can't go on like this."

For a little while, the professor smoked in silence.

"Can't you warn him unofficially, Keltridge?" he asked then.

"That he is disgracing the department?"

"No. That he is wrecking his final chance to amount to anything that's practical? That, if he holds on here, he must keep within some sort of limits in the things he says? That, if he lets go this present opportunity, he'll turn into the worst of all things, a mental derelict?"

The doctor groaned at the suggestion.

"Opdyke, I'll be hanged if I'll put in all my time, playing intellectual wet-nurse to Scott Brenton! I've served my turn. If ever he began to cut his wisdom teeth, it's time he was about it."

The professor took up the metaphor and cast it back upon the doctor.

"A good many babies die of teething," he said. "I've heard you say, yourself, that it was the one time in all a man's life when he was most dependent on the ministrations of the doctor."

The doctor rose and straightened up his shoulders.

"Fairly caught," he confessed. "Well, I'll do my best. Meanwhile, how is Reed?"

"Too busy to think much about himself."

"Not overworking?" the doctor questioned sharply.

"No. At least, not if his mental condition is any index to his physical. He is eager as a boy over the way his work is coming in. Did I tell you he has an assistant coming, day after to-morrow? Poor little Dennison has been swamped, for two weeks, in the rising tide of things that he knew nothing at all about. I must say he's been heroic in his efforts to help Reed out."

The doctor nodded.

"Dolph is a good sort. In the last analysis, he is not unlike Reed; they have the same staying power, the same trick of hating to take themselves in earnest. Still, for Reed's sake as well as Dolph's, I'm glad a trained assistant is coming. In fact, I might say I am glad on my own account."

"You?"

The doctor laughed.

"Yes. I've had Dolph at all hours, tearing his hair in my laboratory, while I tried to coach him. I do think, for a boy brought up on belles-lettres, he's made a decent showing as assistant mineralogist. I like Dolph. He's an all-round good fellow."

The professor laid aside his pipe; then he looked up keenly.

"He's at your house often?" he inquired.

The doctor read his old friend like a large-print page. Reading, he straightway became impenetrable.

"Yes. He drops in rather often," he assented. "Of course, he knows I am a good deal interested in Reed's new venture. Wonderful, isn't it, the way it has turned out so well? If only Brenton had one quarter of his steady grip!"

But, for the present, steady grip was the one thing Brenton lacked. Indeed, watching the recent chaos of his domestic life, one could scarcely wonder. As the doctor had said, reaction was bound to come. It had been no small upsetting, too, the saying farewell to his association with Saint Peter's Parish. The sudden reversal of his collar buttons was, in a sense, typical of the sudden reversal of all his habits of thought and life. His grip had been loosening, during many previous months; the sudden change in his responsibilities appeared to have relaxed it utterly.

In the broadest sense, Brenton's old work, like his new, had been teaching. Now, however, the enthusiasm of his gospel was possessing him completely, a gospel, nowadays, solely of the science which, heretofore, threading through and through the fabric of his sermons, had of necessity been juggled to the likeness of the Book of Revelation. Now that he could set it forth in all its nakedness, it seemed to Brenton more than ever like the Book of Revelation. Day after day, his enthusiasm for his theme increased its pace, threw off the bridle of hard, concrete fact, ran to the speculative limits of its course, and then ran past them. By the first of May, Brenton's lectures had made themselves one of the features of the college world; but, by the same token, they had ceased to be lectures upon chemistry, and had become harangues upon every phase of the allied sciences, harangues which ran through the entire gamut of abstract investigation, and came to rest at last upon the pair of finite questions: *Whence?* and *Whither?*

And, by the first of May, the student world was all agog, seeking to answer those questions flatly and quite off-hand, instead of waiting for experience of life to give the answer for them. Brenton, meantime, was becoming ten times the force he had been at Saint Peter's; the only trouble lay in the fact that now his force was, not formative, but deformative.

"He's making himself a reputation, fast enough," Dolph Dennison said, one day. "How much good he is accomplishing, though, is another question."

To Dolph's surprise, Olive opposed him.

"Isn't there always good in simple, downright sincerity?" she queried.

"Not a bit of it," Dolph assured her bluntly, for a certain talk between them, weeks before, a talk disastrous to the best of Dolph's plans for life, had in no sense put an end to their good friendship. "Sincerity itself is nothing. It's the thing one gets sincere about." Then, without waiting for an answer, "What a woman you are, Olive!" he said.

"Because I stand up for Mr. Brenton?"

"Because, down in your secret heart, you rather admire him for his confounded weaknesses." Dolph spoke with increasing bluntness.

"Not for his weaknesses, Dolph. The man is plucky and sincere. For the sake of the things that he believes are true, he will give up, has given up, more than most of us will ever gain."

Dolph plunged his fists into his pockets.

"Hang it all, Olive! Do be concrete," he bade her.

"I will, if I can," she said fearlessly. "It's only that the things themselves aren't too concrete."

"No." Dolph spoke incisively. "I should say they aren't. Olive look here. Don't get your values muddled, at this stage of the game."

Despite their friendship, she looked up at him haughtily.

"What do you mean, Dolph?"

For a minute, he stared down at her, smiling slightly and with a look in his eyes that nullified the frank brutality of his next words.

"Don't get mawkish over Brenton, Olive, just because he is a pitiful weakling who, in spite of all his good intentions, has made a consistent mess of everything he's tried to do. Because a man is weak, he isn't necessarily more lovable. Because he has an incurable disease, he isn't, of necessity, any more a subject for idolatry. No; I don't mean that to lap over on to Opdyke, either. If ever a man was healthy, Opdyke is that man. But Brenton isn't. His logic

and his conscience both are full of bacteria, bad little bacteria that swim around and mess things. He may pull out of it, of course, and make something in the end. Then, you can set him up on a pedestal and stick flowers in his fair hair. For the present, though, do keep sane about him, and deplore him, not admire."

"Aren't you a little hard on him, Dolph?" Olive asked steadily, although her cheeks were burning with the truth of his implied accusal.

"No; I'm not."

There came a short pause. Then,—

"I am very sorry for him," Olive said a little obstinately.

"Be sorry, then. Be just as sorry as you can. But, for heaven's sake, don't tell him so," Dolph retorted rather mercilessly. "If he's ever going to amount to anything, he must be brought up with a round turn, not coddled and treated as a victim of untoward circumstance. If he behaves like this over a growing pain in his theology, what do you suppose he'd do in Opdyke's place?"

Olive struggled to regain her hauteur.

"The cases aren't parallel, Dolph," she said. "One is a physical matter; the other concerns the spirit."

Once again Dolph paused and looked down at her intently. Then,—

"Which is which?" he queried. "No; don't get testy, Olive. I'm not producing any brief for Opdyke. In fact, he doesn't need one; we both of us know already what he stands for. But I do hate to see a girl like you go off her head about such a man as Brenton, a man with a Christian Science wife and a thrilling voice and speaking eyes: all deadly assets for a misunderstood ex-preacher. No; I do not like Brenton. He's not my sort. Neither, for the fact of it, is he your sort."

Olive compressed her lips.

"I may help to make him so," she said.

"Best let him make himself; he's had too many formative fingers in his pie, already. Besides," Dolph's lips curled into an irrepressible smile; "how do you know it would be for his advantage?"

For one instant, Olive struggled with her pique. Then she cast it off, and looked up at Dolph with her old smile.

"You hit hard, Dolph," she told him; "but I'm not sure you aren't in the right of it, after all. I like Mr. Brenton. I am sorry for him; perhaps it has muddled my values, as you call it, to be on the inside circle of his advisers. Still, there is something to be said upon the other side. You can't comprehend a man like Mr. Brenton, if you try."

"Why not? Not that I've tried over much, though," Dolph added, in hasty confession.

"It wouldn't have done you any good, if you had tried," Olive assured him flatly. "You haven't a single point in common. By ancestry and training, you're as unlike as a Zulu and an Eskimo. You began at about the point where Mr. Brenton, if he's lucky, will leave off. Your great-great-grandparents settled once for all the questions that he's agonizing over now. Naturally, you don't remember their struggles, and so you can't see why his should take it out of him, any more than you can see why a personable man like him ever could have married—"

"What your father aptly terms the She-Gargoyle?" Dolph inquired. "No; I can't. But then the question arises promptly, how can you?"

Olive smiled a little sadly. Loath though she was to acknowledge it to Dolph, of late she had been finding out that comprehension does not always make for full approval.

"As you say, Dolph," she told him; "it's the woman of me. After our own fashion, we every one of us are natural nurses; we know when our menfolk are in pain."

"Not always, Olive." Dolph spoke sadly.

"Yes, Dolph, we do. Hard as it is, though, sometimes we have to admit we have no cure for that especial pain. Still, you can be quite sure that it isn't easy for us to turn away and leave it, unhealed and aching." Then she threw off the little allegory, and once more spoke with spirit. "Dolph, we're created in mental couples, I suspect. Much as I care for Reed, it was you who had the insight to plan how he could make his life over into something besides the bare existence we all were dreading. In the same way, I may be the one to take in the tragedy of Mr. Brenton's indeterminate existence, and make it just a little lighter, if only by

my understanding. Anyway, I mean to try."

She turned in across the lawn, leaving Dolph to stare after her retreating figure with no small anxiety.

"Blast the understanding!" he said profanely. "And then, blast the preacher!"

The poor preacher, however, for preacher still he was, in spite of the reversal of his collar fastenings, was feeling himself already blasted. He had been spending a long hour in the doctor's laboratory; and the doctor, for the once, had turned his back upon his pans and trays of cultures, and lavished his entire attention on his visitor.

"It's just here, Brenton," he said quietly, after an hour of argument; "you can do one of two things: you can keep to your text and teach those girls straight chemistry; or—"

Brenton faced him squarely, squarely capped the sentence with a single word.

"Resign."

"Yes."

"You mean you think I am a failure in my teaching?"

"No. Your teaching is all right. You are a born chemist and a born teacher. It's your infernal preaching I object to," the doctor told him unexpectedly.

"My preaching?"

"Yes. You employ your pulpit methods in your classes. You take a chemical text, and then turn and twist it into any sort of a metaphysical conclusion that appeals to you at the minute. No; wait! I am talking. Science is not equivocal, Brenton. It's as downright and determinate as A+B. It's what we know; not what we think we ought to think about the things we know. And it's science you are there to teach, not glittering abstractions having to do with man's latter end. The fact is, you've spent so long in trying to subject your theology to scientific proof that, now you're surfeited with science, you are trying to use it as a feeder to your theologic fires."

"Not consciously," Brenton objected, as a flush crept up across his cheeks. "I have meant —"

The doctor interrupted, but not unkindly.

"Consciously or unconsciously, it's all one, Brenton, as concerns the output. You must bridle your scientific imagination and your tongue, or else you'll have the whole college by the ears. For the present, you are letting off harmless rockets. Before you know it, though, you'll be dynamiting the whole establishment. Best go slow."

Brenton attempted one last stand.

"Have I any right to go slow, doctor, when there's a principle involved? Have I any right to suppress eternal truths—"

Then the doctor lost his temper.

"Eternal pollywogs!" he burst out. "Man, you're daft. Who told you what truths are eternal? Who told you where science ends, and where theology begins? Who told you what we mean, when we say *provable*? For two thousand years, and then some more, we have been slowly sifting down a whole mass of ill-assorted beliefs into two great facts: Creator and created. For practical purposes, isn't that all we need to know? Isn't it all that we any of us can grasp: the surety that the Creative Mind would never have taken the trouble to fashion us, in the first place if he hadn't put inside us all the needful germs of progress, all the needful intellect to grasp the evident duty that lies just ahead? What else, then, do you need? No. Don't try to talk about it. Just go out and take a good, long walk in the fresh air, and forget your latter end in the more important concerns of deep breathing. You are getting disgustingly round-shouldered. Good bye. And, by the way, I'll tell Olive you will be back here to dinner."

But Brenton, going on his way, was totally oblivious to the doctor's sage counsel as to the merits of deep breathing. Neither did he realize in the least the splendid optimism of the stern old doctor's creed. For the hour, optimism was quite beyond his ken. He only realized that his own world had gone bad; that failure awaited him at every turn, not a downright and practical failure, either, but a nebulous and indeterminate futility. His life had been nothing but one restless struggle to arrive at something finite, something which should satisfy alike his heart and reason. Instead of gaining the one thing, it seemed to him that all had been lost. His present existence was as focusless as an eye after its lens has been extracted. His past had been opaque, his future would be permanently blurred. And for what good had been all the pain? It would have been far better, far more sane, if he had clung stoutly to the flaming horns of his hereditary Calvinism. Infinitely better to feel their scorching touch than

to drift into a state of apathy past any feeling! And Brenton wondered vaguely whether he ever would feel anything again, anything, that is, as a personal issue, rather than as a scrap of the great world-plan. Most things, nowadays, left him conscious of being aloof, remote. Even the going away of his wife. Even the death of—He pulled himself up short. Not the baby's death. That was still personal, still very personal; personal was the message of those little waving hands. What did the baby see? Something denied for ever to his adult and doubting eyes?

Forgetful of the doctor's invitation to come back to dine, Brenton at twilight found himself upon the long white bridge, his elbows on the rail, his eyes upon the darkening surface of the river, as it swept down upon him from out the purpling hills. As of old, its mystery held him, the mystery of its ceaseless coming, the mystery of its ceaseless going on and on, until it lost all individual existence in the soundless, boundless sea. To-night, in the apathy which held his senses in subjection, he watched it through the dying twilight, until it ceased to be to him a river, but appeared to him as an embodiment of life itself, coming, coming, coming down to him out of the purpling distance, going, going, going down away from him into the deepening shadows. And then the light died, and darkness crept across it all, and then—extinction.

Next morning, he arranged it with Professor Opdyke that, for the present, the other assistant should take over all of his lectures, while he himself would put in his time inside the laboratory.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Dolph, being Dolph, spoke out his fears to Opdyke. Dolph, being a rhetorician, approached his subject cornerwise, however.

"I wish to heaven you'd fall in love with Olive, Opdyke," he said moodily, next day.

Reed, looking up from the chaos of letters that were littering his couch, gave a short laugh.

"So that I could properly present my sympathy to you?" he queried, as a faint colour stole up across his cheeks.

Dolph dropped his rhetoric, and went bluntly to the point.

"No; so that you could obliterate Brenton's image from her mind."

"What do you mean, Dennison?" Reed spoke sternly.

Dolph threw himself back in his chair and answered at the ceiling.

"I am not sure I mean anything at all. Olive has sense enough for a dozen, and Brenton is a married man, with a vampire for a wife."

Reed cut in with a question, which showed plainly to Dolph how little he cared to discuss Dolph's fears concerning Olive.

"Does anybody hear anything from the wife?"

"I don't, thank heaven!" Dolph assured him piously. "I did hear my sister-in-law explaining to a visitor that Mrs. Brenton was very busy in Boston. How she knew it; or whether she made it up for conversational purposes, I don't know. Neither do I know how long it takes to get one's self into commission as a healer. Doesn't Brenton ever say anything about her?"

"Not to me. Of course, it's not a subject where I like to be asking questions; and I suppose, for the same reason, he hates to open it up, himself."

"Naturally." Dolph's tone was dry. "Reed, who killed that baby?"

Opdyke raised his brows.

"I'm not the medical examiner, Dennison; I'm not obliged to say what I think about it," he returned.

Dolph sat up and faced his friend.

"I am, then. Opdyke, if it hadn't been a case of his own rector's family, Doctor Keltridge would have carried the matter to the courts."

"Did Olive tell you?"

"Olive doesn't tell things of that sort," Dolph said conclusively. "She's her father's own child." Then, of a sudden, he returned to his original charge. "Opdyke, why don't you think a little more about Olive Keltridge?" he demanded.

"Because I think quite enough of her, as it is," Reed answered.

"Of her, but not about her," Dolph said moodily. "Of course, if I could get her for my own wife, I wouldn't be giving you this advice. I've proved I can't, though—"

Reed interrupted.

"Girls have been known to change their minds," he said.

In spite of his sentimental regrets, Dolph laughed outright.

"If you had been present at our interview, you wouldn't have predicted any change in this case. Olive was—well, just as she always is, the soul of downright niceness; but she managed to leave me quite convinced once and for all that I might as well have wooed the woman in the moon. And, by Jove," Dolph's voice dropped to a confidential murmur; "now it's all over, I begin to think that she was right. It was a nasty half-hour for both of us; but we've come out of it, ripping good friends and without a sentimental regret to our names."

"Speaks well for Olive."

"Doesn't it? It's left me caring for her a long way more than ever, only not in the accepted-suitor sort of fashion. That's the reason I hate to see her drifting about, all at loose ends."

"Dennison," Reed spoke with masterful abruptness; "would you mind doing a letter or two at my dictation? Duncan is busy in the laboratory, this afternoon; and these things must go out on to-night's mail." His voice was steady, as he spoke; but in his brave brown eyes Dolph recognized the old-time harried, hunted look which he had hoped would never come again. Later, the letters done, Dolph went away without waiting for more conversation. For a singularly happy-go-lucky mortal, Dolph's instincts were to be by no means distrusted.

Dolph's going was only just in time to prevent his meeting Olive who came around the curve of the street, just as he was leaving the Opdyke grounds. He waved his hat to her from afar, and she answered his greeting; but neither of them changed the direction of his steps. They saw each other often enough, in any case; and it was an accepted fact between them that Reed's calls were better taken singly, as a rule, than in pairs.

However, as she went into Reed's room, that day, Olive began to have her doubts how long the old rule would hold good. Reed was increasingly busy, nowadays. Letters and drawings, photographs and samples of ores were piling in upon him from all parts of the country. The old phrase, indeed, was gaining a new fulfilment: the mountain was coming to Mahomet in all literalness. Olive had long since become accustomed to finding the room littered with the débris of much consulting, had grown accustomed to having her trivial gossip interrupted by the advent of fresh letters and a new supply of specimen ores. She had grown glib in reading off the unfamiliar phrasing of the letters, facile in writing down the totally unspellable words of Opdyke's dictated replies. In all of this, however, she had been made to feel aware that she herself stood first to Reed, his work stood second.

Not that Olive for one instant would have allowed herself consciously to become jealous of Reed's work. She was too sane and generous for that, too happy in the change it was making in Reed's existence. He was alert and enthusiastic now, where aforetime he was passive and plucky. His brown eyes snapped, not gleamed expressively. In short, the new assistant was finding out, to his extreme surprise, that his position was no sentimental sinecure, that, coming to be hands and feet to supplement an active scientific brain, he was likely to work more strenuously, more to the purpose, than he had done in the New York office of the brilliant specialist who had sent him up to Reed.

It was several weeks now since Dolph had made his crisp suggestion that Reed take his profession into bed with him. Even in that little time, the change was measureless; to all practical intents and purposes, the dying had come into a new life. The life, too, was by no means wholly intellectual. As Reed's professional enthusiasm grew stronger, his bodily gain apparently kept pace with it. To be sure, the lower half of him was totally, irrevocably dead. Nevertheless, by sheer, energetic will, Opdyke was making the upper half of his body do duty for the whole, was gaining a control over his crippled lower limbs that, six months before, he would have pronounced impossible.

With Ramsdell to pull and pry him to position, nowadays, he sat leaning up against the pillows on his bed, for an hour or two of every morning. The effort brought the beads of sweat out upon his forehead; but he took that a good deal as a matter of course, talked bravely of a rolling chair and a lift built on the corner of the house and even, a little later on, of a motor car and of a down-town office. Best of all, the old haunted look had left his eyes for ever. At least, so Olive had believed, until that day. To-day, despite his smile of greeting, the old expression was peering out at her, and she felt her hopes chilling within her at the sight.

"What is it, Reed?" she asked him, after a few minutes of trivial conversation. "Something has gone wrong."

"Not with me," he told her quickly. "In fact, things are very right. Ask Ramsdell."

"But you look—"

"How?" His laugh awaited her final word.

"Worried," she told him flatly. "The way you used to look, last winter."

"No reason that I should," he reassured her. "Things are going swimmingly. Now that my new assistant has rallied from the shock of his surroundings and come to a realizing sense that I prefer technical journals to tracts, he is proving a grand success. He is going to be of immense help; and I needed him, now that work is piling in. I'm hoping, though, your father can plan some way of giving me a little better use of my arms. There's a loose screw in there that he ought to tighten."

"Reed," Olive spoke thoughtfully; "you are rather unusual."

With some effort, he kept all edge of bitterness out of his voice, as he replied,—

"I certainly trust so, Olive. It wouldn't be an advantage to humanity at large to have this a normal state of things. Still, it might be worse, lots worse. I'm not nearly so soggy as I was. Which reminds me: do you mind going to the bottom of that heap of letters and taking out the square gray one. Yes. That's it. Now read it. I've saved it up for your delight."

There came a silence, broken only by the noise of unfolded paper. Then Olive looked up.

"Reed! The—"

"Don't swear, Olive," he admonished her, and now his eyes were wholly mirthful.

"I wasn't going to. I was only hunting for a suitable epithet. How does she dare?"

"Dare take unto herself the glory of what she calls my incipient cure? I wish I thought it was that; but vertebrae are vertebrae, in spite of all the Christian Scientists in all creation. As for her claim, though, she's got us there, Olive. One can't well prove an alibi, when it's a case of absent treatment. Still, I must say I like her nerve."

"When did this thing come?" And Olive cast the letter from her, with a sudden fury which, for the instant, downed her sense of humour utterly.

"Only to-day. I had meant to try a chair, to-morrow; but, in view of her predictions, I'll be hanged if I will. She would go to cackling forth that it was all her doing. How do you suppose she knew anything about me, anyway?"

"Spies, probably. Those people will stoop to anything to carry on their cause," Olive said tartly.

"Then one ought to feel a sneaking admiration for their *esprit du corps*, at least. In fact, if you translate the phrase literally enough, it holds the very nubbin of their whole belief. But I hope you noted the clause concerning Brenton. I am glad she even feels so much of interest in him."

Olive settled back in her chair, and yielded up her creed of married life briefly, trenchantly.

"Reed, if I owned a husband, I'd focus my mind upon his breakfasts and his buttonholes and his entertainment of an evening. That's what men want, not hifalutin' mind cures delivered at long range." Then she repented. "Still, I'm not fair to Mrs. Brenton, Reed. She doesn't interest me in the least."

"Does Brenton?" Reed asked. And then he shut his teeth, as he waited for the reply.

The reply, when it came, was direct.

"Yes, Reed; he does, intensely. He is a mass of brilliant possibilities that all are going wrong. Moreover, I can't help a feeling I could help him, if I would. I know that sometimes I have seen farther inside his mind than even he knows, and it has given me an odd feeling of responsibility over him, a responsibility that I can't see just how to carry out." Suddenly she paused. "Reed," she said; "you're not as well, to-day. What is the trouble? Are you overdoing; or has Ramsdell let you strain yourself?"

He forced a smile back to his lips, although his eyes were haggard.

"It's nothing, Olive, really." He spoke as lightly as he could. "Your imaginings concerning Brenton have lapped over on to me; that's all."

She felt the rebuke in his words, knew within herself how undeserved it was, and, rather than confess the truth, arose in her own defence.

"Not imaginings, Reed," she said, and her self-protective dignity yet hurt him. "Now and then we women do have intuitions that are trustworthy. This, I think, is one of them. And Mr. Brenton needs all the help he can get, out of any sort of source."

Reed shut his teeth upon his hurt, until he could command his voice once more. Then,—

"I agree with you there, Olive," he assented. "Moreover, I wrote to Whittenden about him, a week ago. If any one can be of use, it will be Whittenden; he always knows what tonic it is best to prescribe. Must you go?" He looked up at her appealingly. Then the same appeal came into his voice, set it to throbbing with an accent wholly new to Olive's ears. "Olive," he said; "you're not going to misunderstand me, not going to allow Brenton to come in between us?"

Suddenly the girl went white; suddenly she bent down to rest her hand on his, in one of the few, few touches she had ever given his fingers since the day he had been brought home and laid there in his room, powerless to withdraw himself from too insistent human contacts. Her voice, when she spoke, had a throb that matched his own.

"Never, Reed!" she said.

A moment later, she was gone, leaving Opdyke there alone, to wonder and, wondering, to worry.

Two afternoons later, Duncan, the new assistant, brought up a message from the laboratory. Brenton would be at leisure, soon after four. Might he come up? That was just after luncheon. Therefore two hours would intervene, two hours for a quiet going over of certain things that Reed Opdyke felt it was for him alone to say, certain measures for Olive's safety which he alone should take. Indeed, there was no other man who stood, to Olive's mind, so nearly in a brother's place; no other man, it seemed to Opdyke, who owned one half so good a right to test the ground on which she stood, to assure himself that she might venture forward safely.

Opdyke was no sentimentalist. Nevertheless, he recognized all that it might portend when such a girl as Olive Keltridge, the soul of sanity and downrightness, talked about her comprehension of a man like Brenton. Moreover, Opdyke was no gossip. Nevertheless, he had not failed to hear a certain amount of speculation as to the possibilities of Brenton's seeking a divorce. Sought, there was no question of his getting it. Katharine's desertion was an established fact past all gainsaying.

And, if he sought it and won it, what then? Merely the helping him become as well worth while, as well worth Olive's while, as it was possible for any man to be. This was the task which Reed had set himself; the task for which he was bracing himself, during those two endless hours; the task for the accomplishment of which he was resolved, if need be, to tear away the coverings which, up to now, he had held fast above certain of the reticences of his own life. The tearing would be sure to hurt; but what of that? Olive, given the opportunity, would have done as much for him.

The afternoon lengthened interminably, and the clock was striking the half-hour, when Brenton finally came up the stairs. His face was grave, as he greeted his old friend, his eyes a little overcast and heavy.

Reed jerked his head in the direction of a chair.

"Sit down," he said hospitably; "and then fill up your pipe. Duncan doesn't smoke, worse luck; and I find I miss the old aroma. It's rather like incense offered to the ghost of my old self."

His accent was trivial, and Brenton, listening to the apparently careless words, could form no notion of the pains that had gone into their choosing.

"Your new self, I should say. It's astounding, Opdyke, the way you've picked yourself out of the rut and gone rushing ahead again."

"With a difference, though," Reed told him bluntly. "Is the jar full? You like the kind?"

"Yes, thanks." And Brenton filled his pipe. After a minute's puffing, "After all, Opdyke, you have pretty well minimized the difference," he observed.

"Thanks to Ramsdell and Duncan, yes. They have been wonderful props, and it's good to get on my professional legs again, whatever my bodily ones may do for me. Meanwhile, how are things going with you?"

Brenton smoked in silence for a minute. Then,—

"The wraith of my departed priestly calling forbids me to phrase my answer just as I'd like

best to do," he said.

Reed nodded.

"So bad as that? What is the matter now?"

"It's hard to specify. I seem to have run myself aground."

"Pull off, then," Reed advised.

"No craft in sight to tow me."

Reed shut his teeth.

"Brenton, that has been your trouble from the start. You've always been drifting, anchor up, ready for a tow. Now hoist your sails and, for the Lord's sake, go ahead."

"Where?"

"Where! Wherever the chart takes you. What chart? The chart of plain duty, man, the duty of an honest citizen to make the most of himself and be a little good to humanity at large. No; wait. You've had your chances; you can't cry off on that. You had your chance, 'way back in college, and you chucked it over. How much more would it have hurt your mother to have seen you once for all take up a secular profession, than it would to have watched you setting out to preach all the things her own religion didn't stand for? You had another chance in Saint Peter's. It wasn't a small chance, either. You could have held that church together, solid; you could have brought its people to a working assent to a practical exposition of their creed that would have kept them busy and loyal to their Creator, in doing their duty to their co-created fellow men. Instead, you ignored your chance to keep them busy on things that would help on the world we live in, and spent all your energies in tangling up your notions of the world we came out of, and the world we, some day, are going into. As mental gymnastics, it was very pretty to watch; as a useful employment for a man who calls himself a pastor of souls, it wasn't worth a rush."

"But a man can't help his thoughts," Brenton expostulated suddenly.

"Can't he?" Reed whitened. "Brenton," he asked gravely; "don't you suppose that there have been times on times, since they lugged me up these stairs, that, if I had let myself go, I wouldn't have turned my face to the wall and cursed, not only the whole plan of creation, but the Creator himself? Times on times that, if I hadn't held tight to a few rudimentary notions that I took in with my mother's milk, notions about the decent and square thing to do for the God that made you, I wouldn't have tested the logic of your doubtings with a dose of cyanide? I tell you a man can help his thoughts. I tell you a man can hold to his beliefs. He can wonder about the petty things as much as he chooses, and it never does him one bit of harm. But the final great belief of all, that there is a wise Creator back of things, and that we owe Him at least as much loyal courtesy as we give to the best of our brother men: that is something it is in the hands of any man to hold on to, if he chooses. Brenton, I hate to lecture you," and, with a sudden gesture brimful of appealing for forgiveness, for loyal comprehension, Reed stretched out his hand; "but you have got to bring yourself up with a round turn. In some way or other, you have missed your chances. You have gone rushing off for shiny butterflies, when you ought to have stopped at home and milked the cows. Something," he smiled; "Whittenden says it was my downfall, set you to asking questions that you were too nearsighted to answer. Instead of sticking to a few fundamental bits of faith, you made yourself a ladder out of theological catchwords, clambered up it and kicked out all the rungs, one after another, as you climbed. Then you turned dizzy, and lost your grip, and fell all in a heap. Brenton, we've had about the same experience, one way or another, out of life."

"But you have braced up again and gone ahead," Brenton said slowly.

"So will you, man. That's why I am harrying you now, to start you up again. We neither one of us are half through our allotted term of years. In simple decency, we've got to play out the game."

"If we can," Brenton interrupted.

"No *if* about it. We've got it to do. Of course, we can't do it in quite the same old way. Be plucky as we can, it's impossible for us to deny that we've been scarred—badly; that the scars, some of them, can never really heal. Still, as long as we've a year ahead of us and a drop of fighting blood inside us—Brenton, it isn't easy; but it's our one way to prove we're game."

Then, for a while, the room was very still. At last, Reed spoke once more.

"Scott," he said slowly, and the old name held a note of great love; "once on a time, you didn't resent it when I told you that old Mansfield asked me to take you in hand and show you a few things out of my own experience. Don't resent it now. We've been too good friends

for too many years for that."

Ramsdell's steady step came up the stairs, and Reed went on quite simply.

"Then you've heard from Whittenden?"

Brenton, pulling himself back to the present, looked up sharply at the question.

"How did you know?"

"He wrote me. What does he suggest?"

"Didn't he tell you that? He wants me to go down to him, and take over some of his settlement work."

"Shall you go?"

Brenton shook his head.

"It's out of the question, Opdyke. I only wish I could, for I am not of much use to your father, I'm afraid. Still, hereafter—Well, perhaps you've put new force into me by your admonitions." But his voice broke a little over the intentionally careless words.

Opdyke ignored the allusion.

"Then why not go to Whittenden?" he inquired, as carelessly as he was able.

Brenton arose and stood, erect, looking down at his old friend intently, as if anxious that Opdyke should lose no fragment of his meaning.

"Because, now more than ever," he said, a little bit insistently; "I feel it would be impossible for me to go away from the college. To change now would be a confession of another failure. If I am to make good at all, it must be here and soon. Besides," and now his accent changed; "I must stay on here and keep my house open, Opdyke. The time may come, when Mrs. Brenton wishes to come back to me. If it does come, she must find everything ready, waiting for her to make her realize that, at last, she is once more at home."

And then, as Ramsdell came inside the room, he turned and went away down the stairs. Watching him, Reed Opdyke could not but feel reassured on his account. Whatever his anxieties for himself and Olive, he could not fail to realize that, unknown to any of them, looking on, the steadying processes in Brenton had begun.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

All the world admitted that the summer was a trying one, that year. All the world, with half a dozen exceptions, turned migratory, in the hope of finding better weather farther on. The exceptions included the Opdykes who stayed at home on Reed's account; the Keltridges who remained in mercy to those of the doctor's patients who were too poor to pay the price of a railway ticket to the seashore, even for a day; and Brenton who never, since his wife had left him, had slept a night away from home. That Katharine would one day come back to him, Brenton was so firmly convinced that he saw no need of insisting on his belief to other people. It was his one steadfast ambition to keep the home always ready to welcome her back; always to keep it as nearly as possible as she had left it, so that her home coming might accomplish itself without the slightest jar.

In a sense, despite the chasm which had opened out between them, a chasm, as he now admitted frankly to himself, in part of his own making, despite even the ugly facts surrounding the baby's death, Brenton still loved Katharine. Moreover, he still had hours of being desperately lonely. Back of it all, though, was his strict adherence to the letter of his marriage bond. Whatever came between them, Katharine was still his wife; his home was always hers. Whatever other duties lay ahead of him, one was constant: to hold himself true to this avowed allegiance, to win her back from what seemed to him a passing madness; or else, that failing, to take her as she was and forget everything else besides the one great fact of her wifehood, of her recent motherhood of their dead baby boy. If he held firm to that, and to some other things, the future might yet offer untold good to them. Meanwhile, he would be ready for any event that came.

The other things to which Brenton, all that summer, was holding firmly, had come out of his association with Reed Opdyke. Opdyke, in all terseness, had summed up man's whole duty: to play out the game uprightly, and, out of loyalty to an all-wise Creator, not to lose touch with the present chance in trying to see too many moves ahead. The remoter parts of life, so long as they remained remote, would take care of themselves. And, in the same way,

the problems of the after-life, its meanings, could be left unsolved, if not unstudied, until the time came when one could take them in a nearer view. Properly lived, life was too busy to admit of many questions, anyway. Always there were so many useful things to be done that scanty time remained for over much philosophizing. And, as for the man knocked down and out, whether by spiritual doubting, or black powder, it was for him to choose whether he would lie on his back and wallow limply in the dust of his emotions, or stiffen himself, ready for new effort.

All through the blazing heat of the worst June ever recorded; all through the chill of a cold, wet July, Opdyke preached his doctrine with insistence, preached it in season and out. While he preached, he practised; often, it must be confessed, a good deal to his own detriment. The lift and the rolling chair and the down-town office were still in a future which every one, including Reed himself, knew to be increasingly nebulous. However, he and Duncan were building up no small amount of reputation in their work; and, while the loosened screw of which Opdyke had complained to Olive was throwing all the manual toil on Duncan, it was an open secret that Opdyke supplied the brains.

However, no amount of professional contentment can quite atone for the strain of many sleepless nights; and, more than once that summer, Doctor Keltridge had been strongly tempted to call a halt in the whole undertaking. Then, at the last minute, he had stayed his prohibition. Opdyke, in all surety, was working far beyond his strength. None the less, it seemed to the old doctor that there would be a certain cruelty in bringing to a sudden halt this sole activity permitted to him, this sole means of contact with his old profession. The doctor spent his summer between the horns of a dilemma: his disapproval of Reed's overworking, his greater disapproval of the need for thrusting Reed back into his former impotence. And, to all seeming, there was no middle ground. It would have taxed the strength even of a full-bodied man to have held together a reputation, under such handicaps as those beneath which Reed was working. The doctor grumbled in his throat at Ramsdell; but he spoke out no word to Reed. For the present, he was well aware, he had power to dominate the situation.

And so the cold, wet July rolled along; and then came an August, drearier, more chilly. The sweet New England summer was drowned in a cold, raw fog which only broke at intervals into a day of blazing sunshine which set all the world a-steam. It was a hideous season, even for the prosperous vagrants of society. To Reed, imprisoned in his room and in a town empty of all his friends but two or three, it was well-nigh insupportable. Brenton dropped in upon him, half a dozen times a week, and Olive never missed a day, while Duncan was invaluable. Nevertheless, it was plain that the summer was wearing on the "puffic' fibbous," although his old-time beauty was bidding fair to outlast the malign attacks of fortune. Indeed, to Olive Keltridge, it seemed that Opdyke never had been one half so good to look upon as now, never one half so virile.

"Most men would be impossible in such a situation," she said to her father, one morning in early August. "You would be a caricature, and, as for a man like Mr. Brenton—"

"Hush! Speak of angels!" her father warned her. Then, in another tone, he added, "Morning, Brenton. You're up early; aren't you?"

But Brenton's face refused to light in answer to the doctor's greeting.

"I've had a telegram from Boston," he said, and his accent was dull, monotonous. "Katharine is very ill, pneumonia."

"They have sent for you?"

"Yes. And to hurry."

Olive spoke impetuously.

"I am so sorry. But it may be better than you think."

He looked across at her, as if he had not been aware of her presence until she spoke.

"Good morning, Miss Keltridge," he said hastily. "Yes, it may be. In pneumonia there's always some hope, till the very last, I imagine. That is the reason," he turned back to the doctor; "the reason I've come to you. Can you go to Boston with me?"

The doctor swiftly conned his list of cases.

"This noon? Ye—es. But, Brenton," his keen old eyes were infinitely kind; "you know it is by no means sure that Mrs. Brenton will let me see her."

"I think she will," Brenton said quietly. "She has never been in a place like this—" there came a sudden wave of recollection which made him glance furtively across at the doctor, then add, "exactly. Besides, Catie was always very fond of you."

And Olive, hearing, comprehended once again and, comprehending, gave to Brenton a

new sort of loyalty which she had heretofore denied him. She knew that, in that old-time nickname, coming unbidden to the husband's lips, there was the proof that all memory of Katharine's disaffection had been wiped out from Brenton's mind, for evermore.

It was early, the next morning, when Olive carried the final bulletins to Reed. Her father had just called her up upon the telephone to tell her that the end had come. Up to the last of her consciousness, Katharine had refused to see him; only the healer and Brenton had been allowed inside the room. Then, when she had sunk into the fitful stupor which could have only the one ending, Brenton had come to summon him; and they had stood together, hand on hand, while the life before them ebbed away. It had been a peaceful passing. Just at the very end had come a moment of full consciousness, when she had turned to smile up at her husband.

"Scott," she said to him; "I'm sorry. But, in the next world, I think perhaps you'll understand me just a little better."

And then the earth-light had faded from her eyes and, in its place, there had dawned the dazzling recognition of the things that are to be.

Reed listened to it all, in perfect silence. When Olive had finished,—

"Poor old Brenton!" he said slowly. "It was a conjugal I-told-you-so, coming back to him as a message out of the misty borderland he's tried so hard to penetrate."

Later, that same day, Olive dropped in on Reed again. She was lonely, she claimed, without her father, restless and nervous from thinking much about the Brentons, wondering what Brenton himself would do. And Reed, who had grown eager at her coming, felt his eagerness departing while he listened to her second reason. Even his courage recognized the fact that there were limits to his strength. It seemed to him quite intolerable that he must lie there and smile, and assent politely to the divagations of Olive concerning Brenton's future plans. Besides, loyal as he was to Olive, Reed was conscious of a little disappointment that a girl, even as uncompromisingly downright as she, should be quite so prompt in expressing interest in Brenton's future.

But Olive, noticing his reticence, laid it only to the exhaustion of a hideously rainy day, and talked on steadily. What Reed did not know till later was that her steady monologue was designed to cover up her real intention for just a little while, that she might gain time to stiffen to the resolution she had taken. The resolution had been growing up in her for weeks; it had come to its climax, only that very morning, when she had met Ramsdell on the Opdyke steps.

"How is Mr. Opdyke?" she had queried.

Then she had caught her breath at Ramsdell's answer.

"Rather poorly, Miss Keltridge."

She cast a hasty glance upward, to assure herself that Reed's windows were not open.

"What do you mean?" she demanded sharply then.

Ramsdell looked down upon her gloomily.

"That I'm uneasy, Miss Keltridge. There's no one thing the matter, and yet Mr. Hopdyke does seem to be losing ground. It's 'is ambition runs away with all 'is strength. As long as he kept still on his back, 'e gained. But now 'e seems to be trying to get hout of bed and leave his back be'ind 'im, as that 'ealing woman told him; and, like all of us, he isn't meant to cast off his own spinal column, bad as 'tis. His work won't 'urt 'im, if he takes it quiet; but, as a nurse trained in the Royal 'Ospital, I must hinsist it is bad for any man to try to do Delsarte gymnastics on a hempty stomach of a morning."

Despite her consternation, Olive laughed.

"Can't you make him stop it, Ramsdell?"

"Impossible, Miss Keltridge. When it comes to that I'm nothing but another man. What Mr. Hopdyke needs now is a woman to manage 'im and cocker 'im up a bit. In spite of all his work and that, he's away off on 'is nerve."

"How does he show it, Ramsdell?" Olive asked, a little faintly, for there was that in the whites of the great black eyes which made her painfully aware that Ramsdell was not talking quite at random, and she disliked to feel that even those dog-like eyes, devoted though they were to Reed, had penetrated the secret of her woman's nature.

Ramsdell's reply refreshed her by its very lack of sentiment.

"When 'e's feeling fit, Miss Keltridge, 'e swears something glorious. Nowadays, it's as much as he can do to trump up henergy to let off a single damn. There! He's calling!" And

Ramsdell vanished in the direction of the stairs.

Left to herself, Olive tramped home as if the seven-league boots had been upon her feet. Once at home, for some reason only known to womankind, she elected to sweep and dust the library with her own hands, and then to scour the brasses of the fireplace. Half through the second operation, though, she hesitated, paused, stopped short and threw aside her cloth and pinafore. Leaving them for the maids to discover and gather up at will, she went to her room, arrayed herself immaculately and quite regardless of the weather, and once more sallied out in search of Reed. While she was going up the Opdyke stairs, however, she suddenly became aware that she had nothing to say to him which would account for her suddenly renewed desire for his society. Accordingly, she talked of Brenton till Reed's soul was weary. Then, with a sudden flounce, she brought the talk around to Reed himself.

"How many mines have you added to your list, to-day?" she asked him.

Reed heaved a short sigh of relief, not out of egotism, but merely to be freed from further talk concerning Brenton.

"Only one."

"That's unusual. Still, I am rather glad it happens so. Ramsdell is convinced that you are working too hard, in this impossible weather."

"Ramsdell is a chronic grumbler," Reed said disloyally. "I'm all right, Olive."

She bent forward, her elbows on her knees, and stared down at him intently.

"I'm not too sure of that, Reed. You are growing thin, and you look tired. No wonder, from what Mr. Duncan has told us. Is it quite worth while, though?"

"It is."

"But why?" she urged, with sudden recklessness of any pain her insistence might be causing him.

He reddened.

"Let's leave the dead past out of it, Olive. What's the use of going over the old ground again? You know my one ambition is to make whatever is left of my life a gift worth while."

"Gift?" she queried steadily. "To whom, Reed?"

"Its Creator, when the time comes," he answered, with the slow difficulty with which a strong man always touches such a theme. "Who else?"

His sudden question, answering as it did to her own thoughts, astounded her. Her face flushed, lighted, filled itself with a dazzling radiance which, for the moment, Reed was powerless to interpret. For just that single moment, Olive caught in her breath and held it. Then,—

"Why, to me," she answered simply. "Reed dear, you have made it wonderfully well worth the asking. May I have it for my very own?"

Fifteen minutes later on, Ramsdell came up the stairs. When he had gone down them stealthily and tiptoed through the lower hall, he wiped his eyes, then blew his nose in raucous triumph.

"The one thing I 'ave halways 'oped would 'appen!" he said impressively.

Four days afterward, Brenton came home again, came straight from the burial service on the country hillside to take up his old life in the wifeless home. As a matter of course, his first evening he spent with Opdyke.

Opdyke, looking for change in him, was not disappointed. Change was evident, and of a sort for which Opdyke had scarcely dared to hope. Of sadness there was curiously little sign; the black band on his sleeve was the only outward show of mourning, and Brenton's face explained the lack. Even in the few days of his new experience, the old indecision seemed to have left his face for ever, and with it much of the old sadness. He carried himself more alertly, too, as if, for the future, life were too full of purpose to permit of any indecision or delay.

Of his trouble, he said singularly little.

"Poor Catie! She died, loyal to me, and happy in her belief," he told Reed briefly. "It was the end she would have chosen for herself. Next time we meet each other, though, we shall understand each other better and have better patience." And that was all he said, then or afterwards. Instead, he congratulated Reed upon his new, great happiness.

After a time,—

"Now, shall you go to Whittenden?" Opdyke asked him.

Brenton shook his head.

"No. My place is here. So far, I have never worked out much good from any of the chances I've had given me. I'd better do it, here and now, without wasting time by any further change. As for the quality of the work, Opdyke, I've been thinking things, the past few days. There are men in plenty doing their level best to work out God's existence in the lives of his created children. For me, I think it's better worth the while to try to prove that universal laws exist, and, out of those laws, prove God."

And Opdyke nodded briefly, in token of his perfect comprehension.

THE END

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