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Title: Antony Gray,—Gardener

Author: LM

Release date: August 10, 2008 [eBook #26241]
Most recently updated: January 3, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Roger Frank and the Online Distributed
Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ANTONY GRAY,—GARDENER ***

ANTONY GRAY,—GARDENER

BY
LESLIE MOORE

AUTHOR OF "THE PEACOCK FEATHER," "THE JESTER," "THE
WISER FOLLY," ETC.

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
The Knickerbocker Press
1917

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The Knickerbocker Press, New York

To
MRS. BARTON

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Antony Gray,—Gardener

PROLOGUE

March had come in like a lion, raging, turbulent. Throughout the day the wind had torn spitefully at the yet bare branches of the great elms in the park; it had rushed in insensate fury round the walls of the big grey house; it had driven the rain lashing against the windows. It had sent the few remaining leaves of the old year scudding up the drive; it had littered the lawns with fragments of broken twigs; it had beaten yellow and purple crocuses prostrate to the brown earth.

Against the distant rocky coast the sea had boomed like the muffled thunder of guns; it had flung itself upon the beach, dragging the stones back with it in each receding wave, their grinding adding to the crash of the waters. Nature had been in her wildest mood, a thing of mad fury.

With sundown a calm had fallen. The wind, tired of its onslaught, had sunk suddenly to rest. Only the sea beat and moaned sullenly against the cliffs, as if unwilling to subdue its anger. Yet, for all that, a note of fatigue had entered its voice.

An old man was sitting in the library of the big grey house. A shaded reading lamp stood on a small table near his elbow. The light was thrown upon an open book lying near it, and on the carved arms of the oak chair in which the man was sitting. It shone clearly on his bloodless old hands, on his parchment-like face, and white hair. A log fire was burning in a great open hearth on his right. For the rest, the room was a place of shadows, deepening to gloom in the distant corners, a gloom emphasized by the one small circle of brilliant light, and the red glow of the fire. Book-cases reached from floor to ceiling the whole length of two walls, and between the three thickly curtained windows of the third. In the fourth wall were the fireplace and the door.

There was no sound to break the silence. The figure in the oak chair sat motionless. He might have been carved out of stone, for any sign of life he gave. He looked like stone,—white and black marble very finely sculptured,—white marble in head and hands, black marble in the piercing eyes, the long satin dressing-gown, the oak of the big chair. Even his eyes seemed stone-like, motionless, and fixed thoughtfully on space.

To those perceptive of "atmosphere" there is a subtle difference in silence. There is the silence of woods, the silence of plains, the silence of death, the silence of sleep, and the silence of wakefulness. This silence was the last named. It was a silence alert, alive, yet very still.

A slight movement in the room, so slight as to be almost imperceptible, roused him to the present. Life sprang to his eyes, puzzled, questioning; his body motionless, they turned towards the middle window of the three, from whence the movement appeared to have come. It was not repeated. The old utter silence lay upon the place; yet Nicholas Danver kept his eyes upon the curtain.

The minutes passed. Then once more came that almost imperceptible movement.

Nicholas Danver's well-bred old voice broke the silence.

"Why not come into the room?" it suggested quietly. There was a gleam of ironical humour in his eyes.

The curtains swung apart, and a man came from between them. He stood blinking towards the light.

"How did you know I was there, sir?" came the gruff inquiry.

"I didn't know," said Nicholas, accurately truthful. "I merely guessed."

There was a pause.

"Well?" said Nicholas watching the man keenly. "By the way, I suppose you know I am entirely at your mercy. I could ring this bell," he indicated an electric button attached to the arm of his chair, "but I suppose it would be at least three minutes before any one came. Yes," he continued thoughtfully, "allowing for the distance from the servants' quarters, I should say it would be at least three minutes. You could get through a fair amount of business in three minutes. Was it the candlesticks you wanted?" He looked towards a pair of solid silver candlesticks on the mantelpiece. "They are cumbersome, you know. Or the miniatures? There are three Cosways and four Engleharts. I should recommend the miniatures."

"I wanted to see you," said the man bluntly.

"Indeed!" Nicholas's white eyebrows rose the fraction of an inch above his keen old eyes. "An unusual hour for a visit, and—an unusual entrance, if I might make the suggestion."

"There'd never have been a chance of seeing you if I had come any other way." There was a hint of bitterness in the words.

Nicholas looked straight at him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Job Grantley," was the reply. "I live down by the Lower Acre."

"Ah! One of my tenants."

"Yes, sir, one of your tenants."

"And—?" suggested Nicholas urbanely.

"I'm to turn out of my cottage to-morrow," said the man briefly.

"Indeed!" The pupils of Nicholas's eyes contracted. "May I ask why that information should be of interest to me?"

"It's of no interest to you, sir, and we know it. You never hear a word of what happens outside this house."

"Mr. Spencer Curtis conducts my business," said Nicholas politely.

"We know that too, sir, and we know the way it is conducted. It's an iron hand, and a heart like flint. It's pay or go, and not an hour's grace."

"You can hardly expect him to give you my cottages rent free," suggested Nicholas suavely.

The man winced.

"No, sir. But where a few weeks would make all the difference to a man, where it's a matter of a few shillings standing between home and the roadside—" he broke off.

Nicholas was silent.

"I thought perhaps a word to you, sir," went on the man half wistfully. "We're to go to-morrow if I can't pay, and I can't. A couple of weeks might have made all the difference. It was for the wife I came, sneaking up here like a thief. She's lost two little ones; they never but opened their eyes on the world to shut them again. I'm glad on it now. But women aren't made that way. There's another coming. She's not strong. I doubt but the shock'll not take her and the little one too. Better for them both if it does. A man can face odds, and remake his life if he is a man—" he stopped.

Still there was silence.

"I was a fool to come," said the man drearily. "'Twas the weather did it in the end. I'd gone mad-like listening to the wind and rain, and thinking of her and the child that was to be—" again he stopped.

Nicholas was watching him from under the penthouse of his eyebrows. Suddenly he spoke.

"How soon could you pay your rent?" he demanded.

"In a fortnight most like, sir. Three weeks for certain."

"Have you told Mr. Curtis that?"

"I have, sir. But it's the tick of time, or out you go."

"Have you ever been behindhand before?"

"No, sir."

"How has it happened now?" The questions came short, incisive.

The man flushed.

"How has it happened now?" repeated Nicholas distinctly.

"I lent a bit, sir."

"To whom?"

"Widow Thisby. She's an old woman, sir."

"Tell me the whole story," said Nicholas curtly.

Again the flush rose to the man's face.

"Her son got into a bit of trouble, sir. It was a matter of a sovereign or going to gaol. He's only a youngster, and the prison smell sticks. Trust folk for nosing it out. He's got a chance now, and will be sending his mother a trifle presently." 7

"Then I suppose she'll repay you?"

Job fidgeted with his cap.

"Well, sir, I don't suppose it'll be more'n a trifle he'll send; and she's got her work cut out to make both ends meet."

"Then I suppose you *gave* her the money?"

Job shifted his feet uneasily.

"How did you intend to raise the money due for your rent, then?" demanded Nicholas less curtly.

Job left off fidgeting. He felt on safer ground here.

"It just meant a bit extra saved from each week," he said eagerly. "You can do it if you've time. Boiling water poured into the morning teapot for evenings, and knock off your bit of bacon, and—well, there's lots of ways, sir, and women is wonderful folk for managing, the best ones. Where it's thought and trouble they'll do it, and they'd be using strength too if they'd got it, but some of them hasn't."

"Hmm," said Nicholas. He put up his hand to his mouth. "So you *gave* money you knew would never be repaid, knowing, too, that it meant possible homelessness."

"You'd have done it yourself if you'd been in my place," said the man bluntly.

"Should I?" said Nicholas half ironically. "I very much doubt it. Also what right had you to gamble with your wife's happiness? You knew the risk you ran. You knew the—er, the rule regarding the rents. Job Grantley, you were a fool." 8

Again the colour rushed to the man's face.

"May be, sir. I'll allow it sounds foolishness, but—oh Lord, sir, where's the use o' back-thinking now. I reckon you'd never do a hand's turn for nobody if you spent your time looking backward and forrard at your jobs." He stopped, his chin quivering.

"Job Grantley, you were a fool." Nicholas repeated the words with even deliberation.

The man moved silently towards the window. There was a clumsy dignity about his figure.

"Stop," said Nicholas. "Job Grantley, you *are* a fool."

The man turned round.

"Go to that drawer," ordered Nicholas, "and bring me a pocket-book you will find there."

Mechanically the man did as he was bidden. Nicholas took the book.

"Now then," he said opening it, "how much will put you right?"

The man stared.

"I—oh, sir."

"How much will put you right?" demanded Nicholas.

"A pound, sir. The month's rent is due to-morrow."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows.

"Humph. Not much to stand between you and—hell. I've no doubt you did consider it hell. We each have our own interpretation of that cheerful abode." 9

He turned the papers carefully.

"Now look here," he said suddenly, "there's five pounds. It's for yourselves, mind. No more indiscriminate bestowal of charity, you understand. You begin your charity at home. Do you follow me?"

The man took the money in a dazed fashion. He was more than half bewildered at the sudden turn in events.

"I'll repay you faithfully, sir. I'll—"

"Damn you," broke in Nicholas softly, "who talked about repayment? Can't I make a present as well as you, if I like? Besides I owe you something for this ten minutes. They have been interesting. I don't get too many excitements. That'll do. I don't want any thanks. Be off with you. Better go by the window. There might be a need of explanations if you tried a more conventional mode of exit now. That'll do, that'll do. Go, man."

Two minutes later Nicholas was looking again towards the curtains behind which Job Grantley had vanished.

"Now, was I the greater fool?" he said aloud. There was an odd, mocking expression in his eyes.

Ten minutes later he pressed the electric button attached to the arm of his chair. His eyes were on his watch which he held in his hand. As the library door opened, he replaced it in his pocket.

"Right to the second," he laughed. "Ah, Jessop."

The man who entered was about fifty years of age, or thereabouts, grey-haired, clean-shaven. His face was cast in the rigid lines peculiar to his calling. Possibly they relaxed when with his own kind, but one could not feel certain of the fact.

"Ah, Jessop, do you know Job Grantley by sight?"

For one brief second Jessop stared, amazement fallen upon him. Then the mask of impenetrability was on again.

"Job Grantley, yes, sir."

"What is he like?"

"Tallish man, sir; wears corduroys. Dark hair and eyes; looks straight at you, sir."

"Hmm. Very good. Perhaps I wasn't a fool," he was thinking.

"Do you know Mr. Curtis?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir." This came very shortly.

"Should you call him—er, a hard man?" asked Nicholas smoothly.

Again amazement fell on Jessop's soul, revealing itself momentarily in his features. And again the amazement was concealed.

"He's a good business man, sir," came the cautious reply.

"You mean—?" suggested Nicholas.

"A good business man isn't ordinarily what you'd call tender-like," said Jessop grimly.

Nicholas flashed a glance of amusement at him.

"I suppose not," he replied dryly.

There was a pause.

"Do the tenants ever ask to see me?" demanded Nicholas.

"They used to, sir. Now they save their shoe-leather coming up the drive."

"Ah, you told them—?"

"Your orders, sir. You saw no one."

"I see." Nicholas's fingers were beating a light tattoo on the arm of his chair. "Well, those are my orders. That will do. You needn't come again till I ring."

Jessop turned towards the door.

"Oh, by the way," Nicholas's voice arrested him on the threshold, "I fancy the middle window is unlatched."

Jessop returned and went behind the curtains.

"It was, wasn't it?" asked Nicholas as he emerged.

"Yes, sir."

Jessop left the room.

"Now how on earth did he know that?" he queried as he walked across the hall.

The curtains had been drawn when Nicholas had been carried into the room. The knowledge, for a man unable to move from his chair, seemed little short of uncanny.

"A man can face odds if he is a man, and remake his life."

The words repeated themselves in Nicholas's brain. Each syllable was like the incisive tap of a hammer. They fell on a wound lately dealt.

A little scene, barely ten days old, reconstructed itself in his memory. The stage was the one he now occupied; the position the same. But another actor was present, a big rugged man, clad in a shabby overcoat,—a man with keen eyes, a grim mouth, and flexible sensitive hands.

"I regret to tell you that, humanly speaking, you have no more than a year to live."

The man had looked past him as he spoke the words. He had had his back to the light, but

Nicholas had seen something almost inscrutable in his expression.

Nicholas's voice had followed close upon the words, politely ironical.

"Personally I should have considered it a matter for congratulation rather than regret," he had suggested.

There had been the fraction of a pause. Then the man's voice had broken the silence.

"Do you?"

"I do. What has my life been for fifteen years?" Nicholas had demanded.

"What you have made of it," had been the answer.

"What God or the devil has made of it, aided by Baccarat—poor beast," Nicholas had retorted savagely.

"The devil, possibly," the man had replied, "but aided and abetted by yourself."

"Confound you, what are you talking about?" Nicholas had cried.

The man had still looked towards the book-cases.

"Listen," he had said. "For fifteen years you have lived the life of a recluse—a useless recluse, mind you. And why? Because of pride,—sheer pride. Those who had known you in the strength of your manhood, those who had known you as Nick the dare-devil, should never see the broken cripple. Pride forbade it. You preferred to run to cover, to lie hidden there like a wounded beast, rather than face, like a man, the odds that were against you,—heavy odds, I'll allow."

Nicholas's eyes had blazed.

"How dare you!" he had shouted.

"You've a year left," went on the man calmly. "I should advise you to see what use you can make of it."

"The first use I'll make of it is to order you from the house. You can go at once." Nicholas had pointed towards the door.

The man had got up.

"All right," he had said, looking at him for the first time in the last ten minutes. "But don't forget. You've got the year, you know."

"To hell with the year," said Nicholas curtly.

"Damn the fellow," he had said as the door had closed behind him. But the very truth of the words had left a wound,—a clean-cut wound however. There was never any bungling where Doctor Hilary was concerned.

And now incisive, sharp, came the taps of the hammer on it, taps dealt by Job Grantley's chance words.

"Confound both the men," he muttered. "But the fellow deserved the five pounds. It was the first interest I've had for fifteen years. The kind of entrance I'd have made myself, too; or perhaps mine would have been even a bit more unusual, eh, Nick the dare-devil!"

It was the old name again. He had never earned it through the least malice, however. Foolhardiness perhaps, added to indomitable high spirits and good health, but malice, never.

How Father O'Brady had chuckled over the prank that had first earned him the title,—the holding up of the coach that ran between Byestry and Kingsleigh, Nick at the head of a band of half a dozen young scapegraces clad in black masks and huge hats, and armed with old pistols purloined from the historic gun-room of the old Hall! It had been a leaf from the book of Claude Duval with a slight difference.

Nick had re-acted the scene for him. He was an inimitable mimic. He had taken off old Lady Fanshawe's cackling fright to the life. As the stoutest and oldest dowager of the lot he had obliged her to dance a minuet with him, the terrified coachman, postilion, and solitary male passenger covered by his companions' pistols the while. The fluttered younger occupants of the coach had frankly envied the terrified dowager, yet Nick had bestowed but the most perfunctory of glances upon them, and that for a reason best known to himself.

Later the truth of the affair had leaked out, and Lady Fanshawe could never chaperon one of her numerous nieces to a ball, without being besieged by young men imploring the favour of a dance. Being a sporting old lady—when not out of her wits with terror—she had taken it all in good part. Once, even, she had danced the very same minuet with Nick, the whole ballroom looking on and applauding.

It had been the first of a series of pranks each madder than the last, but each equally light-hearted and gay.

That is till Cecilia Lester married Basil Percy.

The world, namely the small circle in which Cecilia and Nick moved, had heard of the marriage with amazement. If Nick was amazed he did not show it, but his pranks held less of gaiety, more of a grim foolhardiness. Father O'Brady no longer chuckled over their recitation. Maybe because they mainly reached his ears from outside sources. Nick, who was not of his fold, seldom sought his society in these days. Later he heard them not at all, being removed to another mission.

And then, at last, came the day when Nick played his final prank in the hunting field,—his maddest prank, in which Baccarat failed him. The horse was shot where he lay. His rider was carried home half dead; and half dead, literally, he had been for fifteen years.

And there was yet one more year left to him.

Nicholas sat gazing at the fire.

His brain was extraordinarily alert. There was a dawning humour waking in his eyes, a hint of the bygone years' devil-may-careness. The old Nick was stirring within him, roused by the little blows of that sentence.

Suddenly a flash of laughter illuminated his whole face. He brought his hand down on the arm of his chair.

"By gad, I've got it, and Hilary's the man to help me."

It was characteristic of Nicholas to forget his own share in that little ten-day-old scene. Also it may be safely averred that Doctor Hilary would be equally forgetful.

Nicholas still sat gazing into the fire, chuckling every now and then to himself. It was midnight before he rang for Jessop. The ringing had been preceded by one short sentence.

"By gad, Nick the dare-devil, the scheme's worthy of the old days."

CHAPTER I

THE LETTER

Antony was sitting on the stoep of his bungalow. The African sun was bathing the landscape in a golden glory. Before him lay his garden, a medley of brilliant colour. Just beyond it was a field of green Indian corn, scintillating to silver as a little breeze swept its surface. Beyond it again lay the vineyard, and the thatched roof of an old Dutch farmhouse half hidden among trees. Farther off still rose the mountains, golden in the sunlight.

It was the middle of the afternoon. Silence reigned around, broken only by the occasional chirp of a grasshopper, the muffled note of a frog, the twitter of the canaries among the cosmos, or the rustle of the reed curtain which veiled the end of the stoep.

The reed curtain veiled the bathroom, a primitive affair, the bath consisting of half an old wine vat, filled with velvety mountain water, conducted thither by means of a piece of hose-piping attached to the solitary water tap the estate possessed. It was emptied by means of a bung fixed in the lower part of the vat, the water affording irrigation for the garden.

Antony sat very still. His coat lay beside him on the stoep. A small wire-haired puppy named Josephus mounted guard upon it. Woe betide the person other than Antony's self who ventured to lay finger on the garment. There would be a bristling of short wiry white hair, a showing of baby white teeth, and a series of almost incredibly vicious growls. Josephus permitted no man to take liberties with his master's property, nor indeed with his ridiculously dignified small self. Antony was the sole exception to his rule. But then was not he a king among men, a person whose word was law, whose caress a benediction, whose blow a thing for which to demand mute pardon? You knew it was deserved, though the knowledge might possibly at times be vague, since your wisdom was as yet but puppy wisdom.

Now and again Josephus hung out a pink tongue, a tongue which demanded milk in a saucer. He knew tea-time to the second,—ordinarily speaking that is to say. He could not accustom himself to that extra half-hour's delay which occurred on mail days, a delay caused by Riffle, the coloured boy, having to walk to the village to fetch the post. The walk was seldom entirely fruitless. Generally there was a newspaper of sorts; occasionally—very occasionally—a letter. Josephus knew that the click of the garden gate heralded the swift arrival of tea, but it was not always easy to realize on which days that click was to be expected.

Antony gazed at the scintillating field of corn. The sight pleased him. There is always a glory in creation, even if it be creation by proxy, so to speak. At all events he had been the human agent in the matter. He had ploughed the brown earth; he had cast the yellow seed, trudging the furrows with swinging arm; he had dug the little trenches through which the limpid mountain water should flow to the parched earth; he had watched the first hint of green spreading like a light veil; he had seen it thicken, carpeting the field; and now he saw the full fruit of his labours. Strong and healthy it stood before him, the soft wind rippling across its surface, silvering the green.

The click of the garden gate roused him from his contemplation. Josephus cocked one ear, his small body pleurably alert.

Antony turned his head. Mail day always held possibilities, however improbable, an expectation unknown to those to whom the sound of the postman's knock comes in the ordinary course of

events. Riffle appeared round the corner of the stoep. Had you seen him anywhere but in Africa, you would have vowed he was a good-looking Italian. A Cape coloured boy he was truly, and that, mark you, is a very different thing from Kaffir.

"The paper, master, and a letter," he announced with some importance. Then he disappeared to prepare the tea for which Josephus's doggy soul was longing. 20

Antony turned the letter in his hands. It must be confessed it was a disappointment. It was obviously a business communication. Both envelope and clerkly writing made that fact apparent. It was a drop to earth after the first leap of joy that had heralded Riffle's announcement. It was like putting out your hand to greet a friend, and meeting—a commercial traveller.

Antony smiled ruefully. Yet, after all, it was an English commercial traveller. That fact stood for something. It was, at all events, a faint breath of the Old Country. In England the letter had been penned, in England it had been posted, from England it had come to him. Yet who on earth had business affairs to communicate to him!

He broke the seal.

Amazement fell upon him with the first words he read. By the end of the perusal his brain was whirling. It was incredible, astounding. He stared out into the sunshine. Surely he was dreaming. It must be a joke of sorts, a laughable hoax. Yet there was no hint of joking in the concise communication, in the small clerkly handwriting, in the business-like letter-paper, a letter-paper headed by the name of a most respectable firm of solicitors.

"Well, I'm jiggered," declared Antony to the sunshine. And he fell to a second perusal of the letter. Here is what he read: 21

"DEAR SIR,

"We beg to inform you that under the terms of the will of the late Mr. Nicholas Danver of Chorley Old Hall, Byestry, in the County of Devon, you are left sole legatee of his estate and personal effects estimated at an income of some twelve thousand pounds per annum, subject, however, to certain conditions, which are to be communicated verbally to you by us.

"In order that you may be enabled to hear the conditions without undue inconvenience to yourself, we have been authorized to defray any expenses you may incur either directly or indirectly through your journey to England, and—should you so desire—your return journey. We enclose herewith cheque for one hundred pounds on account.

"As the property is yours only upon conditions, we must beg that you will make no mention of this communication to any person whatsoever until such time as you have been made acquainted with the said conditions. We should be obliged if you would cable to us your decision whether or no you intend to hear them, and—should the answer be in the affirmative—the approximate date we may expect you in England.

"Yours obediently,
"HENRY PARSONS."

And the paper was headed, Parsons & Grieve, Solicitors.

Nicholas Danver. Where had he heard that name before? What faint cord of memory did it strike? He sought in vain for the answer. Yet somehow, at sometime, surely he had heard it! Again and again he seemed on the verge of discovering the clue, and again and again it escaped him, slipping elusive from him. It was tantalizing, annoying. With a slight mental effort he abandoned the search. Unpursued, the clue might presently return to him. 22

Riffle reappeared on the stoep bearing a tea-tray. Josephus sat erect. For full ten minutes his brown eyes gazed ardently towards the table. What had happened? What untoward event had occurred? Antony was oblivious of his very existence. Munching bread and butter, drinking hot tea himself, he appeared entirely to have forgotten that a thirsty and bewilderedly disappointed puppy was gazing at him from the harbourage of his old coat. At length the neglect became a thing not to be borne. Waving a deprecating paw, Josephus gave vent to a pitiful whine.

Antony turned. Then realization dawned on him. He grasped the milk jug.

"You poor little beggar," he laughed. "It's not often you get neglected. But it's not often that bombshells in the shape of ordinary, simple, harmless-looking letters fall from the skies, scattering extraordinary contents and my wits along with them. Here you are, you morsel of injured patience."

Josephus lapped, greedily, thirstily, till the empty saucer circled on the stoep under the onslaughts of his small pink tongue. 23

Antony had again sunk into a reverie, a reverie which lasted for another fifteen minutes or so. At last he roused himself.

"Josephus, my son," he announced solemnly, "there are jobs to be done, and in spite of bombshells we'd better do them, and leave Arabian Night wonders for further contemplation this evening."

CHAPTER II

MEMORIES

Some four hours later, Antony, once more in his deck-chair on the stoep, set himself to review the situation. Shorn of its first bewilderment it resolved itself into the fact that he, Antony Gray, owner of a small farm on the African veldt, which farm brought him in a couple of hundred a year or thereabouts, was about to become the proprietor of an estate valued at a yearly income of twelve thousand,—subject, however, to certain conditions. And in that last clause lay the possible fly in the ointment. What conditions?

Antony turned the possibilities in his mind.

Matrimony with some lady of Nicholas Danver's own choosing? He dismissed the idea. It savoured too much of early Victorian melodrama for the prosaic twentieth century. The support of some antediluvian servant or pet? Possibly. But then it would hardly be necessary to require verbal communication of such a condition; a brief written statement to the effect would have sufficed. The house ghost-haunted; a yearly exorcising of the restless spirit demanded? Again too melodramatic. A promise to live on the estate, and on the estate alone? Far more probable.

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Well, he'd give that fast enough. The veldt-desire had never gripped him as it is declared to grip those who have found a home in Africa. Behind the splendour, the pageantry, the vastness, he had always felt a hint of something sinister, something cruel; a spirit, perhaps of evil, ever wakeful, ever watching. Now and again a sound, a scent would make him sick with longing, with longing for an English meadow, for the clean breath of new-mown hay, for the fragrance of June roses, for the song of the thrush, and the sweet piping of the blackbird.

He had crushed down the longing as sentimental. Having set out on a path he would walk it, till such time as Fate should clearly indicate another signpost. He saw her finger now, and welcomed the direction of its pointing. At all events he might make venture of the new route,—an Arabian Night's path truly, gold-paved, mysterious. If, after making some steps along it, he should discover a barrier other than he had a mind to surmount, he could always return to the old road. Fate might point, but she should never push him against his will. Thus he argued, confident within his soul. He had the optimism, the trust of youth to his balance. He had not yet learned the deepest of Fate's subtleties, the apparent candour which conceals her tricks.

26

He gazed out into the night, ruminative, speculative. The breeze which had rippled across the Indian corn during the day had sunk to rest. The darkened field lay tranquil under the stars big and luminous. From far across the veldt came the occasional beating of a buzzard's wings, like the beating of muffled drums. A patch of gum trees to the right, beyond the garden, stood out black against the sky.

Nicholas Danver. The name repeated itself within his brain, and then, with it, came a sudden flash of lucid memory lighting up a long forgotten scene.

He saw a small boy, a very small boy, tugging, pulling, and twisting at a tough gorse stick on a moorland. He felt the clenching of small teeth, the bruised ache of small hands, the heat of the small body, the obstinate determination of soul. A slight sound had caused the boy to turn, and he had seen a man on a big black horse, watching him with laughing eyes.

"You'll never break that," the man had remarked amused.

"I've got to. I've begun," had been the small boy's retort. And he had returned to the onslaught, regardless of the watching man.

Ten minutes had ended in an exceedingly heated triumph. The boy had sunk upon the grass, sucking a wounded finger. The mood of determination had passed with the victory. He had been too shy to look at the rider on the black horse. But the gorse stick had lain on the ground beside him.

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"Shake hands," the man had said.

And the boy had scrambled to his feet to extend a grubby paw.

"What's your name?" the man had demanded.

"Antony Gray."

"Not Richard Gray's son?"

"Yes."

The man had burst into a shout of laughter.

"Where is your father?"

"In London."

"Well, tell him his son is a chip of the old block, and Nicholas Danver says so. Ask him if he remembers the coach road from Byestry to Kingsleigh. Good-bye, youngster."

And Nicholas had ridden away.

It was astonishing in what detail the scene came back to him. He could smell the hot aromatic scent of the gorse and wild thyme. He could hear the humming of the bees above the heather. He could see the figure on the black horse growing speck-like in the distance as he had gazed after it.

The whole thing pieced itself together. He remembered that he had gone to that cottage on the moorland with his nurse to recover after measles. He remembered that his father had said that the air of the place would make a new boy of him. He remembered his father's laugh, when, later, the tale of the meeting had been recounted to him.

"Good old Nick," he had said. "One loses sight of the friends of one's boyhood as one grows older, more's the pity. I must write to old Nick."

There the incident had closed. Yet clearly as the day on which it had occurred, a day now twenty-five years old, it repainted itself on Antony's brain, as he sat on the stoep, gazing out into the African night.

It never occurred to him to wonder why Nicholas should have left him his money and property. That he had done so was marvellous, truly; his reasons for doing so were not even speculated upon. Antony had a childlike faculty for accepting facts as they presented themselves to him, with wonderment, pleasure, frank disapprobation, or stoicism, as the case might be. The side issues, which led to the presentation of the facts, were, generally speaking, the affair of others rather than his own; and, as such, were no concern of his. It was not that he deliberately refused to consider them, but merely that being no concern of his, it never occurred to him to do so. He walked his own route, sometimes singing, sometimes dreaming, sometimes amusedly silent, and always working. Work had been of necessity from the day his father's death had summoned him hurriedly from college. A quixotic, and, it is to be feared, culpable generosity on Richard Gray's part had left his son penniless.

Antony had accepted the fact stoically, and even cheerfully. He had looked straight at the generosity, denying the culpability, thereby preserving what he valued infinitely more than lands or gold—his father's memory, thus proving himself in very truth his son. He had no ties to bind him; he was an only child, and his mother was long since dead. He set out on his own route, a route which had led him far, and finally had landed him, some five years previously, on the African veldt, where he had become the owner of the small farm he now occupied.

After all, there had been compensations in the life. All unconsciously he had taken for his watchword the cry: "I will succeed in spite of ..." rather than the usual old lament: "I could succeed if..." Naturally there had been difficulties. He had considered them grave-eyed and silent; he had tackled them smiling and singing. Inwardly he was the same Antony who had conquered the gorse-stick on the moorland; outwardly—well, he didn't make the fight so obvious. That was all the difference.

And now, sitting on the stoep with the silence of the African night around him, he tried to shape his plans, to bring them forth from the glamour of the marvellous which had enshrouded them, to marshal them up into coherent everyday form. But the glamour refused to be dispelled. Everything, the smallest and most prosaic detail, stood before him bathed in its light. It was all so gorgeously unexpected, so—so stupendously mysterious.

And through all the glamour, the unexpectedness, and the mystery, there was sounding an ever-repeated chord of music, composed of the notes of youth, happiness, memory, desire, and expectation. And, thus combined, they struck the one word—England.

CHAPTER III

QUOD SCRIPTUM EST

The *Fort Salisbury* was cutting her way through the translucent green water. Cape Town, with Table Mountain and the Lion's Head beyond it, was vanishing into the increasing distance.

Antony had taken his passage on the *Fort Salisbury* for three reasons: number one, she was the first boat sailing from Cape Town after he had dispatched his momentous cablegram; number two, he had a certain diffidence regarding the expenditure of other people's money, and his passage on the *Fort Salisbury* would certainly be lower than on a mail boat; number three, a curious and altogether unaccountable impulse had impelled him to the choice. This reason had, perhaps unconsciously, weighed with him considerably more than the other two. He often found instinct throwing itself into the balance for or against the motives of mere reason. When it was against mere reason, matters occasionally complicated themselves in his mind. It had been a comfort to find, in this case, reason on the same side of the scale as instinct.

Antony, leaning on the rail of the upper deck, was content, blissfully content. The sole speck that marred his entire enjoyment was the fact that the rules of the boat had separated him, *pro tem*, from an exceedingly perplexed and distressed puppy. It was the perplexity and distress of

the said puppy that caused the speck, rather than the separation. Antony, with the vaster wisdom vouchsafed to humans, knew the present separation to be of comparatively short duration, and to be endured in the avoidance of a possibly infinitely longer one. Not so Josephus. He suffered in silence, since his deity had commanded the silence, but the perplexed grief in his puppy heart found an echo in Antony's.

It was a faint echo, however. Time and a daily visit would bring consolation to Josephus; and, for himself, the present adventure—it was an adventure—was all-absorbing and delicious. He revelled in it like a schoolboy on a holiday. He watched the sparkling water, the tiny rippling waves; he felt the freshness of the sea breeze, and the throb of the engine like a great living heart in the body of the boat. The fact that there were other people on her decks concerned him not at all. Those who have travelled a good deal become, generally speaking, one of two types,—the type that is quite enormously interested in everyone, and the type that is entirely indifferent to any one. Antony was of this last type. He had acquired a faculty for shutting his mental, and to a great degree, his physical eyes to his human fellows, except in so far as sheer necessity compelled. Naturally this did not make for popularity; but, then, Antony did not care much for popularity. The winning of it would have been too great an effort for his nature; the retaining of it, even more strenuous. Of course the whole thing is entirely a question of temperament.

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A few of the other passengers looked somewhat curiously at the tall lean man gazing out to sea; but, as he was so obviously oblivious of their very existence, so entirely absorbed in his contemplation of the ocean, they left him undisturbed.

It was not till the dressing bugle sounded that he roused himself, and descended to his cabin. It was a matter for his fervent thanksgiving that he had found himself the sole occupant of the tiny two-berthed apartment.

He arrayed himself with scrupulous care. Only the most stringent exigencies of time and place—though they for a while had been frequent—had ever caused him to forego the ceremonial of donning dress clothes for dinner, though no eyes but his own should behold him. Latterly there had been Riffle and then Josephus to behold, and the former to marvel. Josephus took it, puppy-like, as a matter of course.

There were not a vast number of passengers on the boat. Of the four tables in the dining saloon, Antony found only two fully laid, and a third partially so. His own place was some three seats from the captain's left. The chair on the captain's right was, as yet, unoccupied. For the rest, with but one or two exceptions at the other tables, the passengers had already put in an appearance. The almost entire absence of wind, the smoothness of the ocean, had given courage even to those the most susceptible to the sea's malady. It would have required a really vivid imagination to have perceived any motion in the boat other than the throbbing of her engines.

34

Antony slipped into his seat, and a steward placed a plate of clear soup before him. In the act of taking his first spoonful, he paused, his eyes arrested by the sight of a woman advancing towards the chair on the captain's right.

At the first glance, Antony saw that she was a tall woman, dressed in black unrelieved save for ruffles of soft creamy lace at her throat and wrists. Presently he took in further details, the dark chestnut of her hair, the warm ivory of her skin, the curious steady gravity of her eyes—grey or violet, he was not sure which,—the straight line of her eyebrows, the delicate chiselling of her nose, and the red-rose of her mouth. And yet, in spite of seeing the details, they were submerged in the personality which had first arrested him. Something within him told him as clearly as spoken words, that here, in her presence, lay the explanation of the instinct which had prompted him to take his passage on this boat.

An odd little thrill of unaccountable excitement ran through him. He felt like a man who had been shown a page in his own life-book, and who found the words written thereon extraordinarily and amazingly interesting. He found himself longing, half-inarticulately, to turn the leaf; and, yet, he knew that Time's hand alone could do this. He could only read as far as the end of the open page before him. And that page but recorded the fact of her presence.

35

Once, during the repast, her eyes met his, steady, grave, and yet with a little note of half interrogation in them. Again Antony felt that odd little thrill run through him, this time intensified, while his heart beat and pounded under his immaculate white shirt-front.

Perhaps it is a mercy that shirt-fronts, to say nothing of other things, do hide the vagaries of our hearts. It would be a sorry thing for us if the world at large could perceive them,—the joy, the anguish, the remorse, and the bitter little disappointments. Yes, above all, the bitter little disappointments, the cause possibly so trivial, so childish almost, yet the hurt, the wound, so very real, the pain so horribly poignant. It is the little stab which smarts the most; the blow which accompanies the deeper wound, numbs in its very delivery.

Later, in the moonlit darkness, Antony found himself again on deck, and again leaning by the rail. Yet this time he had that page from his life-book for company; and, marvelling, he perused the written words thereon. It was extraordinary that they should hold such significance for him. And why for him alone? he queried. Might not another, others even, have read the selfsame words?

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With the thought came a pang of something akin to jealousy at his heart. He wanted the words for himself, written for him alone. And yet it was entirely obvious, considering the number at the table, that they must have been recorded for others also, since, as already mentioned, they but recorded the fact of her presence. But did they hold the same significance for the others? There

was the question, and there possibly, nay probably, lay the comfort. Also, what lay on the other side of the page? Unanswerable at the moment.

He looked down at the gliding water, alive, alight with brilliant phosphorus. A step behind him made his heart leap. He did not turn, but he was conscious of a figure on his right, also looking down upon the water. Suddenly there was a faint flutter of drapery, and the breeze sent a trail of something soft and silky across his eyes.

"Oh, I am sorry," said a voice in the darkness.

Antony turned.

"The wind caught it," she explained apologetically, tucking the chiffon streamer within her cloak.

Now, it is quite certain that Antony had here an opportunity to make one of those little ordinary pleasant remarks that invariably lead to a conversation, but none presented itself to his mind. He could do nothing but utter the merest formal, though of course polite, acknowledgment of her apology, his brain seeking wildly for further words the while. It found none.

She gave him a little bow, courteous and not at all unfriendly, and moved away across the deck. Antony looked after her figure receding in the darkness.

"Oh, you idiot," he groaned within his heart, "you utter and double-dyed idiot."

He looked despairingly down at the water, and from it to the moonlit sky. Fate, so he mused ruefully, writes certain sentences in our life-book, truly; but it behoves each one of us to fill in between the lines. And he had filled in—nothing.

An hour or so later he descended dejectedly to his cabin.

CHAPTER IV

THE LADY OF THE BLUE BOOK

He saw her at breakfast the next morning; and again, later, sitting on a deck-chair, with a book.

Once more he cursed his folly of the previous evening. A word or two then, no matter how trivial their utterance, and the barriers of convention would have been passed. Even should Fate throw a like opportunity in his path again, it was entirely improbable that she would choose the same hour. She is ever chary of exact repetitions. And, if his stammering tongue failed in speech with the soft darkness to cover its shyness, how was it likely it would find utterance in the broad light of day? The Moment—he spelled it with a capital—had passed, and would never again recur. Therefore he seated himself on his own deck-chair, some twenty paces from her, and began to fill his pipe, gloomily enough. Yet, in spite of gloom, he watched her,—surreptitiously of course. There was no ill-bred staring in his survey.

She was again dressed in black, but this time the lace ruffles had given place to soft white muslin cuffs and collar. Her dark hair was covered by a broad-brimmed black hat. She was leaning back in her chair as she read, the book lying on her lap. Suddenly the gravity of her face relaxed. A smile rippled across it like a little breeze across the surface of some lake. The smile broke into silent laughter. Antony found himself smiling in response.

She looked up from her book, and out over the sun-kissed water, the amusement still trembling on her lips and dancing in her eyes.

"I wonder," reflected Antony watching her, "what she has been reading."

For some ten minutes she sat gazing at the sunshine. Then she rose from her chair, placed her book upon it, and went towards the stairway which led to the lower deck.

Antony looked at the empty chair—empty, that is, except for a pale blue cushion and a deeper blue book. On the back of the chair, certain letters were painted,—P. di D.

Antony surveyed them gravely. The first letter really engrossed his attention. The last was merely an adjunct. The first would represent—or should represent—the real woman. He marshalled every possibility before him, merely to dismiss them: Patience, Phyllis, Prudence, Priscilla, Perpetua, Penelope, Persis, Phœbe, Pauline,—none were to his mind. The last appeared to him the most possible, and yet it did not truly belong. So he summed up its fitness. Yet, for the life of him, he could find no other. He had run through the whole gamut attached to the initial, so he told himself. Curiosity, or interest, call it what you will, fell back baffled.

He got up from his chair, and began to pace the deck. Passing her chair, he gazed again upon the letters painted thereon, as if challenging them to disclose the secret. Inscrutable, they stared back blankly at him.

Turning for the third time, he perceived that she had returned on deck. She was carrying a small bag of old gold brocade. She was in the chair once more as he came alongside of her; but

the blue book had slipped to the ground. He bent to pick it up, involuntarily glancing at the title as he handed it to her. *Dream Days*. It fitted into his imaginings of her.

"Do you know it?" she queried, noticing his glance.

"No," replied Antony, turning the book in his hands.

"Oh, but you should," she smiled back at him. "That is if you have the smallest memory of your own childhood. I was just laughing over 'death letters' ten minutes ago."

"Death letters?" queried Antony perplexed, the while his heart was singing a little pæan of joy at the vagaries of Fate's methods.

"Yes; a will or testament. But a death letter is so infinitely more explanatory. Don't you think, so?"

Antony laughed.

"Of course," he agreed, light breaking in upon him.

"Take the book if you care to," she said. "I know it nearly by heart. But I had it by me, and brought it on deck to look at it again. I didn't want to get absorbed in anything entirely new. It takes one's mind from all this, and seems a loss." A little gesture indicated sunshine, sea, and sky.

"Yes," agreed Antony, "it's waste of time to read in the open." And then he stopped. "Oh, I didn't mean—" he stammered, glancing down at the book, and perceiving ungraciousness in his words.

"Oh, yes, you did," she assured him smiling, "and it was quite true, and not in the least rude. Read it in your berth some time; you can do it there with an easy conscience."

She gave him a little nod, which might have been considered dismissal or a hint of emphasis. Antony, being of course aware that she could not possibly find it the same pleasure to talk to him as he found it to talk to her, took it as dismissal. With a word of thanks he moved off down the deck, the blue book in his hands.

He found a retired spot forward on the boat. A curious shyness prevented him from returning to his own deck-chair, and reading the book within sight of her. In spite of his little remark against reading in the open, he was longing to make himself acquainted with the contents immediately. Had it not been her recommendation? Death letters! He laughed softly and joyously. He had never even given the things a thought before, and here, twice within ten days, they had been brought to his notice in a fashion that, to his mind, fell little short of the miraculous. And it is not at all certain that he did not consider their second queer little entry on the scene the more miraculous of the two.

He opened the book, and there, facing him from the fly-leaf, was the answer to the question he had erstwhile sought to fathom,—Pia di Donatello. His lips formed the syllables, dwelling with pleasure on the first three little letters—Pia. Oh, it was right, it was utterly and entirely right. Every other possibility vanished before it into the remotest background, unthinkable in the face of what was. Pia di Donatello! Again he repeated the musical syllables. And yet—and yet—he'd have sworn she was English. There wasn't the faintest trace of a foreign accent in her speech. If anything, there was a hint of Irish,—the soft intonation of the Emerald Isle. Her colouring, too, was Irish, the blue-black hair, the dark violet eyes—he had discovered that they were violet; looking, for all the world, as if they had been put in with a smutty finger, as the saying goes. He revolved the problem in his mind, and a moment later came upon the solution, so he told himself. An Irish mother, and an Italian father, so he decreed, metaphorically patting himself on the back the while for his perspicacity.

The problem settled, he turned himself to the contents of the book as set forth by the author thereof, rather than the three words inscribed on the fly-leaf by the owner. They were not hard of digestion. The print was large, the matter light. Anon he came to *Mutabile Semper* and the death letters, and, having read them, and laughed in concord with the erstwhile laugh of the book's owner, he closed the pages, and gazed out upon the sunshine and the water.

CHAPTER V

A FRIENDSHIP

Emerson has written a discourse on friendship. It is beautifully worded, truly; it is full of a noble and high-minded philosophy. Doubtless it will appeal quite distinctly to those souls who, although yet on this earth-plane, have already partly cast off the mantle of flesh, and have found their paths to lie in the realm of spirit. Even to those, and it is by far the greater majority, who yet walk humdrumly along the world's great highway, the kingdom of the spirit perceived by them as in a glass darkly rather than by actual light shed upon them from its realm, it may bring some consolation during the absence of a friend. But for the general run of mankind it is set on too lofty a level. It lacks the warmth for which they crave, the personality and intercourse.

"I do then, with my friends as I do with my books," he says. "I would have them where I can find them, but I seldom use them."

Now, it is very certain that, for the majority of human beings, the friendliest books are worn with much handling. If we picture for a moment the bookshelves belonging to our childish days, we shall at once mentally discover our old favourites. They have been used so often. They have been worn in our service. No matter how well we know the contents, we turn to them again and again; there is a very joy in knowing what to expect. Time does not age nor custom stale the infinite variety.

Thus it is in our childish days. And are not the majority of us still children? Should our favourite books be placed out of our reach, should it be impossible for us to turn their pages, it is certain that we would feel a loss, a gap. Were we old enough to comprehend Emerson's philosophy, we might endeavour to buoy ourselves up with the thought that thus we were at one with him in his nobility and loftiness of sentiment. And yet there would be something childish and pathetic in the endeavour, by reason of its very unreality. Certainly if Providence should, either directly or indirectly, separate us from our friends, by all means let us accept the separation bravely. It cannot destroy our friendship. But seldom to use our friends, from the apparently epicurean point of view of Emerson, would be a forced and unnatural doctrine to the majority, as unnatural as if a child should bury Hans Andersen's fairy tales for fear of tiring of them. It would savour more of present and actual distaste, than the love which fears its approach. There is the familiarity which breeds contempt, truly; but there is also the familiarity which daily ties closer bonds, draws to closer union.

Antony had established a friendship with the lady of the blue book. The book had been responsible for its beginning. With Emerson's definition of friendship he would probably have been largely in harmony; not so in his treatment of it. With the following, he would have been at one, with the exception of a word or so:—"I must feel pride in my friend's accomplishments as if they were mine,—wild, delicate, throbbing property in his virtues. I feel as warmly when he is praised, as the lover when he hears applause of his engaged maiden. We over-estimate the conscience of our friend. His goodness seems better than our goodness, his nature finer, his temptations less. Everything that is his, his name, his form, his dress, books, and instruments, fancy enhances. Our own thought sounds new and larger from his mouth."

Most true, Antony would have declared, if you will eliminate "over-estimate," and substitute "is" for "seems."

Unlike Emerson, he made no attempt to analyse his friendship. He accepted it as a gift from the gods. Maybe somewhere in his inner consciousness, barely articulate even to his own heart, he dreamt of it as a foundation to something further. Yet for the present, the foundation sufficed. Death-letters—he laughed joyously at the coincidence—had laid the first stone, and each day placed others in firm and secure position round it. The building was largely unconscious. It is the way with true friendship. The life, also, conduced to it. There are fewer barriers of convention on board ship than in any other mode of living. Mrs. Grundy, it is to be supposed, suffers from sea-sickness, and does not care for this method of travelling. In fact, it would appear that she seldom does travel, but chooses by preference small country towns, mainly English ones, for her place of residence.

The days were days of sunshine and colour, the changing colour of sea and sky; the nights were nights of mystery, veiled in purple, star-embroidered.

One day Pia made clear to him the explanation of her Irish colouring and her Italian surname. Her mother, she told him, was Irish; her father, English. Her baptismal name had been chosen by an Italian godmother. She was eighteen when she married the Duc di Donatello. On their wedding day, when driving from the church, the horses had bolted. She had been uninjured; he had received serious injuries to his head and spine. He had lived for seven years as a complete invalid, totally paralysed, but fully conscious. During those seven years, she had never left him. Two years previously he had died, and she had gone to live at her old home in England,—the Manor House, Woodleigh, which had been in the hands of caretakers since her parents' death. Her husband's property had passed to his brother. The last six months she had been staying with a friend at Wynberg.

She told the little tale extremely simply. It never occurred to her to expect sympathy on account of the tragedy which had marred her youth, and by reason of which she had spent seven years of her life in almost utter seclusion. The fact was merely mentioned in necessary explanation of her story. Antony, too, had held silence. Sympathy on his part would have been somehow an intrusion, an impertinence. But he understood now, in part at least, the steady gravity, the hint of sadness in her eyes.

The name of Woodleigh awoke vague memories in his mind, but they were too vague to be noteworthy. Possibly, most probably, he told himself, he had merely read of the place at some time. She mentioned that it was in Devonshire, but curiously enough, and this was an omission which he noted later with some surprise, he never questioned her as to its exact locality.

On his side, he told her of his life on the veldt, and mentioned that he was returning to England on business. On the outcome of that same business would depend the question whether he remained in England, or whether he returned to the veldt. Having the solicitor's injunction in view, he naturally did not volunteer further information. Such details, too, sank into insignificance before the more absorbing interest of personality. They are, after all, in a sense, mere accidents, and have no more to do with the real man than the clothes he wears. True, the

manner in which one dons one's clothes, as the manner in which one deals with the accidental facts of life, affords a certain index to the true man; but the clothes themselves, and the accidental facts, appear, at all events, to be matters of fate. And if you can obtain knowledge of a man through actual contact with his personality, you do not trouble to draw conclusions from his method of donning his clothes. You may speculate in this fashion with regard to strangers, or mere acquaintances. You have a surer, and infinitely more interesting, fashion with your friends.

Life around them moved on in the leisurely, almost indolent manner in which it does move on board a passenger ship. The younger members played quoits, cricket on the lower deck, and inaugurated concerts, supported by a gramophone, the property of the chief officer, and banjo solos by the captain. The older members read magazines, played bridge, or knitted woollen articles, according to the promptings of their sex and their various natures, and formed audiences at the aforementioned concerts.

Antony and the Duchessa di Donatello alone seemed somewhat aloof from them. They formed part of the concert audiences, it is true; but they neither played bridge, quoits, nor cricket, nor knitted woollen articles, nor read magazines. The Duchessa employed her time with a piece of fine lace work, when she was not merely luxuriating in the sunshine, or conversing with Antony. Antony either conversed with the Duchessa, or sat in his deck chair, smoking and thinking about her. There was certainly a distinct sameness about the young man's occupation, which, however, he found not in the smallest degree boring. On the contrary, it was all-absorbing and fascinating. The very hours of the day were timed by the Duchessa's movements, rather than by the mere minute portions of steel attached to the face of a commonplace watch. Thus:—

Dawn. He realizes the Duchessa's existence when he wakes. (His dreams had been coloured by her, but that's beside the mark.)

Daybreak. The Duchessa ascends on deck and smiles at him.

Breakfast time. The Duchessa sits opposite to him.

The sunny morning hours. The Duchessa sews fine lace; she talks, she smiles,—the smile that radiates through the sadness of her eyes.

And so on, throughout the day, till the evening gloaming brings a hint of further intimacy into their conversation, and night falls as she wishes him pleasant dreams before descending to her cabin.

He dwelt then, for the moment, solely in her friendship, but vaguely the half articulate thought of the future began to stir within him, pulsing with a secret possibility of joy he barely dared to contemplate.

CHAPTER VI

AT TENERIFFE

It was about ten o'clock of a sunny morning that the *Fort Salisbury* cast anchor off Teneriffe, preparatory to undergoing the process known as coaling.

Antony, from her decks, gazed towards the shore and the buildings lying in the sunlight. Minute doll-like figures were busy on the land; mules, with various burdens, were ascending the steep street. Boats were already putting out to the ship, to carry ashore such passengers as desired to spend a few hours on land.

The whole scene was one of movement, light, and colour. The sea, sky, and earth were singing the Benedicite, and Antony's heart echoed the blessings. It was all so astonishingly good and pleasant,—the clean, fresh morning, the blue blue of the sky, the green blue of the water, and the possibilities of the unknown mountain land lying before him.

There is an extraordinary fascination in exploring an unknown land, even if the exploration is to be of somewhat limited duration. The ship by which Antony had travelled to the Cape, had sailed straight out; it had passed the peak of Teneriffe at a distance. Antony had looked at it as it rose from the sea, like a great purple amethyst half veiled in cloud. He had wondered then, idly enough, whether it would ever be his lot to set foot upon its shores. Never, in his wildest dreams, had he imagined under what actual circumstances that lot would be his. How could he have guessed at what the fates were holding in store for him? They had held their secret close, giving him no smallest inkling of it. If we dream of paradise, our dream is modelled on the greatest happiness we have known; therefore, since our happiness is, doubtless, but a rushlight as compared to the sunshine of paradise, our dreams must necessarily fall exceedingly far short of the reality. Hitherto Antony's happiness had been largely monochrome, flecked with tiny specks of radiance. He might indeed have dreamed of something a trifle brighter, but how was it possible for him to have formed from them the smallest conception of the happiness that was awaiting him?

"It is really perfect," said a voice behind him, echoing his thoughts.

Antony turned.

The Duchessa had come on deck, spurred and gauntleted for their adventure,—in other words, attired in a soft, black dress, a shady black hat on her head, crinkly black gloves, which reached to the elbow, on her hands, and carrying a blue sunshade. 54

"It is really perfect," she repeated, gazing towards the mountainous land before them, the doll-like figures on the shore, the boats cleaving the sparkling waters.

"Absolutely," declared Antony, his eyes wrinkling at the corners in sheer delight. "The gods have favoured us."

"Is there a boat ready?" she demanded, eager as a child to start on the adventure.

"A boat," said Antony, looking over the ship's side, "will be with us in a couple of moments I should say, to judge by the strength of the rower's arms. He has been racing the other fellows, and will be first at his goal."

"Then come," she said. "Let us be first too. I don't want to lose a minute."

Antony followed in her wake. Her sentiments most assuredly were his. It was not a day of which to squander one iota.

Ten minutes later they were on their way to the shore. Behind them the *Fort Salisbury* loomed up large and black from the limpid water; before them lay the land of possibilities.

The other passengers in the boat kept up a running fire of comments. A stout gentleman in a sun-helmet, which he considered *de rigeur* as long as he was anywhere at all near the regions of Africa, gazed towards the shore through a pair of field-glasses. At intervals he made known such objects of interest as he observed, in loud husky asides to his wife, a small meek woman, who clung to him, metaphorically speaking, as the ivy to the oak. Her vision being unaided by field-glasses, she was unable to follow his observations with the degree of intelligence he demanded. 55

"I don't think I quite—" she remarked anxiously now and again, blinking in the same direction as her spouse.

"To the left, my dear, among the trees," he would reply. Or, "Half-way up the street. *Now* don't you see?" Or, removing the field-glasses for a moment to observe the direction of her anxious blinking, "Why, bless my soul, you aren't looking the right way *at all*. Get it in a line with that chimney over there, and the yellow house. The *yellow* house. You're looking straight at the pink one. Bless my soul, tut, tut." And so forth.

A small boy, leaning far over the side of the boat, gazed rapturously into the water, announcing in shrill tones that he could see to the very bottom, an anxious elder sister grasping the back of his jersey meanwhile. A girl with a pigtail jumped about in a manner calculated to bring an abrupt and watery conclusion to the passage, till forcibly restrained by her melancholy-looking father. A young man announced that it was going to be, "Deuced hot on shore, what?" And a gushing young thing of some forty summers appealed to everyone at intervals to know the hour to the very second it would be necessary to return, since it really would be a sin to keep the ship waiting. While the remarks from an elderly and cynical gentleman, that, in the event of unpunctuality on her part, it would be more probable that she would find herself waiting indefinitely at Teneriffe, caused her to giggle hysterically, and label him a naughty man. 56

"It is a matter for devout thankfulness," said the Duchessa some ten minutes later, as she and Antony were walking across the square, "that the *Fort Salisbury* is large enough to permit of a certain separation from one's fellow humans. I do not wish to be uncharitable, but their proximity does not always appeal to me."

Antony laughed, and tossed some coppers to a small brown-faced girl, who, clasping an infant nearly as large as herself, jabbered at him in an unknown but wholly understandable language.

"You'll be besieged and bankrupt before you see the ship again, if you begin that," warned the Duchessa.

"Quite possible," returned Antony smiling.

The Duchessa shook her head.

"Oh, if you are in that mood, warnings are waste of breath," she announced.

"Quite," agreed Antony, still smiling.

He was radiantly, idiotically happy. The joy of the morning, the brilliance of the sunshine, and the fact that the Duchessa was walking by his side, had gone to his head like wine. If the expenditure of coppers could impart one tenth of his happiness to others, he would fling them broadcast, he would be a very spendthrift with his gladness. 57

At the church to the left of the square, the Duchessa paused.

"In here first," she said. And Antony followed her up the steps.

They made their way through a swarm of grubby children, and entered the porch. It was cool and dark in the church in contrast to the heat and sunshine without. Here and there Antony descried a kneeling figure,—women with handkerchiefs on their heads, and a big basket beside them; an old man or two; a girl telling her beads before the Lady Altar; and a small dark-haired child, who gazed stolidly at the Duchessa. Votive candles burned before the various shrines. The ruby lamp made a spot of light in the shadows above the High Altar.

The Duchessa dropped on one knee, and then knelt for a few moments at one of the *prie-dieux*. Antony watched her. He was sensible that she was not a mere sight-seer. The church held an element of home for her. Two of the passengers—the young man and the cynical elderly gentleman, who had been in the boat with them—strolled in behind him. They gazed curiously about, remarking in loudish whispers on what they saw. Antony felt suddenly, and quite unreasonably, annoyed at their entry. Somehow they detracted from the harmony and peace of the building.

58

"I didn't know you were a Catholic," he said five minutes later, as he and the Duchessa emerged once more into the sunlight.

"You never asked me," she returned smiling.

"No," agreed Antony. And then he added simply, as an afterthought, "it didn't occur to me to ask you."

"It wouldn't," responded the Duchessa, a little twinkle in her eyes.

"No," agreed Antony again. "I wish those people hadn't come in," he added somewhat irrelevantly.

"What people?" demanded the Duchessa. "Oh, you mean those two men. Why not? Most tourists visit the church."

"I dare say," returned Antony. "But—well, they didn't belong."

"No?" queried the Duchessa innocently.

Antony reddened.

"You mean I didn't," he said a little stiffly.

"Ah, forgive me." The Duchessa's voice held a note of quick contrition. "I didn't mean to hurt you. Somehow we Catholics get used to Protestants regarding our churches merely as a sight to be seen, and for the moment I smiled to think that *you* should be the one whom it irritated. But I do know what you mean, of course. And—I'm *glad* you felt it."

"Thank you," he returned smiling.

The little cloud, which had momentarily dimmed the brightness of his sun, was dispelled. The merest inflection in the Duchessa's voice had the power of casting him down to depths of heart-searching despair, or lifting him to realms of intoxicating joy. And it must be confessed that the past fortnight had been spent almost continuously in these realms. Also, if he had sunk to the depths of despair, it was rather by reason of an ultra-sensitive imagination on his own part than by any fault of the Duchessa's. But then, as Antony would have declared, the position of a subject to his sovereign is a very different matter from the position of the sovereign to the subject. The Duchessa could be certain of his loyalty. It was for her to give or withhold favours as it pleased her. It was a different matter for him.

59

It is not easy for a man, who has lived a very lonely life, to believe in a reciprocal friendship where he himself is concerned. A curious admixture of shyness and diffidence, the outcome of his lonely life, prevented him from imagining that the Duchessa could desire his friendship in the smallest degree as he desired hers. To him, the friendship she had accorded him had become the most vital thing in his existence, quite apart from that vague and intoxicating dream, which he scarcely dared to confess in the faintest whisper to his heart. He knew that her friendship appeared essential to his very life. But how could he for one moment imagine that his friendship was essential to her? It could not be, though he would cheerfully have laid down his life for her, have undergone torture for her sake.

60

Knowing, therefore, that his friendship was not essential to her happiness, yet knowing what her friendship meant to him, he was as ultra-sensitive as a lonely child. His soul sprang forward to receive her gifts, but the merest imagined hint of a rebuff would have sent him back to that loneliness he had learned to look upon as his birthright. Not that he would have gone back to that loneliness with a hurt sense of injury. That must be clearly understood to understand Antony. To have felt injury, would have been tantamount to saying that he had had a right to the friendship, and it was just this very right that Antony could not realize as in the least existent. He would have gone back with an ache, it is true, but with a brave face, and an overwhelming and life-long gratitude for the temporary joy. That is at the present moment; of later, one cannot feel so certain.

To-day, however, loneliness seemed a thing unthinkable, unimaginable, with the Duchessa by his side, and the golden day ahead of him. By skilled manœuvring, and avoiding the recognized hours of meal-time, they managed to escape further contact with their fellow passengers.

An exceedingly late luncheon hour found them the sole occupants of a small courtyard at the back of an hotel,—a courtyard set with round tables, and orange trees in green tubs. Over the roofs of the houses, and far below them, they could see the shining water, and the *Fort Salisbury*, lying like a dark blob on its surface. Boats bearing coal were still putting out to her, and men were busy hauling it over her sides.

61

The Duchessa looked down on the ship and the water.

"It is queer to think," said she smiling, "that little more than a week hence, I shall be in Scotland, and, probably, shivering in furs. It can be exceedingly chilly up there, even as late as May."

"I thought you were going to your old home," said Antony.

"So I am," she replied, "but not till nearly the end of June. I am going to stay with friends in Edinburgh first. Where are you going?"

Antony lifted his shoulders in the merest suspicion of a shrug.

"London first," he responded. "After that—well, it's on the knees of the gods."

"Are you likely to stay in England long?" she asked. And then she added quickly, "You don't think the question an impertinence, I hope."

"Why should I?" he answered smiling. "But I really don't know yet myself. It will depend on various things."

There was a little silence.

"In any case, I shall see you before I leave England again, if I may," he said. "That is, if I do leave."

The Duchessa was still looking at the water.

"I hope you will," she replied. And then she turned towards him. "I don't want our friendship to end completely with the voyage." 62

Antony's heart gave a little leap.

"It—it really is a friendship?" he asked.

"Hasn't it been?" she asked him.

Antony looked at her.

"For me, yes," he replied steadily.

"Can a friendship be one-sided?" she demanded. She emphasised the word a little.

"I don't know," said Antony whimsically. "I don't know much about them. I haven't ever wanted one before."

Again there was a little silence. Then:

"Thank you," said the Duchessa.

Antony drew a long breath. They were such simple little words; and yet, to him, they meant more than the longest and most flowery of speeches. There was so infinitely more conveyed in them. And he knew that, if they had not been meant, they would not have been spoken. She did think his friendship worth while, and she had given him hers. It was all his heart dared ask at the moment, yet, deep within it, his secret hope stirred to fuller life. And then, suddenly, prompted by some instinct, quite unexplainable at the moment, he put a question.

"What is the foundation of friendship?" he asked.

"Trust," she responded quickly, her eyes meeting his for a moment. "And here," she said, looking towards the hotel, "comes our lunch." 63

It was sunset before the *Fort Salisbury* was once more cleaving her way through the water. Antony, from her decks, looked once more at the receding land. Again he saw it rising, like a purple amethyst, from the sea, but this time it was veiled in the rose-coloured light of the sinking sun. He looked towards that portion of the amethyst where the little courtyard with the orange trees in green tubs was situated.

Once more he heard his question and the Duchessa's answer. It was a memory which was to remain with him for many a month.

CHAPTER VII

ENGLAND

A week later, Antony was sitting in a first-class carriage on his way from Plymouth to Waterloo. He gazed through the window, his mind filled with various emotions.

Uppermost was the memory of the voyage and the Duchessa. The memory already appeared to him almost as a vivid and extraordinarily beautiful dream, though reason assured him to the contrary. The whole events of the last month, and even his present position in the train, appeared to him intangible and unreal. It seemed a dream self, rather than the real Antony, who was gazing from the window at the landscape which was slipping past him; who was looking out on the English fields, the English woods, and the English cottages past which the train was tearing. He saw gardens ablaze with flowers; bushes snowy with hawthorn; horses and cows standing idly in the shadow of the trees; and, now and again, small, trimly-kept country stations, looking for all the world like prim schoolgirls in gay print dresses. 64

65

He glanced from the window to the rack opposite to him, where his portmanteau was lying. That, at all events, was tangible, real, and familiar. It struck the sole familiar note in the extraordinary unfamiliarity of everything around him. He looked at his own initials painted on it, slowly tracing them in his mind. He pulled out his pocket-book, and took from it the letter which had altered the whole perspective of his life. He could almost see the African stoep as he looked at it, feel the heat of the African sun, hear the occasional chirping of the grasshoppers. Age-old the memory appeared, caught from bygone centuries. And it was only a month ago. Replacing it in the book, his eye fell upon a small piece of pasteboard. The Duchessa had given it to him that morning. Her name was printed on it, and below she had written a few pencilled words,—her address in Scotland. She was remaining in Plymouth for a day or so, before going North. He was to write to her at the Scotland address, and let her know where she could acquaint him with her further movements, and the actual date of her return to the Manor House. That, too, was tangible and real,—that small piece of white pasteboard. And, then, a little movement beside him, and a long quivering sigh of content brought back to him the most tangible thing of all—Josephus. Josephus, who was sleeping the sleep of the contented, just after a frenzied and rapturous reunion with his deity.

66

Oh, of course it was all real, and it was he, Antony, his very self, who was sitting in the train, the train which was rushing through the good old English country, carrying him towards London and the answer to the riddle contained in that most amazing of letters.

“It isn’t a dream, Josephus,” he assured the sleepy puppy. “I am real, you are real, the train is real, England is real, and Heaven be praised—the Duchessa is real.” After which act of assurance he turned his attention once more to the window.

67

And now, the dream sense dispelled, he found long-forgotten memories awaken within him, memories of early boyhood, aroused by the sight of some old church tower, of some wood lying on a hillside, of some amber stream rippling past rush-grown banks. He hugged the memories to his soul, rejoicing in them. They brought a dozen trivial little incidents to his mind. He could hear his old nurse’s voice warning him not to lean against the door of the carriage. He could feel his small nose pressed against the window-pane, his small hand rubbing the glass where it had been dimmed by his breath. He could hear the crackle of paper bags, as sandwiches and buns were produced for his refreshment; he could taste the ham between the pieces of bread and butter; and he could see a small boy, with one eye on his nurse, pushing a piece of fat between the cushions of the seat and the side of the carriage. This last memory evoked a little chuckle of laughter. That nurse had been a strong disciplinarian.

The memories linked together, forming a more connected whole. He recalled places farther afield than those caught sight of from the window of the train. He remembered a copse yellow with primroses, a pond where he had fished for sticklebacks, a bank with a robin’s nest in it. He remembered a later visit with an aunt. He must then have been fourteen or thereabouts. There had been a small girl, staying with her aunt at a neighbouring farm, who had accompanied him on his rambles. Despite her tender age—she couldn’t have been more than five years old—she had been the inventor of their worst escapades. It was she who had egged him on to the attempt to cross the pond on a log of wood, racing round it to shout encouragement from the opposite side. The timely advent of one of the farm-labourers alone had saved him from a watery grave. It was she who had invented the bows and arrows with which he had accidentally shot the prize bantam, and it was she who had insisted on his going with her to search for pheasants’ eggs, a crime for which he barely escaped the penalty of the law.

68

He remembered her as a fragile fair-haired child, with a wide-eyed innocence of expression, utterly at variance with her true character. In spite of her nobly shouldering her full share of the blame, he had invariably been considered sole culprit, which he most assuredly was not, though weight of years should have taught him better. But then, one could hardly expect the Olympians to lay any measure of such crimes at the door of a grey-eyed, fair-haired angel. And that was what she had appeared to mere superficial observation. It required extreme perspicacity of vision, or great intimacy, to arrive at anything a trifle nearer the truth. He sought in the recesses of his memory for her name. That it had suited her admirably, and that it was monosyllabic, was all he could remember. After a few minutes fruitless search, he abandoned it as hopeless, and pulled pipe and tobacco pouch from his pocket.

Presently he saw the square tower and pinnacles of Exeter Cathedral above some trees, and the train ran into the station. Antony watched the people on the platform with interest. They were English, and it was thirteen years since he had been in England. He listened to the fragmentary English sentences he heard, finding pleasure in the sound. He marvelled idly at the lack of colour in the scene before him. The posters on the walls alone struck a flamboyant note. Yet there was something restful in the monochrome of the dresses, the dull smoke-griminess of the station. At all events it was a contrast to the vivid colouring of the African veldt.

69

Despite his interest in his fellow humans, however, he found himself devoutly trusting his privacy would remain undisturbed, and it was with a sense of relief that he felt the train glide slowly out of the station, leaving him the sole occupant of his compartment.

Later, he saw the spire of Salisbury Cathedral. Again fortune favoured him in the matter of privacy, and presently drowsiness descended on his eyelids, which was not fully dispelled till the train ran into the gloom of Waterloo station.

CHAPTER VIII

THE AMAZING CONDITIONS

The offices of Messrs. Parsons and Grieve, solicitors, are situated off the Strand, and within seven minutes' walk of Covent Garden. It is an old-established and exceedingly respectable firm. Its respectability is emphasized by the massiveness of its furniture and the age of its office boy. He is fifty, if he is a day. An exceeding slowness of brain prevented him from rising to a more exalted position, a position to which his quite extraordinary conscientiousness and honesty would have entitled him. That same conscientiousness and honesty prevented him from being superseded by a more juvenile individual, when his age had passed the limit usually accorded to office boys. Imperceptibly almost, he became part and parcel of the firm, a thing no more to be dispensed with than the brass plate outside the office. He appeared now as an elderly and exceedingly reputable butler, and his appearance quite enormously increased the respectability of the firm.

Nominally James Grieve and Henry Parsons were partners of equal standing, neither claiming seniority to the other; virtually James Grieve was the voice, Henry Parsons the echo. In matters of great importance, they received clients in company, Henry Parsons playing the part of Greek chorus to James Grieve's lead. In matters of less importance, they each had their own particular clients; but it is very certain that, even thus, Henry Parsons invariably echoed the voice. It merely meant that the voice had sounded in private, while the echo was heard in public.

71

When George, the office-boy-butler, presented James Grieve with a small piece of pasteboard, on the morning following Antony's arrival in town, with the statement that the gentleman was in the waiting-room, James Grieve requested the instant presence of Henry Parsons, prior to the introduction of Antony. From which token it will be justly observed that the matter in hand was of importance. In James Grieve's eyes it was of extreme importance, and that by reason of its being extremely unusual.

Some six weeks previously an unknown client had made his appearance in the person of a big clean-shaven man, by name Doctor Hilary St. John. Henry Parsons happened, this time quite by accident, to be present at the interview. The big man had made certain statements in an exceedingly business-like manner, and had then requested Messrs. Parsons and Grieve to act on his behalf, or, rather, on behalf of the person for whom he was emissary.

72

"But, bless my soul," James Grieve had boomed amazed, on the conclusion of the request, "I never heard such a thing in my life. It—I am not at all sure that it is legal."

"Not at all sure that it is legal," Henry Parsons had echoed.

The big man had laughed, recapitulated his statements, and urged his point.

"I don't see how it can be done," James Grieve had responded obstinately.

"It can't be done," the echo had repeated with even greater assurance than the voice.

"Oh, yes, it can," Doctor Hilary had replied with greater assurance still. "See here—" and he had begun all over again.

"Tut, tut," James Grieve had clucked on the conclusion of the third recital. "You've said all that before. I tell you, man, the whole business is too unusual. It—I'm sure it isn't legal. And anyhow it's mad. What's the name of your—er, your deceased friend?"

"The name?" piped Henry Parsons.

"Nicholas Danver," had been the brief response.

"Nicholas Danver!" James Grieve had almost shouted the words. "Nicholas Danver! God bless my soul!" And he had leant back in his chair and shaken with laughter. Henry Parsons, true to his rôle, had chuckled at intervals, but feebly. For the life of him he could see no cause for mirth.

73

"Oh, Nick, Nick," sighed James Grieve, wiping his eyes after a few minutes, "I always vowed you'd be the death of me. To think of you turning up in the life of a staid elderly solicitor at this hour."

Henry Parsons stared. And this time his voice found no echo.

"Well, Doctor," said James Grieve, stuffing his handkerchief back into his pocket, "I suppose I—" he broke off. "This is a most respectable firm of solicitors," he remarked suddenly and almost fiercely. "We'd never dream of stooping to anything approaching fraud."

"Not dream of it," echoed Henry.

"Of course not," said Doctor Hilary heartily. "But this——"

"Oh, yes, I daresay, I daresay. Now then, what are your propositions?"

"Your propositions?" echoed Henry.

And a fourth time Doctor Hilary repeated them.

At the end of a lengthy interview, James Glieve opened the door of his sanctum to show Doctor Hilary out.

"You might give my kindest remembrances—" he stopped. "Bless my soul, I was just going to send my remembrances to old Nick, and we've been spending the last hour settling up his will. Where's my memory going! I shall probably run down in a few days, and go through matters with you on the spot. A—er, a melancholy pleasure to see the old place again. What?"

74

Henry Parsons, within the room, lost this last speech; therefore it found no echo.

When Antony entered the private sanctum of James Glieve, he saw a stout red-faced man, with a suspicion of side whiskers and a slight appearance of ferocity, seated at a desk. On his right, and insignificant by comparison, was a small grey-haired and rather dried-up man.

"Mr. Antony Gray?" queried the red-faced man, looking at Antony over his spectacles.

Antony bowed.

"You come in answer to our communication regarding the will of the—er, late Mr. Nicholas Danver?" asked James Glieve.

"I do," responded Antony. And he drew the said communication from his pocket, and laid it on the table.

James Glieve glanced at it. Then he leant back in his chair, put his elbows on its arms, and placed the tips of his fingers together.

"The—er, the conditions of the will are somewhat unusual," he announced. "It is my duty to set them plainly before you. Should you refuse them, we are to see that you are fully recompensed for any expense and inconvenience your journey will have entailed. Should you, on the other hand, accept them, it is understood that as a man of honour you will fulfil the conditions exactly, not only in the letter, but in the spirit."

75

"In the spirit," echoed Henry Parsons.

Antony bowed in silence.

"Of course, should you fail in your contract," went on James Glieve, "the will becomes null and void. But it would be quite possible for you to keep to the contract in the letter, while breaking it merely in the spirit, in which case probably no one but yourself would be aware that it had been so broken. You will not be asked to sign any promise in the matter. You will only be asked to give your word."

"To give your word," said Henry Parsons, looking solemnly at Antony.

"Yes," said Antony quietly.

James Glieve pulled a paper towards him.

"The conditions," he announced, "are as follows. I am about to read what the—er, late Mr. Nicholas Danver has himself written regarding the matter."

He cleared his throat, and pushed his spectacles back on his nose.

Antony looked directly at him. In spite of the business-like appearance of the room, the business-like attitude of the two men opposite to him, he still felt that odd Arabian Nights' entertainment sensation. The room and its occupants seemed to be masquerading under a business garb; it seemed to need but one word—if he could have found it—to metamorphose the whole thing back to its original and true conditions, to change the room into an Aladdin's cave, and the two men into a friendly giant and an attendant dwarf. The only thing he could not see metamorphosed was George, the office-boy-butler. He retained his own appearance and personality. He appeared to have been brought—as a human boy, possibly—into the entertainment, and to have grown up imperturbably in it. Though quite probably, under his present respectable demeanour, he was well aware of the true state of affairs, and was laughing inwardly at it.

76

James Glieve cleared his throat a second time, and began.

"The conditions under which I make the aforesaid Antony Gray my heir," he read, "are as follows. He will not enter into possession of either property or money for one year precisely from the day of hearing these conditions. He shall give his word of honour to make known to no person whatsoever that he is my heir. He shall live, during the said year, in a furnished cottage on the estate, the cottage to be designated to him by my friend Doctor Hilary St. John. He will undertake that he lives in that cottage and nowhere else, not even for a day. He will live as an ordinary labourer. That this may be facilitated he will have a post as one of the under-gardeners in the gardens of Chorley Old Hall. Golding, the head-gardener, will instruct him in his duties. He will be paid one pound sterling per week as wage, and he shall pay a rent of five shillings per week for the cottage. He will undertake to use no income or capital of his own during the said year, nor receive any help or money from friends. Briefly, he will undertake to make the one pound per week, which he will earn as wage, suffice for his needs. He will take the name of Michael Field for one year, and neither directly nor indirectly will he acquaint any one whomsoever with the fact that it is a pseudonym. In short, he will do all in his power to give the impression to everyone that he is simply and solely Michael Field, working-man, and under-gardener at Chorley Old Hall."

77

“He will make his decision in the matter within twenty-four hours, and, should his decision be in the affirmative, he will bind himself, as a man of honour to abide by it. And, further, he will proceed to Byestry within one week of the decision, to take up his duties, and his residence in the aforesaid cottage.

“NICHOLAS DANVER.

“The fifth day of March,
nineteen hundred and eleven.”

James Glieve stopped. He did not look at Antony, but at the paper, which he placed on the desk in front of him.

“Hmm,” said Antony quietly and ruminatively.

“You have twenty-four hours in which to make your decision,” said James Glieve.

“Twenty-four hours,” said Henry Parsons.

“I think that’s as well,” returned Antony. He was still feeling the quite absurd desire to find the word which should metamorphose the scene before him to its true conditions.

“I told you the terms of the will were unusual,” said James Glieve.

“Very unusual,” emphasized Henry Parsons.

“They are,” said Antony dryly. Then he got up from his chair. He looked at his watch. “Well, Mr. Glieve, it is twelve o’clock. I will let you know my decision by eleven o’clock to-morrow morning. That, I believe, will entirely fulfil the conditions?”

“Entirely,” said James Glieve.

“Entirely,” echoed Henry Parsons.

CHAPTER IX

THE DECISION

As soon as Antony left the office, he walked down into the Strand, where he took an omnibus as far as Pimlico. There he dismounted, and made his way to the embankment, intending to walk back to his rooms in Chelsea. He had spent the previous evening hunting for rooms solely on Josephus’s account. Dogs, and more especially puppies, are not welcomed at hotels; also, Antony considered the terms demanded for this special puppy’s housing and maintenance entirely disproportionate to Josephus’s size and requirements.

As he walked along the embankment he reviewed the situation and conditions recently placed before him. At first sight they appeared almost amusing and absurd. The whole thing presented itself to the mind in the light of some huge joke; and yet, behind the joke, lay a curious sense of inexorableness. At first he did not in the least realize what caused this sense, he was merely oddly aware of its existence. He walked with his eyes on the river, watching a couple of slowly moving barges.

It was a still, sunny day. The trees on the embankment were in full leaf. Scarlet and yellow tulips bedecked the window-boxes in the houses on his right. An occasional group of somewhat grubby children, generally accompanied by an elder sister and a baby in a perambulator, now and again occupied a seat. A threadbare and melancholy-looking man flung pieces of bread to a horde of sea-gulls. Antony watched them screaming and whirling as they snatched at the food. They brought the *Fort Salisbury* to his mind. And then, in a sudden flash of illumination, he saw precisely wherein that sense of inexorableness lay. With the realization his heart stood still; and, with it, for the same brief second, his feet. The next instant he had quickened his steps, fighting out the new idea which had come to him.

It was not till he had reached his rooms, and partaken of a lunch of cold meat and salad, that he had reduced it to an entirely business-like statement. Then, in the depths of an armchair, and fortified by a pipe, he marshalled it in its somewhat crude form before his brain. Briefly, it reduced itself to the following:—

Should he refuse the conditions attached to the will, he remained in exactly the same position in which he had found himself some four or five weeks previously; namely, in the position of owner of a small farm on the African veldt, which farm brought him in an income of some two hundred a year. In that position the dream, which had dawned within his heart on the *Fort Salisbury*, would be impossible of fulfilment. His life and that of the Duchessa di Donatello must lie miles apart, separated both by lack of money and the ocean. If, on the other hand, he accepted the conditions, a year must elapse before he made that dream known to her; and—and here lay the meaning of that sense of inexorableness he had experienced—he could give her no explanation of the extraordinary situation in which he would find himself, a situation truly calculated to

create any amount of misunderstanding. To all appearances the adventure on which he had started out had brought him to an impasse, a blind alley, from which there was no favourable issue of any kind.

"The whole thing is a deuced muddle," he announced gloomily, addressing himself to Josephus.

Josephus put his paws on Antony's knees, and licked the hand which was not holding the pipe.

"To refuse the conditions," went on Antony aloud, and still gloomily, and stroking Josephus's head, "is to bring matters to an absolute deadlock, one from which I can never by the remotest atom of chance extricate myself. To accept them—well, I don't see much better chance there. How on earth am I to explain the situation to her? How on earth will she understand the fact that I remain in England, and make no attempt to see her for a year? I can't even hint at the situation. Oh, it's preposterous! But to accept gives me the only possible faintest hope."

82

And then, suddenly, a memory sprang to life within his soul. He saw again a courtyard set with small round tables and orange trees in green tubs. He heard his own voice putting a question.

"What is the foundation of friendship?" it asked.

"Trust," came the reply, in the Duchessa's voice.

Yet, was her friendship strong enough to trust him in such a matter? Strong enough not to misunderstand his silence, his—his oddness in the whole business? And yet, was it not something like a confession of weakness of friendship on his own part, to question the endurance of hers? She had said they were friends. Perhaps the very test of the strength of his own friendship was to lie in his trust of the strength of hers. And, at all events, he could write her some kind of a letter, something that would tell her of his utter inability to see her, even though he might not give the smallest hint of what that inability was. At least he could let her perceive it was by no wish of his own that he stayed away.

Hope revived within his heart. On the one hand there would be temporary banishment, truly. But it would be infinitely preferable to life-long exile. A year, after all, was only a year. To him the moments might, nay would, drag on leaden feet; but to her it would be but as other years, and, ordinarily speaking, they speed by at an astonishing rate. He must look to that assurance for comfort. A little odd smile twisted his lips. What, after all, did a grey year signify to him, as long as its greyness did not touch her. And why should it? The fact of his absence could not possibly bring the same blank to her as it would to him. She might wonder a little, she might even question. But had not she herself spoken of trust?

83

With the memory of that one word for his encouragement, he took his resolution in both hands and made his decision.

Perhaps, if Antony had attempted to pen his letter to the Duchessa before making his decision, he might have hesitated regarding making it. It was, however, not till the evening before he left town to take up his new life, that he attempted to write to her. Then he discovered the extraordinary difficulty of putting into anything like coherent and convincing words the statement he had to make. He drafted at least a dozen attempts, each, to his mind, more unsatisfactory than the last. Finally he wrote as follows:

"DEAR DUCHESSA:

"Since I said good-bye to you at Plymouth, my affairs have undergone unexpected and quite unforeseen changes. As matters stand at present, I shall be remaining in England for some time. I had hoped to see you when you returned from Scotland, but find, deeply to my regret, that I will be unable to do so, for a considerable time at all events. Need I tell you that this is a great disappointment to me? I had been looking forward to seeing you again, and now fate has taken matters out of my hands. When the time comes that I am able to see you, I will write and let you know; and perhaps, if by then you have not forgotten me, you will allow me to do so.

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"I would like to thank you for your kindness and comradeship to me during the voyage. Those days will ever remain as a golden memory to me.

"Having in mind your words when we lunched together in the garden of that little hotel at Teneriffe, I dare to inscribe myself,

"Always your friend,
"ANTONY GRAY."

It was not the letter he longed to write, yet he dared not write more explicitly. Honour forbade the smallest hint at the strange position in which he found himself; diffidence held him back from writing the words his heart was crying to her. Bald and flat as he felt the letter to be, he could do no better. It must go as it stood. He headed it with the address of his present rooms, giving his landlady instructions to forward all letters to the post office at Byestry.

One letter, bearing a Scottish postmark, alone came for him after his departure. It remained for close on two months on the table of the dingy little hall. Then, fearing lest Antony's receipt of it should betray her own carelessness, Mrs. Dobbin consigned it unopened to the kitchen fire.

85

CHAPTER X

AN ENGLISH COTTAGE

Kingsleigh is the station for Byestry, which is eight miles from it. It is a small town, not much larger than a mere village, lying, as its name designates, on the shores of the estuary, which runs from the sea up to Kingsleigh. Chorley Old Hall stands on high wooded land, about a mile from the coast, having a view across the estuary, and out to the sea itself.

It was a grey day, with a fine mist of a rain descending, when Antony, with Josephus at his heels, stepped on to Kingsleigh platform. In the road beyond the station, a number of carts and carriages, and a couple of closed buses, were collected. The drivers of the said vehicles stood by the gate through which the passengers must pass, ready to accost those by whom they had been already ordered, or pounce upon likely fares.

"Be yü Michael Field?" demanded a short wiry man, as Antony, carrying an old portmanteau, and followed by Josephus, emerged through the gate.

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For a moment Antony stared, amazed. Then he remembered.

"I am," he replied.

"That's güd," responded the man cheerfully. "'It the first nail, so to speak. T'Doctor sent I wi' t'trap. Coom along. Got any more baggage?"

Antony replied in the negative. Three minutes later he was seated in the trap, Josephus at his feet. He turned up the collar of his mackintosh, and pulled down his tweed cap over his eyes.

"Bit moist-like," said the man cheerfully, whipping up his horse.

Antony assented. He was feeling an amazing sense of amusement. The adventurous side of the affair had sprung again to the fore, after a week of business-like detail,—writing letters of instruction to Riffle to carry on with the farm till further notice, an office he was fully qualified to fulfil; making certain arrangements with Lloyd's bank regarding monies to be sent out to him; buying garments suitable for the part he himself was about to play; and having one or two further interviews with Messrs. Parsons and Glieve, in which the absolute necessity of his playing up to his rôle in every way was further impressed upon him.

The one difficulty that had presented itself to his mind, was his speech. He spent several half hours conversing with himself in broadest Devonshire, but finally decided that, it being the speech of the natives, he might sooner or later betray himself by some inadvertent lapse. Next he attempted a Colonial accent. James Glieve, however, being consulted on the subject, it was firmly negatived as likely to prove unpopular. In the end he fell back on a strong Irish accent. It came to him readily enough, the nurse of his childhood having hailed from the Emerald Isle. Possibly his actual phraseology would not prove all it might be, but the Devonians were not likely to be much the wiser. Anyhow Antony admired his own prowess in the tongue quite immensely.

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"Sure, 'tis the foine country ye have here," quoth he presently, as, mounting a hill, they came out upon a road crossing an expanse of moorland. Gorse bushes bloomed golden against a background of grey sky and atmosphere, seen through a fine veil of rain.

"'Tis güd enuff," said the man laconically. And Antony perceived that the beauties of nature held no particular interest for him.

He looked out at the wide expanses around him. Mist covered the farther distances, but through it, afar off, he fancied he could descry the grey line of the sea. To the right the moorland gave place to a distant stone wall, beyond which was a wheat field; to the left it stretched away into the mist, through which he saw the dim shapes of trees.

The man jerked his head to the left.

"'Tis over yonder is t'old Hall. Yü'm to be under-gardener there I heerd t'Doctor say. What they'll want wi' keeping up t'gardens now I doant know, and t'old Squire gone. Carried off mighty suddint 'e was. Us said as t'journey tü Lunnon ud be the death o' he. Never outside t'doors these fifteen year and more, and then one fine day Doctor takes he oop to Lunnon to see one o' they chaps un calls a speshulist. Why t'speshulist didn't come to he us can't tell. Carried on a stretcher he was from t'carriage to t'train, for all the world like a covered corpse. Next thing Doctor coom home alone, and us hears as t'old Squire be dead. I doant rightly know as who 'twas was the first to tell we, for Doctor, 'e doant like talking o' the business. But there 'tis, and t'Lord only knows who'll have t'old place now, seeing as 'ow 'e never 'ad no wife to bear un a son. Us *heerd* as 'twould be a chap from foreign parts. 'Twas Jane Ellen from Doctor's as put that around, but us thinks her got the notion in a way her shouldn't, for her's backed out o' the sayin' o't now. Says her never said nowt o' the kind. But her did. 'Twas Jim Morris's wife her told. S'pose Mr. Curtis'll run t'show till t'heir turns oop. 'Twont make much difference to we. He's run it the last ten year and more, and run it *hard*, I tell 'ee that. Doant yü go for to get the wrong side o' Spencer Curtis, I warns 'ee. George Standing afore 'e worn't much to boast on, but Spencer Curtis be a fair flint."

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"Will he be the agent?" demanded Antony, as the man paused.

"'Tis what 'e's *called*. 'Tis master he *is*. T'old Squire oughtn't never to have got a chap like 'e to do 'is jobs. 'Tis cast iron 'e is. And 'twasn't never no use going to Squire for to stand between him and we. 'E'd never set eyes on nobody, 'e wouldn't. If I'd my way I'd give every gentry what owns property a taste o' livin' on it same's we. 'E'd know a bit more about the fair runnin' o' it then."

Antony started. An idea, quick-born, presented itself before him. Was it possible, was it conceivable, that this very thought had been in the old Squire's mind when he drew up those extraordinary conditions? Antony nearly laughed aloud. Verily it was an absurdity, though one that Nicholas Danver most assuredly could not have guessed. Yet that he—Antony—should require a further year's enlightenment as to the shifts to which the poor were put to make both ends meet, as to the iron hand of agents and over-seers! Truly it was laughable!

He'd had experience enough and to spare,—he smiled grimly to himself,—experience such as an English farm-labourer earning a pound a week, even with a wife and children to keep, and all odds against him, could never in the remotest degree aided by the wildest flights of imagination, conceive. In England water at least is always obtainable. Antony had visions of the jealous husbanding of a few drops of hot moisture in a sunbaked leather bottle. In England the law at least protects you from bodily ill-treatment at the hands of agent or overseer. Antony had visions—But he dismissed them. There was a chapter or two in his life which it was not good to recall.

They were descending now, driving between the high banks and hedges of a true Devonshire lane. Primroses starred the banks, though in less profusion than they had been a fortnight earlier; bluebells and pink campion grew among them, and the feathery blossom of the cow-parsley. Turning to the left at the foot of the lane, the hedge on the right was lower. Over it, and across an expanse of sloping fields dotted here and there with snow-white hawthorn bushes, Antony saw the roofs of houses and cottages, and, beyond them, the sea. It lay grey and tranquil under an equally grey sky. A solitary fishing smack, red-sailed, made a note of colour in the neutral atmosphere of sea and sky. To the right was a gorse-crowned cliff; to the left, and across the estuary, a headland ran far out into the water.

"Byestry," said the man, nodding in the direction of the roofs. "Us doant go down into t'place. Yü'm to have Widow Jenkins's cottage, her as died back tü Christmas. 'Tis a quarter o'mile or so from t'town, and 'twill be that mooch nearer t'old Hall. Yü see yon chimbleys by they three elms yonder? 'Tis Doctor's house. Yü'm tü go there this evenin' about seven o'clock 'e bid me tell 'ee. Where was yü working tü last?"

The question came abruptly. For one brief second Antony was non-plussed. Then he recovered himself.

"'Tis London I've just come from," he replied airily enough. "I've been doing a bit on my own account lately."

"Hmm," replied the man. "I reckon if I'd been workin' my own jobs, I'd not take an under post in a hurry. But yü knoaws your own business best. T'last chap as was underest gardener oop tü t'Hall got took on by folks living over Exeter way. He boarded wi' t'blacksmith and his wife. Maybe yü'm a married man?"

"I am not," said Antony smiling.

"Not got a maid at all?" queried the other.

Antony shook his head.

The man opened his eyes. "Lord love 'ee, what do un want wi' a cottage, then! Yü'd best be takin' oop wi' a wife. There's a sight of vitty maids tü Byestry, and 'tis lonesome like comin' home to an empty hearth and no supper. There's Rose Darell, her's a güd maid, and has a bit o' money; or Jenny Horswell, her's a bit o' a squint, but is a fair vitty maid tü t'cleanin'; or Vicky Mathers, her's as pretty as a picter, but her's not the money nor the house ways o' Rose or Jenny," he ended with thoughtful consideration.

Antony laughed, despite the fact that inwardly he was not a trifle dismayed. He had no mind to have the belles of Byestry thus paraded for his choice. Work, he had accepted with the conditions, but a wife was a very different matter.

"Sure, I'm not a marryin' man at all, I am not," he responded, a hypocritical sigh succeeding to the laugh.

"Crossed?" queried the man. "Ah, well, doant 'ee go for to get down on your luck for one maid. There's as güd blackberries hangin' on t'bushes as ever was plucked from them. And yü'm tü young a chap tü be thinkin' o' yürself as a sallybat, and so I tells 'ee."

Antony smothered a spasm of laughter.

"It's not women folk I'm wanting in my life," responded he, still with hypocritical gloom.

"'Tis kittle cattle they be, and that's sartain, sure," replied the other, shaking his head. "But 'twas a rib out o' the side o' Adam the first woman was, so t'Scripture do tell we, and I reckon us men folk do feel the lack o' that rib nowadays, till us gets us a wife."

Antony was spared an answer, a fact for which he sent up devout thanks. They had made another leftward turn by now, and come upon a cottage set a little way back from the road,—a cottage with a wicket gate between two hedges, and a flagged path leading up to a small porch,

thatched, as was the cottage.

"Here us be," said the man.

Antony's heart gave a sudden big throb of pleasure. The little place was so extraordinarily English, so primitive and quaint. True, the garden was a bit dilapidated looking, the apple trees in the tiny orchard to the left of the cottage quite amazingly old and lichen grown; but it spelled England for him, and that more emphatically than any other thing had done since his arrival in the Old Country. 94

Antony dismounted from the trap, then lifted Josephus and his bag to the ground. This done, he began to feel in his pocket for some coins. The man saw the movement.

"That bain't for yü," he replied shortly, "t' Doctor will settle wi' I."

And Antony withdrew his hand quickly, feeling he had been on the verge of a lapse.

"Here's t'key," remarked the man. "And if yü feel like a pipe one o' these evenin's, yü might coom down tü t'village. My place is over opposite t'post office. I be t'saddler. Yü'll see t'name Allbut George over t'shop."

Antony thanked Mr. Albert George, and then watched the patriotically named gentleman turn his horse, and drive off in the direction of the coast. When the trap had vanished from sight, he heaved a sigh of relief.

"Josephus," he remarked, "it will need careful practice and wary walking, but I fancy I did pretty well." And then he opened the garden gate.

He walked up the little path, and fitted the key with which Allbut George had provided him, into the lock. He turned it, and pushed open the door. It gave at once into a small but cheerful room, brick-floored, with a big fireplace at one side. An oak settle stood by the fireplace; a low seat, covered with a somewhat faded dimity, was before the window; there was a basket-chair, two wooden chairs, a round table, a dresser with some highly coloured earthenware crockery on it, a corner cupboard, and a grandfather's clock. There was a door behind the settle to the right of the fireplace, and, in the opposite corner, stairs leading to a room or rooms above. 95

Antony put his bag down on the table and went to investigate the door. It led into a tiny scullery or kitchen, provided solely with a small range, a deal table, a chair, a sink, and a pump. In one corner was a box containing some pieces of wood. In another corner was a galvanized bucket, a broom, and a scrubbing-brush. He glanced around, then came back into the sitting-room, and made his way to the stairs.

They led direct into a bedroom, a place furnished with a camp bed covered with a red and brown striped blanket; a small, somewhat rickety oak chest of drawers, a rush-bottomed chair, a small table, a corner washstand, and a curtain, which hid pegs driven into the wall. A door led into a small inner room over the kitchen scullery. Antony opened the door. The room was empty. Widow Jenkins had had no use for it, it would appear. Or, so Antony suddenly thought, perhaps all Widow Jenkins's furniture had been removed, and what at present occupied the place had been put there solely on his account.

He crossed to the window, and pushed it back. It looked on to a tiny vegetable garden, in much the same state of neglect as the front garden, and was separated from a field yellow with buttercups by a low hawthorn hedge. Beyond the field was a tiny brook; and, beyond that again, a copse. There was not a sound to break the silence, save the dripping of the rain from the roof of the cottage, and, in the distance, the low sighing note of the sea. The silence was emphasized by the fact that for the last week Antony had had the hum of traffic in his ears, and had but this moment come from the noise of trains and the rattle of a shaky dog-cart. 96

He still leaned there looking out. It was even more silent than the veldt. There were no little strange animal noises to break the silence. Nothing but that drip, drip of the rain, and that soft distant sighing of the sea.

A curious sense of loneliness fell upon him, a loneliness altogether at variance with the loneliness of the veldt. He could not have defined wherein the difference lay, yet he was well aware that there was a difference. It was one of those subtle differences, exceedingly apparent to the inner consciousness, yet entirely impossible to translate into terms of speech. The nearest approach he could get to anything like a definition of it, was that it was less big, but more definitely poignant. Beyond that he did not, or could not, go. For some five minutes or so he leant at the little casement window, gazing at the gold of the buttercups seen through a blurred mist of rain. Then he pulled the window to, and came down into the parlour. 97

The hands of the grandfather's clock pointed to ten minutes to five. Antony, remembering the box of wood in the scullery, bethought himself of a cup of tea. His bag contained all the requirements. Long practice had taught him to provide himself with necessities, and also, on occasions, to substitute lemon for milk, as a complement to tea.

He was just about to go and fetch a handful of sticks, preparatory to lighting a fire, when he heard the click of his garden gate. Turning, and looking through the window, he saw a big man coming up the path.

DOUBTS

Doctor Hilary was returning from his rounds. His state of mind was nearly as grey as the atmosphere.

It is one thing to agree to a mad-brained scheme in the first amused interest of its propounding, even to mould it further, and bring it into shape. It is quite another to be actually confronted with the finished scheme, to realize that, though you may not be its veritable parent, you have at all events foster-fathered it quite considerably, and that, moreover, you cannot now, in conscience, cast off responsibility in its behalf.

The fact that you had excellent reasons for adopting the scheme in the first place, will doubtless be of comfort to your soul, but that particular species of comfort and ordinary everyday common sense are not always as closely united as you might desire. In fact they are occasionally apt to pull in entirely opposite directions, a method of procedure which is far from consoling.

Doctor Hilary found it far from consoling.

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Conscience told him quite plainly that his real and innermost reason for foster-fathering the scheme was simply and solely for the sake of snatching at any mortal thing that would, or could, bring interest into an old man's life. Common sense demanded why on earth he had not suggested an alternative idea, something a trifle less mad. And it was mad. There did not now appear one single reasonable point in it, though very assuredly there were quite a vast number of unreasonable ones.

In the first place, and it seemed to him nearly, if not quite, the most unreasonable point, Nicholas had known nothing whatever about the young man he had elected to make his heir,—nothing, that is, beyond the fact that he had known the young man's father, and had once seen Antony himself when Antony was a child. There had even been very considerable difficulty in obtaining knowledge of his whereabouts.

In the second place, it appeared quite absurd to appoint the young man to the position of under-gardener at the Hall. It was more than probable that he knew nothing whatever about gardening. It was true that, if he did not, he could learn. But then Golding, the head gardener, might not unreasonably find matter for amazement and comment in the fact that a young and ignorant man, who was paid a pound a week and allowed to rent a furnished cottage, should be thrust upon him, rather than an experienced man, or an ignorant boy who would have received at the most eight shillings a week, and have lived at his own home. Amazement and comment were to be avoided, that had been Nicholas's idea, and yet, to Doctor Hilary's mind they ran the risk of being courted from the outset. In the third place, how was it likely that a man of education—and it had been ascertained that Antony was a university man—could comport himself like a labourer in any position,—gardener, farm-hand, or chauffeur? The conditions had stated that he was to do so. But could he? There was the point.

100

The more Doctor Hilary thought about the conditions, the madder they appeared to him. Yet, having undertaken the job of carrying the mad scheme through, he could not possibly back out at the eleventh hour. He could only hope for the best, but it must be confessed that he was not exceedingly optimistic about that best. And further, he was not exceedingly optimistic about the young man. He could imagine himself, in a like situation, consigning Nick and his conditions to the nether regions; certainly not submitting meekly to a year's effacement of his personality for the sake of money. Such conditions would have enraged him.

No; he was not optimistic regarding the man. He pictured him as either a bit of a fawner, who would cringe through the year, or a keen-headed business man, who would go through it with a steel-trap mouth, and an eye to every weakness in his fellow-workers. Certainly neither type he pictured appealed to him. Yet he felt confident he would find one of the two, and had already conceived a strong prejudice against Antony Gray. From which regrettable fact it will be seen that he was committing the sin of rash judgment.

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It was not altogether surprising, therefore, that his mood was nearly as grey as the atmosphere.

He sighed heavily, and shook his head, somewhat after the fashion of a big dog. Reasons, partly mental, partly physical were responsible for the shake. In the first place it was an attempt to dispel mental depression; in the second place it was to free his eyebrows and eyelashes from the rain drops clinging to them, since the rain was descending in a grey misty veil.

With the shake, an idea struck him.

Why not confront the embodied scheme at once? Why not interview this preposterous young man without delay, and be done with it?

He gave a brief direction to his coachman.

Five minutes later saw him standing at the gate of Copse Cottage, his dog-cart driving away down the lane. It had been his own doing. He had said he would walk home. An idiotic idea! What on earth had suggested it to him?

However, it was done now.

He pushed open the gate, and walked up the little flagged path.

CHAPTER XII

CONCERNING MICHAEL FIELD

Antony, having seen a figure approaching the door, opened it, and confronted a big, rugged-faced man, who looked at him somewhat grimly.

"Michael Field?" demanded the big man briefly.

"Sure, 'tis my name," he replied cheerfully. "You'll be Doctor Hilary, I'm thinking. Won't you be coming in out of the wet." He flung wide the door on the words.

"George found you all right?" queried Doctor Hilary stepping across the threshold. He appeared totally oblivious of the fact that Antony's presence made the success of George's search fairly obvious.

"He did that," returned Antony pushing forward a chair, but making no attempt to sit down himself. The impulse had been upon him. Memory had awakened just in time.

Doctor Hilary was silent. The reality was so entirely different from his preconceived notions. The cheerful, clean-shaven young man, with the Irish accent, standing before him in an attitude of quite respectful, but not in the least subservient attention, was at such complete variance with either of his two imaginary types, that he found his attitude of grimness insensibly relaxing.

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"Did George speak to you regarding your work?" he demanded suddenly. He couldn't for the life of him, think of anything else to say.

"Well," returned Antony thoughtfully considering, "he asked me about my last place, and I told him I'd been working on my own account. Thereupon he expressed surprise that I should now be taking an under post, but remarked with vast wisdom that every man knew his own business best."

"Hmm," said Doctor Hilary.

"He also," continued Antony, his eyes twinkling, "was for giving me advice on matrimony, and mentioned three 'vitty maids' he could produce for my inspection. I told him," continued Antony solemnly, though his eyes were still twinkling, "that I was not a marrying man at all."

Doctor Hilary found the twinkle in Antony's eyes gaining response in his own. He was such a remarkably cheerful young man, and so confiding.

"Hmm," he remarked again. "He said nothing else I suppose? Expressed no surprise at your being chosen for the post, instead of a local man?"

"He did not," responded Antony, replying to the last question. "It would seem that he thought any appointment to the post unnecessary, in view of the fact that the Hall was at present untenanted."

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"And you replied—?" asked Doctor Hilary.

"Sure, I had no opinion to offer," said Antony. "It was not my affair at all. He talked, but I said little."

"A good principle," remarked Doctor Hilary approvingly, "and one I should advise you to adhere to. Your accent is all right, but your—your speech is a trifle fluent, if I may make the suggestion."

Antony laughed pleasantly. He was now made sure of the fact of which he had been already tolerably certain, namely, that this big, rugged-faced man was fully aware of the conditions of the will, and his own identity.

"Sure, 'tis we Irish have the gift o' the gab," he returned apologetically, "but I'll be remembering your advice."

There was a little silence. It was broken by Antony.

"I was for making a cup of tea when you came up the path, sor. Will you be having one with me? It'll not take beyond ten minutes or so to get a fire going, and the water boiling. That is, if you'll be doing me the honour, sor," he concluded gravely.

Doctor Hilary laughed outright.

He watched Antony disappear into the scullery, to reappear with a bundle of sticks and a log. He watched him kneeling by the fire, manipulating them deftly. He watched him fill a kettle with water, and put it on the fire, set cups on the table, then open his bag, and produce bread, butter, a packet of tea, and a lemon.

105

It was extraordinary what an alteration his sentiments had undergone since entering Cope Cottage. Every trace of prejudice had vanished. There was, in his mind, something pathetic in the skill, evidently born of long practice, with which this tall lean man made his preparations for

the little meal.

From watching the man, Doctor Hilary turned his attention to the room. It was fairly comfortable, at all events, if not in the least luxurious. But the inevitable loneliness of the life that would be led within its walls, struck him with a curious forcefulness.

"Do you know anything of gardening?" he demanded suddenly, breaking the silence.

"Sure, it's little I don't know," returned Antony. "'Twas a bit of wild earth my garden was before I took it in hand. Now there's peach trees, and nectarines, and plum trees in it, and all the vegetables any man could be wanting, and flowers fit for a queen's drawing-room. There's roses as big as your fist. Oh, 'tis a fine garden it is out on—" he broke off, "out beyond," he concluded.

"On the veldt," suggested Doctor Hilary quietly.

"'Twas the veldt I was after meaning," responded Antony smiling, "but I thought 'twould be as well to get my tongue used to forgetting the sound of the word, lest it should slip out some fine day, when I wasn't meaning it to at all."

"Wise, anyhow," agreed Doctor Hilary, and he too smiled. "But you understand that I—well, I happen to know all the circumstances of this arrangement."

Antony laughed. "I was thinking as much," he confessed.

"I wonder—" began Doctor Hilary. And then he stopped. He had been about to wonder aloud as to why on earth Antony should have accepted the conditions, why he should have exchanged the freedom and untrammelled spaces of the veldt for the conventional life of England, even with the Hall and a goodly income, at the end of the year, to the balance. He knew most assuredly that nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand would have done so, and he knew that he himself was the thousandth who would not. His exceedingly brief acquaintance with Antony had given him the impression that he, also, was a thousandth man.

"You wonder—?" queried Antony.

"I wonder how you'll like the life," said Doctor Hilary, though it was not precisely what he had originally intended to say.

"'Tis England," said Antony briefly.

"Is that your sole reason for accepting the life?" asked Doctor Hilary curiously.

Antony looked him full in the eyes.

"It is not," he replied smiling. And then he turned to the kettle, which was on the point of boiling over.

Of course it was a rebuff. But it was a perfectly polite one. And oddly—or, perhaps, not oddly—Doctor Hilary did not resent it in the least. On the contrary, he respected the man who had administered it.

"There's no milk," said Antony presently, pouring tea into two cups. "Can you be putting up with a lemon?"

"I like it," Doctor Hilary assured him.

After the meal they smoked together, making remarks now and again, interspersed with little odd silences, which, however, appeared quite natural and friendly. Josephus, who at the outset had viewed the entry of the big man on the scene with something akin to disapproval, now walked solemnly over to him, stood on his hind legs, and put his fore paws on Doctor Hilary's knees.

"A token of approval," said Antony.

And then another of the odd little silences fell.

"You will report yourself to Golding at half-past seven on Monday morning," said Doctor Hilary some quarter of an hour later, as he rose to take his leave. "He lives at the lodge about five minutes' walk up the road. You'll find the place all right. You will take all instructions as to your work from him. If you should wish to see me personally at any time regarding anything, you will usually find me at home in the evening."

Antony touched his forehead in the most approved style.

"I thank you, sor," he responded.

Doctor Hilary smiled. "Well, good luck to you. It will be better—of course, from now onward, we must remember that you are Michael Field, under-gardener at the Hall."

"'Tis a good name," said Antony solemnly. "Sure, I'm downright obliged to me godfathers and godmothers for giving me such a one."

Again Doctor Hilary smiled. "Oh, and by the way," he said, "how about money?"

Antony felt in his pockets. He produced two florins, a sixpence, and a halfpenny. He looked at them lying in the palm of his hand. Then he looked whimsically at the Doctor.

"I don't know whether the possession of these coins breaks the spirit of the contract. I'm thinking 'twill hardly break the letter. 'Tis all I have."

The Doctor laughed.

"I fancy not," he replied. "I'd better give you your first week's wage in advance. You'll need to

lay in provisions. There's a general store in Byestry. Perhaps you'll want to do a little in the purchasing line. Remember, to-morrow is Sunday."

He laid a sovereign on the table, and a moment later the garden gate clicked to behind him.

Antony went back into the little parlour.

CHAPTER XIII

A DISCOVERY

The morning broke as fair, as blue-skied, as sunny, as the previous day had been gloomy, grey-skied, and wet.

The song of a golden-throated lark was the first sound that Antony heard, as he woke to find the early morning sunshine pouring through the open casement window. He lay very still, listening to the flood of liquid notes, and looking at the square of blue sky, seen through the window. Now and again an ivy leaf tapped gently at the pane, stirred by a little breeze blowing from the sea, and sweeping softly across buttercupped meadow and gorse-grown moorland. Once a flight of rooks passed across the square blue patch, and once a pigeon lighted for an instant on the windowsill, to fly off again on swift, strong wings.

He lay there, drowsily content. For that day at least, there was a pleasant idleness ahead of him, nothing but his own wants to attend to. The morrow would see him armed with spade and rake, probably wrestling with weeds, digging deep in the good brown earth, possibly mowing the grass, and such like jobs as fall to the lot of an under-gardener. Antony smiled to himself. Well, it would all come in the day's work, and the day's work would be no novel master to him. The open air, whether under cloud or sunshine, was good. After all, his lot for the year would not be such a bad one. He was in the mood to echo the praises of that brown-feathered morsel pouring forth its lauds somewhere aloft in the blue. Suddenly the song ceased. The bird had come to earth.

For a moment or so longer Antony lay very still, listening to the silence. Then he flung back the bed-clothes, went to the window, and looked out.

He looked across the tiny garden, and the lane, to a wild-rose hedge; fragile pink blossoms swayed gently in the breeze. Beyond the hedge was a field of close-cropped grass, dotted here and there with sheep. To the left a turn in the lane, and the high banks and hedges, shut further view from sight. To the right, and far below the cottage, across meadows and the hidden village of Byestry, lay the sea.

It lay blue and sparkling, flecked with a myriad moving specks of gold, as the sunshine fell on the dancing water. He had seen it at close quarters last night, from the little quay, seen it smooth and grey, its breast heaving now and then as if in gentle sleep. To-day it was awake, alive, and buoyant. He must get down to it again. It was inviting him, smiling, dimpling, alluring.

He made a quick but exceedingly careful toilet. Antony was fastidious to a degree in the matter of cleanliness. Earth dirt he had no objection to; slovenly dirt was as abhorrent to him as vice.

Josephus, who had slept in the parlour, accorded him a hearty welcome on his descent of the narrow steep little stairs, intimating that he was every whit as ready to be up and doing as was his master. The sunshine, the blithesomeness of the morning was infectious. You felt yourself smiling in accord with its smiles.

Antony flung wide the cottage door. A scent of rosemary, southernwood, and verbena was wafted to him from the little garden,—clean, old-fashioned scents, English in their very essence. Anon he had more commonplace scents mingling with them,—the appetizing smell of fried sausages, the aromatic odour of freshly made coffee. Josephus found himself in two minds as to the respective merits of the attractions without, and the alluring odours within. Finally, after one scamper round the garden, he compromised by seating himself on the doorstep, for the most part facing the sunshine, but now and again turning a wet black nose in the direction of the breakfast table and frying-pan.

An hour or so later he was giving himself wholeheartedly to the grassy and rabbitty scents dear to a doggy soul, as he scampered in the direction of Byestry with his master. Occasionally he made side tracks into hedges and down rabbit holes, whence at a whistle from Antony, he would emerge innocent in expression, but utterly condemned by traces of red earth on his black nose and white back.

There was a lazy Sundayish atmosphere about the village as Antony passed through it, with Josephus now at his heels. Men lounged by cottage doors, women gossiped across garden fences. The only beings with an object in view appeared to be children,—crimp-haired little girls, and stiffly-suited small boys, who walked in chattering groups in the direction of a building he rightly judged to be a Sunday-school.

A little farther on, a priest was standing by the door of a small barn-like-looking place with a cross at one end. Antony vaguely supposed it to be a church, and thought, also vaguely, that it was the oddest-looking one he had ever seen. He concluded that Byestry was too small to boast a larger edifice.

On reaching the quay he turned to the right, walking along a cobbled pavement, which presently sloped down to the beach and a narrow stretch of firm smooth sand, bordered by brown rocks and the sea on one side, and a towering cliff on the other. The tide was going down, leaving the brown rocks uncovered. Among them were small crystal pools, reflecting the blue of the sky as in a mirror. Sea spleenwort and masses of samphire grew on the cliffs to his right. No danger here to the would-be samphire gatherer; it could be plucked from the safety of solid earth, with as great ease as picking up shells from the beach.

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After some half hour's walking, Antony turned a corner, bringing him to a yet lonelier beach. Looking back, he found Byestry shut from his view,—the cliffs behind him, the sea before him, the sky above him, stretches of sand around him, and himself alone, save for Josephus, and sea-gulls which dipped to the water or circled in the blue, and jackdaws which cried harshly from the cliffs.

He sat down on the sand, and began to fill his pipe. It was extraordinarily lonely, extraordinarily peaceful. There was no sinister note in the loneliness such as he had experienced in the vast spaces of the African veldt, but a reposefulness, a quiet rest which appealed to him. The very blueness of the sky and sparkle of the sunshine was tender after the brazen glitter of the African sun. Turning to look behind him, he saw that here the cliff was grass-covered, sloping almost to the beach, and among the grass, hiding its green, were countless bluebells, a sheet of shimmering colour. Two lines of Tennyson's came suddenly into his mind.

And the whole isle side flashing down with never a tree
Swept like a torrent of gems from the sky to the blue of the sea.

The island of flowers and the island of silence in one, he felt the place to be, and no fear of fighting, with himself as sole inhabitant. So might the islands have been after Maeldune had renounced his purpose of revenge, after he had returned from the isle of the saint who had spoken words of peace.

114

He lost count of time. A pleasant waking drowsiness fell upon him, till at length, seeing that the sun had reached its zenith, he realized that it must be noon, and began to consider the advisability of retracing his steps.

He got to his feet, whistling to a white speck in the distance, which he rightly judged to be Josephus, and set out on his homeward route.

The village appeared deserted, as he once more reached it. Doubtless the Sunday dinner, which accounts so largely for Sunday sleepiness, was in progress.

Coming to the small barn-like-looking building which he had noticed earlier in the morning, and seeing that the door was open, he looked in. The air was heavy with the scent of incense. It needed only a moment's observation to tell him that he was in a Catholic church. A curtained tabernacle stood on the little altar, before which hung a ruby lamp. The building was too small to allow of two altars, but at one side was a statue of Our Lady, the base surrounded with flowers, since it was the month of May. Near the porch was a statue of St. Peter.

115

Antony looked curiously around. It was the third time only that he had entered a Catholic church, the second time being at Teneriffe with the Duchessa. Ordering Josephus to stay without, he walked up the little aisle, and sat down in one of the rush-seated chairs near the sanctuary. He hadn't a notion what prompted the impulse, but he knew that some impulse was at work.

He looked towards the sanctuary. Mass had been said not long since, and the chalice covered with the veil and burse was still on the altar. Antony hadn't a notion of even the first principles of the Catholic faith, not as much as the smallest Catholic child; but he felt here, in a measure, the same sense of home as he knew the Duchessa to have felt in the church at Teneriffe. Oddly enough he did not feel himself the least an intruder. There was almost a sense of welcome.

From looking at the altar he looked at the chairs, and the small oblong pieces of pasteboard fastened to their backs. He looked down at the piece which denoted the owner of the chair in which he was sitting. And then he found himself staring at it, while his heart leaped and thumped madly. On the pasteboard four words were written,—The Duchessa di Donatello.

He gazed at the words hardly able to believe the sight of his own eyes. What odd coincidence, what odd impulse had brought him to her very chair? It was extraordinary, unbelievable almost. And then another thought flashed into his brain, making his heart stand still.

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A door to the left opened, and a priest came out. He looked momentarily at Antony, then went into the sanctuary, genuflected, took the covered chalice from the altar, genuflected again, and went back into the sacristy, leaving the door partly open.

Antony got suddenly to his feet. He went towards the sacristy. The priest, hearing the sound of steps, opened the door wide.

"Excuse me," said Antony, "but can you tell me where Woodleigh is?" His Irish brogue was forgotten.

"Certainly," replied the priest. "It is about two miles from here, inland." He looked rather

curiously at the man, who, though labourer by his dress, yet spoke in an obviously refined voice. He waited, perhaps expecting some further question.

"That was all I wanted to know," said Antony. "Thank you." He turned back into the church.

Father Dormer looked after him. There was a puzzled look in his eye.

Antony came out of the church and into the sunlight. He called to Josephus, who was busy with the investigation of a distant smithy, and turned up the street, walking rather quickly.

CHAPTER XIV

HONOR VINCIT

His brain was working rapidly, the while he felt a curious leaden sensation at his heart. He had never even contemplated the possibility of the Duchessa living in the neighbourhood, though he now marvelled why he had never happened to question her as to the exact locality of Woodleigh.

Of course he knew, and assured himself that he knew, that the chances were all against any probability of their meeting. How was it likely they should meet, seeing that she was a *grande dame*, and he merely an under-gardener at the Hall? Of course it was not probable. Nevertheless there was just the faintest chance. He couldn't deny that remote chance. And if they did meet, and she should recognize him?—There was the question.

Explanation would be impossible in view of his promise. And what would she think? Wouldn't it be conceivable, nay, wouldn't it be natural that she should be indignant at the thought that she had admitted to her friendship a man, who, to her eyes, would appear one of inferior birth? Wouldn't his behaviour on the *Fort Salisbury* appear to her in the light of a fraud? Wouldn't his letter appear to her as a piece of preposterous presumption on his part? How could it be expected that she should see beneath the surface of things as they seemed to be, and solve the riddle of appearances? It was such an inconceivable situation, such an altogether unheard of situation, laughable too, if it weren't for the vague possibility of the—to him—tragedy he now saw involved in it. It was this, this vague sense of tragedy, that was causing that leaden sensation at his heart.

He tried to tell himself that he was being morbid, that he ran no possible risk of coming face to face with the Duchessa, in spite of the fact that the Manor House Woodleigh lay but two miles distant. But the assurances he heaped upon his soul, went a remarkably small way towards cheering it.

And yet, through the leadenness upon his soul, through that vague, almost indefinable sense of tragedy at hand, ran a curious little note of exultation. Though he had no smallest desire for her to set eyes on him, might not he set eyes on her? And yet, if he did, would the joy in the sight be worth the dull ache, the horrible sense of isolation in the knowledge that word with her was forbidden.

He realized now, for the first time in its fullest measure, what her advent into his life meant to him. Bodily separation for a year had been possible to contemplate. Even should it extend to a lifetime, he would still have three golden weeks of memory to his comfort. But should mental separation fall upon him, should it ever be his lot to read anger in her eyes, he felt that his very soul would die. Even memory would be lost to him, by reason of the unbearable pain it would hold. And then, with the characteristics of a man accustomed to face possibilities, to confront contingencies and emergencies beforehand, he saw himself face to face with a temptation. Should the emergency he contemplated arise, was there not a simple solution of it? She was quick-witted, she might quite conceivably guess at the existence of some riddle. Would not the tiniest hint suffice for her? The merest possible inflection of his voice?

He had reached his cottage by now. He went in and shut the door.

He sat down on the oak settle, staring at the little casement window opposite to him, without seeing it. It appeared to him that there were voices talking within his brain or soul,—he didn't know which,—while he himself was answering one of them—the loudest.

The loudest voice spoke quite cheerfully, and was full of common sense. It urged him to abandon the consideration of the whole matter for the present; it told him that the probability of his meeting the Duchessa was so extraordinarily remote, that it was not worth while torturing his mind with considerations of what line of action he would take should the emergency arise. Should it do so, he could act then as his conscience prompted.

He found himself replying to this voice, speaking almost stubbornly. He had got to fight the matter out now, he declared. He had got to decide absolutely definitely what course of action he intended to pursue, should the emergency he feared arise. He was not going to leave matters to chance and be surprised into saying or doing something he might either way afterwards regret. He knew the danger of not making up his mind beforehand. To which the loud voice responded

with something like a sneer, telling him to have it his own way. And then it remained mockingly silent, while another and more insidious voice began to speak.

The insidious voice told him quite gently that this emergency might indeed arise; it pointed out to him the quite conceivable events that might occur from it; it assured him that it had no possible desire that he should break his promise in any way. He was not to dream of giving any explanation to the Duchessa, but that he would owe it to himself, *and to her*, to give her the faintest hint that at a future date he *could* give her an explanation. That was all. There would be no breaking of his promise. She could not possibly even guess at what that explanation might be. She would merely realize that *something* underlay the present appearances.

121

The proposition sounded perfectly reasonable, perfectly just. His own common sense told him that there could be no harm in it. It was the rightful solution of the difficulty, arrived at by silencing that first loud voice,—the voice which had clearly wished him to abandon all consideration of the matter, that he might be surprised into giving a full explanation of the situation.

Antony drew a long breath of relief.

After all, he had been torturing himself needlessly. She herself had spoken of trust. Should that trust totter for an instant, would not the faintest possible hint be sufficient to re-establish it on a firm basis?

With the thought, the little square of casement window came back once more to his vision. He saw through it an old-fashioned rose bush of crimson roses in the garden; he heard a bird twitter, and call to its mate. The abnormal had vanished, reduced itself once more to plain wholesome common sense. And then suddenly, and without warning, a sentence flashed through his brain.

Antony sat up, clenching his hands furiously between his knees. It was absurd, preposterous. There was no smallest occasion to take those words in such a desperately literal sense.

“In short, he will do all in his power to give the impression that he is simply and solely Michael Field, working-man, and under-gardener at Chorley Old Hall.”

122

The words rang as clearly in his brain as if there were someone in the room speaking them aloud. Once more the window vanished. There were no voices speaking now; there was only a curious and rather horrible silence, in which there was no need for voices.

The faintest little whine from Josephus aroused him. It was long past the dinner hour, and racing the sands is exceedingly hungry work.

Antony's eyes came back from the window. His face was rather white, and his mouth set in a straight line. But there was an oddly triumphant look in his eyes.

“I think a meal will do us both good, old man,” he said with a little whimsical smile. And he began getting down plates from the dresser.

CHAPTER XV

IN THE GARDEN

123

Some fifteen or more years ago, the gardens of Chorley Old Hall were famous for their beauty. They still deserved to be famous, and the reason that they were so no longer, arose merely from the fact that they had become unknown, had sunk into obscurity, since no one but the actual inmates of the Hall, Doctor Hilary, and the gardeners themselves ever set eyes on them.

Yet Golding, being an artist at heart, cared for them for pure love of the work, rather than for any kudos such care might bring him. Had he read poetry with as great diligence as he read works on horticulture, he would possibly have declared his doctrine to be found in the words:—

Work thou for pleasure, paint, or sing or carve
The thing thou lovest, though the body starve.
Who works for glory misses oft the goal,
Who works for money coins his very soul.
Work for the work's sake, and it may be
That these things shall be added unto thee.

Certain it is that the gardens under his care were as beautiful as gardens may be. Where trimness was desirable, they were as neat, as well-ordered, as stately as some old-world lady; where nature was allowed fuller sway, they luxuriated in a very riot of mad colour,—pagan, bacchanalian almost, yet in completest harmony, despite the freedom permitted.

124

Before the house, beyond a rose-embowered terrace, a wide lawn, soft as thickest velvet, terminated in two great yews, set far apart, a sundial between them, and backgrounded by the

sea and sky. To right and left were flower borders brilliant in colour, against yew hedges. Still farther to the right was the Tangle Garden, where climbing roses, honeysuckle, and clematis roamed over pergolas and old tree stumps at their own sweet will and fancy. Beyond the yew hedge on the left was another garden of yews, and firs, and hollies. A long avenue ran its full length while white marble statues, set on either side, gleamed among the darkness of the trees. The end of the avenue formed a frame for an expanse of billowing moorland, range upon range of hills, melting from purple into pale lavender against the distant sky.

Behind the house was another and smaller lawn, broken in the middle by a great marble basin filled with crystal water, whereon rested the smooth flat leaves of water-lilies, and, in their time, the big white blossoms of the chalice-like flowers themselves. A little fountain sprang from the marble basin, making melodious music as the ascending silver stream fell back once more towards its source. Fantailed pigeons preened themselves on the edge of the basin, and peacocks strutted the velvet grass, spreading gorgeous tails of waking eyes to the sun. Beyond the lawn, and separated from it by an old box hedge, was an orchard, where, in the early spring, masses of daffodils danced among the rough grass, and where, later, the trees were covered with a sheet of snowy blossoms—pear, cherry, plum, and apple. A mellow brick wall enclosed the orchard, a wall beautified by small green ferns, by pink and red valerian, and yellow toadflax. Behind the wall lay the kitchen gardens and glass houses, which ended in another wall separating them from a wood crowning the heights on which Chorley Old Hall was situated.

Had Antony had a free choice of English gardens in which to work, it is quite conceivable that he had chosen these very ones in which fate, or Nicholas Danver's conditions, had placed him. In an astonishingly short space of time he was taking as great a pride in them as Golding himself. It is not to be supposed, however, that, at the outset, Golding was over-pleased to welcome a young man, who had been thrust upon him from the unknown without so much as a by your leave to him. For the first week or so, he eyed the cheerfully self-contained young gardener with something very akin to suspicion, merely allotting to him the heavy and commonplace tasks which Antony had foreseen as his.

Antony made no attempt to impress Golding with the fact that his knowledge of fruit growing, if not of floriculture, was certainly on a level with his own. It was mere chance that brought the fact to light,—the question of a somewhat unusual blight that had appeared on a fruit tree. Antony happened to be in the vicinity of the peach tree when Golding was remarking on it to another gardener. Five minutes later, the second gardener having departed, Antony approached Golding. He respectfully mentioned the nature of the blight, and suggested a remedy. It led to a conversation, in which Golding's eyes were very considerably opened. He was not a man to continue to indulge in prejudice merely because it had formerly existed in his mind. He realized all at once that he had found a kindred spirit in Antony, and a kind of friendship between the two, having its basis on horticulture, was the result. Not that he showed him the smallest favouritism, however. That would have been altogether outside his sense of the fitness of things.

There were moments when Antony found the situation extraordinarily amusing. Leaning on his spade, he would look up from some freshly turned patch of earth towards the old grey house, a light of humorous laughter in his eyes. Virtually speaking the place was his own already. The months ahead, till he should enter into possession, were but an accidental interlude, in a manner of speaking. He was already planning a little drama in his own mind. He saw himself sauntering into the garden one fine morning, with Josephus at his heels.

"Ah, by the way, Golding," he would say, "I'm thinking we might have a bed of cosmos in the southern corner of the Tangle Garden."

It would do as well as any other remark for a beginning, and he *would* like a bed of cosmos. He could picture Golding's stare of dignified amazement.

"Are you giving orders?" he could imagine his querying with dry sarcasm.

"If you don't mind," Antony heard himself answering. "Though if you *have* any objection to the cosmos—" And he would pause.

Golding would naturally think that he had taken leave of his senses.

"Under the impression you're master here, perhaps?" Golding might say. Anyhow those were the words Antony put into his mouth.

"I just happen to have that notion," Antony would reply pleasantly.

"Since when?" Golding ought to ask.

"The *notion*," Antony would reply slowly, "has been more or less in my mind since a year ago last March. I am not sure whether the *fact* dated from that month, or came into actuality this morning."

There his imagination would fail him. There would be an interim. Then the scene would conclude by their having a drink together, Golding looking at Antony over his glass to utter at slow intervals.

"Well, I'm jiggered."

It was so possible a little drama, so even probable a little drama, it is small wonder that Antony found himself chuckling quietly every now and then as he considered it. The only thing was, that he wanted it to hurry up, and that not solely for his own sake, nor for the sake of his secret hopes, nor for the sake of watching Golding's amazed face during the enactment of the little drama, but quite largely for the sake of the big grey house, which lay before him.

It looked so terribly lonely; it looked dead. It was like a flower-surrounded corpse. That there actually was life within it, he was aware, since he had once seen a white-haired man at a window, who, so a fellow-gardener had informed him on being questioned later, must have been the old butler. He and his wife had been left in charge as caretakers. All the other indoor servants had been dismissed by Doctor Hilary on his return from that fateful journey from London. Somehow the man's presence at the window had seemed but to emphasize the loneliness, the odd corpse-like atmosphere of the house. It was as if a face had looked out from a coffin. Antony never had nearer view of either the butler or his wife. Tradespeople called for orders, he believed; but, if either the man or woman ever sought the fresh air, it must be after the work in the gardens was over for the day.

129

Antony liked to picture himself restoring life to the old place. Now and again he allowed himself to see a woman aiding him in the pleasant task. He would picture her standing by the sundial, looking out towards the sparkling water; standing by the marble basin with white pigeons alighted at her feet, and peacocks strutting near her; walking among the marble statues, with a book; passing up the wide steps of the solitary house, taking with her the sunshine of the garden to cheer its gloom.

His heart still held hope as its guest. He had put the thought of that possible emergency from him on the same afternoon as he had decided on his course of action, should it arise. He never crossed bridges before he came to them, as the saying is. He might recognize their possible existence, he might recognize the possibility of being called upon to cross them, even recognize to the full all the unpleasantness he would find on the other side. Having done so, he resolutely refused to approach them till driven thereto by fate.

He found a delight, too, in his little English cottage, in his tiny orchard, and tinier garden. Each evening saw him at work in it, first clearing the place of weeds, reducing it to something like order; later, putting in plants, and sowing seeds. Each Sunday morning saw him walking the lonely beach with Josephus, and, when Mass was over, seeking the little church where the Duchessa had formerly worshipped, and would worship again. Added to the quite extraordinary pleasure he felt in sitting in her very chair, was strange sense of peace in the little building. Father Dormer became quite accustomed to seeing the solitary figure in the church. Of course later, Antony knew, it might be desirable that these visits should cease, but till the end of June, at all events, he was safe.

130

On Saturday and Sunday afternoons and evenings he took long walks inland, exploring moorland, wood, and stream, and recalling many a childish memory. He found the pond where he had endangered his life at the instigation of the fair-haired angel, whose name he could not yet recall. The pond had not shrunk in size as is usual with childhood's recollections; on the contrary it was quite a large pond, a deep pond, and he found himself marvelling that he had ever had the temerity to attempt to cross it on so insecure a bark as a mere log of wood. Possibly the angel had been particularly insistent, and, despite the fact that he was a good many years her senior, he had feared her scorn. He found the wood where he and she had been caught kneeling by the pheasant's nests. It had been well for him that the contents had not already been transferred to his pockets. The crime had been in embryo, so to speak, performed, by good chance, merely in intention rather than in deed.

131

Now the wood was a mass of shimmering bluebells, and alive with the notes of song birds. Antony would lie at full length on the moss, listening to the various notes, dreamily content as his body luxuriated in temporary idleness. As the afternoon passed into evening the sound of a church bell would float up to him from the hidden village. He had discovered by now another church, on the outskirts of the village, an old stone edifice dating from long before the times of the so-called reformation. It never claimed him as a visitor, however: it held no attraction for him as did the little barn-like building on the quay. The sound of the bell would rouse him to matters present, and he would return to his cottage to prepare his evening meal, after which he sat in the little parlour with pipe and book.

Thus quietly the days passed by. May gave place to June, with meadows waist high in perfumed grass, and hedges fragrant with honeysuckle, while Antony's thoughts went more frequently out to Woodleigh and the Duchessa's return.

He had seen the little place from the moorland, looking down into it where it lay in a hollow among the trees. He had seen the one big house it boasted, white-walled and thatch-roofed, half-hidden by climbing roses. Before many days were passed the Duchessa would be once more within it.

CHAPTER XVI

A MEETING

132

And as the end of June drew nearer, Antony found himself once more contemplating a possible meeting with the Duchessa, contemplating, also, the worst that meeting might hold in store.

An odd, indefinable restlessness was upon him. He told himself quite plainly that, in all probability before many weeks, many days even, were passed, there would be a severance of that friendship which meant so much to him. He forced himself to realize it, to dwell upon it, to bring consciously home to his soul the blankness the severance would bring with it. There was a certain relief in facing the worst; yet he could not always face it. There was the trouble. Now and then a hope, which he told himself was futile, would spring unbidden to his heart, establish itself as a radiant guest. Yet presently it would depart, mocking him; or fade into nothingness leaving a blank greyness in its stead.

Uncertainty—though reason told him none was existent—tantalized, tormented him. And then, when certainty came nearest home to him, he knew he had still to learn the final and definite manner of its coming. That it must inevitably be preceded by moments of soul torture he was aware. Yet what precise form would that soul torture take?

He put the query aside. He dared not face it. Once, lying wide-eyed in the darkness, gazing through the small square of his window at the star-powdered sky without, an odd smile had twisted his lips. Pain, bodily pain, had at one time been his close companion for weeks, he had then fancied he had known once and for all the worst of her torments. He knew now that her dealings with the body are quite extraordinarily light in comparison to her dealings with the mind. And this was only anticipation.

One Saturday afternoon he started off for a walk on a hitherto untried route. It was in a direction entirely opposite to Woodleigh, which he now wished to avoid.

Half an hour's walking brought him to a wide expanse of moorland, as lonely a spot as can well be imagined. Behind him lay Byestry and the sea; to his left, also, lay the sea, since the coast took a deep turn northwards about three miles or so to the west of Byestry; to the right, and far distant, lay Woodleigh. Before him was the moorland, covered with heather and gorse bushes. About half a mile distant it descended in a gentle decline, possibly to some hidden village below, since a broadish grass path, or species of roadway bearing wheel tracts, showed that, despite its present loneliness, it was at times traversed by human beings.

Antony sat down by a gorse bush, whose golden flowers were scenting the air with a sweet aromatic scent. Mingling with their scent was the scent of thyme and heather, and the hot scent of the sunbaked earth. Bees boomed lazily in the still air, and far off was the faint melodious note of the ever-moving sea. The sun was hot and the droning of the bees drowsy in its insistence. After a few moments Antony stretched himself comfortably on the heather, and slept.

A slight sound roused him, and he sat up, for the first moment barely realizing his whereabouts. Then he saw the source of the sound which had awakened him. Coming along the grass path, and not fifty paces from him, was a small pony and trap, driven by a woman. Antony looked towards it, and, as he looked, he felt his heart jump, leap, and set off pounding at a terrible rate.

In two minutes the trap was abreast him, and the little Dartmoor pony was brought to a sudden standstill. Antony had got to his feet.

"Mr. Gray," exclaimed an astonished voice, though very assuredly there was a note of keen delight mingled with the astonishment.

Antony pulled off his cap.

"Fancy meeting you here!" cried the Duchessa di Donatello. "Why ever didn't you let me know that you were in these parts? Or, perhaps you have only just arrived, and were going to come and see me?"

There was the fraction of a pause. Then,

"I've been at Byestry since the beginning of May," said Antony.

"At Byestry," exclaimed the Duchessa. "But why ever didn't you tell me when you wrote, instead of saying it was impossible to come and see me?"

"I didn't know then that Woodleigh and Byestry lay so near together," said Antony. And then he stopped. What on earth was he to say next?

The Duchessa looked at him. There was an oddness in his manner she could not understand. He seemed entirely different from the man she had known on the *Fort Salisbury*. Yet—well, perhaps it was only fancy.

"You know now, anyhow," she responded gaily. "And you must come and see me." Then her glance fell upon his clothes. Involuntarily a little puzzlement crept into her eyes, a little amazed query.

"What are you doing at Byestry?" she asked. The question had come. Antony's hand clenched on the side of the pony-trap.

"Oh, I'm one of the under-gardeners at Chorley Old Hall," he responded cheerfully, and as if it were the most entirely natural thing in the world, though his heart was as heavy as lead.

"What do you mean?" queried the Duchessa bewildered.

"Just that," said Antony, still cheerfully, "under-gardener at Chorley Old Hall."

"But why?" demanded the Duchessa, the tiniest frown between her eyebrows.

"Because it is my work," said Antony briefly.

There was a moment's silence.

"But I don't quite understand," said the Duchessa slowly. "You—you aren't a labourer."

Antony drew a deep breath.

"That happens to be exactly what I am," he responded.

"What do you mean, Mr. Gray?" There was bewilderment in the words.

"Exactly what I have said," returned Antony almost stubbornly. "I am under-gardener at Chorley Old Hall, or, in other words, a labourer. I get a pound a week wage, and a furnished cottage, for which I pay five shillings a week rent. My name, by the way, is Michael Field."

The Duchessa looked straight at him.

"Then on the ship you pretended to be someone you were not?" she asked slowly.

Antony shrugged his shoulders.

"That was the reason you wrote and said you couldn't see me?"

Again Antony shrugged his shoulders.

The Duchessa's face was white.

"Why did you pretend to be other than you were?" she demanded.

Antony was silent.

"I suppose," she said slowly, "that, for all your talk of friendship, you did not trust me sufficiently. You did not trust my friendship had I known, and therefore you deliberately deceived me all the time."

Still Antony was silent.

"You really meant to deceive me?" There was an odd note of appeal in her voice.

"If you like to call it that," replied Antony steadily.

"What else can I call it?" she flashed.

There was a long silence.

"I should be grateful if you would not mention having known me as Antony Gray," said Antony suddenly.

"I certainly do not intend to refer to that unfortunate episode again," she replied icily. "As far as I am concerned it will be blotted from my memory as completely as I can wipe out so disagreeable an incident. Will you, please, take your hand off my trap."

Antony withdrew his hand as if the trap had stung him.

The Duchessa touched the pony with her whip, Antony stood looking after them. When, once more, the moorland was deserted, he sat down again on the heather.

Josephus, returning from a rabbit hunt more than an hour later, found him still there in the same position. Disturbed by something queer in his deity's mood, he thrust a wet black nose into his hand.

The touch roused Antony. He looked up, half dazed. Then he saw Josephus.

"I've done it now, old man," he said. And there was a queer little catch in his voice.

CHAPTER XVII

AT THE MANOR HOUSE

The Duchessa di Donatello was sitting at dinner. Silver and roses gleamed on the white damask of the table-cloth. The French windows stood wide open, letting in the soft air of the warm June evening. Through the windows she could see the lawn surrounded by elms, limes, and walnut trees. The sun was slanting low behind them, throwing long blue shadows on the grass. A thrush sang in one of the elm trees, a brown songster carolling his vespers from a topmost branch.

At the other end of the table sat a kindly-faced middle-aged woman, in a grey dress and a lace fichu fastened with a large cameo brooch. She was Miss Esther Tibbutt, the Duchessa's present companion, and one-time governess. Now and then she looked across the table towards the Duchessa, with a little hint of anxiety in her eyes, but her conversation was as brisk and unflagging as usual.

"I hope you had a nice drive this afternoon, my dear. And did Clinker go well?" Clinker was the Dartmoor pony.

The Duchessa roused herself. She was evidently preoccupied about something, thought Miss

Tibbutt.

"Oh, yes, very well. And he has quite got over objecting to the little stream by Crossways."

Miss Tibbutt nodded approvingly.

"I thought he would in time. So you went right over the Crossways. Which way did you come home?"

"Over Stagmoor," said the Duchessa briefly.

"Stagmoor," echoed Miss Tibbutt. "My dear, that *is* such a lonely road. I should have been quite anxious had I known. Supposing you had an accident it might be hours before any one found you. I suppose you didn't see a soul?"

"Oh, just one man," returned the Duchessa carelessly.

"A labourer I suppose," queried Miss Tibbutt.

"Yes, only a labourer," responded the Duchessa quietly.

Miss Tibbutt was silent. She had a vague feeling of uneasiness, and yet she did not know why she had it. She was perfectly certain that something was wrong; and, whatever that something was, it had occurred between the time Pia had set off in the pony-cart with Clinker after lunch, and her return, very late for tea, in the evening. Also, Pia had said she didn't want any tea, but had gone straight to her room. And that was unlike her,—certainly unlike her. It would have been far more natural for her to have ordered a fresh supply, and insisted on Miss Tibbutt sharing it with her, quite oblivious of the fact that she had already had all the tea she wanted, and was going to eat again at a quarter to eight.

"I walked over to Byestry," said Miss Tibbutt presently. "Yes, I know it was very hot, but I walked slowly, and took my largest sunshade. I wanted to get some black silk to mend one of my dresses. I saw Father Dormer. He was very glad to hear that you were back. I told him you had only arrived on Thursday, and I had come on the Tuesday to get things ready for you. My dear, he told me Mr. Danver is dead."

"Mr. Danver," exclaimed the Duchessa, her preoccupation for the moment forgotten.

"Yes. I wonder none of the servants happened to mention it. But I suppose they forgot we didn't know, and probably they have forgotten all about the poor man by now. It's sad to think how soon one *is* forgotten. It appears he went to London in March with Doctor Hilary to consult a specialist and died the day after his arrival in town. Perhaps the journey was too much for him. I should think it might have been, but Doctor Hilary would know best, or perhaps Mr. Danver insisted on going. Anyhow the place is in the hands of caretakers now; the butler and his wife are looking after it till the heir turns up, whoever he may be. There's a rumour that he is an American, but no one seems to know for certain. But they must be keeping the garden in good order. Golding is staying on, and the other men, and they've just got another under-gardener." She paused.

"Have they?" said the Duchessa carelessly, and a trifle coldly. Nevertheless a little colour had flushed into her cheeks.

"I'm afraid you think I'm a terrible gossip," said Miss Tibbutt apologetically. "I really don't mean to be. But in a little place, little things interest one. I am afraid I did ask Father Dormer a good many questions. I hope he didn't—" And she broke off anxiously.

"You dear old Tibby," smiled the Duchessa, "I'm sure he didn't. Nobody thinks you're a gossip. Gossiping is talking about things people don't want known, and generally things that are rather unkind, to say the least of it. You're the soul of honour and charity, and Father Dormer knows that as well as everyone else."

"Oh, my dear!" expostulated Miss Tibbutt. "But I'm glad you think he didn't—"

The Duchessa got up from the table.

"Of course he didn't. Let us go into the garden, and have coffee out there. The fresh air will blow away the cobwebs."

Miss Tibbutt followed the Duchessa through the French window and across the wide gravel path, on to the lawn. The Duchessa led the way to a seat beneath the lime trees. The bees were droning among the hanging flowers.

"Have you any cobwebs in your mind, my dear?" asked Miss Tibbutt as they sat down.

"Why do you ask?" queried the Duchessa.

"Oh, my dear! I don't know. You said that about cobwebs, you see. And I thought you seemed—well, just a little preoccupied at dinner."

There was a little silence.

"Tell me," said Miss Tibbutt.

"There's nothing to tell," said the Duchessa lightly. "A rather pretty soap-bubble burst and turned into an unpleasant cobweb, that's all. So—well, I've just been brushing my mind clear of both the cobweb and the memory of the soap-bubble."

"You're certain it—the cobweb—isn't worrying you now?" asked Miss Tibbutt.

"My dear Tibby, it has ceased to exist," laughed the Duchessa.

It was a very reassuring little laugh. Miss Tibbutt knew it to be quite absurd that, in spite of it, she still could not entirely dispel that vague sense of uneasiness. It spoiled the keen pleasure she ordinarily took in the garden, especially in the evening and most particularly in the month of June. She had a real sentiment about the month of June. From the first day to the last she held the hours tenderly, lingeringly, loath to let them slip between her fingers. There were only three more days left, and now there was this tiny uneasiness, which prevented her mind from entirely concentrating on the happiness of these remaining hours.

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And then she gave herself a little mental shake. It was, after all, a selfish consideration on her part. If there were cause for uneasiness, she ought to be thinking of Pia rather than herself, and if there were no cause—and Pia had just declared there was not—she was being thoroughly absurd. She gave herself a second mental shake, and looked towards the house, whence a young footman was just emerging with a tray on which were two coffee cups and a sugar basin. He put the tray down on a small rustic table near them, and went back the way he had come, his step making no sound on the soft grass.

"I wonder what it feels like to be a servant, and have to do everything to time," she said suddenly. "It must be trying to have to be invariably punctual."

Now, as a matter of fact, Miss Tibbutt was exceedingly punctual, but then it was by no means absolutely incumbent upon her to be so; she could quite well have absented herself entirely from a meal if she desired. That, of course, made all the difference.

"You are punctual," said the Duchessa laughing.

"I know. But it wouldn't in the least matter if I were not. You could go on without me. You couldn't very well go on if Dale had forgotten to lay the table, or if Morris had felt disinclined to cook the food."

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"No," agreed the Duchessa. And then, after a moment, she said, "Anyhow there are some things we have to do to time—Mass on Sundays and days of obligation, for instance."

Miss Tibbutt nodded. "Oh, of course. But that's generally only once a week. Besides that's different. It's a big voice that tells one to do that—the voice of the Church. The other is a little human voice giving the orders. I know, in a sense, one ought to hear the big voice behind it all; but sometimes one would forget to listen for it. At least, I know I should. And then I should simply hate the routine, and doing things—little ordinary everyday things—to time. I'd just love to say, if I were cook, that there shouldn't be any meals to-day, or that they should be an hour later, or an hour earlier, to suit my fancy."

The Duchessa laughed again.

"My dear Tibby, it's quite obvious that your vocation is not to the religious life. Fancy you in a convent! I can imagine you suggesting to the Reverend Mother that a change in the time of saying divine office would be desirable, or at all events that it should be varied on alternate days; and I can see you going off for long and rampageous days in the country, just for a change."

Miss Tibbutt shook her head.

"Oh, no!" she said gravely. "I should hear the big voice there."

"You'd hear it speak through quite a number of human voices, anyhow," returned the Duchessa.

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There was a silence. She wondered what odd coincidence had led Tibby to such a subject. If it were not a coincidence, it must be a kind of thought transference. Almost unconsciously she had been seeing a tall, thin, brown-faced man marching off in the early morning hours to his work in a garden. She had seen him busy with hoe and spade, till the bell over the stables at the Hall announced the dinner hour. She had seen him again take up his implements at the summons of the same bell, working through the sunshine or the rain, as the case might be, till its final evening dismissal. Above all, she had seen him taking his orders from Golding, a well-meaning man truly, and an exceedingly capable gardener, but—well, she pictured Antony as she had seen him in evening dress on the *Fort Salisbury*, as she had seen him throwing coppers to the brown-faced girl outside the Cathedral at Teneriffe, as she had seen him sitting in the little courtyard with the orange trees in green tubs, and the idea of his receiving and taking orders from Golding seemed to her quite extraordinarily incongruous.

Yet until Miss Tibbutt had introduced the subject, she had been more or less unaware of these mental pictures.

"Besides," she remarked suddenly, and quite obviously in continuation of her last remark, "it entirely depends on what you have been brought up to, I mean, of course as regards the question of being a servant. The question of a religious is entirely different."

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"Oh, entirely," agreed Miss Tibbutt promptly. "You can always get another place as a servant if you happen to dislike the one you are in."

"Yes," said the Duchessa, slowly and thoughtfully.

A sudden little anxious pang had all at once stabbed her somewhere near the region of the heart. Would that be the effect of that afternoon's meeting? Most assuredly she hoped it would not be, and equally assuredly she had no idea she was hoping it; verily, her feeling towards Antony was one of mingled anger, indignation, and mortified pride.

Once more there was a silence,—a silence in which Miss Tibbutt sat stirring her coffee, and looking towards the reflection of the sunset sky seen through the branches of the trees opposite.

Suddenly she spoke, dismayed apology in her voice.

"Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry, I quite forgot. A letter came for you this afternoon. I put it down on the little round table in the drawing-room window, meaning to give it to you when you came in. But you went straight to your room, and so I forgot it. I will get it at once."

"Nonsense," said the Duchessa lightly, "I will get it. I don't suppose for an instant that it is important."

She got up and went across the lawn. In a minute or two she returned, an open letter in her hand.

"It's from Trix," she announced as she sat down again, "She wants to know if she can come down here at the beginning of August."

Miss Tibbutt literally beamed.

"How delightful!" she exclaimed. "Trix has never stayed with you here. You will like having her."

"Dear Trix," said the Duchessa.

"I do so enjoy Trix," remarked Miss Tibbutt fervently.

"So do most people," smiled the Duchessa.

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CHAPTER XVIII

A DREAM AND OTHER THINGS

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It is perfectly amazing to what a degree the physical conditions of the atmosphere appear to be bound up with one's own mental atmosphere. In the more ordinary nature of things, the physical conditions will act on the mental, sending your mind up to the point marked gaiety when the sun shines, dropping it down to despair—or, at any rate, down to dulness—when the skies are leaden. Also, in more extreme cases, the mental conditions will act on the physical, if not actually, at least with so good a show of reality as to appear genuine. If you are thoroughly unhappy—no mere, light, passing depression, mind you—it matters not at all how brilliant the sunshine may be, it is nothing but grey fog for all you see of it. If, on the other hand, you are in the seventh heaven of joy, the grey clouds are suffused with a golden light of radiance. But these are extreme cases.

It was an extreme case with Antony. Despite the sunshine which lay upon the earth, despite the singing of the birds in the early morning, and at evening, despite the flowers which displayed their colours and lavished their scents around him as he worked, the world might have been bathed in fog for all he saw of its brightness. Hope had taken unto herself wings and fled from him, and with her joy had departed.

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He felt a queer bitterness towards his work, a bitterness towards the garden and the big grey house, and most particularly towards the man who had lived in it, and who was responsible for his present unhappiness. He had none towards the Duchessa. But then, after all, he appeared in her eyes as a fraud, the thing of all others he himself most detested. He could not possibly blame her for her attitude in the matter. Yet all the time, he had a queer feeling of something like remorse for his present bitterness; it was almost as if the garden and the very flowers themselves were reproaching him for it, reminding him that they were not to blame. And then a little incident suddenly served to dispel his gloom, at all events in a great measure.

It was a slight incident, a trivial incident, merely an odd dream. Nevertheless, having in view its oddness, and—unlike most dreams—its curious connectedness, also its effect on Antony's spirit, it may be well to record it.

He dreamt he was walking in a garden. He knew it was the garden of Chorley Old Hall, though there was something curiously unlike about it, as there often is in dreams. The garden was full of flowers, and he could smell their strong, sweet scent. At one side of the garden—and this, in spite of that curious unlikeness, was the only distinctly unlike thing about it—was a gate of twisted iron. He was standing a long way from the gate, and he was conscious of two distinct moods within himself,—an impulse which urged him towards the gate, and something which held him back from approaching it.

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Suddenly, from another direction, he saw a woman coming towards him. Recognition and amazement fell upon him. She was the same small girl he had played with in his boyhood, and whose name he could not remember, but grown to womanhood. She came towards him, her fair hair uncovered, and shining in the sunshine.

As she reached him she stood still.

"Antony," she cried in her old imperious way, "why don't you go to the gate at once? She is waiting to be let in."

"Who is waiting?" he demanded.

"Go and see," she retorted. And she went off among the flowers, turning once to laugh back at him over her shoulder.

Antony stood looking after her, till she disappeared in the distance. Then he went slowly towards the gate. As he came near it, he saw a figure standing outside. But he could not see it distinctly, because, curiously enough, though the garden was full of sunshine, it was dark outside the gate, as if it were night.

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"Who are you?" asked Antony.

The figure made no reply.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Still the figure made no reply.

Antony felt his heart beating quickly, madly. And then, suddenly from a distance behind him, he heard a gay mocking voice.

"Why don't you open the gate, silly? Can't you hear her knocking?"

Still Antony stood irresolute, though he heard little taps falling on the iron.

"Open it, open it," came the sweet mocking voice, this time with a suspicion of pleading in it.

Antony went towards the gate. A great key was sticking in the iron lock. He took hold of it and found it needed the strength of both his hands to turn. Then he flung the gate wide open. The figure moved slowly through the gate, and into the full sunshine.

"Antony," she said smiling.

"You! You at last!" he cried.

And he woke, to find he had cried the words aloud. He sat up in bed. A white pigeon was on the sill outside his window, tapping with its beak on the glass.

Of course it was an entirely trifling incident, and probably he was superstitious to attach any real importance to it. Nevertheless it had a very marked influence on his spirits.

Doubtless it was as well it had, since about this time a certain happening occurred, which, though it did not precisely depress him, most assuredly caused him considerable anger and indignation.

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In spite of the somewhat hermit-like life he led, he nevertheless had something of an acquaintance with his fellow-creatures. Among these fellow-creatures there was one, Job Grantley, a labourer on the home farm, possessed of a pretty, rather fragile wife, and a baby of about three months old. Antony had a kindly feeling for the fellow, and often they exchanged the time of day when meeting on the road, or when Job chanced to pass Antony's garden in the evening.

One evening Antony, busy weeding his small flagged path, saw Job in the road.

"Good evening," said Antony; and then he perceived by the other's face, that matters were not as they might be.

"Sure, what's amiss with the world at all?" demanded Antony, going down towards the gate.

"It's that fellow Curtis," said Job briefly, leaning on the gate.

"And what'll he have been up to now?" asked Antony. It would not be the first time he had heard tales of the agent.

Job kicked the gate.

"Says he's wanting my cottage for a chauffeur he's getting down from Bristol, and I'm to turn out at the end of August."

"Devil take the man!" cried Antony. "Why can't his new chauffeur be living in the room above the garage, like the old one?"

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Job grunted. "Because this one's a married man."

"And where are you to go at all?" demanded a wrathful Antony.

"He says I can have the cottage over to Crossways," said Job. "He knows 'tis three mile farther from my work. But that's not all. 'Tis double the rent, and I can't afford it. And that's the long and short of it."

Antony dug his hoe savagely into the earth.

"Why can't he be putting his own chauffeur there, and be paying him wage enough for the higher rent?" he asked.

"Why can't he?" said Job bitterly. "Because he won't. He's had his knife into me ever since March last, when I paid up my rent which he thought I couldn't do. I'd been asking him for time; then the last day—well, I got the money. I wasn't going to tell him how I got it, and he thought I'd been crying off with no reason. See? Now he thinks he can force me to the higher rent. 'Tis a bigger cottage, but 'tis so far off, even well-to-do folk fight shy of the extra walk, and so it's stood empty a year and more. Now he's thinking he'll force my hand."

Antony frowned.

"What'll you do?" he demanded.

"The Lord knows," returned Job gloomily. "If I chuck up my work here, how do I know I'll get a job elsewhere? If I go to the other place I'll be behind with my rent for dead certain, and get kicked out of that, and be at the loss of ten shillings or so for the move. I've not told the wife yet. But I can see nought for it but to look out for a job elsewhere. Wish I'd never set foot in this blasted little Devonshire village. Wish I'd stayed in my own parts."

Antony was making a mental survey of affairs, a survey at once detailed yet rapid.

"Look here," said he, "I'd give a pretty good deal to get even with that old skinflint, I would that. You and your wife just shift up along with me. There's an extra room upstairs with nothing in it at all. We'll manage top hole. Sure, 'twill be fine havin' me cooking done for me. You can be giving me the matter of a shilling a week, and let the cooking go for the rest of the rent. What'll you be thinking at all?"

Now, the offer was prompted by sheer impulsive kind-heartedness, wedded to a keen indignation at injustice. Yet it must be confessed that a sensation exceeding akin to dismay followed close on its heels. Of his own free will he was flinging his privacy from him, and hugging intrusion to his heart.

Job shook his head.

"You'll not stand it," said he briefly. "We don't say anything, but we know right enough you're a come down. You didn't start in the same mould as the rest of us."

"Rubbish," retorted Antony on a note of half-anger and wholly aghast at the other's perspicacity. "I'm the same clay as yourself."

"A duke's that," declared Job, "but the mould's different."

"Saints alive!" cried Antony, "it's no matter what the mould may be. Sure, it's just a question of what it's been used for at all. My mould has been used for labour since I was little more than a boy, and stiffer labour than this little smiling village has dreamt of, that's sure. Besides, think of your wife and child, man."

Job hesitated, debated within his soul. "It's them I am thinking of," he said; "I could fend for myself well enough, and snap my fingers at Curtis and his like."

"Then, 'tis settled," said Antony with amazing cheerfulness.

There was a silence.

"Well," said Job at last, "if you're in the same mind a week hence, but don't you go for doing things in a hurry-like, that you'll repent later."

"'Tis settled now," said Antony. "Tell your wife, and snap your fingers at that old curmudgeon."

Nevertheless despite his cheery assurance, he had a very bitter qualm at his heart as, an hour or so later, he looked round his little cottage, and realized, even more forcibly, precisely what he had done.

"Never mind," he told himself and Josephus with a good show of bravery, "it's not for a lifetime. And, hang it all, a man's mere comfort ought to give way before injustice of that kind."

Thus he buoyed himself up.

And then another aspect of affairs arose.

No one knew how the matter of the intended arrangement leaked out. Job vowed he'd mentioned it to no one but his wife; his wife vowed she mentioned it to no one but Job. Perhaps they spoke too near an open window. Be that as it may, Antony, again at work in his garden one evening, became aware of Mr. Curtis looking at him over the little hedge.

"Good evening," said Mr. Curtis smoothly.

"Good evening," returned Antony equally smoothly, and going on with his work.

"I hear you're thinking of taking in lodgers," said Mr. Curtis blandly.

"Sure now, that's interesting hearing," returned Antony pleasantly, and wondering who on earth had babbled.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Curtis, still blandly, "I was misinformed. I heard the Grantleys were moving up here. I daresay it was merely an idle rumour."

"Sure it may have been," returned Antony nonchalantly, and sticking his spade into the ground.

"It must have been," said Mr. Curtis thoughtfully. "All lodging houses are rented at ten shillings a week, even unfurnished small ones, not five shillings. Besides Grantley is only getting a pound a week wage. He can't afford to live in apartments, unless he's come in for a fortune. If he has I must look out for another man. Men with fortunes get a trifle above themselves, you know. Besides he'd naturally not wish to stay on. But of course the whole thing's merely a rumour. I'd contradict it if I were you. Good evening."

He walked up the lane smiling.

"You bounder," said Antony softly, looking after him. "Just you wait till next March, my friend."

He left his spade stuck into the earth, and went back into the cottage. Half an hour later, he was walking quickly in the direction of Byestry.

Doctor Hilary was in his surgery, when he was told that Michael Field had asked if he could see him. He went at once to the little waiting-room. Antony rose at his entrance.

"Good evening, sor," he said, touching his forehead. "Can you be sparing me five minutes' talk?"

"By all means," said Doctor Hilary. "Sit down."

Antony sat down. In a few brief words he put the Grantley affair before him.

"Well?" said Doctor Hilary, as he finished.

"Well," queried Antony, "can nothing be done?"

Doctor Hilary shook his head. "I am not the agent. I have no voice in the management of the estate."

"Then you can do nothing?"

"I am afraid not."

"Thank you," said Antony, "that's all I wanted to know." He got up.

"Sit down again," said Doctor Hilary.

Antony sat down.

"What do you mean to do?" asked Doctor Hilary quietly.

Antony looked directly at him.

"The only thing I can do. I'll get that extra rent to Job somehow. He mustn't know it comes from me; I must think out how to manage. But, of course, that's merely a make-shift in the business. I wanted the injustice put straight."

Doctor Hilary looked through the window behind Antony.

"Let me advise you," said he, "to do nothing of the kind."

"Why not?" The words came short and rather quick.

"Because Mr. Curtis means to get rid of Grantley. He has got his knife into him, as Grantley said. Your action would merely postpone the evil day, and make it worse in the postponement. Job Grantley had better go."

"And how about another job?" demanded Antony.

Doctor Hilary shrugged his shoulders. "He must see what he can find."

"Well of all the—" began Antony. And then he stopped. After all, he'd seen enough injustice in his time, to be used to it.

"You're honest in saying I would make it worse for Job if I tried to help him?" he asked.

"Perfectly honest," said Doctor Hilary with an odd little smile.

Antony again got up from his chair.

"All right," and his voice was constrained. "I'll not be keeping you any longer, sor."

Doctor Hilary went with him to the door.

"I'm sorry about this business," he said.

"Are you?" said Antony indifferently.

Doctor Hilary went back to his surgery.

"He didn't believe me," he said to himself, "small wonder."

He pulled out his note-book and made a note in it. Then he shut the book and put it in his pocket.

"Anyhow," he said, "it's the kind of thing we wanted."

The memorandum he had entered, ran:—

"Write Sinclair *re* Grantley."

CHAPTER XIX

TRIX ON THE SCENE

"Tibby, angel, what's the matter with Pia?"

Trix Devereux was sitting on the little rustic table beneath the lime trees, smoking a cigarette. Miss Tibbutt was sitting on the rustic seat, knitting some fine lace. The ball of knitting cotton was in a black satin bag on her lap.

Trix had arrived at Woodleigh the previous day, two days earlier than she had been expected. A telegram had preceded her appearance. It was a lengthy telegram, an explicit telegram. It set forth various facts in a manner entirely characteristic of Trix. Firstly, it announced her almost immediate arrival; secondly, it remarked on the extraordinary heat in London; and thirdly it stated quite clearly her own overwhelming and instant desire for the nice, fresh, cool, clean, country.

"Trix is coming to-day," the Duchessa had said as she read it.

"How delightful!" Miss Tibbutt had replied instantly. And then, after a moment's pause, "There will be plenty of food because Father Dormer is dining here to-night."

The Duchessa had laughed. It was so entirely like Tibby to think of food the first thing.

"I know," she had replied. And then reflectively, "I think it might be desirable to telephone to Doctor Hilary and ask him to come too. It really is not fair to ask Father Dormer to meet three solitary females."

A second time Miss Tibbutt had momentarily and mentally surveyed the contents of the larder, and almost immediately had nodded her entire approval of the idea. She most thoroughly enjoyed the mild excitement of a little dinner party.

"Tibby, angel, what's the matter with Pia?"

The question fell rather like a bomb, though quite a small bomb, into the sunshine.

"Matter with Pia," echoed Miss Tibbutt. "What do you think, my dear?"

"That," said Trix wisely, "is precisely what I am asking you?"

Miss Tibbutt laid down her knitting.

"But do you think anything *is* the matter?" she questioned anxiously.

"I don't think, I know," remarked Trix succinctly.

Miss Tibbutt took off her spectacles.

"But she is so bright," she said.

Trix nodded emphatically.

"That's just it. She's too bright. Oh, one can overdo the merry light-hearted rôle, I assure you. And then, to a new-comer at all events, the cloak becomes apparent. But haven't you the smallest idea?"

Miss Tibbutt shook her head.

"Not the least," she announced. "I fancied one evening shortly after she returned here, that something was a little wrong. I remember I asked her. She talked about soap-bubbles and cobwebs but said there weren't any left."

"Of which," smiled Trix. "Soap-bubbles or cobwebs?"

"Oh, cobwebs," said Miss Tibbutt earnestly. "Or was it both? She said,—yes, I remember now just what she did say—she said that a pretty bubble had burst and become a cobweb. And when I asked her if the cobweb were bothering her, she said both it and the bubble had vanished. So, you see!" This last on a note of triumph.

"Hmm," said Trix ruminative, dubious. "Bubbles have a way of taking up more space than one would imagine, and their bursting sometimes leaves an unpleasant gap. The bursting of this one has left a gap in Pia's life. You haven't, by any chance, the remotest notion of its colour?"

"Its colour?" queried Miss Tibbutt.

Trix laughed. "Nonsense, Tibby, angel, nonsense pure and simple. But all the same, I wish I knew for dead certain."

"So do I," said Miss Tibbutt anxiously, though she hadn't the smallest notion what advantage a knowledge of the colour would be to either one of them.

Trix dabbed the stump of her cigarette on the table.

"Well, don't let her know we think there's anything wrong. If you want to remain wrapped up in the light-hearted cloak, nothing is more annoying than having any one prying to see what's underneath,—unless it's the right person, of course. And we're not sure that we are—yet. We must just wait till she feels like giving us a peep, if she ever does."

A silence fell. Miss Tibbutt took up her knitting again. Trix hummed a little air from a popular opera. Presently Miss Tibbutt sighed. Trix left off humming.

"What's the matter, Tibby?"

Miss Tibbutt sighed more deeply. "I'm afraid it's my fault," she said.

"What's your fault?" demanded Trix.

"I've not noticed Pia. I thought everything was all right after what she said. I ought to have noticed. I've been too wrapped up in my own affairs. Perhaps if I'd been more sympathetic I should have found out what was the matter."

Trix laughed, a happy amused, comfortable little laugh.

"Oh, Tibby, you angel, that's so like you. You always want to shoulder the blame for every speck

of wrong-doing or depression that appears in your little universe. Women like you always do. It's an odd sort of responsible unselfishness. That doesn't in the very least express to any one else what I mean, but it does to myself. You never allow that any one else has any responsibility when things go wrong, and you never take the smallest share of the responsibility—or the praise, rather—when things go right."

Miss Tibbutt laughed. In spite of her queer earnestness over what seemed—at all events to others—very little things, and her quite extraordinary conscientiousness—some people indeed might have called it scrupulosity—she had really a keen sense of humour. She was always ready to laugh at her own earnestness as soon as she perceived it. She was not, however, always ready to abandon it, unless it were quite, quite obvious that she had really better do so. And then she did it with a quick mental shake, and put an odd little mocking humour in its place.

"But, my dear, one generally is responsible, and that just because my universe is so small, as you justly pointed out. But I always believe literally what any one says. I don't in the least mean that Pia said what was not true. Of course she thought she had swept away the cobweb and the bubble, and I've no doubt she did. But it left a gap, as you said. I ought to have seen the gap and tried to fill it."

Trix shook her head.

"You couldn't, Tibby, if the bubble were the colour I fancy. Only the bubble itself, consolidated, could do that."

"Oh, my dear, you mean—?" said Miss Tibbutt.

"Just that," nodded Trix. "It was bound to happen some time. Pia is made to give and receive love. She was too young when she married to know what it really meant. And, well, think of those years of her married life."

"I thought of them for seven years," said Miss Tibbutt quietly. "You don't think I've forgotten them now?"

Trix's eyes filled with quick tears.

"Of course you haven't. I didn't mean that. What I do mean is that I suppose she thought she had got the real thing then, and all the young happiness in it was destroyed in a moment. Then came those seven terrible years. For an older woman perhaps there would have been a self-sacrificing joy in them; for Pia, there was just the brave facing of an obvious duty. She was splendid, of course she was splendid, but no one could call it joy. Now, somehow, she's had a glimpse of what real joy might be. And it has vanished again. I don't know how I know, but it's true. I feel it in my bones."

Again there was a silence. Then:

"What can we do?" asked Miss Tibbutt simply.

Trix laughed, though her eyes were grave. "You, angel, can pray. Of course I shall, too. But I'm going to do quite a lot of thinking, and keeping my eyes open as well. And now I am going right round this perfectly heavenly garden once more, and then, I suppose, it will be time to dress for dinner."

Swinging herself off the table, she departed waving her hand to Miss Tibbutt before she turned a corner by a yew hedge.

"Dear Trix," murmured Miss Tibbutt.

CHAPTER XX

MOONLIGHT AND THEORIES

The little party of two men and two women were assembled in the drawing-room. Trix had not yet put in an appearance. But, then, the dinner gong had not sounded. Trix invariably saved her reputation for punctuality by appearing on the last stroke.

Miss Tibbutt and Father Dormer were sitting on the sofa; Pia was in an armchair near the open window, and Doctor Hilary was standing on the hearthrug. His dress clothes seemed to increase his size, and he did not look perfectly at home in them; or, perhaps, it was merely the fact that he was so seldom seen in them. Doctor Hilary in a shabby overcoat or loose tweeds, was the usual sight.

Father Dormer was a tallish thin man, with very aquiline features, and dark hair going grey on his temples. At the moment he and Miss Tibbutt were deep in a discussion on rose growing, a favourite hobby of his. Deeply engrossed, they were weighing the advantages of the scent of the more old-fashioned kinds, against the shape and colour of the newer varieties, with the solemnity of two judges.

"They're pretty equally balanced in my garden," said Father Dormer. "I can't do without the old-fashioned ones, despite the beauty of the newer sorts. I've two bushes of the red and white—the York and Lancaster rose. I was a Lancashire lad, you know."

And then the first soft notes of the gong sounded from the hall, rising to a full boom beneath the footman's accomplished stroke.

There was a sound of running steps descending the stairs, and a final jump.

"Keep it going, Dale," said a voice without. And then Trix entered the room, slightly flushed by her rapid descent of the stairs, but with an assumption of leisurely dignity.

"I'm not late," she announced with great innocence. "The gong hasn't stopped."

Doctor Hilary, who was facing the door, looked at her. He saw a small, elf-like girl in a very shimmery green frock. The green enhanced her elf-like appearance.

"Deceiver," laughed Pia. "We heard you quite, quite distinctly."

Obviously caught, Trix echoed the laugh.

"Well, anyhow I'd have been in before the echo stopped," she announced.

They went informally into the dining-room, where the light of shaded wax candles on the table mingled with the departing daylight, for the curtains were still undrawn.

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"I like this kind of light," remarked Trix, as she seated herself.

Trix almost always thought aloud. It meant that conversation in her presence seldom flagged, since her brain was rarely idle; though she could be really marvellously silent when she perceived that silence was desirable.

"Do you know this garden?" she said, addressing herself to Doctor Hilary, by whom she was seated.

He assented.

"Well, isn't it lovely? That's what made me nearly late,—going round it again. I've been round five times since yesterday. It's just heavenly after London. Roses *versus* petrol, you know." She wrinkled up her nose as she spoke.

"You ought to see the gardens of Chorley Old Hall, Miss Devereux," said Father Dormer. "Not that I mean any invidious comparison between them and this garden," he added, with a little smile towards the Duchessa.

"Chorley Old Hall," remarked Trix. "I used to go there when I was a tiny child. There was a man lived there, who used to terrify me out of my wits, his eyes were so black. But I liked him, when I got over my first fright. What has become of him?"

"He died a short time ago," said the Duchessa quietly. "Oh," said Trix regretfully. Possibly she had contemplated a renewal of the acquaintanceship.

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"He'd been an invalid for a long time," explained the Duchessa. She was a little, just a trifle anxious as to whether the conversation might not prove embarrassing for Doctor Hilary. There was a feeling in the village that the journey, which Doctor Hilary had permitted—some, indeed, said advocated—had been entirely responsible for the death.

But Doctor Hilary was eating his dinner, apparently utterly and completely at his ease.

"Anyhow the gardens aren't being neglected," said Father Dormer. "They've got a new undergardener there who is proving rather a marvel in his line. In fact Golding confesses that he'll have to look out for his own laurels. He's a nice looking fellow, this new man, and a cut above the ordinary type, I should say. I used to see him in church after Mass on Sundays at one time. But he has given up coming lately."

"Really," said the Duchessa.

Trix looked up quickly, surprised at the intonation of her voice.

"Oh, he isn't a Catholic," smiled Father Dormer. "Perhaps curiosity brought him in the beginning, and now it has worn off."

Trix was still looking at the Duchessa. She couldn't make out the odd intonation of her voice. It had been indifferent enough to be almost rude. But, if it were intended for a snub, Father Dormer had evidently not taken it as such. Yet there was a little pause on the conclusion of his remark, almost as if Doctor Hilary and Miss Tibbutt had had the same idea as herself. At least, that was what Trix felt the little pause to mean. And then she was suddenly annoyed with herself for having felt it. Of course it was quite absurd.

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She looked down at her plate of clear soup. It had letters of a white edible substance floating in it.

"I've got an A and two S's in my soup," she remarked pathetically. "I don't think it is quite tactful of the cook."

There was an instant lowering of eyes towards soup plates, an announcing of the various letters seen therein. Trix had an application for each, making the letters stand as the initials for words.

"C. S.," said Miss Tibbutt presently, entering into the spirit of the game.

"Sure there isn't a T?" asked Trix.

"No," said Miss Tibbutt peering closer, "I mean there isn't one."

"Well then, it can't be Catholic Truth Society. My imagination has given out. I can only think of Christian Science. I don't think it's quite right of you, Tibby dear."

Miss Tibbutt blinked good-humouredly.

"Aren't they the people who think that the Bible dropped down straight from heaven in a shiny black cover with S. P. G. printed on it?" she asked.

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Trix shook her head.

"No," she declared solemnly, "they're Bible Christians. The Christian Science people are the ones who think we haven't got any bodies."

"No bodies!" ejaculated Miss Tibbutt.

"Well," said Trix, "anyhow they think bodies are a false—false something or other."

"False claim," suggested Father Dormer.

"That's it," cried Trix, immensely delighted. "How clever of you to have thought of it. Only I'm not sure if it's the bodies are a false claim, or the aches attached to the bodies. Perhaps it's both."

"I thought that was the New Thought Idea," said Pia.

Trix shook her head. "Oh no, the New Thought people think a lot about one's body. They give us lots of bodies."

"Really?" queried Doctor Hilary doubtfully.

"Oh yes," responded Trix. "I once went to one of their lectures."

"My dear Trix!" ejaculated Miss Tibbutt flustered.

"It was quite an accident," said Trix reassuringly. "A friend of mine, Sybil Martin, was coming up to town and wanted me to meet her. She suggested I should meet her at Paddington, and then go to a lecture on psychometry with her, and tea afterwards. I hadn't the faintest notion what psychometry was, but I supposed it might be first cousin to trigonometry, and quite as dull. But she wanted me, so I went. It *was* funny," gurgled Trix.

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Doctor Hilary was watching her.

"You'd better disburden your mind," he said.

Trix crumbled her bread, still smiling at the recollection.

"Well, the lecture was held in a biggish room, and there were a lot of odd people present. But the oddest of all was the lecturer. She wore a kind of purple velvet tea-gown, though it was only three o'clock in the afternoon. She talked for a long time about vibrations, and things that bored me awfully, and people kept interrupting with questions. One man interrupted particularly often. He kept saying, 'Excuse me, but am I right in thinking—' And then he would give a little lecture on his own account, and look around for the approval of the audience. I should have flung things at him if I had been the purple velvet lady. It was so obvious that he was not desiring *her* information, but merely wishful to air his own. There was a text on the wall which said, 'We talk abundance here,' and when I pointed out to Sybil how true it was, she wasn't a bit pleased, and said it didn't mean what I thought *in the least*. But she wouldn't explain what it did mean. After the lecture, the purple velvet lady held things—jewelry chiefly—that people in the audience sent up to her, and described their owners, and where they'd got the things from. There was quite a lot of family history, and people's characteristics and virtues and failings, and very, *very* private things made public, but no one seemed to mind."

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"That's the odd thing about those people," said Doctor Hilary thoughtfully. "Disclosing their innermost thoughts, feelings, and so-called experiences, seems an absolute mania with them. And the more public the disclosure the better they are pleased. But go on, Miss Devereux."

"Well," said Trix, "at last she began describing a sort of Cleopatra lady, and—and rather vivid love scenes, and—and things like that. When she'd ended, the bracelet turned out to belong to a little dowdy woman looking like a meek mouse. I thought the purple velvet lady would have been really upset and mortified at her mistake. But she wasn't in the least. She just smiled sweetly, and returned the bracelet to the owner, and said that the dowdy little woman had been Cleopatra in a former incarnation. Of course when she began on *that* tack, I saw the kind of lecture I'd really let myself in for, and I knew I'd no business to be in the place at all, so I made Sybil take me away. It was nearly the end, and she didn't mind, because she missed the silver collection. But she talked to me about it the whole of tea-time, and she really believed it all," sighed Trix pathetically.

Miss Tibbutt looked quite shocked.

"Oh, but, my dear, she couldn't really."

"She did," nodded Trix.

Miss Tibbutt appealed helplessly to Father Dormer.

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"Why do people believe such extraordinary things?" she demanded almost wrathfully.

Father Dormer laughed. "That's a question I cannot pretend to answer. But I suppose that if people reject the truth, and yet want to believe something beyond mere physical facts, they can

invent anything, that is if they happen to be endowed with sufficient imagination.”

“Then the devil must help them invent,” said Miss Tibbutt with exceeding firmness.

After dinner they had coffee in the garden. A big moon was coming up in the dusk behind the trees, its light throwing the shadows dark and soft on the grass.

“It’s so astonishingly silent after London,” said Trix, gazing at the blue-grey velvet of the sky.

She looked more than ever elfin-like, with the moonlight falling on her fair hair and pointed oval face, and the shimmering green of her dress.

“I wonder why we ever go to bed on moonlight nights,” she pursued. “Brilliant sunshine always tempts us to do something—a long walk, a drive, or boating on a river. Over and over again we say, ‘Now, the very next fine day we’ll do—so and so.’ But no one ever dreams of saying, ‘Now, the next moonlight night we’ll have a picnic.’ I wonder why not?”

“Because,” said Doctor Hilary smiling, and watching her, “the old and staid folk have no desire to lose their sleep, and—well, the conventions are apt to stand in the way of the young and romantic.”

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“Conventions,” sighed Trix, “are the bane of one’s existence. They hamper all one’s most cherished desires until one is of an age when the desires become non-existent. My aunt Lilla is always saying to me, ‘When you’re a much older woman, dearest.’ And I reply, ‘But, Aunt Lilla, *now* is the moment.’ I know, by experience, later is no good. When I was a tiny child my greatest desire was to play with all the grubbiest children in the parks. Of course I was dragged past them by a haughty and righteous nurse. I can talk to them now if I want to, and even wheel their perambulators. But it would have been so infinitely nicer to wheel a very dirty baby in a very ramshackle perambulator when I was eight. Conventions are responsible for an enormous lot of lost opportunities.”

“Mightn’t they be well lost?” suggested Father Dormer.

Trix looked across at him.

“Serious or nonsense?” she demanded.

“Whichever you like,” he replied, a little twinkle in his eyes.

“Oh, serious,” interpolated Miss Tibbutt.

Trix leant a little forward, resting her chin on her hands.

“Well, seriously then, conventions—those that are merely conventions for their own sake,—are detestable, and responsible for an enormous lot of unhappiness. ‘My dear (mimicked Trix), you can be quite polite to so and so, but I cannot have you becoming friendly with them, you know they are not *quite*.’ I’ve heard that said over and over again. It’s hateful. I’m not a socialist, not one little bit, but I do think if you like a person you ought to be able to be friends, even if you happen to be a Duchess and he’s a chimney-sweep. The motto of the present-day world is, ‘What will people think?’ People!” snorted Trix wrathfully, warming to her theme, “what people? And is their opinion worth twopence halfpenny? Fancy them associating with St. Peter if he appeared now among them as he used to be, with only his goodness and his character and his fisherman’s clothes, instead of his halo and his keys, as they see him in the churches.”

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The two men laughed. Miss Tibbutt made a little murmur of something like query. The Duchessa’s face looked rather white, but perhaps it was only the effect of the moonlight.

“But, Miss Devereux,” said Doctor Hilary, “even now the world—people, as you call them, are quite ready to recognize genius despite the fact that it may have risen from the slums.”

“Yes,” contended Trix eagerly, “but it’s not the person they recognize really, it’s merely their adjunct.”

“What do you mean?” asked Miss Tibbutt. Father Dormer smiled comprehendingly.

“I mean,” said Trix slowly, “they recognize the thing that makes the show, and the person because of that thing, not for the person’s own self. Let me try and explain better. A man, born in the slums, has a marvellous voice. He becomes a noted singer. He’s received everywhere and fêted. But it’s really his voice that is fêted, because it is the fashion to fête it. Let him lose his voice, and he drops out of existence. People don’t recognize him himself, the self which gave expression to the voice, and which still *is*, even after the voice is dumb.”

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Father Dormer nodded.

“Well,” went on Trix, “I maintain that that man is every bit as well worth knowing afterwards,—after he has lost his voice. And even if he’d never been able to give expression to himself by singing, he might have been just as well worth knowing. But the world never looks for inside things, but only for external things that make a show. So if Mrs. B. hasn’t an atom of anything congenial to me in her composition, but has a magnificent house and heaps of money, it’s quite right and fitting I should know her, so people would say, and encourage me to do so. But it’s against all the conventions that I should be friendly with little Miss F. who lives over the tobacconist’s at the corner of such and such a street, though she *is* thoroughly congenial to me, and I love her plucky and cheery outlook on life.” She stopped.

“Go on,” encouraged Doctor Hilary.

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“Well,” laughed Trix, “take a more extreme case. Sir A. C. is—well, not a bad man, but not the least the kind of man I care about, but he may take me in to dinner, and, on the strength of that

brief acquaintance, to a theatre if he wants, provided I have some other woman with me as a sort of chaperon, and he can talk to me by the hour, and that all on account of his money and title. Mr. Z. is a really white man, but he's a 'come-down,' through no fault of his own, and a bus-conductor. I happen to have spoken to him once or twice; and like him. But I mightn't even walk for half an hour with him in the park, if I'd fifty authorized chaperons attending on me. That's what I mean about conventions that are conventions for their own sake." She stopped again.

"And what do you suggest as a remedy?" asked Father Dormer, smiling.

"There isn't one," sighed Trix. "At least not one you can apply universally. Everybody must just apply it for themselves, and not exactly by defying conventions, but by treating them as simply non-existent."

The Duchessa made a little movement in the moonlight.

"Which," she said quietly, "comes to exactly the same thing as defying them, and it won't work."

"Why not?" demanded Trix.

"You'd find yourself curiously lonely after a time if you did."

"You mean my friends—no, my acquaintances—would desert me?"

"Probably."

"Well, I'd have the one I'd chanced it all for."

"Yes," said the Duchessa slowly and deliberately, "but you'd have to be very sure, not only that the friend was worth it, but that you were worth it to the friend."

There was rather a blank silence. Trix gave a little gasp. It was not so much the words that hurt, as the tone in which they had been spoken. It was a repetition of the little scene at dinner, but this time intensified. And it was so utterly, so entirely unlike Pia. Trix felt miserably squashed. She had been talking a good deal too, perhaps, indeed, rather foolishly, that was the worst of it. No doubt she *had* made rather an idiot of herself. She swallowed a little lump in her throat. Well, anyhow that inflection in Pia's tone must be covered at once. That was the first, indeed the only, consideration.

"I never thought of all those contingencies," she laughed. There was the faintest suspicion of a quiver in her voice. "Let's talk about the moonlight. But it was the moonlight began it all."

Two hours later the garden lay deserted in the same moonlight.

A woman was sitting by an open window, looking out into the garden. She had been sitting there quite a long time. Suddenly her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, Trix, Trix," she said half aloud, "if only it would work. But it won't. And it was the moonlight that began it all."

CHAPTER XXI

ON THE MOORLAND

Trix was walking over the moorland. The Duchessa and Miss Tibbutt had departed to what promised to be an exceedingly dull garden party some five miles distant. It had been decreed that it was entirely unnecessary to inflict the same probable dullness on Trix, therefore she had been left to freedom and her own devices for the afternoon.

Trix was playing the game of "I remember." It can be a quite extraordinarily fascinating game, or an exceedingly painful one. Trix was finding it extraordinarily fascinating. It was so gorgeously delightful to find that nothing had shrunk, nothing lessened in beauty or mystery. A larch copse was every bit as much a haunt of the Little People as formerly; the moss every bit as much a cool green carpet for their tripping feet. A few belated foxglove stems added to the old-time enchantment of the place. Even a little stream rippling through the wood, was a veritable stream, and not merely a watery ditch, as it might quite well have proved. Then there was the view from the gate, through a frame of beech trees out towards the sea. It was still as entrancing an ocean, sun-flecked and radiant. There were still as infinite possibilities in the unknown Beyond, could one have chartered a white-winged boat, and have sailed to where land and water meet. There was a pond, too, surrounded by blackberry bushes and great spear-like rushes, perhaps not quite the enormous lake of one's childhood, but a reasonably large pond enough, and there were still the blackberry bushes and the spear-like rushes. And, finally, there was the moorland, glowing with more radiant crimson lakes and madders than the most wonderful paint box ever held, and stretching up and down, and up again, till it melted in far away purples and lavenders.

Trix's heart sang in accord with the laughing sun-kissed earth around her. It was all so

gorgeous, so free and untrammelled. She lay upon the hot springy heather, and crushed the tiny purple flowers of the wild thyme between her fingers, raising the bruised petals to her face to drink in their strong sweet scent.

From far off she could hear the tinkle of a goat bell, and the occasional short bark of a sheep dog. All else was silence, save for the humming of the bees above the heather. Tiny insects floated in the still air, looking like specks of thistle-down as the sun caught and silvered their minute wings. Little blue butterflies flitted hither and thither like radiant animated flowers.

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For a long time Trix sat very still, body and soul bathed in the beauty around her. At last she got to her feet, and made her way across the heather, ignoring the small beaten tracks despite the prickliness of her chosen route.

After some half-hour's walking she came to a stone wall bordering a hilly field, a low wall, a battered wall, where tiny ferns grew in the crevices, and the stones themselves were patched with orange-coloured lichen.

Trix climbed the wall, and walked across the soft grass. A good way to the right was a fence, and beyond the fence a wood. Trix made her way slowly towards it. Thistles grew among the grass,—carding thistles, and thistles with small drooping heads. She looked at them idly as she walked. Suddenly a slight sound behind her made her turn, and with the turning her heart leapt to her throat.

From over the brow of the hilly field behind her, quite a number of cattle were coming at a fair pace towards her.

Now Trix hated cows in any shape or form, and these were the unpleasant white-faced, brown cattle, whose very appearance is against them. They were moving quickly too, quite alarmingly quickly.

Trix cast one terrified and pathetic glance over her shoulder. The glance was all-sufficient. She ran,—ran straight for the wood, the cattle after her. Doubtless curiosity, mere enquiry maybe, prompted their pursuit. Trix concerned herself not at all with the motive, the fact was all-sufficient. Fear lent wings to her feet, and with the horned and horrid beasts still some ten yards behind her, she precipitated herself across the fence to fall in an undignified but wholly relieved heap among a mass of bracken and whortleberry bushes. The briefest of moments saw her once more on her feet, struggling, fighting her way through shoulder-high bracken. Five minutes brought her to an open space beyond. Trembling, breathless, and most suspiciously near tears, she sank upon the ground.

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"The beasts!" ejaculated Trix opprobriously, and not as the mere statement of an obvious fact. She took off her hat, which flight had flung to a somewhat rakish angle, and blinked vigorously towards the trees. She was *not* going to cry.

Presently fright gave place to interest. She gazed around, curious, speculative. It was an unusual wood, a strange wood, a wood of holly trees, with a scattered sprinkling of beech trees. The grey twisted trunks of the hollies gleamed among the dark foliage, giving an eerie and almost uncanny atmosphere to the place. It was extraordinarily silent, too; and infinitely lonelier than the deserted moorland. It gave Trix an odd feeling of unpleasant mystery. Yet there was nothing for it but to face the mystery, to see if she could not find some way out further adown the wood. Not for untold gold would she again have faced those horned beasts behind her.

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A tiny narrow path led downhill from the cleared space. Trix set off down it, swinging her hat airily by the brim the while. Presently the sense of uncanniness abated somewhat; the elfin in her went out to meet the weirdness of the wood.

Now and again she stopped to pick and eat whortleberries from the massed bushes beneath the trees. She did not particularly like them, truly; nevertheless she was still young enough to pick and eat what nature had provided for picking and eating, and that for the mere pleasure of being able to do so. Also, at this juncture the action brought confidence in its train.

Presently, through the trees facing her, she saw a wall, a high wall, a brick wall, and quite evidently bordering civilization.

"It can't go on for ever," considered Trix. "It must come to an end some time, either right, or left. And I'm not going back." This last exceedingly firmly.

She went forward, scrutinizing, anxious. And then,—joyful and welcome sight!—a door, an open door came into view. A mound of half-carted leaf mould just without showed, to any one endowed with even the meanest powers of deduction, that someone—some man, probably—was busy in the neighbourhood.

Trix made hastily for the door. The next moment she was through it, to find herself face to face with a man and a wheelbarrow. Trix came to a standstill, a standstill at once sudden and unpremeditated. The man dropped the wheelbarrow. They stared blankly at each other. And Trix was far too flustered to realize that his stare was infinitely more amazed than her own.

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"You can't come through this way," said the man, decisive though bewildered. His orders regarding the non-entrance of strangers had been of the emphatic kind.

Trix's brain worked rapidly. The route before her must lead to safety, and nothing, no power on earth, would take her back through the field atop the wood. She was genuinely, quite genuinely too frightened. This is by way of excuse, since here a regrettable fact must be recorded. Trix gave vent to a sound closely resembling a sneeze. It was followed by one brief sentence.

"There's someone at the gate," was what the man heard.

Again amazement was written on his face. He turned towards the gate. Trix fled past him.

"I couldn't go back," she insisted to herself, as she vanished round the corner of a big greenhouse. "And I *did* say 'isn't there' even if it was mixed up with a sneeze. And wherever have I seen that man's face before?"

She whisked round another corner of the green-house, attempting no answer to her query at the moment, ran down a long cinder path bordered by cabbages and gooseberry bushes, and bolted through another door in another wall. And here Trix found herself in an orchard, at the bottom of which was a yew hedge wherein she espied a wicket gate. She made rapid way towards it. And now she saw a big grey house facing her. There was no mistaking it. Childhood's memories rushed upon her. It was Chorley Old Hall.

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Trix came through the wicket gate, and out upon a lawn, in the middle of which was a great marble basin full of crystal water, from which rose a little silver fountain. Before her was the big grey house, melancholy, deserted-looking. The blinds were drawn down in most of the windows. It had the appearance of a house in which death was present.

And then a spirit of curiosity fell upon her, a sudden strong desire to see within the house, to go once more into the rooms where she had stood in the old days, a small and somewhat frightened child.

There was not a soul in sight. Probably the man with the wheelbarrow had not thought it worth while to pursue her. The garden appeared as deserted as the house. Trix tip-toed cautiously towards it. She looked like a kitten or a canary approaching a dead elephant.

To her left was a door. Quite probably it was locked; but then, by the favour of fortune, it might not be. Of course she ran a risk, a considerable risk of meeting some caretaker or other, and her presence would not be particularly easy to explain. Curiosity and prudence wavered momentarily in the balance. Curiosity turned the scale. She tried the door. Vastly to her delight it yielded at her push. She slipped inside the house, closing it softly behind her.

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She found herself in a long carpeted passage, sporting prints adorning the walls. She tip-toed down it, her step making no smallest sound on the soft carpet. The end of the passage brought her into a big square hall. To her right were wide deep stairs; opposite them was a door, in all probability the front door; to her left was another door.

Trix recalled the past, rapidly, and in detail. The door to the left must lead to the library,—that is, if her memory did not play her false. She remembered the big room, the book-cases reaching from floor to ceiling, and the man with the black eyes, who had terrified her. Something, some fleeting shadow, of her old childish fear was upon her now, as she turned the door handle. The door yielded easily. She pushed it wide open.

The room was shadowed, gloomy almost. The heavy curtains were drawn back from the windows, but other curtains of some thinnish green material hung before them, curtains which effectually blotted out any view from the window, or view into the room from without. Before her were the old remembered book-cases, filled with dark, rather fusty books.

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Trix pushed the door to behind her, and turned, nonchalantly, to look around the room. As she looked her heart jumped, leapt, and then stood still.

CHAPTER XXII

AN OLD MAN IN A LIBRARY

A white-haired man was watching her. He was sitting in a big oak chair, his hands resting on the arms.

"Oh!" ejaculated Trix. And further expression failed her.

"Please don't let me disturb you," came a suave, courteous old voice. "You were looking for something perhaps?"

"I only wanted to see the library," stuttered Trix, flabbergasted, dismayed.

"Well, this is the library. May I ask how you found your way in?"

"Through a door," responded Trix, voicing the obvious.

"Ah! I did not know visitors were being admitted to the house?" This on a note of interrogation, flavoured with the faintest hint of irony, though the courtesy was still not lacking.

Trix coloured.

"I wasn't admitted," she owned. "I just came."

"Ah, I see," said the white-haired man still courteously. "You perhaps were not aware that your

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presence might be an—er, an intrusion.”

Again Trix coloured.

“A man did tell me I couldn’t come through this way,” she confessed.

“Yet he allowed you to do so?” There was a queer note beneath the courtesy.

Trix’s ear, catching the note, found it almost repellent.

“It wasn’t his fault,” she declared. “I came. I said, ‘Isn’t there someone at the gate?’ And while he turned to look, I ran. At least,—” a gleam of laughter sprang to her eyes—“I sneezed first, so it sounded like ‘There’s somebody at the gate.’ So he thought there was really. It—it was rather mean of me.”

“What you might call an acted lie,” suggested the man.

Trix looked conscience-stricken, contrite.

“I suppose it was,” she admitted in a very small voice. “But it was the cows. Only I think they were bulls. I *am* so frightened of cows. I couldn’t go back. And he wasn’t going to let me through. It wasn’t his fault a bit, it wasn’t really. I know I told a—a kind of lie.” She sighed heavily.

“You did,” said the man.

Again Trix sighed.

“I’d never make a martyr, would I? Only”—a degree more hopefully—“A sneeze isn’t quite like denying real things, things that matter, is it?” This last was spoken distinctly appealingly.

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“I’m not a theologian,” said the man dryly.

Trix looked at him. A sudden light of illumination passed over her face, giving place to absolute amazement.

“Aren’t you Mr. Danver?” she ejaculated.

“I never heard of his being a theologian,” was the retort.

“But Mr. Danver is dead!” gasped Trix.

“Is he?”

“Well,” said Trix dazed, bewildered, “he evidently isn’t. But why on earth did you—” she broke off.

“Did I what?” he demanded with a queer smile.

“Say you were dead?” asked Trix.

“Dead men, my dear young lady, tell no tales, nor have I ever heard of a living one proclaiming his own demise.”

Trix laughed involuntarily.

“Anyhow you’ve let other people say you are,” she retorted.

The man shrugged his shoulders.

“Why did you let them?” asked Trix.

Again the man shrugged his shoulders.

“I have no responsibility in the matter.”

“Doctor Hilary has, then,” she flashed out.

“Has he?” was the quiet response.

“He has told people you were dead.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“Well, he’s let them think so anyway. Why has he?” demanded Trix.

“You ask a good many questions for an—er—an intruder,” remarked the man.

Trix’s chin went up. “I’m sorry. I apologize. I’ll go.”

“No, don’t,” said the man. “Sit down.”

Trix sat down near a table. She looked straight at him.

“Well,” she asked, “what do you want to say to me?”

“I am Nicholas Danver,” he said.

“I was quite sure of that,” nodded Trix. She was recovering her self-possession.

“I had an excellent reason for allowing people to imagine I was dead,” he remarked, “as excellent a one, perhaps, as yours for your—your unexpected appearance.”

“I’m glad you didn’t say ‘intrusion’ again,” said Trix thoughtfully.

Nicholas gave a short laugh.

There was a little silence.

“Doctor Hilary must have told a dreadful lot of lies,” said Trix slowly and not a little regretfully.

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"On the contrary," said Nicholas, "he told none."

Trix looked up quickly.

"Listen," said Nicholas, "it's quite an interesting little history in its way. You can stop me if I bore you.... Doctor Hilary says, in the hearing of a housemaid, that it might be a good plan to consult a specialist. It is announced in the village that the Squire is going to consult a specialist. Doctor Hilary travels up to town with an empty litter. The village announces that he has taken the Squire to the specialist. He returns alone. The station-master asks him when the Squire will return from London. He is briefly told, never. The village announces the Squire's demise. I don't say that certain little further incidents did not lend colour to the idea, such as the Squire confining himself entirely to two rooms, and allowing the butler alone of the servants to see him; Doctor Hilary's dismissal of the other indoor servants on his return to town; the deserted appearance of the house. But from first to last there was less actual direct lying in the matter, than in—shall I say, than in a simple sneeze."

A third time the colour mounted in Trix's cheeks.

"You'll not let me forget *that*," she said pathetically. "But why ever did you want everyone to think you were dead?"

Nicholas looked towards the window thoughtfully, ruminatively.

"That, my dear young lady, is my own affair."

"I beg your pardon," said Trix quickly. She lapsed into silence. Suddenly she looked up, an elfin smile of pure mischief dancing in her eyes. "And now I know you're not dead," she remarked. "Exactly," said Nicholas. "You know I'm not dead."

"Well?" demanded Trix.

"Well, of course you can go and publish the news to the world," he remarked smoothly.

"And equally of course," retorted Trix, "I shall do nothing of the kind. Quite possibly you mayn't trust me, because—because I *did* sneeze. But honestly I didn't have time to think properly then, at least, only time to think how to get out of the difficulty, and not time to think about fairness or anything. I truly don't tell lies generally. And to tell about you would be like telling what was in a private letter if you'd read it by accident, so *of course* I shan't say a word."

Nicholas held out his hand without speaking. Trix got up from her chair, and put her own warm hand into his cold one.

"All right," he said in an oddly gentle voice. "And you can speak to Doctor Hilary about it if you like. You'll no doubt need a safety valve." He looked again at her, still holding her hand. "Haven't I seen you before?" he asked.

Trix nodded. "When I was a tiny child. My name is Trix Devereux. I used to come here with my father."

"What!" exclaimed Nicholas, "Jack Devereux's daughter! How is the old fellow?"

"He died five years ago," said Trix softly.

Nicholas dropped her hand.

"And I live on," he said grimly. "It's a queer world." He looked down at the black dressing gown which hid his useless legs. "Bah, where's the use of sentiment at this time of day. Anyhow it's a pleasure to meet you, even though your entrance was a bit of—"

"An intrusion," smiled Trix.

"I was going to say a surprise," said Nicholas courteously. "And now you must allow me to give you some tea."

Trix hesitated.

"Oh, but," she demurred, "the butler will see me."

"And a very pleasant sight for him," responded Nicholas, "if you will permit an old man to pay you a compliment. Besides Jessop is used to holding his tongue."

Trix laughed.

"That," she said, "I can quite well imagine."

Nicholas pressed the electric button attached to the arm of his chair. He watched the door, a curious amusement in his eyes.

Trix attempted an appearance of utter unconcern, nevertheless she could not avoid a reflection or two regarding the butler's possible views on her presence.

During the few seconds of waiting, she surveyed the room. It was extraordinarily familiar. Nothing was altered from her childish days. The very position of the furniture was the same. There were the same heavy brocaded curtains to the windows, the same morocco-covered chairs, the same thick Aubusson carpet, the same book-cases lined with rather fusty books, the same great dogs in the fireplace.

Nicholas looked at her, observing her survey.

"Well?" he queried.

"It's all so exactly the same," responded Trix.

"I never cared for change," said Nicholas shortly.

And then the door opened.

"Jessop," said Nicholas smooth-voiced, "Will you kindly bring tea for me and this young lady."

A flicker, a very faint flicker of amazement passed over the man's face.

"Yes, sir," he responded, and turned from the room.

"An excellent servant," remarked Nicholas.

"I wonder," said Trix reflectively, "how they manage to see everything, and look as if they saw nothing. When I see things it's perfectly obvious to everyone else I am seeing them. I—I *look*."

"So do most people," returned Nicholas.

When, some half-hour later, Trix rose to take leave, Nicholas again held out his hand. "I believe I'd ask you to come and pay me another visit," he said, "but it would be wiser not. It is not easy for—er, dead men to receive visitors."

"I wish you hadn't—died," said Trix impulsively.

"Do you mean that?" asked Nicholas curiously.

Trix nodded. There was an odd lump in her throat, a lump that for the moment prevented her from speaking.

"You're a queer child," smiled Nicholas.

The tears welled up suddenly in Trix's eyes.

"It's so lonely," she said, with a half-sob.

"My own doing," responded Nicholas.

"That doesn't make it nicer, but worse," gulped Trix.

Nicholas held her hand tighter.

"On the contrary, it's better. It's my own choice." He emphasized the last word a little.

Trix was silent. Nicholas let go her hand.

"Let yourself out the front way," he said. "I am sorry I am unable to accompany you."

Trix went slowly to the library door. At the door she turned.

"It mayn't be right of me," she announced, "but I'm glad, really glad I did sneeze."

Nicholas laughed.

"To be perfectly candid," he remarked, "so am I."

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CHAPTER XXIII

ANTONY FINDS A GLOVE

Trix's appearance at the door in the wall had fairly dumbfounded Antony. He had recognized her instantly. And the amazing thing was that she was exactly as he had seen her in his dream. Her announcement had carried the dream sense further, and it was with a queer feeling of intense disappointment that he found no one standing outside the gate. There was nothing but the silent deserted wood and the mound of leaf-mould. For a moment or so he stood listening, almost expecting to hear a footstep among the trees. Nothing but silence greeted him, however, broken only by the faint rustling of the leaves.

He turned back to the garden. It was empty. There was nothing, nothing on earth to prove that the whole thing had not been an extraordinarily vivid waking dream. And if it were a dream, surely it was calculated to dispel the relief the first dream had brought him. Yet was it a dream? Could it have been? Wasn't he entirely awake, and in the possession of his right senses?

Demanding thus of his soul, solemn, bewildered, and reflective, he turned once more to his wheelbarrow. Ten minutes later, trundling it down a cinder path, his eye fell on an object lying beneath a gooseberry bush. He dropped the barrow, and picked up the object.

It was a long soft doe-skin glove.

"It wasn't a dream," said Antony triumphantly. "But where in the name of all that's wonderful did she come from? And where did she vanish to?"

He put the glove into his pocket, and resumed his work.

"I am afraid," he remarked to himself as he heaved the leaf-mould out of the barrow, "that she knew perfectly well there was no one at the gate. I wonder why she said there was, and why,

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above all, she made such an extraordinarily unexpected appearance.”

These considerations engrossed his mind for at least the next half-hour, when, the leaf-mould having been transported from the wood, he went round to the front of the house to trim the edges of the lawn. He was on his knees on the gravel path, busily engaged with a pair of shears, when he heard the amazing sound of the front door opening and shutting. He looked round over his shoulder, to see the same apparition that had appeared to him from the wood, walking calmly down the steps and in the direction of the drive. Apparently she was too engrossed with her own thoughts to observe him where he was kneeling at a little distance to the eastward of the front door.

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“Well!” ejaculated Antony bewildered. And he gazed after her.

It was not till her white dress had become a speck in the distance, that Antony remembered the long soft glove reposing in his pocket. He dropped his shears, and bolted after her.

Trix was half-way down the drive, when she heard rapid steps behind her. She looked back, to see that she was being pursued by the young man who had formerly been trundling a wheelbarrow.

Her first instinct was one of flight. Her second, conscious that the owner of the property had condoned her intrusion, and also having in view the fact that there was nowhere but straight ahead to run, and he was in all probability fleet of foot than she, was to stand her ground, and that as unconcernedly as possible.

“Yes?” queried Trix with studied calmness, as he came up to her.

“Excuse me, Miss, but you dropped this in the kitchen garden.” Antony held out the long soft glove.

“Oh, thank you,” said Trix, infinitely relieved that his rapid approach had signified nothing worse than the restoration of her own lost property. And then she looked at him. Where on earth had she seen him before?

“There wasn’t any one at the gate, Miss,” said Antony suddenly.

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Trix flushed. “Oh, wasn’t there? I—” she broke off.

Then she looked straight at him.

“I knew there wasn’t,” she confessed. “But I was afraid to go back, so I had to make you look away while I ran. It was the cows.” She sighed. She felt she had been making bovine explanations during the greater part of the afternoon.

“Cows, Miss?” queried Antony, a twinkle in his eyes.

Trix nodded.

“Yes; awful beasts with white faces, in the field above the wood. I’m not sure they weren’t bulls.”

Antony laughed.

“Sure, and why weren’t you telling me, then? I’d have tackled them for you.”

Trix smiled.

“I never thought of that way out of the difficulty,” she owned. “But it will be all right, I ex—” She broke off. She had been within an ace of saying she had explained matters to Mr. Danver. She really must be careful. “I expect—I’m sure you won’t get into trouble about it,” she stuttered.

“Sure, that’s all right,” he said, a trifle puzzled.

There was a queer pleasure in this little renewal of the acquaintanceship of the bygone days, despite the fact of its being an entirely one-sided renewal. He’d have known her anywhere. It was the same small vivacious face, the same odd little upward tilt to the chin, the same varied inflection of voice, the same little quick gestures. He would have liked to keep her standing there while he recalled the small imperious child in the elfin-like figure before him. But, her property having been restored, there was nothing on earth further he could say, no possible reason for prolonging the conversation. He waited, however, for Trix to give the dismissal.

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Trix was looking at him, a queer puzzlement in her eyes. Why *was* his face so oddly familiar? It was utterly impossible that she should have met him before, at all events on the intimate footing the familiarity of his face suggested. It must be merely an extraordinary likeness to someone to whom she could not at the moment put a name. Quite suddenly she realized that they were scrutinizing each other in a way that certainly cannot be termed exactly orthodox. She pulled herself together.

“Thank you for restoring my glove,” said she with a fine resumption of dignity; and she turned off once more down the drive.

Antony went slowly back to his shears.

CHAPTER XXIV

AN INTEREST IN LIFE

Doctor Hilary was walking down the lane in a somewhat preoccupied frame of mind. He had been oddly preoccupied the last day or so, lapsing into prolonged meditations from which he would emerge with a sudden and almost guilty start.

Coming opposite the drive gates of Chorley Old Hall, he was brought to a sense of his surroundings by a figure, which emerged suddenly from them and came to a dead stop.

"Oh!" ejaculated Doctor Hilary. "Good afternoon." And he took off his cap.

"Good afternoon," responded Trix. She turned along the lane beside him.

"Have you been interviewing the gardens?" he asked. She fancied there was the faintest trace of anxiety in his voice.

A sudden spirit of mischief took possession of Trix. She had been given leave. It was really too good an opportunity to be lost.

"Oh no," she responded, dove-like innocence in her voice, "I've just been having tea with Mr. Danver."

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If she wanted to see amazement written on his face, she had her desire. It spread itself large over his countenance, finding verbal expression in an utterly astounded gasp.

"He seems very well," said Trix demurely.

"Miss Devereux!" ejaculated Doctor Hilary.

"Yes?" asked Trix sweetly.

"Have you known all the time?" he demanded.

Trix shook her head, laughter dancing in her eyes. It found its way to her lips.

"Oh, you looked so surprised," she gurgled. "I hadn't the tiniest bit of an idea. How could I? I was never so flummoxed in all my life as when I realized who was talking to me."

Doctor Hilary was silent.

Trix put her hand on his arm, half timidly.

"Don't be angry," she said. "He wasn't. And I've promised faithfully not to tell."

Doctor Hilary glanced down at the hand on his arm.

"I'm not angry," he said with a queer smile, "I'm only—" He stopped.

"Flummoxed, like I was," nodded Trix, removing her hand. "It's quite the amazingest thing I ever knew." She gave another little gurgle of laughter, looking up at the very blue sky as if inviting it to share her pleasure.

"How much did he tell you?" asked Doctor Hilary.

Trix lowered her chin, and considered briefly.

"Just nothing, now I come to think of it, beyond the fact that he was Mr. Danver. But then I'd really been the first to volunteer that piece of information. I haven't the faintest notion why there's all this mystery, and why he has pretended to be dead. He didn't want me to know that. So please don't say anything that could tell me. He said I could talk to you."

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"I won't," smiled Doctor Hilary answering the request.

They walked on a few steps in silence.

"But what I should like to know," he said after a minute, "is how you managed to get inside the house at all?"

"Oh dear!" sighed Trix twisting her glove round her wrist.

Doctor Hilary looked rather surprised.

"Don't say if you'd rather not," he remarked quickly.

Trix sighed again.

"Oh, I may as well. It will only be the third time I've had to own up."

And she proceeded with a careful recapitulation of the events of the afternoon.

"You must have been very frightened," said he as she ended.

"I was," owned Trix.

"Ah, well; it's all over now," he comforted her.

"Y-yes," said Trix doubtfully.

"What's troubling you?" he demanded.

"The sneeze," confessed Trix in a very small voice.

Doctor Hilary stifled a sudden spasm of laughter. She was so utterly and entirely in earnest.

"I wouldn't worry over a little thing like that, if I were you," said he consolingly.

Once more Trix sighed.

"Of course it's absurd," she said. "I know it's absurd. But, somehow, little things do worry me, even when I know they're silly. And there's just enough that's not silliness in this to let it be a real worry."

"A genuine midge bite," he suggested. "But, you know, rubbing it only makes it worse."

She laughed a trifle shakily.

"And honestly," he pursued, "though I do understand your—your conscience in the matter, I'm really very glad you've seen Mr. Danver."

"Well, so was I," owned Trix.

Again there was a silence. They were walking down a narrow lane bordered on either side with high banks and hedges. The dust lay rather thick on the grass and leaves. It had already covered their shoes with its grey powder. Doctor Hilary was turning certain matters in his mind. Presently he gave voice to them.

"It is exceedingly good for him that someone besides myself and the butler and his wife should know that he is alive, and that he should know they do know it. I agreed to this mad business because I believed it would give him an interest in living, eccentric though the interest might be."

Trix gurgled.

"It sounds so odd," she explained, "to hear you say that pretending to be dead could give any one an interest in life." And she gurgled again. Trix's gurgling was peculiarly infectious.

"Odd!" laughed Doctor Hilary. "It's the oddest thing imaginable. No one but Nick could have conceived the whole business, or found the smallest interest in it. But he did find an interest, and that was enough for me. He is lonely now, I grant. But before this—this invention, he was stagnant as well as lonely. His mind, and seemingly his soul with it, had become practically atrophied. His mind has now been roused to interest, though the most extraordinarily eccentric interest."

"And his soul?" queried Trix simply.

Doctor Hilary shook his head.

"Ah, that I don't know," he said.

They parted company at the door of Doctor Hilary's house. Trix went on slowly down the road. She paused opposite the presbytery, before turning to the left in the direction of Woodleigh. She rang the bell, and asked to see Father Dormer.

He came to her in the little parlour.

"Oh," said Trix, getting up as he entered, "I only came to ask you to say a Mass for my intention. And, please, will you say one every week till I ask you to stop?"

"By all means," he responded.

"Thank you," said Trix. Then she glanced at a clock on the mantelpiece. "I had no idea it was so late," she said.

She walked home at a fair pace. The midge bite had ceased to worry her. But then, at Doctor Hilary's suggestion, she had ceased to rub it. She was thinking of only one thing now, of a solitary old figure in a large and gloomy library.

She sighed heavily once or twice. Well, at all events she had asked for Masses for him.

CHAPTER XXV

PRICKLES

If you happen to have anything on your mind, it is impossible—or practically impossible—to avoid thinking about it. Which, doubtless, is so obvious a fact, it is barely worth stating.

The Duchessa di Donatello had something on her mind; it possessed her waking thoughts, it coloured her dreams. And what that something was, is also, perhaps, entirely obvious. Again and again she told herself that she would not dwell on the subject; but she might as well have tried to dam a river with a piece of tissue paper, as prevent the thought from filling her mind; and that probably because—with true feminine inconsistency—she welcomed it quite as much as

she tried to dispel it.

Occasionally she allowed it free entry, regarded it, summed it up as unsatisfactory, and sternly dismissed it. In three minutes it was welling up again, perhaps in the same old route, perhaps choosing a different course.

"Why can't I put the man and everything concerning him out of my mind for good and all?" she asked herself more than once. And, whatever the reply to her query, the fact remained that she couldn't; the thought had become something of an obsession.

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Now, when a thought has become an obsession, there is practically only one way to free oneself from it, and that is by speech. Speech has a way of clearing the clogged channels of the mind, and allowing the thought to flow outwards, and possibly to disappear altogether; whereas, without this clearance, the thought of necessity returns to its source, gathering in volume with each recoil.

But speech is frequently not at all easy, and that not only because there is often a difficulty in finding the right confidant, but because, with the channels thus clogged, it is a distinct effort to clear them. Also, though subconsciously you may realize its desirability, it is often merely subconsciously, and reason and common sense,—or, rather, what you at the moment quite erroneously believe to be reason and common sense—will urge a hundred motives upon you in favour of silence. Maybe that most subtle person the devil is the suggester of these motives. If he can't get much of a look in by direct means, he'll try indirect ones, and depression is one of his favourite indirect methods. At all events so the old spiritual writers tell us, and doubtless they knew what they were talking about.

Now, Trix was perfectly well aware that Pia had something on her mind; she was also perfectly well aware that it was something she would have an enormous difficulty in talking about. And the question was, how to give her even the tiniest lead.

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Trix had stated that she had guessed the colour of the soap-bubble; but she hadn't the faintest notion where it had come into existence, nor where and how it had burst. Nor had Pia given her directly the smallest hint of its having ever existed. All of which facts made it exceedingly difficult for her even to hint at soap-bubbles—figuratively speaking of course—as a subject of conversation.

And Pia was slightly irritable too. Of course it was entirely because she was unhappy, but it didn't conduce to intimate conversation. Prickles would suddenly appear among the most innocent looking of flowers, in a way that was entirely disconcerting and utterly unpleasant. And the worst of it was, that there was no avoiding them. They darted out and pricked you before you were even aware of their presence. It was so utterly unlike Pia too, and so—Trix winked back a tear as she thought of it—so hurting.

At last she came to a decision. The prickles simply must be handled and extracted if possible. Of course she might get quite unpleasantly stabbed in the process, but at all events she'd be prepared for the risk, and anything would be better than the little darts appearing at quite unexpected moments and places.

"The next time I'm pricked," said Trix to herself firmly, "I'll seize hold of the prickle, and then perhaps we'll see where we are."

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And, as a result perhaps of this resolution, the prickles suddenly disappeared. Trix was immeasurably relieved in one sense, but not entirely easy. She fancied the prickles to be hidden rather than extracted. However, they'd ceased to wound for the time being, and that certainly was an enormous comfort. Miss Tibbutt, with greater optimism than Trix, believed all to be entirely well once more, and rejoiced accordingly.

"Doctor Hilary has been over here rather often lately," remarked Miss Tibbutt one afternoon. Pia and she were sitting in the garden together.

"Old Mrs. Mosely is ill," returned Pia smiling oracularly.

"But only a very little ill," said Miss Tibbutt reflectively. "Her daughter told me only yesterday—I'm afraid it wasn't very grateful of her—that the Doctor had been 'moidering around like 'sif mother was on her dying bed, and her wi' naught but a bit o' cold to her chest, what's gone to her head now, and a glass or two o' hot cider, and ginger, and allspice, and rosemary will be puttin' right sooner nor you can flick a fly off a sugar basin."

Pia laughed.

"My dear Tibby, he doesn't come to see Mrs. Mosely."

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Miss Tibbutt looked up in perplexed query.

"He comes on here to tea, doesn't he?" asked Pia, kindly, after the manner of one giving a lead.

"Certainly," returned Miss Tibbutt, still perplexed. "He would naturally do so, since he is in Woodleigh just at tea time."

Pia leant back in her seat, and looked at Miss Tibbutt.

"Tibby dear, you're amazingly slow at the uptake."

Miss Tibbutt blinked at Pia over her spectacles.

"Please explain," said she meekly.

Pia laughed.

"Haven't you discovered, Tibby dear, that it's Trix he comes to see?"

"Trix!" ejaculated Miss Tibbutt.

"Yes; and she is quite as unaware of the fact as you are, so don't, for all the world, enlighten her. Leave that to him, if he means to."

Miss Tibbutt had let her work fall, and was gazing round-eyed at Pia.

"But, my dear Pia, he's years older than Trix."

"Oh, not so very many," said Pia reassuringly. "Fifteen or sixteen, perhaps. Trix is twenty-four, you know."

"And Trix is leaving here the day after to-morrow," said Miss Tibbutt regretfully.

"London isn't the antipodes," declared Pia. "She can come here again, or business may take Doctor Hilary to London. There are trains."

"Well, well," said Miss Tibbutt.

Trix appeared at the open drawing-room window and came out on to the terrace. She paused for a moment to pick a dead rose off a bush growing near the house. Then she saw the two under the lime tree. She came towards them.

"Doctor Hilary has just driven up through the plantation gate," she said. "I suppose he's coming to tea. His man was evidently going to put up the horse."

The Duchessa glanced at a gold bracelet watch on her wrist.

"It's four o'clock," she said.

"He takes tea quite for granted," smiled Trix.

"I suppose," responded the Duchessa, "that he considers five almost consecutive invitations equivalent to one standing one."

"Well, anyhow I should," nodded Trix. "What are you looking so wise about, Tibby angel?"

Miss Tibbutt started. "Was I looking wise? I didn't know."

Trix perched herself on the table.

"Dale will clear me off in a minute," she announced. "I suppose you'll have tea out here as usual. Till then it's the nicest seat. Oh dear, I wish I wasn't going home to-morrow. That's not a hint to you to ask me to stay longer. I shouldn't hint, I'd speak straight out. But I must join Aunt Lilla at her hydro place. She's getting lonely. She wants an audience to which to relate her partner's idiocy at Bridge, and someone to help carry her photographic apparatus. Also someone to whom she can keep up a perpetual flow of conversation. That's not the least uncharitable, as you'd know if you knew Aunt Lilla. I think she must have been born talking. But I love her all the same."

Trix tilted back her head and looked up at the sky through the branches of the trees.

"I wonder why space is blue," she said, "and why it's so much bluer some days than others, even when there aren't any clouds."

A step on the terrace behind her put an end to her wondering. Doctor Hilary came round the corner of the house.

"I've taken your invitation for granted, Duchessa, as I happened to be out this way," said he as he shook hands.

"Is old Mrs. Mosely still so ill?" asked Trix, sympathy in her voice.

Miss Tibbutt kept her eyes almost guiltily on her knitting. Pia, glancing at her, laughed inwardly.

"She's better to-day," responded Doctor Hilary cheerfully. And then he sat down. Trix had descended from the table, and seated herself in a basket chair.

Dale brought out the tea in a few minutes, and put it on the table Trix had vacated. The conversation was trivial and desultory, even more trivial and desultory than most tea-time conversation. Miss Tibbutt was too occupied with Pia's recent revelation to have much thought for speech, Doctor Hilary was never a man of many words, the Duchessa had been marvellously lacking in conversation of late, and Trix's occasional remarks were mainly outspoken reflections on the sunshine and the flowers, which required no particular response. Nevertheless she was conscious of a certain flatness in her companions, and wondered vaguely what had caused it.

"I'm going to Llandrindod Wells to-morrow," said she presently.

Doctor Hilary looked up quickly.

"Then your visit here has come to an end?" he queried.

Trix nodded.

"Alas, yes," she sighed, regret, half genuine, half mocking, in her voice. "But most certainly I shall come down again if the Duchessa will let me come. I had forgotten, absolutely forgotten, what a perfectly heavenly place this was. And that doesn't in the least mean that I am coming solely for the place, and not to see her, though I am aware it did not sound entirely tactful."

"And when do you suppose you will be coming again?" asked Doctor Hilary with a fine assumption of carelessness, not in the least lost upon the Duchessa.

"Before Christmas I hope," replied she in Trix's stead. "Or, indeed, at any time or moment she chooses."

Doctor Hilary looked thoughtful, grave. A little frown wrinkled between his eyebrows. He pulled silently at his pipe. The Duchessa was watching him.

"Alas, poor man!" thought she whimsically. "He was about to seize opportunity, and behold, fate snatches opportunity from him. Oh, cruel fate!"

And then she beheld his brow clearing. He knocked the ashes from his pipe, and began feeling in his pocket for his pouch to refill it.

"He's relieved," declared the Duchessa inwardly, and somewhat astounded. "He's so amazingly diffident, and yet so utterly in love, he's relieved."

Of course she was right, she knew perfectly well she was right. Well, perhaps courage would grow with Trix's absence. For his own sake it was to be devoutly trusted that it would.

Doctor Hilary took his tobacco pouch from his pocket, and with it a small piece of paper. He looked at the paper.

"The name of a new rose," he said. "Michael Field, the new under-gardener at the Hall, gave it to me. He tells me it is a very free flowerer, and has a lovely scent. Do you care to have the name, Duchessa?" He held the slip of paper towards her.

The Duchessa looked carelessly at it. Trix was looking at the Duchessa.

"No, thank you," she replied. "We have plenty of roses here, and Thornby can no doubt give me the name of any new kinds I shall want."

Now it was not merely an entirely unnecessary refusal, but the tone of the speech was nearly, if not quite, deliberately rude. It was a terribly big prickle, and showed itself perfectly distinctly. There wasn't even the smallest semblance of disguise about it.

Doctor Hilary put the paper and his tobacco pouch back into his pocket.

"I must be off," he said in an oddly quiet voice. "I've one or two other calls to make."

Miss Tibbutt walked towards the house with him,—to fetch some more knitting, so she announced. Trix suspected a little mental stroking.

"What's the matter, Pia?" asked Trix calmly, leaning back in her chair.

"The matter?" said Pia, the faintest suspicion of a flush in her cheeks.

"You were very—very *snubbing* to Doctor Hilary," announced Trix, still calmly. Inwardly she was not so calm. In fact, her heart was thumping quite loudly.

"My dear Trix," replied the Duchessa coldly, "I have an excellent gardener. I do not care for recommendations emanating from a complete stranger."

"There was no smallest need to snub Doctor Hilary, though," said Trix quietly. The queer surprise on his face had caused a little stab at her heart.

The Duchessa made no reply.

"Pia, what *is* the matter?" asked Trix again.

"I have told you, nothing," responded the Duchessa.

Trix shook her head. "Yes; there is. You're unhappy. You've been—you can tell me to mind my own business, if you like—you've been horribly prickly lately. You've tried to hurt my feelings, and Tibby's, and now you've tried to hurt Doctor Hilary's. And he didn't deserve it in the least, but he thought, for a moment, he did. And it isn't like you, Pia. It isn't one bit. Do tell me what's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Pia again.

"Darling, that's a—a white lie at all events."

Pia coloured. "Anyhow it's not worth talking about," she said.

"Are you sure it isn't?" urged Trix. "Couldn't I help the weeniest bit?"

The Duchessa shook her head.

"Darling," said Trix again, and she slipped her arm through Pia's.

"I'm all one big bruise," said Pia suddenly.

Trix stroked her hand.

"It is entirely foolish of me to care," said the Duchessa slowly. "But I happen to have trusted someone rather implicitly. I never dreamed it possible the person could stoop to act a lie. I would not have minded the thing itself,—it would have been absurd for me to have done so. But it hurt rather considerably that the person should have deceived me in the matter, in fact have acted a deliberate lie about it. I am honestly doing my best to forget the whole thing, but I am being constantly reminded of it."

Trix sat up very straight. So that was it, she told herself. How idiotic of her not to have guessed at once,—days ago, that is,—when she herself had made her marvellous discovery. It was now

quite plain to her mind that Pia must have made it too. It was Doctor Hilary whom she believed to be the fraud, the friend whom she had trusted, and who had acted a lie. The whole oddness of Pia's behaviour became suddenly perfectly clear to her. Tibby had told her that it had begun on her return to Woodleigh. Well, that must have been when she first found out. How she'd found out, Trix didn't know. But that was beside the mark. She evidently had found out.

Trix's mind ran back over various little incidents. She remembered the snub administered to Father Dormer the evening after her arrival. The new under-gardener had been the subject of conversation then, of course reminding Pia of the Hall. And she had snubbed Father Dormer, as she had snubbed Doctor Hilary a few minutes ago. All Pia's snubs and sudden prickles came back to her mind. They all had their origin in some inadvertent remark regarding the Hall.

Yes; everything was as clear as daylight now. Pia had learnt of this business in some roundabout way that did not allow of her speaking openly to Doctor Hilary on the subject, so she saw merely the fraud, and had no idea that it was, in all probability, an entirely justifiable one, and that at all events no one had told any deliberate lie. Of course Pia was disturbed and upset. Wouldn't she have been herself, in Pia's place? And hadn't she felt quite unreasonably unhappy till Mr. Danver had assured her that Doctor Hilary had not spoken a single word of actual untruth?

Oh, poor Pia!

Now, it was not in the least astonishing that Trix's mind should have leapt to this entirely erroneous conclusion. For the last fortnight it had been full of her discovery. The smallest thing that seemed to bear on it, instantly appeared actually to do so. And everything in her present train of thought fitted in with astonishing accuracy. Each little incident in Pia's late behaviour fell into place with it.

She did not stop to consider that, if this were the sole cause of Pia's trouble, she—Pia—was unquestionably taking a very exaggerated view of it. It never occurred to Trix to do so. If she had considered the matter at all, it would have been merely to realize that Pia's attitude towards it was remarkably like what her own would have been. She would have known, had she attempted analysis of the subject, that she herself was frequently troubled about trifles, or what at any rate would have appeared to others as trifles, where any friend of hers was concerned. Her friends' actions and her own, in what are ordinarily termed little things, mattered quite supremely to her, most particularly in any question regarding honour. The smallest infringement of it would be enough to cause her sleepless nights and anxious days. Therefore, without attempting any analysis, she could perfectly well understand what she believed Pia's point of view to be. And her present distress was, that, in view of her promise, she could do nothing definite to help her.

She could not show her Doctor Hilary's standpoint in the matter, since it was not permissible for her to give the smallest hint that she was acquainted either with it, or with the whole business at all. She could not even hint that she believed Doctor Hilary to be the person concerning whom Pia was troubled. She could only take refuge in generalities, which, with a definite case before her, she felt to be a peculiarly unsatisfactory proceeding. Yet there was nothing else to be done. It was more than probable that Pia was in the same kind of cleft stick as herself, and that therefore direct discussion of the matter was out of the question.

Still stroking Pia's hand, Trix spoke slowly.

"Pia, darling, what I am going to say will sound very poor comfort, I know. But it's this. Isn't it just possible that you could give the—the person concerned the benefit of a doubt? Even if it seems to you that he has acted a lie, and therefore been something of a fraud, mayn't there be some extraordinarily good reason, behind it all, that circumstances are preventing him from explaining? Such queer things do happen, and sometimes people have to appear to others as frauds, when they really aren't a bit. If you were ever really friends with the person—and you must have been, or you wouldn't care—I'd just say to myself that I would trust him in spite of every appearance to the contrary. Perhaps some day you'll be most awfully sorry if you don't. And isn't it a million times better to be even mistaken in trust where a friend is concerned, than give way to the smallest doubt which may afterwards be proved to be a wrong doubt?"

Pia was silent. Then she said in an oddly even voice,

"Trix do you *know* anything?"

Trix flushed to the roots of her hair. Pia turned to look at her.

"Trix!" she said amazed.

"Pia," implored Trix, "you mustn't ask me a single question, because I can't answer you. But do, do, trust."

Pia drew a long breath.

"Trix, you're the uncanniest little mortal that ever lived, and I can't imagine how you could have guessed, or what exactly it is you really do know. But I believe I am going to take your advice."

Antony was working in his front garden. It was a Saturday afternoon, and a blazingly hot one. Every now and then he paused to lean on his spade, and look out to where the blue sea lay shining and glistening in the sunlight.

It was amazingly blue, almost as blue as the sea depicted on the posters of famous seaside resorts, posters in which a bare-legged child with a bucket and spade, and the widest of wide smiles is invariably seen in the foreground. Certainly the designers of these posters are not students of child nature. If they were, they would know that a really absorbed and happy child is almost portentously solemn. It hasn't the time to waste on smiles; the building of sand castles and fortresses is infinitely too engrossing an occupation. A smile will greet the anticipation; it is lost in the stupendous joy of the fact. But as smiles are evidently considered *de rigueur* by the designers of posters, and as the mere anticipation will not allow of the portrayal of the Rickett's blue sea, destined to hit the eye of the beholder, smiles and sea have—rightly or wrongly—to be combined.

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Antony gazed at the sea, if not quite as blue as a poster sea, yet—as already stated—amazingly blue. Josephus lay on a bit of hot earth watching him, his nose between his forepaws, and quite exhausted after a mad and wholly objectless ten minutes' race round the garden.

Antony turned from his contemplation of the sea, and once more grasped his spade. Presently he turned up a small flat round object, which at first sight he took to be a penny. He picked it up, and rubbed the dirt off it. It proved to be merely a small lead disk, utterly useless and valueless; he didn't even know what it could have been used for. He threw it on the earth again, and went on with his digging. But it, or his action of tossing it on to the earth, had started a train of thought. It is extraordinary what trifles will serve to start a lengthy and connected train of thought. Sometimes it is quite interesting, arriving at a certain point, to trace one's imaginings backwards, and see from whence they started.

The disk reminded Antony of the coppers he had tossed to the child at Teneriffe. From it he quite unconsciously found himself reviewing all the subsequent happenings. They linked on one to the other without a break. He hardly knew he was reviewing them, though they so absorbed his mind that he was totally unconscious of his surroundings, and even of the fact that he was digging. His employment had become quite mechanical.

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He was so engrossed that he did not hear a step in the road behind him. Josephus heard it, however, and gave vent to a faint whine, raising his head from between his paws. The sound roused Antony, and he turned.

His face went suddenly white beneath its bronze. The Duchessa di Donatello was standing at the gate, looking over into the garden.

"Might I come in and rest a moment?" she asked. "The sun is so hot."

Antony could hardly believe his ears. Surely he could not have heard aright? But there she was, standing at the gate, most evidently waiting his permission to enter.

He left his spade sticking in the earth, and went to unfasten the gate. Without speaking, he led the way up the little flagged path, and into the parlour.

The Duchessa crossed to the oak settle and sat down. Slowly she began to pull off her long crinkly doe-skin gloves. Antony watched her. He saw the gleam of a diamond ring on her hand. It was a ring he had often noticed. A picture of the Duchessa sitting at a little round table among orange trees in green tubs flashed suddenly and very vividly into his mind.

"It is very hot," said the Duchessa looking up at him.

"Yes," said Antony mechanically.

"Am I interrupting your work?" asked the Duchessa.

Antony started.

"Oh, no," he replied. And he sat down by the table, leaning slightly forward with his arms upon it.

"Do you mind my coming here?" she asked.

"I don't think so," said Antony reflectively.

A gleam of a smile flashed across the Duchessa's face. The reply was so Antonian.

There was quite a long silence. Suddenly Antony roused himself.

"You'll let me get you some tea, Madam," he said.

Awaiting no reply, he went into the little scullery, where the fire by which he had cooked his midday meal was still alight. The kettle filled with water and placed on the stove, he stood by it, in a measure wishful, yet oddly reluctant to return to the parlour. Reluctance won the day. He remained by the kettle, gazing at it.

Left alone, the Duchessa looked round the parlour. It was exceedingly primitive, yet, to her mind, curiously interesting. Of course in reality it was not unlike dozens of other cottage parlours, but it held a personality of its own for her. It was the room where Antony Gray lived.

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She pictured him at his lonely meals, sitting at the table where he had sat a moment or so ago; sitting on the settle where she was now sitting, certainly smoking, and possibly reading. She found herself wondering what he thought about. Did he ever think of the *Fort Salisbury*, she wondered? Or had he blotted it from his mind, as she had endeavoured—ineffectually—to do? And then, with that thought, with the possibility that he had done so, her presence in the room seemed quite suddenly an intrusion. What on earth would he think of her for coming? And what on earth did she mean to say to him now she had come?

The impulse which had led her down the lane, which had caused her to pause at the gate and speak to him, all at once seemed to her perfectly idiotic, and, worse still, intrusive and impertinent. What possible excuse was she going to give for it, in the face of her behaviour to him that afternoon on the moorland? Merely to have asked for shelter on account of the heat, appeared to her now as the flimsiest of excuses, and would appear to him as an excuse simply to pry upon him, to see his mode of living. He had not returned to the parlour. Doubtless his absence was a silent rebuke to her. She had thrust the necessity of hospitality upon him, but he intended to show her plainly that it was entirely of necessity he had offered it.

Her cheeks burned at the thought. She looked quickly round. Anyhow there was still time for flight. She picked up her gloves from where she had laid them on the settle, and got to her feet.

“The water won’t be long in boiling, Madam,” said Antony’s voice.

He had come back quietly into the room. For a moment he glanced in half surprise to see the Duchessa standing by the settle. Then he crossed to the dresser, and began taking down a cup, a saucer, and a plate.

The Duchessa sat down again, drawing her hand nervously along her gloves.

She looked at him getting down the things and setting them on the table. She watched his neat, deft movements. Antony took no notice of her; she might have been part of the settle itself for all the attention he paid her. His preparations made, he returned momentarily to the scullery to fill the teapot. Coming back with it he placed it on the table.

“Everything is ready, Madam,” he said. Dale himself could not have been more distantly respectful.

The Duchessa looked at the one cup, the one saucer, and the one plate.

“Aren’t you going to have some tea, too?” she asked.

“Servants do not sit down with their superiors,” said Antony.

The colour rose hotly in the Duchessa’s face.

“Why do you say that?” she demanded.

Antony lifted his shoulders, the merest suspicion of a shrug.

“I merely state a fact,” he replied.

“I wish you to,” she said quickly.

“Is that a command?” asked Antony.

“If you like to take it so,” she replied.

Antony turned to the dresser. He took down another cup and plate and put them on the table. Then he stood by it, waiting for her to be seated.

“Sugar?” asked the Duchessa. She was making a brave endeavour to steady the trembling of her voice.

“If you please, Madam,” said Antony gravely.

The meal proceeded in dead silence.

“Mr. Gray,” said the Duchessa suddenly.

“My name,” said Antony respectfully, “is Michael Field.”

The Duchessa gave a little shaky laugh.

“Well, Michael Field,” she said. “I was not very kind that day I met you on the moorland.”

Antony kept his eyes fixed on his plate.

“There was no reason that you should be kind,” he replied quietly.

“There was,” flashed the Duchessa.

“I think not,” replied Antony, calmly. “Ladies in your position are under no obligation to be kind to servants, except to those of their own household. Even then, it is more or less of a condescension on their part.”

“You were not always a servant,” said the Duchessa.

There was the fraction of a pause.

“I did not happen to be actually in a situation when I was on the *Fort Salisbury*, if that is what you mean, Madam,” returned Antony.

“I mean more than that,” retorted the Duchessa. “I mean that by your up-bringing you are not a servant.”

Antony laughed shortly.

"I happen to have had a better education than falls to the lot of most men who have been in the positions I have been in, and who are in positions like my present one. But most assuredly I am a servant."

"What positions have you been in?" demanded the Duchessa.

A very faint smile showed itself on Antony's face.

"I have been a sort of miner's boy," he replied slowly. "I have been a farm hand, mainly used for cleaning out pigsties, and that kind of work. I have been servant in a gambling saloon; odd man on a cattle boat. I have worked on a farm again. And now I am an under-gardener. Very assuredly I have been, and am, a servant."

The Duchessa's brows wrinkled. "Yet you speak like a gentleman, and—and you wore dress clothes as if you were used to them."

Again a faint smile showed itself on Antony's face.

"I told you I happen to have had a decent education in my youth. Also, I would suggest, that even butlers and waiters wear dress clothes as if they were used to them."

Once more there was a silence. A rather long silence this time. It was broken by the Duchessa's voice.

"Some months ago," she said, "I offered my friendship to Antony Gray; I now offer that same friendship to Michael Field."

Antony gave a little laugh. There was an odd gleam in his eyes.

"Michael Field regrets that he must decline the honour."

The Duchessa's face went dead white.

Antony got to his feet.

"Please don't misunderstand me," he said. "I fully appreciate the honour you have done me, but—" he shrugged his shoulders—"it is quite impossible to accept it. It—you must see that for yourself—would be a rather ridiculous situation. The Duchessa di Donatello and a friendship with an under-gardener! I don't fancy either of us would care to be made a mock of, even by the extremely small world in which we happen to live." He stopped.

The Duchessa rose too. Her eyes were steely.

"Thank you for reminding me," she said. "In a moment of absurd impulsiveness I had overlooked that fact. Also, thank you for—for your hospitality."

She moved to the door without looking at him. Antony was before her, and had it open. He followed her down the path and unfastened the wicket gate. She passed through it without turning her head, and walked rather deliberately down the lane.

Antony went back into the cottage. For a moment he stood looking at the table, his throat contracted. Then slowly, and with oddly unseeing eyes, he began clearing away the débris of the meal.

CHAPTER XXVII

LETTERS AND MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Trix was sitting in a summer-house in the garden of an hotel at Llandrindod Wells. She was reading a letter, a not altogether satisfactory letter to judge by the wrinkling of her brows, and the gravity of her eyes.

The letter was from the Duchessa di Donatello, and ran as follows:

"MY DEAR TRIX:

"I am glad you had a comfortable journey, and that Mrs. Arbuthnot had not been pining for you too deeply. It is a pity her letters gave you the impression that she was feeling your absence so acutely. Possibly it is always wiser to subtract at least half of the impression conveyed in both written and spoken words. Please understand that I am speaking in generalities when I say that we are exceedingly apt to exaggerate our own importance to others, and their importance to us.

"Talking of exaggeration, will you forget our conversation on your last evening here? I exaggerated my own trouble and its cause. Rather foolishly I let your remarks influence me, and sought an explanation, or rather, attempted to ignore appearances, and return to the old footing. The result being that not only did I find that there was no explanation to be given, but that I got rather badly snubbed. As you, of course, will know who administered the snub, you

can understand that it was peculiarly unpleasant. I had endeavoured to ignore the fact that he was my social inferior, but he reminded me of it in a way it was impossible to overlook, and showed me that he deeply resented what he evidently looked upon as a somewhat impertinent condescension on my part.

"The theories, my dear Trix, which you set forth in the moonlight under the lime trees, simply won't hold water. For your own sake I advise you to abandon them forthwith. Blood will always tell; and sooner or later, if we attempt intimacy with those not of our own station in life, we shall get a glimpse of the hairy hoof. I know the theories sound all right, and quite beautifully Christian—as set forth in the moonlight,—but they don't work in this twentieth century, as I have found to my cost. You had better make up your mind to that fact before you, too, get a slap in the face. I assure you you don't feel like turning the other cheek. However, that will do. But as it was mainly through following out your theories and advice that I found my pride not only in the mud, but rubbed rather heavily in it, I thought you might as well have a word of warning. Please now consider the matter closed, and never make the smallest reference to that rather idiotic conversation.

"Doctor Hilary was over here again yesterday. He enquired after you, and asked to be very kindly remembered to you. I should like Doctor Hilary to attend me in any illness. He gives one such a feeling of strength and reliance. There's absolutely no humbug about him.

"Much love, my dear Trix,
"Yours affectionately,
"PIA DI DONATELLO."

Trix read the letter through very carefully, and then dropped it on her lap.

"It wasn't Doctor Hilary!" she ejaculated. "So who on earth was it?"

She sat gazing through the opening of the summer-house towards the garden. It was the oddest *puzzle* she had ever encountered. Who on earth could it have been? And why—since it wasn't Doctor Hilary—had Pia jumped to the conclusion that she—Trix—knew who it was?

It wasn't Mr. Danver, that was very certain. "Social inferior" put that fact out of the question. But then, what social inferior had been mixed up in the business? Or—Trix's brain leapt from point to point—had Pia's trouble nothing whatever to do with the mad business at the Hall? Had she and Pia simply been playing a quite amazing game of cross-purposes that evening? It would seem that must have been the case. Yet the recognition of that fact didn't bring her in the smallest degree nearer the solution of the riddle. Again, who on earth was it? What social inferior was there, could there possibly be, at Woodleigh, to cause Pia a moment's trouble? Every preconceived notion on Trix's part, including the colour of the soap-bubble, vanished into thin air, and left her contemplating an inexplicable mystery.

Whatever it was, it had affected Pia pretty deeply. It was absurd for her to say the incident was closed. Externally it might be, in the matter of not referring to it again. Interiorly it had left a wound, and one which was very far from being easily healed, to judge by Pia's letter. It had not been written by Pia at all, but by a very bitter woman, who had merely a superficial likeness to Pia. That fact, and that fact alone, caused Trix to imagine that she had been right when she told Tibby—if not in so many words, at least virtually speaking—that love had come into Pia's life. Love embittered alone could have inflicted the wound she felt Pia to be enduring. And yet the wording of her letter would appear to put that surmise out of the question. Truly it was an insolvable riddle.

Once more she re-read the letter, but it didn't help her in the smallest degree. There was only one small ounce of comfort in it. It wasn't Doctor Hilary who had caused the wound. Pia had merely tried to pick a quarrel with him, as she had frequently tried to pick one with herself and Tibby, because she was unhappy. If only Trix knew what had caused the unhappiness. And Pia thought she did know. If she wrote and told her now that she hadn't the smallest conception of what she was talking about, it would in all probability rouse conjectures in Pia's mind as to what Trix *had* thought. That, having in view her promise, had certainly better be avoided.

Should she, then, ignore Pia's letter, or should she reply to it? She weighed the pros and cons of this question for the next ten minutes, and finally decided she would write, and at once.

Returning, therefore, to the hotel, she indited the following brief missive:

"MY DEAR PIA,—

"The incident is closed so far as I am concerned. But I don't mean to give up seeking my pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. I dare say most people would call it an imaginary quest. Well then, I like an imaginary quest. It helps to make me forget much that is prosaic, and a good deal that is sordid in this work-a-day world.

"Please remember me to Doctor Hilary when you see him. Best love, Pia darling,

"TRIX."

Three days later Pia wrote:

"MY DEAR TRIX,

"The rainbow vanishes, and the sordidness and the prosaicness become rather horribly apparent, especially when one finds oneself obliged to look at them after having steadily ignored their existence.

"Yours affectionately,
"PIA."

To which Trix replied:

"MY DEAR PIA,

"My rainbow shines after every shower, and is brightest against the darkest clouds. When I look towards the darkest clouds I wait for the rainbow.

"Yours,
"TRIX."

And Pia wrote:

"MY DEAR TRIX,

"What happens when there is no longer any sun to form a rainbow?"

"Yours affectionately,
"PIA."

And Trix wrote:

"Wait till the clouds roll by, Jenny, wait till the clouds roll by."

And Pia wrote:

"MY DEAR TRIX,

"Some people wait a lifetime in vain,

"Yours affectionately,
"PIA."

And Trix wrote:

"DARLING PIA,

"You're twenty-eight. TRIX."

After which there was a cessation of correspondence for a time, neither having anything further to say on the subject, or at all events, nothing further they felt disposed to set down in writing.

Trix spent her mornings, and the afternoons, till tea time, in her Aunt's company. After that, Mrs. Arbuthnot being engrossed in Bridge till bedtime, Trix was free to do exactly as she liked. What she liked was walking till it was time to dress for dinner, and spending the evenings in the garden.

Even before her father's death, Trix had stayed frequently with her aunt. Her mother had died when Trix was three years old and Mrs. Arbuthnot, a widow with no children of her own, would have been quite ready to adopt Trix. But neither Mr. Devereux, nor, for that matter, Trix herself, were in the least disposed to fall in with her plans. Trix was merely lent to her for fairly lengthy periods, and it had been during one of these periods that Mrs. Arbuthnot had taken her to a farm near Byestry, in which place Mr. Devereux had spent most of his early years.

In those days Mrs. Arbuthnot's one hobby had been photography. People used to say, of course unjustly, that she never beheld any view with the naked eye, but merely in the reflector of a photographic apparatus. Yet it is entirely obvious that she must first have regarded it in the ordinary way to judge of its photographic merits. Anyhow it is true that quite a good deal of her time was spent beneath the folds of a black cloth (she never condescended to anything so amateurish as a mere kodak), or in the seclusion of a dark room.

Veritable dark rooms being seldom procurable on her travels, she invariably carried with her two or three curtains of thick red serge, several rolls of brown paper, and a bottle of stickphast. The two last mentioned were employed for covering chinks in doors, etc. It cannot be said that it was entirely beneficial to the doors, but hotel proprietors and landladies seldom made any complaint after the first remonstrance, as Mrs. Arbuthnot was always ready to make handsome compensation for any damage caused. It is to be feared that at times her generosity was largely

imposed upon.

In addition to the red curtains, the brown paper, and the stickphast, two large boxes were included in her luggage, one containing all her photographic necessities, and they were not few, the other containing several dozen albums of prints.

Of late years Bridge had taken quite as large a place in her affections as photography. Not that she felt any rivalry between the two; her pleasure in both pastimes was quite equally balanced. Her mornings and early afternoons were given to photography. The late afternoons and evenings Mrs. Arbuthnot devoted to Bridge.

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One exceedingly wet afternoon, tea being recently concluded, Trix in her bedroom was surveying the weather from the window.

She was debating within her mind whether to don mackintosh and souwester and face the elements, or whether to retire to a far corner of the drawing-room with a novel, as much as possible out of earshot of the Bridge players. She was still in two minds as to which prospect most appealed to her mood, when Mrs. Arbuthnot tapped on her door, and immediately after sailed into the room. It is the only word applicable to Mrs. Arbuthnot's entry into any room.

She was a large fair woman, very distinctly inclined to stoutness. In her youth she had been both slender, and quick in her movements; but recognizing, and rightly, that quickness means a certain loss of dignity in the stout, she had trained herself to be exceedingly deliberate in her actions. There was an element of consciousness in her deliberation, therefore, which gave the impression of a rather large sailing vessel under weigh.

"Trix, dearest," she began. And then she perceived that Trix had been observing the weather.

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"You were not going out, were you, dearest? I really think it would hardly be wise. It is blowing quite furiously. I know it is rather dull for you as you don't play Bridge. Such a pity, too, as you understand it so well. But I have a suggestion to make. Will you paste some of my newest prints into the latest album? There is a table in the window in my room, and a fresh bottle of stickphast. Not in the window, I don't mean that, but in my trunk. And Maunder can find it for you." Maunder was Mrs. Arbuthnot's maid.

Trix turned from the window. Of course Mrs. Arbuthnot's request settled the question of a walk. She had really been in two minds about it.

"Why, of course," she said. "Where are the prints?"

Mrs. Arbuthnot brightened visibly.

"They're inside a green envelope on the writing-table. You'll find a small pair of very sharp scissors there too. The dark edges are so unsightly if not trimmed. You're sure you don't mind, dearest? It really will be quite a pleasant occupation. It is so dreadfully wet. And Maunder will give you the stickphast. There is clean blotting-paper on the writing-table too, and Maunder can find you anything else you want. Well, that's all right. Maunder is in my room now. She will be going to her tea in ten minutes, so perhaps you might go to her at once. And she is sure to be downstairs for at least an hour and a half, if not longer. Servants always have so much to talk about, and take so long saying it. Why, I can't imagine. It always seems to me so much better not to waste words unnecessarily. So you will have the room to yourself, till she comes to put out my evening things. And I must go back to the drawing-room at once, or they will be waiting Bridge for me. And Lady Fortescue hates being kept waiting. It puts her in a bad temper, and when she's in a bad temper she is extraordinarily erratic as to her declarations. Though, for that matter, she is seldom anything else. I don't mean bad-tempered, but seldom anything but erratic. So, dearest, I mustn't let you keep me any longer. Don't forget to ask Maunder for the stickphast, and anything else you want. And the prints and the scissors——"

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"Yes, I know," nodded Trix cheerfully, "on the writing table. Hurry, Aunt Lilla, or they'll all be swearing."

"Oh, my dearest, I trust not. Though perhaps interiorly. And even that is a sin. I remember——"

Trix propelled her gently but firmly from the room. Doubtless Mrs. Arbuthnot continued her remembrances "interiorly" as she went down the passage and descended the stairs.

Ten minutes later, Trix, provided with the stickphast, the green envelope, the scissors, and the clean blotting-paper, and having a very large album spread open before her on a table, was busily engaged with the prints. They were mainly views of Llandrindod Wells, though there were quite a good many groups among them, as well as a fair number of single figures. Trix herself appeared chiefly in these last,—Trix in a hat, Trix without a hat, Trix smiling, serious, standing, or sitting.

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For half an hour or so Trix worked industriously, indefatigably. She trimmed off dark edges, she applied stickphast, she adjusted the prints in careful positions, she smoothed them down neatly with the clean blotting-paper. At the end of that time, she paused to let the paste dry somewhat before turning the page.

With a view to whiling away the interval, she possessed herself of a sister album, one of the many relations stacked against a wall, choosing it haphazard from among the number.

There is a distinct fascination in photographs which recall early memories. Trix fell promptly under the spell of this fascination. The minutes passed, finding her engrossed, absorbed. Turning a page she came upon views of Byestry, herself—a white-robed, short-skirted small person—appearing in the foreground of many.

Trix smiled at the representations. It really was rather an adorable small person. It was so slim-legged, mop-haired, and elfin-smiled. It was seen, for the most part, lavishing blandishments on a somewhat ungainly puppy. One photograph, however, represented the small person in company with a boy.

Trix looked at this photograph, and suddenly amazement fell full upon her. She looked, she leant back in her chair and shut her eyes, and then she looked again. Yes; there was no mistake, no shadow of a mistake. The boy in the photograph was the man with the wheelbarrow, or the other way about, which possibly might be the more correct method of expressing the matter. But, whichever the method, the fact remained the same.

Trix stared harder at the photograph, cogitating, bewildered. Below it was written in Mrs. Arbuthnot's rather sprawling handwriting, "T. D., aged five. A. G., aged fourteen. Byestry, 1892."

Who on earth was A. G.? Trix searched the recesses of her mind. And then suddenly, welling up like a bubbling spring, came memory. Why, of course A. G. was the boy she used to play with, the boy—she began to remember things clearly now—who had tried to sail across the pond, and with whom she had gone to search for pheasants' eggs. A dozen little details came back to her mind, even the sound of the boy's voice, and his laugh, a curiously infectious laugh.

Oh, she remembered him distinctly, vividly. But, what—and there lay the puzzlement, the bewilderment—was the boy, now grown to manhood, doing with a wheelbarrow in the grounds of Chorley Old Hall, and, moreover, dressed as a gardener, working as a gardener, and speaking—well, at any rate speaking after the manner of a gardener? Perhaps to have said, speaking as though he were on a different social footing from Trix, would have better expressed Trix's meaning. But she chose her own phraseology, and doubtless it conveyed to her exactly what she did mean. Anyhow, it was an amazing riddle, an insoluble riddle. Trix stared at the photograph, finding no answer to it.

Finding no answer she left the book open at the page, and returned to the sticking in of prints. But every now and then her eyes wandered to the big volume at the other end of the table, wonderment and query possessing her soul.

Maunder appeared just as Trix had finished her task. Helpful, business-like, she approached the table, a gleam spelling order and tidiness in her eye.

"Leave that album, please," said Trix, seeing the helpful Maunder about to shut and bear away the book containing the boy's photograph.

Maunder hesitated, sighed conspicuously, and left the book, occupying herself instead with putting away the stickphast, the scissors, the now not as clean blotting-paper, and somewhat resignedly picking up small shreds of paper which were scattered upon the table-cloth and carpet. In the midst of these occupations the dressing-gong sounded. Maunder pricked up her ears, actually almost, as well as figuratively.

Ten minutes elapsed. Then Mrs. Arbuthnot appeared.

"What, finished, dearest!" she exclaimed as she opened the door. "Splendid! How quick you've been. And I am sure the time flew on—not leaden feet, but just the opposite. It always does when one is pleasantly occupied. Developing photographs or a rubber of Bridge, it's just the same, the hands of the clock spin round. And I've won six shillings, and it would have been more if it had not been for Lady Fortescue's last declaration. Four hearts, my dearest, and the knave as her highest card. They doubled us, and of course we went down. I had only two small ones. I had shown her my own weakness by not supporting her declaration. Of course at my first lead I led her a heart, and it was won by the queen on my left. A heart was returned, and Lady Fortescue played the nine. It was covered by the ten which won the trick. She didn't make a single trick in her own suit. It is quite impossible to understand Lady Fortescue's declarations. And did you put in all the prints? They will have nearly filled the last pages. I must send for another album. Are these they?" She crossed to the open volume.

"No," said Trix, "that's an old volume. I was looking at it. Who's the boy in the photograph, Aunt Lilla?"

Mrs. Arbuthnot bent towards the page.

"'A. G., aged fourteen.' Let me see. Why, of course that was Antony Gray, Richard Gray's son. But I never knew his father. He—I mean the boy—was staying in rooms with his aunt, Mrs. Stanley. She was his father's sister, and married George Stanley. Something to do with the stock exchange, and quite a wealthy man, though a bad temper. And his wife was not a happy woman, as you can guess. Temper means such endless friction when it's bad, especially with regard to things like interfering with the servants, and wanting to order the kitchen dinner. So absurd, as well as annoying. There's a place for a man and a place for a woman, and the man's place is not the kitchen, even if his entry is only figurative. By which I mean that Mr. Stanley did not actually go to the kitchen, but gave orders from his study, on a sort of telephone business he had had fixed up and communicating with the kitchen. So trying for the cook's nerves, especially when making omelettes, or anything that required particular attention. She never knew when his voice wouldn't shout at her from the wall. A small black thing like a hollow handle fixed close to the kitchen range. Quite uncomfortably near her ear. Worse than if he himself had appeared at the kitchen door, which would have been normal, though trying. And Mr. Stanley never lowered his voice. He always spoke as if one were deaf, especially to foreigners who spoke English every bit as well as himself. Mrs. Stanley gave excellent wages,

and even bonuses out of her dress money to try and keep cooks. But they all said the voice from the wall got on their nerves. And no wonder. And then unpleasantness when the cooks left. As if it were poor Mrs. Stanley's fault, and not his own. She once suggested they should give up their house and live in an hotel. He couldn't have a telephone arrangement to the kitchen there. But he was more unpleasant still. Almost violent. And he died at last of an attack of apoplexy. Such a relief to Mrs. Stanley. Not the dying of apoplexy, which was a grief. But the quiet, and the being able to keep a cook when he had gone." Mrs. Arbuthnot paused a moment to take breath.

"Do you know what became of the boy?" asked Trix.

Mrs. Arbuthnot considered for an instant.

"I believe he went abroad. Yes; I remember now, hearing from Mrs. Stanley just before she died herself, poor soul—ptomaine poisoning and a dirty cook, some people seem pursued by cooks, figuratively speaking, of course,—that her brother had lost all his money and died, and that Antony had gone abroad. We are told not to judge, and I don't, but it did seem to me that Mrs. Stanley ought to have made him some provision, if not before her death, at least after it. By will, of course I mean by 'after'! which in a sense would have been before death. But you understand. Instead of which she left all her money to a deaf and dumb asylum. No doubt good in its way, but not like anything religious, which would have been more justifiable, though she was a Protestant. And teaching dumb people to speak is always a doubtful blessing. They have such an odd way of talking. Scarcely understandable. But perhaps better than nothing for themselves, though not for others. Though with a penniless nephew and all that money I *do* think—But, as I said, we are told not to judge."

"And you don't know what became of him after that?" asked Trix.

Mrs. Arbuthnot looked almost reproachful.

"My dearest, how could I? Mrs. Stanley in the family grave with her brother,—she mentioned that particularly in her will, and not with her husband, I suppose she could not have had much affection for him,—I could not possibly hear any more of the young man. There were no other relations, and I did not even know what part of the world he was in. Nor should I have thought it advisable to write to him if I had, unless it had been a brief letter of consolation as from a much older woman, which I was. But even with age I do not think a correspondence between men and women desirable, unless they are related, especially with Mrs. Barclay's novels so widely read. Not for my own sake, of course, as I do not think I am easily given to absurd notions. But one never knows what ideas a young man may not get into his head. And now, dear child, I must dress. Maunder has been sighing for the last ten minutes, and I know what that means. And you'll be late yourself, if you don't go."

Much later in the evening, Trix, in a far corner of the drawing-room with a novel, found herself again pondering deeply on her discovery.

She was absolutely and entirely certain that the man with the wheelbarrow was none other than Antony Gray, the boy with whom she had played in her childhood. She remembered now that his face had been oddly familiar to her at the time, though, being unable to put any name to him, she had looked upon it merely as a chance likeness. But since he was Antony Gray, what was he doing at Chorley Old Hall?

Her first impulse had been to write to the Duchessa, tell her of her certainty, and ask her to find out any particulars she could regarding the man. She had abandoned that idea, in view of the fact that she would have to say where she had met him, which would very probably lead to questions difficult to answer.

One thing she would do, however, and she gave a little inward laugh at the thought, when she was next at Byestry, if she saw him again, she would ask him if he remembered the pond and the pheasants' eggs. It would be amusing to see his amazed face.

CHAPTER XXVIII

FOR THE DAY ALONE

Probably there are times in the life of every human being, when the only possible method of living at all, would seem to be by living in the day—nay, in the moment—alone, resolutely shutting one's eyes to the mistakes behind one, refusing to look at the blankness ahead. And this is more especially the case when the mistakes and the blankness have been caused by our own actions. There is not even stolid philosophy to come to our aid, a shrugging of the shoulders, a foisting of the blame on to fate. It may be that the majority of the incidents have been forced upon us, that we have not been free agents in the matter, but if we must of honesty say,—Here or there was the mistake which led to them, and I made that mistake of my own free will,—we cannot turn to philosophy regarding fate for our comfort.

To Antony's mind he had made a big mistake. Fate had been responsible for his receipt of that

letter, it had had nothing to do with himself; he might even consider that, having received it, fate was largely responsible for his journey to England and his meeting with the Duchessa, but he could not possibly accuse fate of his acceptance of those mad conditions attached to the will. He had been an entirely free agent so far as they were concerned; they had been put before him for him to accept or reject them as he chose, and he had accepted them. It had been a huge blunder on his part, and one for which he alone had been responsible.

Of course he might quite justly declare that he could not possibly have foreseen all the other moves fate had up her sleeve; but then no living being could have foreseen them. Fate never does show her subsequent moves. She puts decisions before us in such a way, that she leaves us to imagine we can shape our succeeding actions to our own mind and according to the decision made. She leaves us to imagine it is simply a question whether we will reach our goal by a road bearing slightly to the right or to the left, by a road which may take a long time to traverse and be a fairly smooth road, or a road which will take a short time to traverse and be a rough one. Or, even, as in Antony's case, she will leave us to imagine there is one route and one route only by which we may reach our goal. And then, whatever our choice, she may suddenly plant a huge barrier across the path, labelled,—No thoroughfare to your goal in this direction.

Sometimes it is possible to defy fate, retrace our steps, and start anew towards the goal. Occasionally we will find that we have burnt our bridges behind us; we are up against an obstacle, and there we are bound to remain helpless. And here fate appears at her worst trickery.

And even supposing we are minded to call it not fate, but Providence, who does these things, it will be of remarkably little comfort to us when we are aware of our own blunders in the background.

A hundred times Antony reviewed the past; a hundred times he blamed himself for the part he had chosen. It is true that, so far as he could see, none other would have had the smallest chance of leading him to his desired goal, yet any other could not have raised the enormous barrier he now saw before him.

He had angered her: she despised him.

To his mind nothing, no subsequent happening, could alter that fact. There was the thought he had to face, and behind him lay his own irredeemable blunder.

Well, the only thing now left for him was to live his life as it was, minus one spark of brightness. Certainly he didn't feel like singing, but whining was no earthly good. And since he could not sing, and would not whine, silence alone was left him. He would work as best he could till the year was out. He had no intention of going back on his bargain, despite the uselessness of it. At the end of the year, the Hall being his own property, he would sell the place, and travel. Perhaps he would go off shooting big game, or perhaps he would go round the world. It did not much matter which, so long as it prevented him from whining.

And quite possibly, though he would never have any heart for singing, the day might come when he would again be able to whistle.

CHAPTER XXIX

IN THE CHURCH PORCH

It was somewhere about the second week in December that Trix became the recipient of another letter, a letter quite as amazing, perplexing, and extraordinary as that which she had perused in the summer-house at Llandrindod Wells. They had returned to London in October.

The letter was brought to her in the drawing-room one evening about nine o'clock. Mrs. Arbuthnot had gone out to a Bridge party.

Trix was engrossed in a rather exciting novel at the moment, a blazing fire and an exceedingly comfortable armchair adding to her blissful state of well-being. Barely raising her eyes from the book, she merely put out her hand and took the letter from the tray. It was not till she had come to the end of the chapter that she even glanced at the handwriting. Then she saw that the writing was Miss Tibbutt's.

Now, a letter from Miss Tibbutt was of such extremely rare occurrence that Trix immediately leapt to the conclusion that Pia must be ill. It was therefore with a distinct pang of uneasiness that she broke the seal. This is what she read:

"MY DEAR TRIX,—

"I have made rather an astounding discovery. At least I feel sure I've made it, I mean that I am right in what I think. I have no one in whom I can confide, as it certainly would not do to speak to Pia on the subject,—I feel sure she would rather I didn't, so I am writing to you as I feel I

must tell someone. My dear, it sounds too extraordinary for anything, and I can't understand it myself, but it is this. Pia knows the under-gardener at the Hall, really knows him I mean, not merely who he is, and that he is one of the gardeners, and that he came to these parts last March, which, of course, we all know.

"I found this out quite by accident, and will explain the incident to you. You must forgive me if I am lengthy; but I can only write in my own way, dear Trix, and perhaps that will be a little long-winded.

"Yesterday afternoon, which was Saturday, Pia and I motored into Byestry, as she wanted to see Father Dormer about something. I went into the church, while she went to the presbytery. I noticed a man in the church as I went in, a man in workman's clothes, but of course I did not pay any particular attention to him. I knelt down by one of the chairs near the door, and just beyond St. Peter's statue. I suppose I must have been kneeling there about ten minutes when the man got up. He didn't genuflect, and I glanced involuntarily at him. He didn't notice me, because I was partly hidden by St. Peter's statue. Then I saw it was the under-gardener,—Michael Field, I believe his name is.

"My dear, the man looked dreadfully ill, and so sad. It was the face of a man who had lost something or someone very dear to him. He went towards the porch, and just before he reached it, I heard the door open. Whoever was coming in must have met him just inside the church. There was a sound of steps as if the person had turned back into the porch with him. Then I heard Pia's voice, speaking impulsively and almost involuntarily. At least I felt sure it was involuntarily. It sounded exactly as if she couldn't help speaking.

"'Oh,' she said, 'you've been ill.'

"'Nothing of any consequence, Madam,' I heard the man's voice answer.

"'But it must have been of consequence,' I heard Pia say. 'Have you seen a doctor?'

"'There was no need,' returned the man.

"Then I heard Pia's voice, impulsive and a little bit impatient. She evidently had not seen me in the church, and thought no one was there.

"'But there is need. Why don't you go and see Doctor Hilary?'

"'I am not ill enough to need doctors, Madam,' returned the man.

"'But you are,' returned Pia, in the way that she insists when she is very anxious about anything.

"I heard the man give a little laugh."

"'It is exceedingly good of you to trouble concerning me,' he said, 'and I really don't know why you should.'

"'Oh,' said Pia quickly, 'you need not be afraid that I, personally, wish to interfere with you again. You made it quite plain to me months ago that you had no smallest wish for me to do so. But, speaking simply as one human being to another, as complete and entire strangers, even, I do ask you to see a doctor.'

"Then there was a moment's silence."

"'I think not,' I heard the man say presently. 'I am really not sufficiently interested in myself. Though—' and then, Trix dear, he half stopped, and his voice altered in the queerest way,—'the fact that you have shown interest enough to ask me to do so, has, curiously enough, made me feel quite a good deal more important in my own eyes.'

"'You refused my friendship,' I heard Pia say, and her voice shook a little.

"'I did,' said the man in rather a stern voice.

"Again, Trix dear, there was a little silence. Then Pia said:

"'I don't intend again to offer a thing that has once been rejected. I shall *never* do that. But because we once were friends, or at all events, fancied ourselves friends, I do ask you to see Doctor Hilary. That is all.'

"She must have turned from him at once, because she came into the church, and went up the aisle to her own chair. She knelt down, and put her hands over her eyes; and, Trix dearest, she was crying. I am crying now when I think about it, so forgive the blots on the paper. A minute later I heard the door open and shut again, so I knew the man had gone. I got up as softly as I could, and slipped out of the church. It would never have done for Pia to see me, and I was so thankful to St. Peter for hiding me.

"Well, my dear Trix, wasn't it amazing? And one of the most amazing things was that the man's voice and way of speaking was quite educated, not the least as one would suppose a gardener would speak.

"I went to the post-office and bought some stamps, though I really had plenty at home, and loitered about for nearly a quarter of an hour. Then I thought I had better go and find Pia. I met her coming out of the church. She was very pale; but she smiled, and wanted to know where I'd been, and I told her to the post-office. And then we drove home together. Pia laughed and chatted all the way, while my heart was in a big lump in my throat, and I could hardly keep from crying, like the foolish old woman that I am. I ought to have been talking, and helping Pia to pretend.

"She has been quite gay all to-day, and oddly gentle too. But you know the kind of gayness. And to-night my heart feels like breaking for her, for there is some sad mystery I can't fathom. So, Trix dearest, I have written to you, because I cannot keep it all to myself. And I am crying again now, though I know I oughtn't to. So I am going to leave off, and say the rosary instead.

"Good night, my dear Trix.
"Your affectionate old friend,
"ESTHER TIBBUTT.

P.S. I wish you could come down here again. Can't you?"

Trix leant back in her chair, and drew a long breath. The novel was utterly and entirely forgotten. So *that* was what Pia's letter had meant. It was this man she had been thinking of all the time. A dozen little unanswered questions were answered now, a dozen queer little riddles solved.

Trix slid down off her chair on to the bear-skin rug in front of the fire. She leant her arms sideways on the chair, resting her chin upon them. Most assuredly she must place the whole matter clearly before her mind, in so far as possible. She gazed steadily at the glowing coals, ruminative, reflective.

And firstly it was presented to her mind as the paramount fact, that it was the mention of this man—this Michael Field, so-called—that had been the direct cause of Pia's odd irritability, and not the indirect cause, as she most erroneously had imagined. Somehow, in some way, he had caused her such pain that the mere mention of his name had been like laying a hand roughly on a wound. Secondly, though Trix most promptly dismissed the memory, there was Pia's hurting little speech, the speech which had followed on her—Trix's—theories promulgated beneath the lime trees. In the light of Miss Tibbutt's letter that speech was easy enough of explanation. Had not Pia had practical proof of the unworkableness of those theories? Proof which must have hurt her quite considerably. How utterly and entirely childish her words must have seemed to Pia,—Pia who *knew*, while she truly was merely surmising, setting forth ideas which assuredly she had never attempted to put into practice. Thirdly—Trix ticked off the facts on her fingers—there was the amazing little game of cross-questions. That too was entirely explained. How precisely it was explained she did not attempt to put into actual formulated words. Nevertheless she perceived quite clearly that it was explained. And lastly there was Pia's letter to her, the letter which had vainly tried to hide the bitterness which had prompted it. Clear as daylight now was the explanation of that letter. Buoyed up by Trix's advice, by Trix's eloquence, she had once more attempted to put the high-sounding theories into practice. And it had proved a failure, an utter and complete failure.

All these things fell at once into place, fitting together like the pieces of a puzzle, an unfinished puzzle, nevertheless. The largest pieces were still scattered haphazard on the board, and there seemed extremely little prospect of fitting them into the rest. How had Pia ever met the man? What was he doing at Chorley Old Hall? And why was he pretending to be Michael Field, when she—Trix—now knew him to be Antony Gray? The last two proved the greatest difficulty, nor could Trix, for all her gazing into the fire, find the place they ought to occupy. She remembered, too, her own idea regarding the colour of that bubble. Was it possible that she had been right in her idea? Verily, if she had been, in the face of this new discovery, it opened up a yet more astounding problem. Pia actually and verily in love with the man, a man she believed to be under-gardener at the Hall,—Pia, the distant, the proud, the reserved Pia! It was amazing, unthinkable!

Trix heaved a sigh; it was all quite beyond her. One thing alone was obvious; she must go down to Woodleigh again as soon as possible. Certainly she had no very clear notion as to what precise good she could do by going, nevertheless she was entirely convinced that go she must. And then, having reached this point in her reflections, she returned once more to the beginning, and began all over again.

And suddenly another idea struck her, one which had been entirely omitted from her former train of thought. Was it possible that Mr. Danver knew of the identity of this Michael Field? Was it possible, was it conceivable that he held the key to those greatest riddles? Truly it would seem possible. His one big action had been so extraordinary, so mad even, that it would be quite justifiable to believe, or at least conjecture, that minor extraordinary actions might be mixed up with it.

And then, from that, Trix turned to a somewhat more detailed consideration of Pia's position. One point presented itself quite definitely and clearly to her. It was certainly evident from that memorable letter of Pia's, that she *did* regard this man as a social inferior, from which fact it was entirely plain that she had no smallest notion of his real identity. Trix clasped her hands beneath her chin, shut her eyes, and plunged yet deeper into her reflections. They were becoming even more intricate.

Now, would it be a comfort to Pia to know that this man was by birth her social equal, or would it, in view of the fact that he had in some way shown her what she had called "a glimpse of the hairy hoof," appear to her an added insult. Trix pondered the question deeply, turning it in her mind, and sighing prodigiously more than once in the process.

And then, all at once, she opened her eyes. Where, after all, was the use of troubling her head on that score. Comfort or not, who was to tell Pia? Most assuredly Trix couldn't. She had considered that question already, weeks ago in fact, and answered it in the negative. Of course

it was quite possible that she was being somewhat over-sensitive and ultra-scrupulous on the subject. But there it was. It was the way she regarded matters.

Trix sighed deeply. It was all terribly perplexing, and Tibby's letter was quite horribly pathetic. Anyhow she would go down to Woodleigh as soon as she possibly could.

She had been so entirely engrossed with her reflections, that she had quite forgotten the passing of time. It was with a start of surprise, therefore, that she heard the door open. At the selfsame moment the clock on the mantelpiece chimed the hour of midnight. Trix got to her feet.

"My dearest," exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot, "not gone to bed yet! And all the beauty sleep before midnight, they tell us. Not that you need it except in the way of preservation, dearest. For I always did tell you, regardless of making you conceited which I do not think I do do, that I have admired you from the time you were in your cradle. Well, food is the next best thing to sleep, so come and have a sandwich and some sherry. I am famished, positively famished. And I ate an excellent dinner, I know; but Bridge is always hungry work. Bring the tray to the fire, dearest. I see James has put it all ready. And ham, which I adore. It may be indigestible, though I never believe it with things I like. Not merely because I like to think so, but because it is true. Nature knows best, as she knew when I was a child, and gave me a distaste for fat which always upset me, and a great appreciation for oranges which doctors are crying up tremendously nowadays."

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Mrs. Arbuthnot sank down in an armchair, and threw back her cloak. Trix brought the tray to a small table near her.

"And how have you been amusing yourself, dearest? Not dull, I hope? But the fire and a book are always the best of companions I think, to say nothing of one's own thoughts, though some people do consider day-dreaming waste of time. So narrow-minded. They read novels which are only other people's day-dreams, and their own less expensive, as saving library subscriptions and the buying of books, besides a certain superiority in feeling they are your own. On the whole more satisfactory, too. Even though you know the end before you come to it, it can always be arranged as you like, and sad or happy to suit your mood. Though for my part it should always be happy. If you're happy you want it happy, and if you're not, you still want it to make you. If it weren't for the difficulty of dividing into chapters, I'd write my own day-dreams, and no doubt have a big sale. But publishers have an absurd prejudice in favour of chapters, and even headings, which means an average of thirty titles. Quite brain-racking. A dear friend of mine who wrote, told me she always thought the title the most difficult part of a book."

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She helped herself to a glass of sherry and two sandwiches as she concluded her speech.

"And did you really have a pleasant evening?" said Trix, politely interrogative.

Mrs. Arbuthnot surveyed her sandwich reflectively.

"Well, dearest, on the whole, yes. But unfortunately Mrs. Townsend was there. An excellent Bridge player, and I am always pleased to see her myself, but some people are so odd in their manner towards her. Quite embarrassing really, in fact awkward at times. Absurd, too, with so good a player. And though her father was a grocer it was in the wholesale line, which is different from the retail. Besides, she married well, and doesn't drop her aitches."

Trix's chin went up. "I hate class distinctions being made so horribly obvious," said she with fine scorn.

Mrs. Arbuthnot looked thoughtful.

"Well, dearest, in Mrs. Townsend's case, perhaps. But not always. I remember a girl I knew married a farmer. Most foolish."

"But why, if he was nice?" demanded Trix, exceedingly firmly.

"Oh, but dearest," ejaculated Mrs. Arbuthnot, "it was so unsuitable. He wasn't even a gentleman farmer. He had been a labourer."

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"He might have been a nice labourer," contended Trix.

Mrs. Arbuthnot sighed. "In himself, possibly. But it wouldn't do. The irritation afterwards. We are told to avoid occasions of sin, and it would not be avoiding occasions of ill-temper if you married a man like that. Beer and muddy boots, to say nothing of inferior tobacco. The glamour passed, though for my part I cannot see how there ever would be any glamour, probably infatuation, the boots—you know the kind, dearest, great nails and smelling of leather—the beer and the tobacco would be so terribly obvious. No, dearest, it doesn't do."

Trix was silent. After all wasn't she again arguing on a point regarding which she had had no real experience? Pia had tried the experiment, and declared it didn't work; and that, in the case of a man who *was* of gentle birth, though posing as a labourer. In her own mind she felt it ought to work,—of course under certain circumstances. It was not the birth, but the mind that mattered. And, if there were the right kind of mind, there most certainly would not be the boots, the beer, and the tobacco. Trix was perfectly sure there wouldn't be. But it evidently was no atom of good trying to explain to other people what she meant, because they entirely failed to understand, and she was not certain that she could explain very well to herself even what she did mean.

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It was not in the least that she had ever had the smallest desire to run counter to these conventions in any really important way, but she did hate hard and fast rules. Why should people lay down laws, as rigid as the laws of the Medes and Persians on matters that did not involve actual questions of right and wrong! There were enough of those to observe, without

inventing others which were not in the least necessary.

It was all horribly muddling, and rather depressing, she decided. She finished her sandwich and glass of sherry, swallowing a little lump in her throat at the same time. Then she spoke.

"Aunt Lilla," she said impulsively, "I want to go down to Woodleigh."

Mrs. Arbuthnot looked up.

"Woodleigh, dearest. You were there only a little time ago, weren't you?"

"It was in August," said Trix. "And, anyhow, I want to go again. You don't mind, do you?"

Mrs. Arbuthnot took another sandwich.

"That's the fifth," she said. "Disgraceful, but all the fault of Bridge. Why, of course not, if you want to go. But what made you think of it to-night?"

Trix leant back in her chair. "I had a letter from Miss Tibbutt," she said.

Mrs. Arbuthnot laid down her sandwich. She regarded Trix with anxious and almost reproachful eyes. 274

"Oh, my dearest, nothing wrong I hope? So inconsiderate of me to talk of Bridge. I saw a letter in your hand, but no black edge. Unless there is a black edge, one does not readily imagine bad news. Not like telegrams. They send my heart to my mouth, and generally nothing but a Bridge postponement. So trivial. But it is the colour of the envelope, and the possibility. Ill news flies apace, and telegrams the quickest mode of communicating it. Except the telephone. And that is expensive at any distance." Mrs. Arbuthnot paused, and took up her sandwich once more.

"Oh, no," responded Trix, answering the first sentence of the speech. Experience, long experience had taught her to seize upon the first half-dozen words of her aunt's discourses, and cling to them, allowing the remainder to float harmlessly into thin air. Later there might be the necessity to clutch at a few more, but generally the first half-dozen sufficed. "Oh, no; no bad news. But Miss Tibbutt is not quite satisfied about Pia."

That was true, at all events.

Mrs. Arbuthnot made a little clicking sound with her tongue, expressive of sympathy.

"Oh, my dearest, I know that term 'not quite satisfied.' So vague. It may mean nothing, or it may mean a good deal. And we always think it means a good deal, when it is probably only influenza. Depressing, but not at all serious if taken in time. And ammoniated quinine the best thing possible. Not bitter, either, if taken in capsule form. But I quite feel with you, and go-by all means if you wish. And take eucalyptus, with you to avoid catching it yourself. So infectious, they say, but not to be shirked if one is needed. I would never stand in the light of duty. The corporal works of mercy, inconvenient at times, and I have never been to see a prisoner in my life, but perhaps easier than the spiritual, except the three last. You always run the risk of interference with the first of the spiritual, so wiser to leave them entirely to priests. When do you want to go, dearest?" 275

Trix came to herself with a little start. She had lost the thread of Mrs. Arbuthnot's discourse.

"The day after to-morrow, I think," she said, reflectively. "I can wire to-morrow and get a reply."

Mrs. Arbuthnot got up.

"Then that's settled. Don't look anxious, dearest, because there is probably no cause for it. Though I know how easy it is to give advice, and how difficult to take it, even when it is oneself. Though perhaps that is really harder, being often half-hearted. And now we will go to bed, and things will look brighter in the morning, especially if it is fine. And the glass going up as I came through the hall. Quite time it did. I always had sympathy with the boy in the poem—Jane and Anne Taylor, wasn't it?—who smashed the glass in the holidays because it wouldn't go up. It always seems as if it were its fault. Though I know it's foolish to think so. And there is the clock striking one, and I shall eat more sandwiches if I stay, so let us put out the light, and go to bed." 276

CHAPTER XXX

A QUESTION OF IMPORTANCE

It had been chance pure and simple which happened to take Doctor Hilary to Woodleigh on the day the Duchessa received Trix's telegram, but it cannot be equally said that it was chance which took him to Exeter on the following day, and which made him travel down again to Kingsleigh by the four o'clock train. Also it was certainly not chance which induced him to be on the platform at least a quarter of an hour before the train was due at the station, ready to keep a careful lookout on all the passengers in it. 277

Trix had had an uneasy journey from London. She had re-read Miss Tibbutt's letter at least a

dozen times. At first she had allowed herself to be almost unreasonably depressed by it; afterwards she had been almost more unreasonably depressed because she had allowed herself to be depressed in the first instance. Quite possibly it was all a storm in a tea-cup, and this man had nothing whatever to do with Pia's unhappiness. Of course the chance meeting and the overheard conversation had fitted in so neatly as to make Miss Tibbutt think it had, and she had easily communicated the same idea to Trix. But quite probably it had nothing more to do with it than her own surmise regarding Doctor Hilary had had. And that had proved entirely erroneous, though at the time it had appeared the most sane of conclusions. Also Miss Tibbutt might quite conceivably be wrong as to Pia's being now unhappy at all, whatever she had seemed to be in the summer.

Trix's visit began to appear to her somewhat in the light of a wild-goose chase. Anyhow she had not given Pia the smallest hint as to why she was coming. Naturally she could not possibly have done that. She had still to invent some tangible excuse for her sudden desire to visit Woodleigh again. Sick of London greyness would be quite good enough, though certainly not entirely true. But possibly a slight deviation from truth would be excusable under the circumstances. And she *was* sick of London greyness. The fog yesterday had got on her nerves altogether, though quite probably it would not have done so if it had not been for Miss Tibbutt's letter, which had made her feel so horribly restless. But then there was no need to say why the fog had got on her nerves.

Yes; the fog would be excuse enough. And it was not an atom of good worrying herself as to whether Miss Tibbutt had been right or wrong regarding the idea communicated in her letter. If she were right it made Trix unhappy to think about it, and if she were wrong it made Trix cross to think she *had* thought about it. So the wisest course was not to think about it at all. But the difficulty was not to think about it.

Trix knew perfectly well that absurd little things had this power of depressing her, and she wished they had not. She knew, also, that other quite little things had the power of cheering her in equal proportion, and she wished that one of these other things would happen now. But that was not particularly likely.

The depression had been at its lowest ebb as they ran into Bath. It was, however, slightly on the mend by the time Trix reached Exeter, though she was still feeling that her journey had probably, if not certainly, been a piece of pure foolishness on her part.

The carriage she was in was up in the front of the train. She was the sole occupant thereof. She now put up something akin to a prayer that she might remain in undisturbed possession. Apparently, however, the prayer was not to be granted. A tall figure, masculine in character, suddenly blocked the light from the window. Trix heaved a small sigh of patient resignation.

"Good afternoon, Miss Devereux," said a voice.

Trix looked up. Her resignation took to itself wings and fled.

"Doctor Hilary!" she exclaimed.

Doctor Hilary heaved his big form into the carriage, and turned to take a tea-basket from a porter just behind him. First tipping the said porter, he put the basket carefully on the seat.

"I've been on the lookout for you," he remarked calmly.

"Oh," said Trix, a trifle surprised.

Doctor Hilary sat down, keeping, however, one eye towards the platform.

"Yes," he continued, still calmly. "The Duchessa happened to tell me yesterday that you were coming, and as I happened to be in Exeter to-day I thought we might as well do this bit of the journey together."

"I see," said Trix.

Doctor Hilary looked up. "You don't mind, do you?" he asked quickly.

"Mind!" echoed Trix, "I am quite delighted. I've been so bored, and rather tired, and—yes, I think quite depressed."

Doctor Hilary looked concerned.

"You poor little thing," he said. "And I suppose you have had one sandwich, and no tea. Men turn to food when they're depressed, and women think they can't eat. Honestly, there's nothing like a good meal for helping one to look on the brighter side of things."

Trix smiled first at him, and then at the tea-basket.

"Anyhow I'm to be fed now, it seems."

The train began to move slowly out of the station. Doctor Hilary gave vent to an ill-suppressed sigh of relief. The train was non-stop to Brent. He began pulling at the straps of the tea-basket.

Tea and Doctor Hilary's company had a really marvellous effect on Trix's spirits. The little pleasant occurrence *had* happened, and quite unexpectedly.

"I'm glad you're coming down to Woodleigh," said Doctor Hilary presently. "The Duchessa has seemed out of sorts lately, and I fancy your coming will cheer her."

"Oh," said Trix, "you think so, too." And then she stopped.

"Who else thinks so?" queried Doctor Hilary.

"Well, Miss Tibbutt didn't seem quite satisfied about her," owned Trix. "It was a letter from her made me come. And then I thought perhaps she'd been mistaken, and I'd been silly to think there was any need of me, and that—well, that I'd been a little officious. It's a depressing sensation," sighed Trix.

Doctor Hilary laughed.

"So that was the cause of the depression," quoth he.

Trix nodded. "It was rather silly, wasn't it?" she asked.

"I am not sure," he said.

"It was such an idiotic little thing to worry about," said Trix

Doctor Hilary looked thoughtful.

"Perhaps. But isn't it just the little things we *do* worry over? They are so small, you know, it's difficult to handle them. It is far easier not to worry over a thing you can get a real grasp of." 282

Trix smiled gratefully.

"I am so glad you understand," she said. "I am always doing things on impulse. I fancy I am indispensable, I suppose, and then all at once I think what a little donkey I am to have interfered. It is so easy to think oneself important to other people's welfare when one isn't a bit."

"Aren't you?" said Doctor Hilary quietly.

"Of course not," replied Trix. There was a hint of indignation in her voice. "And please don't say I am, or else it will make me feel that you think I said what I did say just in order that you might contradict me. Like fishing for a compliment, you know. And I didn't mean that in the least, I didn't truly."

Doctor Hilary smiled, a queer little smile.

"I know you didn't mean that. But all the same I am going to contradict you."

Trix looked up. "Oh well," she began, laughing and half resignedly. And then something in Doctor Hilary's face made her stop suddenly, her heart beating at a mad pace.

"You have become very important in my life," he said quietly. "I did not realize how important, till you went away."

Trix was silent.

"I am not very good at making pretty speeches," said Doctor Hilary steadily, "but I hope you understand exactly what I mean. You have become so important to my welfare that I should find it exceedingly difficult to go on living without you. I suppose I should do it somehow if I must, but probably I should make a very poor job of it." He stopped. 283

Trix gave a sudden little intake of her breath. For a moment there was a dead silence. Then:—

"Will you always feed me when I am depressed?" she asked. And there was a little quiver half of laughter, half of tears, in her voice.

CHAPTER XXXI

MIDNIGHT REFLECTIONS

"Yes, Tibby angel, you were quite right."

It was the sixth time Trix had made the same remark in the last half hour, and she had made it each time with the same attentive deliberation as if the words were being only once spoken, though she knew she would probably have to say them at least six times more.

She was sitting in front of her bedroom fire clad in a blue dressing-gown. Miss Tibbutt was sitting in an armchair opposite to her. She had come into the room presumably for two minutes only, to see that Trix had all she wanted, but after she had fluttered for full ten minutes from dressing-table to bed, and back to dressing-table again, talking all the time, Trix had firmly pushed her into an armchair.

Miss Tibbutt took off her spectacles, and polished them slowly.

"And what is to be done, Trix dear?"

Trix looked thoughtful.

"I really don't know just at the moment. You see, though we are pretty certain, we are not quite certain. I know I thought last August that Pia was in love with someone, and now you say you are certain it is this man, and of course, as you say—" Trix hesitated a moment, feeling slightly hypocritical,—"it does seem odd when he is only a gardener, and one wonders how she could 284

have met him, and all that. But, you know, you are not *quite* certain that you are right; or, even supposing that you are, that Pia will want any interference on our part. We must just wait a day or two and think matters over."

Miss Tibbutt sighed.

"But you *do* think I was right to let you know?" she asked.

And a seventh time Trix replied with careful deliberation,

"Yes, Tibby angel, you were quite right."

"You see," said Miss Tibbutt, "I thought—" And she related exactly what she had thought, all over again.

Trix listened exceedingly patiently. She did not even know she was being patient. She only knew the enormous relief it was to Miss Tibbutt to repeat herself. With each repetition the thought which had choked her mind, so to speak, for the last five days, was further cleared from her brain. It was quite possible that Miss Tibbutt might sleep a very great deal better that night than she had done lately.

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At last she stopped speaking, and looked towards the clock.

"My dear, I had no idea it was so late. You must be tired after your journey, and here have I been thinking only of myself again, and of my own anxiety, and not of you at all. I am not going to keep you up a moment longer. And if I am late for breakfast, please tell Pia I have gone to Mass. The walk won't hurt me, and telling our dear Lord all about it will be the best way to help Pia. So good night, dear. And you are really not looking very tired in spite of your journey, and my having kept you up so late."

Trix went with her to the door, and then returned to her chair by the fire. She was not in the least sleepy, and bed would do quite well enough later. Just now she wanted to think. There were two distinct trends of thought in which she wished to indulge; the one certainly contained cause for a little anxiety, the other was quite extraordinarily delicious. She must take the anxious trend first.

She had been considering matters exceedingly earnestly all the while Miss Tibbutt had been talking to her, and she had come to one very definite conclusion. She felt perfectly certain now, that it *would* ease the situation considerably if Pia knew who this Michael Field really was. It had come to her in an illuminating flash, that the same reason which had caused him to hide his identity, was responsible for his odd behaviour towards Pia. Now, of course, if Pia could see some even possible reason and excuse for the oddness of his behaviour, it must be a great comfort to her. But the question was, could she—Trix—tell her? Would not the telling probably involve her in the untruth her soul loathed? Or, if she was firm not to tell lies, would it not somehow involve a breaking of her promise to Nicholas? Again she saw, or thought she saw, all the questions which must ensue if she said where she had met the man; and if she did not say where she had met him, it would probably mean saying something which, virtually speaking at least, would not be true. If only she had not met him in the grounds of Chorley Old Hall.

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It was the same old problem which had presented itself to her mind twice already, and the same possible over-scrupulosity was perplexing her now. However, she must stop thinking about it for to-night. She had come to an end of these thoughts so far as she could muster them into shape, and it was not the least particle of use going over them again. Her brain would run round like a squirrel in a cage, if she did. And Tibby was not with her to open the cage door, as she had opened it for Tibby. Besides, there was the other trend now.

She settled herself back among the cushions, and gazed at the dancing flames. It was all so wonderful, so gorgeously unexpected, and yet it was one of those things which just had to be. She was so sure of that, it made the happening doubly sweet. It was exactly as if she had been walking all her life through a quiet wood, a wood where the sunshine flickered through the trees overhead just sufficiently to make her feel quite certain of the existence of the sunshine, and then suddenly she had come out into its full warmth and beauty to behold a perfect landscape. And she knew that no single other path could have led her to this place, also that there could be no other prospect as beautiful for her.

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"When did you first know?" she had asked him. The question millions of women have asked in their time, and that will be asked by millions more.

"I think," he had answered smiling, "it was the very first moment you came into the room, looking like a woodland elf in your green frock. Anyhow I am quite certain it was when you were—shall we say a trifle snubbed in the moonlight."

"Ah, poor Pia," said Trix.

And then they had told each other countless little trivial things, things of no earthly importance to any one but their two selves, things rendered sweet, not so much by the words, as by the tone in which they were spoken. It had been the old, old story, the story which began in all its first beauty in the Garden of Eden, before the devil had entered therein with his wiles, a story which even now oftentimes holds much of that age-old wonderful beauty. And the stuffy, fusty railway carriage had not in the least diminished the joy of the telling.

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Trix smiled to herself, a soft little radiant smile.

To-morrow she must tell Pia. She gave a little sigh. It would seem almost cruel to let her know of their happiness.

For Trix's own happiness to be without flaw, it was invariably necessary that others should be in practically the same state of bliss.

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CHAPTER XXXII

SUNLIGHT AND HAPPINESS

Sleep, they say, brings counsel. Most certainly it brought counsel to Trix, and really such simple counsel she marvelled that she had not thought of it before.

After all, the question as to whether she should or should not disclose Antony Gray's identity to Pia, and thereby run the risk either of untruth or of breaking a promise, was purely a question of conscience. Now, in a question of conscience, if you cannot decide for yourself, it is always safe to consult a priest. She would therefore walk over to Byestry after breakfast—after she had told Pia her own particular and wonderful news—and consult Father Dormer. It would be quite easy to explain matters to him without mentioning names.

Trix began formulating her query in her mind as she dressed. By the time this process was completed, however, she had come to the conclusion that she was not altogether sure whether it would be so easy. She found herself getting wound up into rather extraordinary knots. Well, anyhow she would explain somehow, and no doubt words would come when she was actually confronted with him. Besides, it was never the smallest use arranging conversations beforehand, like a French conversation book, because people never gave the right answers to your questions, and never put the questions to which you had the answers ready.

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Trix crossed slowly to the window. There had been a frost in the night, and the lower part of the window-pane was covered with magic fern fronds, while lawn and shrubs were clothed with a light white veil.

Suddenly the sun came up behind the distant hills, a glowing ball of fire, sending forth his ruddy beams till they struck clean through the window, turning the fern fronds to ruby jewels, and making of the frost veil without a web of diamonds.

"That," breathed Trix softly, "is what happened to us yesterday."

And she knelt down quite suddenly by the window.

The breakfast hour at the Manor House was, ordinarily speaking, most punctually at nine o'clock, but owing, doubtless, to some slight hitch in the lower regions, the gong that morning did not sound till a quarter past the hour. This delay gave Miss Tibbutt time to put in an appearance not more than two minutes late, and saved any necessary explanation regarding her early walk to Byestry. As it was really on Pia's account that she had gone to Mass, she wished to avoid mentioning that she had been. Of course Pia could not possibly have guessed the real motive, but Miss Tibbutt had a feeling, which reason told her to be quite foolish, that in some odd way she might guess. And she did not want her to guess.

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"What is the plan of campaign to-day?" asked the Duchessa, as they assembled in the morning room after breakfast.

Trix examined an ornament on the mantelpiece with rather studied care.

"I was thinking of walking over to Byestry, this morning," she remarked.

"All right," agreed the Duchessa, "and after lunch we will have the car. It is cold, but too good a day to be wasted."

Trix had a moment's anxiety.

"We shan't be late for tea?" she queried.

"I don't think so," responded Pia. "The days are too short now. But why?"

Trix put down the ornament she was examining.

"Doctor Hilary is coming to tea," she announced carelessly, though she knew perfectly well that the colour was rising in her cheeks.

Pia looked at her.

"Trix!" she said.

"Yes, darling," nodded Trix, "just that."

"Oh, my Trix!" cried Pia delighted, putting her arms round her.

Miss Tibbutt looked a trifle bewildered.

"What is it?" she demanded

Pia laughed.

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"These two," she said, "Trix and Doctor Hilary. I told you, you remember, and said there *were* trains, though I never dreamed they would be utilized quite so literally. Of course it *was* yesterday?"

"Yes," nodded Trix again. And then with a huge sigh, "Oh, Pia, I am so happy."

Pia turned her round towards Miss Tibbutt.

"Tibby, look at her face, and then she tells us she is happy, as though it were necessary to advertise the fact to our slow intelligences."

Trix laughed, though the tears were in her eyes. Laughter and tears are amazingly close together at times.

"And is it quite necessary to walk to Byestry this morning?" teased Pia. "He will probably be on his rounds, you know."

Again Trix laughed, this time without the tears.

"I am not proposing to sit in his pocket," she remarked. "He did not happen to suggest that I should, and it certainly never occurred to me to suggest it."

CHAPTER XXXIII

TRIX SEEKS ADVICE

Trix walked along the road from Woodleigh to Byestry in infinitely too happy a state of mind to think consistently of any one thing. She did not even think precisely definitely of the man who had caused this happiness. She knew only that the happiness was there.

The hoar frost still lay thickly on the hedges and the grass by the roadside. The frost finger had outlined the twigs, the blades of grass, the veins of dried leaves with the delicate precision nature alone can achieve. At one spot a tiny rivulet, arrested by the ice-king in its course from a field and down a bank, hung in long glistening icicles from jutting stones and frozen earth. Now and again her own footfall struck sharp and metallic on the hard road. The sky was cloudless, a clear, cold blue. A robin trilled its sweet, sad song to her from a frosted bough.

It was all amazingly like a frosted Christmas card, thought Trix, those Christmas cards her soul had adored in her childish days, and yet which, oddly enough, always brought with them a sentimental touch of sadness. Many things had brought this odd happy sadness to Trix as a child,—the sound of church bells across water, fire-light gleaming in the darkness from the uncurtained windows of some house, the moon shining on snow, a solitary tree backgrounded by a grey sky, or a flight of rooks at sunset.

It was a quarter to eleven or thereabouts when she reached Byestry, and she made her way at once to the little white-washed, thatched presbytery, separated from the road by a small front garden.

Trix walked up the path, and rang the bell. Father Dormer was at home, so his housekeeper announced, and she was shown into a small square room with a round table in the centre, and a vase of bronze chrysanthemums on the table.

Trix sat down and began to try and arrange her ideas. She was by now perfectly well aware that they were not only rather difficult to arrange, but would be infinitely more difficult to express. She sighed once or twice rather heavily, gazing thoughtfully at the bronze chrysanthemums the while, as if seeking inspiration from their feathery brown faces. And then the door opened and Father Dormer came in in his cassock, which he always wore in the morning.

"It is an unexpected pleasure to see you, Miss Devereux," he said. "Please sit down again."

Trix sat down, and so did Father Dormer.

"I only arrived yesterday," said Trix, "and I came over to see you this morning because I wanted to ask you something rather particular." Trix was feeling just a little nervous, she was also feeling that if she did not open the subject immediately, it was quite possible that she might leave the presbytery without having done so, despite all her preconceived intentions.

"Yes," smiled Father Dormer. He was perfectly well aware that she was feeling a trifle nervous.

"Well," said Trix, "it isn't going to be quite easy to explain, because I can't mention names. But as it is a thing I can't make up my mind about,—about the right or wrong of doing it, I mean,—I thought I'd ask your advice."

"That is always at your service," he assured her as she stopped.

Trix heaved a little sigh. She leant forward in her chair, and rested her hands on the table.

"Well then, Father, it's like this. I know something about someone which another person doesn't know, and I think it is rather important that they should know it. The first person doesn't know I

know it, and mightn't quite like it if they knew I knew it. Also I am pretty sure that they don't want any one else to know it. But under the circumstances I think I'm justified in telling the second person, because it isn't a thing like a scandal, or anything like that. But the difficulty is, that in telling the second person about the first person, I may either have to tell lies, or disclose a secret about a third person, and that is a secret I have promised not to tell. Do you think I ought to take the risk?"

Father Dormer listened attentively.

"Do you mind saying it again," he asked politely as she ended. There was just the faintest possible twinkle in his eyes.

Trix laughed outright.

"Oh, Father, don't try to be polite," she urged. "I know it is the muddliest kind of explanation that ever existed. Can't you suggest some way of making it clearer?"

"Supposing," he said, "you call the first person A, the second B, and the third one C. And let me know first exactly your position towards A."

"All right," agreed Trix cheerfully. "And even supposing you guess the tiniest bit what I am talking about, you won't let yourself guess, will you?"

Father Dormer assured her that he would not. He certainly felt she need have no smallest anxiety on that score, having in view her own method of explanation, but he tactfully refrained from saying so.

"Well," began Trix again, and rather slowly, "A has a secret. He doesn't know I know it, and I found it out quite by accident. He hasn't said it is a secret, but I know it is, because nobody else knows about it. Well, B knows A, but doesn't know A's secret, and because she doesn't know A's secret she is unhappy about A's conduct, whereas if she knew the secret I am pretty sure she wouldn't be so unhappy. And A need never know B does know, even if I tell her. And I feel sure from A's point of view it would not matter telling B, while it *would* be a good thing for B to know. But, in order to tell her, I may have to let her know how I learnt A's secret, and in doing that I should possibly have to tell lies, or let her know C's secret, which I promised not to tell. Because it was in meeting A that I found it out. Of course I may not have to do either, but there is the risk. Do you think I can take it? And is the matter quite clear now?"

Father Dormer smiled.

"I think I have grasped it," he said. "Well, in the first place, it isn't a matter of life and death, is it?"

"Oh no," said Trix.

"Then if I were you, I wouldn't take any risk about telling lies."

"No," said Trix relieved, "I thought I had better not. But then there is C's secret."

"Let us take A's secret first," suggested Father Dormer. "You feel quite sure it is important to let B know it, and that you are justified in disclosing it?"

Trix reflected.

"I feel quite sure it is important B should know," she said. "And I feel pretty sure I am justified in disclosing it. At first I thought perhaps I ought not to do so. But I know B won't tell any one else, so it can't matter her knowing as well as me. No; I am sure it can't," ended Trix decidedly.

"Then," said Father Dormer, "your best plan will be to ask C to release you from your promise."

Trix started.

"Oh, but—" she began. She shook her head. "I don't believe he would ever release me," she said.

"You could ask him, anyhow," said Father Dormer.

"Yes, I could," replied Trix doubtfully.

"Try that first," he suggested. "It is the simplest plan."

"Yes," said Trix still doubtfully.

Of course it sounded the simplest plan to Father Dormer, but then he had not the remotest idea of what the secret was, nor whom it concerned.

"You see," said Trix thoughtfully, "he knows A's secret too; at least, I feel sure he does."

"Perhaps," smiled Father Dormer, "it is not quite such a secret as you imagine."

"Oh, yes, it is," nodded Trix. "It is the most complicated affair that ever was, and the most extraordinary. Nobody would believe it if they didn't know." She sighed.

Father Dormer watched her. He saw that she evidently did consider it a complicated situation, though, in spite of her rather complicated explanation it had appeared quite simple to him. At all events, the solution had. It had not even—as soon as he had grasped the question she had come to ask—appeared to involve much difficulty of answering. It was quite obvious she ought not to run the risk of telling lies (he could guess that her honesty would make it exceedingly difficult for her to evade any awkward questions without telling them), mainly because it was never right to tell lies, but also because the smallest white one—so-called—would appear extremely black to Trix.

"Is that settled now?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," said Trix. She looked at her watch. "I've two hours; I had better do it at once." Then she stopped suddenly. "Oh, Father!" she exclaimed.

"Well?" he queried.

"You didn't guess, did you?"

"How could I?" he asked smiling.

"Oh, because saying that told you that C lived here."

He laughed. "My dear child, when you arrive at Woodleigh one day, and ask me a rather complicated question the next, it is perfectly obvious it is one which has to be settled in this neighbourhood, and at once. I could hardly imagine you have travelled down here on purpose to consult me; or that, if it were a question to be settled in town, you would not wait till your return to consult some other priest on the subject."

Trix smiled.

"I never thought of that," she owned. "But, of course, it is quite obvious. Only I am so afraid of breaking my promise."

She had risen to her feet by now. He held out his hand.

"I would not worry about that, if I were you. You have not broken it in the smallest degree. But now go and get leave to break it, if you can, and set your mind at rest."

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CHAPTER XXXIV

AN AMAZING SUGGESTION

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The avenue and garden were quite deserted as Trix approached Chorley Old Hall. The lawn was one great sheet of unbroken whiteness, flanked by frosted yew hedges, and very desolate.

She passed quickly along the terrace towards the front door, feeling almost as if spying eyes were watching her from behind the curtained windows. She took hold of the hanging iron bell-handle and pulled it, its coldness striking through her glove with an icy chill. She heard its clang in some far-off region, yet oddly loud in the dead silence. Involuntarily she shivered, partly with the cold, and partly with a sudden sense of nervousness.

A second or two passed. Trix stared hard at the brass knocker on the door, trying to still the nervousness which possessed her. There came a sound of steps in the hall, and the door was opened.

"Can I see Mr. Danver?" asked Trix.

Jessop stared, visibly startled.

"It is all right," said Trix quickly. "Don't you remember I had tea here last August?"

Jessop's face relaxed, but he looked a trifle dubious.

"I don't think—" he began.

Trix raised her chin.

"Go and ask him," she said with slight authority. "I will wait in the hall."

Jessop departed, to return after a minute.

"Will you come this way, please, Madam."

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Nicholas Danver looked at her as she entered, an odd expression on his face.

He might never have moved from his chair since the day she had last seen him, thought Trix. The only difference in the surroundings was a crackling wood fire now burning on the big hearth.

"Well, Miss Devereux," he said, holding out his hand.

"You don't mind my having come?" queried Trix. "No one saw me."

A slight look of relief passed over Nicholas's face.

"I think I am glad you've come," he said. "Sit down, please."

Trix sat down. Her hands were tightly clasped within her muff. She was still beating back that quite unaccountable nervousness.

"You had a particular reason for coming to see me?" suggested Nicholas.

Trix nodded.

"Yes; I am in rather a difficulty. You are the only person who can help me."

Nicholas laughed shortly.

"It is an odd experience to be told that I can be of service to any one," he said. "What is it?"

Trix drew a long breath.

"Mr. Danver, I want you to release me from my promise."

Nicholas's eyes narrowed suddenly. A little gleam, like the spark from iron striking flint, flashed from them.

"What do you mean?" he asked coldly.

Trix's heart chilled at the tone.

"I must try and explain," she said. "In the first place, of course you know who your undergardener really is?"

Nicholas stared at her.

"May I ask what that has got to do with you?"

"Well, I know too, you see," said Trix, feeling her heart beginning to beat still more quickly.

"How do you know? What questions have you been asking?"

Trix flushed.

"I haven't asked any questions," she said quickly. "I saw him the day I came here before. I knew his face then, but I couldn't remember who he was. Afterwards I remembered I used to play with him when I was a child."

"Well?" queried Nicholas briefly.

"Well," echoed Trix desperately, "I want to be able to tell someone he is Antony Gray, and not Michael Field. It is really very important that they should know, important for their happiness. But if I tell, they may want to know where I saw him, and ask questions which might lead to my either having to tell lies or betray your secret. If it becomes necessary, may I betray your secret? Will you release me from my promise?"

Nicholas's hand clenched tightly on the arm of his chair.

"Most certainly not," he replied shortly.

The tone was utterly final. Trix felt the old childish fear of him surging over her. It was quite different from the nervousness she had just been experiencing, and, oddly enough, it gave her a kind of desperate courage. She had no intention of accepting his refusal without a struggle.

"I wouldn't tell unless it became absolutely necessary," she urged.

"It never can be absolutely necessary," he retorted. "It would be no more dishonourable to tell a lie than break a promise."

Trix went scarlet.

"I never had the smallest intention of doing either," she replied. "If I had, I need not have troubled to come up here and ask you to release me from my promise."

Nicholas drummed his fingers on a small table near him.

"Well, you've had my answer," he said.

His voice was perfectly adamant. Trix felt as if she were up against a piece of rock. She knew it was useless to pursue the subject further, yet for Pia's sake she tried again.

"Mr. Danver, why do you want everyone to think you're dead?" There was something almost childish in the way she put the question.

Nicholas laughed.

"Partly, my dear young lady, for my own amusement, but largely for a scheme I have on hand."

Trix leant forward.

"Is the scheme really important?" she queried, her eyes on his face.

"I don't know," he replied, watching her. "But my amusement is."

"Amusement," said Trix slowly.

"Yes, my amusement," he repeated mockingly. "I've had none for fifteen years. For fifteen years I have lived here like a log, alone, solitary. Now I've got a little amusement in pretending to be dead."

Trix shook her head. It sounded quite mad. Then she remembered Doctor Hilary's words to her when she had met him at the gates of Chorley Old Hall last August. He knew it was mad, but it was saving Nicholas from being atrophied, so he had said. To Trix's mind at least a dozen more satisfactory ways might have been found to accomplish that end. But every man to his own taste. Also it was quite possible that a brain which had been atrophied, or practically atrophied for fifteen years, was not particularly capable of conceiving anything more enlivening.

"But you needn't have been a log for fifteen years," she said suddenly.

"Needn't I?" he retorted. "Look at me." He made a gesture towards his helpless legs.

"I wasn't thinking of your body," said Trix calmly. "I was thinking of your mind."

Nicholas's face hardened.

"And so was I," he replied, "when I preferred to sit here like a log, rather than face the prying sympathy of my fellow-humans."

"Oh!" said Trix softly, a light of illumination breaking in upon her. "But, Mr. Danver, sympathy isn't always prying."

"Bah!" he retorted. "Prying or not, I didn't want it. Staring eyes, condoling words, and mockery in their hearts! 'He got what he deserved for his madness,' they'd have said."

Trix leant forward, putting her hands on the table.

"Mr. Danver," she said thoughtfully, "if you were a younger man, or I were an older woman, I'd say you were—well, quite remarkably foolish."

Nicholas chuckled. He liked this.

"You might forget our respective ages for a few moments," he suggested, "that is, if you have anything enlivening to say."

"I don't know about it being enlivening," remarked Trix calmly, "but I have got quite a good deal to say."

"Say it then," chuckled Nicholas.

Trix drew a deep breath.

"Mr. Danver, did you ever care for any one?"

Nicholas's eyes blazed suddenly.

"What the devil—" he began. "I beg your pardon. I gave you leave to speak."

Trix waved her hand.

"I was talking about men," she said, "men pals. Were there any you ever cared about?"

Nicholas laughed shortly.

"Your father, my dear young lady, and Richard Gray, father of the man who has led to this interesting discussion."

"They were really your friends?" queried Trix.

"The best fellows that ever stepped," said Nicholas with unwonted enthusiasm.

Trix nodded. Her eyes were shining. She was thinking of her aunt's disclosure regarding this Richard Gray.

"And I suppose," she said coolly, "you rejoiced when Richard Gray lost his money? You laughed at him for a fool?"

Nicholas stared at her.

"What on earth do you mean?" he asked. "I never knew he had lost money. I would have given my right hand to help him if I had known."

"He did lose money," said Trix. "But that's beside the point. You'd have helped him if you could? You wouldn't have jeered at him?"

"What do you take me for?" asked Nicholas half angrily.

Trix looked very straight at him.

"Only what you take others for, Mr. Danver."

There was a dead silence.

"Listen," said Trix suddenly. "You would have been generous to him, because you cared for him. Do you really think you are the only generous friend?"

Nicholas looked at her. There was a gleam of laughter in his eyes.

"It strikes me you are a very shrewd young woman," he said.

"It's only logical common sense," declared Trix stoutly.

Once more there fell a silence, a silence in which Nicholas was watching the girl opposite to him.

"Mr. Danver, will you tell me exactly what amusement you found in all this? What originated the idea in your mind?" Her voice was pleading.

For a moment Nicholas was silent.

"Yes," he said suddenly, "I will tell you."

It was not a long story, and to Trix it was oddly pathetic. It was the mixture partly of regret, partly the desire of justice to be administered to his property after his death, and partly the queer mad love of pranks which had been the keynote of his nature, and which had stirred again within the half-dead body. He told it all very simply, baldly almost, and yet he could not quite hide a certain queer wistfulness underlying it, the wistfulness of pride which has built barriers too strong for it, and yet from which it longs to escape.

"I thought Antony Gray could have a taste of living as one of the people," he ended. "Perhaps it would make him a better master than I had been. And then the scheme took shape."

"I see," said Trix slowly and thoughtfully.

"Well?" queried Nicholas.

Trix looked up at him. Her lips were smiling, but there were tears in her eyes.

"I understand," she said. "Perhaps I understand ever so much better than you think. But—but has it been worth it?"

Nicholas looked towards the fire.

"After the first planning, I don't honestly know that it has," he said. "A thing falls flat with no one to share it with you. And Hilary never really approved."

Again there was a silence, and again the odd pathos, the childishness of the whole thing stirred Trix's heart. She said she understood, and she did understand more profoundly than Nicholas could possibly have conceived. In the few seconds of silence which followed, she reviewed those solitary years in an amazingly quick mental process. She saw first the pride which had built the barrier, and then the slow stagnation behind it. She realized the two sentences which had penetrated the barrier (he had been perfectly candid in his story) without being able to destroy it, and then the faint stirrings of life within the almost stagnant mind. And the result had been this perfectly mad scheme,—the thought of a foolish boy conceived and carried out by the obstinate mind of a man; a scheme childish, foolish, mad, and of value only in so far as it had roused to faint life the mind of the lonely man who had conceived it.

And now he had tired of it. It had become to him as valueless as a flimsy toy; and yet he clung to it rather than leave himself with empty hands. Without it, he had absolutely nothing to interest him,—a past on which it hurt him to dwell by reason of its contrast with the present; a present as lonely almost as that of a prisoner in solitary confinement; and a future which to him was a mere blank, a grey nothingness.

Trix shivered involuntarily.

"And the fact remains, that I am dead," said Nicholas with a grim smile.

Trix turned suddenly towards him.

"Unless you have a sort of resurrection," she said.

Nicholas stared.

"Listen," said Trix.

CHAPTER XXXV

TRIX TRIUMPHANT

It was more than an hour before Trix departed, exultant, rejoicing.

Nicholas sat staring at the chair she had just vacated. He had been bewitched, utterly bewitched, and he knew it. Her vitality, her insistence had carried him with her despite himself,—that and an odd under-current of something he could not entirely explain. He might have called it faith, only it was not faith as he had been accustomed to think of it, when he thought at all. It was so infinitely more alive and personal. And yet she had only once touched on what he would have termed religion.

"You've wandered entirely from the object of your visit," he had remarked at one point in the conversation, "and I can't for the life of me see why you are taking this extraordinary interest in what you consider my welfare. What on earth can it matter to any one else, how I choose to live my life?"

"Ah, but it does matter," she had answered earnestly, "it matters quite supremely. I know we often pretend to ourselves that it doesn't in the least matter how we live our lives so long as we don't commit actual sin; but we can't isolate ourselves from others without loss to them and to ourselves."

"How about monks and nuns, who shut themselves up, and never see their fellow-creatures at all?" he had retorted, greatly pleased with himself for the retort.

Trix had opened eyes of wonder.

"The contemplative orders! Why, Mr. Danver, they're the cog-wheels of the whole machinery. They only keep their bodies apart that their minds may be more free. Nobody has the good of mankind so much at heart as a contemplative. They are keeping the machinery going by prayer the whole time."

The utter conviction in her words was unmistakable. For an odd flashing moment he had had

something like a mental vision of an irresistible force pouring forth from those closed houses, a force like the force of a great river, carrying all things with it, and with healing virtue in its waters. The thought was utterly foreign to him. But it had been there.

"I am not much of a believer in prayer," he had said dryly. He had expected her to ask if he had ever tried it. She had not done so.

"Most of us do it so badly," she had said with a little sigh, "but they don't." And then she had flashed a glance of amusement at him. "Did you ever hear of the story of the old lady who said she was going to pray one night with entire faith that the hill beyond her garden might be removed? In the morning she found it still there. 'I knew it would be!' said the old lady triumphantly."

Nicholas joined in her laugh, but somewhat grimly.

"We're all like that," he said.

Trix shook her head.

"Not all, mercifully; but a good many." And then she had returned to her former charge.

Well, she had ended by bewitching him, and the queer thing was he was quite glad of the bewitchment. Now and again he pulled himself up with a jerk and a muttered word or two of irritation; but it was all a pretence, and he knew it. There was an odd excitement pulsing at his heart; despite his age and crippled state, he was feeling boyishly, absurdly young. For the first time for fifteen years he was looking forward to the morrow with pleasure.

He began to consider his programme. It was entirely simple. First there was Antony Gray to be interviewed. She had insisted on that. It was due to him to be given an entire, full, and detailed account of the whole business, so she had decreed. Nicholas shrugged his shoulders at the thought. There was just a question in his mind as to how the young man might regard the matter. Secondly, there was to be a tea-party in the library, at which Trix, the Duchess, Miss Tibbutt, Antony, and Doctor Hilary were to be present. After that—well, events might take their own course. The villagers get to hear? Let them. Any amount of gossip? Of course, what did he expect? Anyhow he'd be a benefactor to mankind in giving poor, dull little Byestry something more interesting to talk about than the latest baby's first tooth, or the last injustice of Mr. Curtis. Yes; she meant it. Mr. Curtis was unjust, and the sooner Mr. Danver got rid of him and put Antony Gray in his place the better it would be for everyone concerned. And if he wanted a really dramatic moment he had better have Mr. Curtis up, and inform him that his services were no longer needed, and introduce him to the new agent at the same time. Trix only wished she could be present at the interview, but Mr. Danver would have to describe it to her in the minutest detail.

It is not at all certain that the thought of this interview, suggested before Trix had wrung the final promise from him, did not go a remarkably long way towards extracting that promise. The idea appealed to Nicholas. In the first place there would be the agent's profound amazement at the fact that Nicholas was not lying, as he had supposed, in the tomb of his ancestors; in the second place there would be his discomfiture in realizing that Nicholas had been entirely aware of his own movements, and the small act of petty spite towards Job Grantley and Antony; and in the third place there would be his amazement and discomfiture combined when he found that Nicholas was not the doddering old ass he had taken him for, but a man prepared to take matters into his own hands, and put a stop once and for all to a long system of tyranny.

"Yes sir, a man, and not the crippled fool you have taken me for," Nicholas heard himself saying. He chuckled at the thought.

And then he sat upright. What need to wait till the morrow for that interview? It was barely lunch time. A message to Antony requesting his presence at two o'clock, another to Mr. Curtis requesting his an hour later, and the game could be begun immediately.

Once more Nicholas chuckled. Then he pressed the electric button attached to the arm of his chair.

For once, and once only, in the long course of his butlership did the placid and unmoved calm of his manner entirely desert Jessop. The occasion was the present one.

He was in the pantry cleaning silver, when the whirr of the electric bell just above his head broke the silence. He put down the spoon he was polishing, discarded his green baize apron, donned his coat, and made his dignified way to the library.

Nicholas looked up at his entrance.

Accustomed to note every slightest variance in his master's moods, Jessop was at once aware of something unusual in his bearing. There was an odd, suppressed excitement; the nonchalance of his manner was unquestionably assumed.

"Ah, Jessop, I rang."

"Yessir," said Jessop, imperturbably, as who should say, "Naturally, since I have answered the summons."

Nicholas cleared his throat.

"Er—Jessop, you can bring Michael Field here at two o'clock this afternoon, when he returns from his dinner. You can also let Mr. Curtis know that he is to be here at three o'clock. You had better go to Byestry and give the message yourself. If he wishes to know by whose orders, you

need mention no names, but merely say that orders have been given you to that effect. I fancy curiosity will bring him, even if he resents the non-mention of actual authority."

Jessop stared, actually stared, a prolonged, amazed survey of his master's face.

"You are seeing them, sir!" he gasped.

For a moment testiness swung to the fore at the question. Then the amazement on Jessop's face unloosed his sense of humour.

"Yes," said Nicholas quietly.

"But—" began Jessop. His mind was in a chaos. The order was so utterly unexpected. There were at least a million things he wished to point out, but the only one on which his brain would focus was the fact that if these men saw Nicholas, they would no longer imagine him to be dead. And yet that fact was so obvious, it was evident it must have occurred to Nicholas's own mind.

"Don't try to think," remarked Nicholas grimly, "merely obey orders."

The words pricked, restoring Jessop's balance. He drew himself to rigid attention, the mask suddenly resumed.

"Very good, sir," and Jessop left the room.

"What the blue blazes!" he muttered, as he returned, almost stumbling, towards the pantry.

The expression had belonged to the youthful Nicholas. Jessop borrowed it only at moments of the severest stress. It was borrowed now.

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CHAPTER XXXVI

AN OLD MAN TELLS HIS STORY

Antony did not in the least understand Jessop's request to follow him to the library, when he returned from his midday meal. He imagined that there was some job which required doing, and that Jessop was regarding him in the light of a handy man. Anyhow Antony followed him good-humouredly enough, and not without a certain degree of curiosity. The big, silent house had always exercised an odd fascination over him, and he had more than once had a strong desire to set foot within its walls. He experienced an almost unconscious excitement in complying with the order.

He followed Jessop up the steps, and through the big door. Facing him were wide shallow oak stairs, uncovered and polished. Great Turkish rugs lay on the hall floor; two huge palms in big Oriental pots stood at either side of the stairs; hunting crops and antlers adorned the walls. Jessop opened a door on the right. Almost before Antony had realized what was happening, the butler had withdrawn and closed the door behind him.

Antony half turned in amazement towards the door.

"Ahem!"

With a start Antony turned back into the room. It was not empty, as he had imagined it to be. A white-haired, black-eyed man was sitting in a big oak chair, his colourless hands resting on the arms.

"Well?" said the man.

Memory surged over Antony in a flood. Alteration there unquestionably was in the crippled form before him, but the black piercing eyes were unchanged. The suddenness of his surprise made his brain reel. He put out his hand towards the back of a chair to steady himself.

"So you know me, Antony Gray," came the mocking old voice.

"Nicholas Danver," Antony heard himself saying, though he hardly realized he was speaking the words.

"Exactly," smiled Nicholas, "not dead, but very much alive, though not—" he glanced down at his helpless legs,— "precisely what you might term kicking."

Antony drew a deep breath. What in the name of wonder did this astounding drama portend?

"Sit down," said Nicholas shortly, pointing to a chair. "I have a good deal to say to you. You would be tired of standing before I have done."

Antony sat down. The Arabian Nights entertainment sensation he had formerly experienced in the offices of Messrs. Parsons and Glieve, rushed upon him with an even fuller force; yet here the lighter and almost humorous note was lacking. Something tinged with resentment had taken its place. He felt himself to have been trapped, befooled, though he had not yet fully grasped the manner of the befooling.

"I was a friend of your father," said Nicholas abruptly.

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The story would not be told exactly as he had told it to Trix, though the difference in the telling would be largely unconscious. It would deal more with the surface of things, and less with the inner trend of thought, the telling of which had been drawn from him by her unspoken sympathy.

"I know," said Antony quietly, in answer to the remark.

"Also I met you once," said Nicholas, a little reminiscent smile dawning in his eyes. It had an oddly softening effect upon his rather carven face. For the moment he looked almost youthful.

"I remember," replied Antony gravely.

"Do you?" said Nicholas, the smile finding its way to his lips. "What a determined youngster you were! 'I've got to. I've begun!'" Nicholas threw back his head with a laugh. "It appealed to me, did that sentiment. I saw the bulldog grip in it. But there was no viciousness in the statement. Jove! you weren't even angry. You were as cool as a cucumber in your mind, though your cheeks were crimson with the effort. You succeeded, too. I had forgotten the whole business till last March. Then it came back to me. I've got to tell you the story to explain matters. It is only fair that you should know the ins and outs of this business. I have no doubt it seems pretty queer to you?" Nicholas paused.

"I confess I am somewhat at a loss regarding it," returned Antony dryly.

"Not over-pleased," muttered Nicholas inwardly. Aloud he said, "I've no doubt you will think it all a sort of fool show, and I am by no means sure that I don't regard it in something that fashion myself now. However—" Nicholas cleared his throat. "Since my accident on the hunting field I have seen no one. I had no desire to have a lot of gossiping women and old fool men around. I hate their cackle. I left the management of the estate to Standing, my agent. When he left—he got the offer of a post on Lord Sinclair's estate—Spencer Curtis took his place. He had to report to me, and I saw that he kept things going all right. He was not an easy man to the tenants, but I did not particularly want a softling, you understand. Last March one of the tenants—Job Grantley, you know him—sneaked up here. It had been a vile day. He was in difficulties as to his rent, and Curtis was putting the pressure on. He had a fancy for squeezing those who couldn't retaliate, I suppose. Dirty hound!"

Antony made a little sound indicative of entire assent. He was becoming interested in the recital.

"I learnt a little more about him," went on Nicholas smiling thoughtfully, "though he never guessed I made any enquiries. That was later. At the moment Job Grantley's tale was enough for me,—that, and something else he chanced to say. After he had gone I sat thinking, first of past days, then of the future. A distant cousin was heir to the property, a fellow to whom Curtis would have been a man after his own heart. I'd never had what you might precisely term a feeling of bosom friendship towards William Gateley. Oddly enough, you came into my mind at the moment. I remembered the whole scene on the moorland. I could not get away from the memory. Then the thought flashed into my mind to make you my heir. It seemed absurd, but it remained a fixture, nevertheless. The main thoroughly reasonable objection was that I knew exceedingly little about you. The child is not always father to the man. Fate takes a hand in the after moulding at times. Yet if it were not you it would be Gateley. That, at all events, was my decision. Then I conceived the notion of making you live as one of the labourers on the estate, in short of giving you some first-hand knowledge of a labourer's method of living, and incidentally of the tenderness of Curtis. Do you follow me?"

Antony nodded, an odd smile on his lips. He remembered his own conjecture, suggested by Mr. Albert George's discourse. The education was absolutely unnecessary.

"I fancied," went on Nicholas, "that it might teach you to be more considerate if you had any tendencies in an opposite direction. But—" he paused a moment, then smiled grimly,—“well, you may as well have the truth even if it is slightly unpalatable, and you can remember that I did not know you as a man. I was not sure of you. If you had known I was up here, and you had got an inkling of the game I was playing, what was to prevent you from playing your own game for the year, I argued, in fact pretending to a sympathy with the tenants which you did not feel. I have never had the highest opinion of human nature. On that account I conceived the idea of dying. It was easily carried out. The folk around were amazingly gullible; the report spread like wild-fire, —through the village, that is to say. I don't for a moment suppose it went much beyond it. The solicitors were in our confidence, and no obituary notice appeared in the papers. The villagers were not likely to notice the omission. Gateley is in Australia. Yes; it was easy enough to manage. But I see the weakness in the business now. You might quite well have imagined Hilary to be the watch-dog, and have played your game to him, and if I'd died suddenly before the year was up, and you had disclosed your true hand, matters would not have been as I had intended them to be. It was a mad idea, I have no doubt, though on the whole I am not sure that it wasn't its very madness that most appealed to me." He stopped.

"And what," said Antony, "is to be the outcome of this confidence now?" There was a certain stiffness in the question. The odd feeling of resentment was returning. He suddenly saw the whole business as a stupid child's game, a game in which he had given his word of honour with no smallest advantage to any single human being, and with quite enormous disadvantages to himself.

"The main outcome," said Nicholas, "is that I wish to offer you—Antony Gray—the post of agent on my estate for the remainder of my lifetime. At my death the will I have already drawn up holds good. The year's probation for you therein mentioned is not likely to be long exceeded,

even if it is exceeded at all. At least such is Doctor Hilary's opinion."

There was a silence. Nicholas was watching Antony from under his shaggy eyebrows. The man was actually hesitating, debating! What in the name of wonder did the hesitation mean? Surely the offer of the post of agent was infinitely preferable to that of under-gardener? If the latter had been accepted, why on earth should there be hesitation regarding the former? So marvelled Nicholas, having, of course, no clue to the inner workings of Antony's mind. And even if he had had, the workings would have appeared to him illogical and unreasonable. It is truly not fully certain whether Antony understood them himself. He only knew that whereas it would be possible, though difficult, for him to remain in the neighbourhood of the Duchessa as Michael Field, gardener, to remain as Antony Gray, gentleman, appeared to him to be impossible; though precisely why it should be, he could not well have explained to himself.

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"I should prefer to decline the offer," replied Antony quietly.

Nicholas's face fell. He was blankly disappointed, as blankly disappointed as a child at the sudden frustration of some cherished scheme. In twenty minutes Spencer Curtis, agent, would be blandly entering the library, and there would be no *coup de théâtre*, such as Nicholas had pictured, to confront him.

"May I ask the reason for your refusal?" questioned Nicholas, his utter disappointment lending a flat hardness to his voice.

Antony shrugged his shoulders.

"Merely that I prefer to refuse," he answered.

Nicholas's mouth set in grim lines. His temper, never a very equable commodity, got the better of his diplomacy.

"It is always possible for me to alter my will," he remarked suavely.

Antony flashed round on him.

"For God's sake alter it, then," he cried. "The most fool thing I ever did in my life was to fall in with your mad scheme. Write to your solicitors at once." He made for the door.

"Stop," said Nicholas.

Antony halted on the threshold. He was furious at the situation.

"I have no intention of altering my will," said Nicholas, "I should like you clearly to understand that. I intend to abide by my part of the contract whether you do or do not now see fit to abide by your own."

Antony hesitated. The statement had taken him somewhat by surprise.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Precisely what I say," retorted Nicholas. "I have made you my heir, and I have no intention of revoking that decision. You agreed to work for me for a year. You can break your contract if you choose. I shall not break mine."

"I can refuse the inheritance," said Antony.

Nicholas laughed. "If you choose to shirk responsibility and see the tenants remain the victims of Curtis's tenderness, you can do so. You have had experience of his ideas of fair play, and let me tell you that your experience has been of a remarkably mild order."

"You can choose another agent," said Antony shortly.

"I can," said Nicholas, with emphasis on the first word. "But I fancy William Gateley will find a twin to Curtis on my demise if you refuse the inheritance."

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Once more Antony hesitated.

"Find another heir, then," he announced after a moment.

Nicholas shook his head. "You hardly encourage me to do so. My present failure appears so palpable, I am not very likely to make a second attempt in that direction."

Again there was a silence. Antony moved further back into the room.

"You rather force my hand," he said coldly.

"You mean you accept the inheritance?" asked Nicholas eagerly. His eagerness was almost too blatant.

"I will accept it," replied Antony dispassionately, "and will see justice done to your tenants. It will not be incumbent on me to make personal use of your money."

Nicholas let that pass.

"And for the present?" he asked.

"Concerning the matter of the contract," said Antony stiffly, "I would point out to you that I undertook to work for you for a year as Michael Field, gardener. Well, I will abide by that contract, and prolong it if necessary." He did not say till the day of Nicholas's death. But Nicholas understood his meaning.

"I trust you consider that I am now treating you fairly," said Antony still stiffly, and after a slight pause.

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Nicholas bowed his head.

"Fairly, yes," he said in an odd, almost pathetic voice, "but hardly—shall we call it—as a friend."

Antony looked suddenly amazed.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I wanted you to help me to get even with Curtis," he replied regretfully. His tone was somewhat reminiscent of a rueful schoolboy.

Despite himself Antony smiled.

"I ordered him to come here at three o'clock," went on Nicholas, glancing at the clock which wanted only five minutes of the hour. "I wanted to give him his *congé*, and introduce him to the new agent at the same moment. He believes firmly in my demise, by the way, which would certainly have added zest to the business. And now—well, it will be a pretty flat sort of compromise, that's all."

Antony laughed aloud. For the life of him he could not help it. And then, as he laughed, he realized in a sudden flash, almost as Trix had realized, the odd pathos, the utter loneliness which could find interest in the mad business he—Nicholas—had invented.

Suddenly Antony spoke.

"You may as well carry out your original programme," he said, and almost good-humouredly annoyed at his own swift change of mood.

The library door opened.

"Mr. Spencer Curtis," announced Jessop on a note of solemn gloom.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRIFLES

It was not till a good many hours later that the anticlimax of the recent situation struck Trix. Excitement had prevented her from realizing it at first. In the excitement of what the thing stood for, she had overlooked the utter triviality of the thing itself. When, later, the two separated themselves in a measure, and she looked at the thing as apart from what it indicated, the ludicrousness of it struck her with astounding force.

Nicholas Danver would give a tea-party.

And it was this, this small commonplace statement, which had kept the Duchessa, Miss Tibbutt, Doctor Hilary, and herself in solemn and amazed confabulation for at least two hours. It was infinitely more amazing even than the whole story of the past months, and Trix had given that in fairly detailed fashion, avoiding the Duchessa's eyes, however, whenever she mentioned Antony's name. Yes; it was what the tiny fact stood for that had astounded them; though now, with the fact in a measure separated from its meaning, Trix saw the almost absurdity of it.

Fifteen years of a living death to terminate in a tea-party!

It was an anticlimax which made her almost hysterical to contemplate. She felt that the affair ought to have wound up in some great movement, in some dignified action or fine speech, and it had descended to the merely ludicrous, or what, in view of those fifteen years, appeared the merely ludicrous. And she had been the instigator of it, and Doctor Hilary had called it a miracle. Which it truly was.

And yet, banishing the ludicrous from her mind, it was so entirely simple. There was not the faintest blare of trumpets, not a whisper even of an announcing voice, merely the fact that a solitary man would once more welcome friends beneath his roof.

The only real touch of excitement about the business would be when Antony Gray learnt the news, and he and the Duchessa met. And yet even that somehow lost its significance before the absorbing yet quiet fact of Nicholas's own resurrection.

"He is looking forward to it like a child," Trix had said.

And Miss Tibbutt had suddenly taken off her spectacles and wiped them.

"It's an odd little thing to feel choky about," she had said with a shaky laugh.

Presently she had left the room. A few moments later Doctor Hilary had also taken his leave. Trix and the Duchessa had been left alone. Suddenly the Duchessa had looked across at Trix.

"What made you do it?" she had asked.

Trix understood the question, and the colour had rushed to her face.

"What made you do it?" the Duchessa had repeated.

"For you," Trix had replied in a very small voice.

"You guessed?" the Duchessa had asked quietly.

Trix nodded. It *had* been largely guesswork. There was no need, at the moment at all events, to speak of Miss Tibbutt's share in the matter. That was for Tibby herself to do if she wished.

The Duchessa had got up from her chair. She had gone quietly over to Trix and kissed her. Then she, too, had left the room.

Trix stared thoughtfully into the fire. Its light was playing on the silver-backed brushes on her dressing-table, gleaming on the edges of gilt frames, and throwing her shadow big and dancing on the wall behind her. The curtains were undrawn, and without the trees stood ghostly and bare against the pale grey sky. There was the dead silence in the atmosphere which tells of frost.

It was just that,—the oddness of little things, and their immense importance in life, and simply because of the influence they have on the human soul. It was this that made the fact of Nicholas Danver giving a tea-party of such extraordinary importance, though, viewed apart from its meaning, it was the most trivial and commonplace thing in the world.

Trix got up from her chair, and went over to the window.

Not a twig of the bare trees was stirring. The earth lay quiet in the grip of the frost king; a faint pink light still lingered in the western sky. She looked at the rustic seat and the table beneath the lime trees. How amazingly long ago the day seemed when she had sat there with Pia, and heard the little tale of wounded pride. How amazingly long ago that very morning seemed, when she had seen the sunlight flood her window-pane with ruby jewels. Even her interview with Father Dormer seemed to belong to another life. It had been another Trix, and not she herself who had propounded her difficulty to him, a difficulty so astoundingly simple of solution.

She heaved a little sigh of intense satisfaction, and then she caught sight of a figure crossing the grass.

The Duchessa had come out of the house and was going towards the garden gate.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A FOOTSTEP ON THE PATH

Antony was sitting in his cottage. It was quite dusk in the little room, but he had not troubled to light the lamp. A mood of utter depression was upon him, though for the life of him he could not tell fully what was causing it. That very fact increased the depression. There was nothing definite he could get a grip on, and combat. He was in no worse situation than he had been in three hours previously, in fact it might be considered that he was in an infinitely better one, and yet this mood was less than three hours old.

Of course the thought of the Duchessa was at the root of the depression. But why? If he met her again—and all things now considered, the meeting was even more than probable—what earthly difference would it make whether he met her in his rôle of Michael Field, gardener, or as Antony Gray, agent? And yet he knew that it would make a difference. Between the Duchessa di Donatello and Michael Field there was fixed a great social gulf. He himself had assured her of that fact. Keeping that fact in view, he could deceive himself into the belief that it alone would be accountable for the aloofness of her bearing, for the frigidity of her manner should they again meet. Oh, he'd pictured the meetings often enough; pictured, too, and schooled himself to endure, the aloofness, the frigidity.

"I rubbed it well in that I am only a gardener, a mere labourer," he would assure his soul, with these imaginary meetings in mind. Of course he had known perfectly well that he was deceiving himself, yet even that knowledge had been better than facing the pain of truth.

But now the truth had got to be faced.

There would be the aloofness, sure enough, but there would no longer be that great social gulf to account for it. The true cause would have to be acknowledged. She scorned him, firstly on account of his fraud, and secondly because he had wounded her pride by his quiet deliberate snubbing of her friendship. Whatever justification she might presently see for the first offence, it never for an instant occurred to his mind that she might overlook the second. He had deliberately put a barrier between them, and it appeared to him now, as it had appeared at the moment of its placing, utterly and entirely unsurmountable. She would be civil, of course; there would not be the slightest chances of her forgetting her manners, but—his mind swung to the little hotel courtyard, to the orange trees in green tubs, to the golden sunshine and the sparkle of the blue water, to the woman then sitting by his side.

Memory can become a sheer physical pain at times.

Antony got up from the settle, and moved to the window. Despite the dusk within the room, there was still a faint reflection of the sunset in the sky, a soft pink glow.

One thing was certain—nothing, no power on earth, should ever drag him back to Teneriffe again. If only he could control the action of his memory as easily as he could control the actions of his body. At all events he'd make a fight for it. And yet, if only—The phrase summed up every atom of regret for his mad decision, his falling in with that idiotic plan of Nicholas's. And, after all, had it been so idiotic? Mad, certainly; but wasn't there a certain justification in the madness? It was a madness the villagers would unquestionably bless.

His thoughts turned to the recent interview. It had fully borne out all Nicholas's expectations. Bland, self-confident, Curtis had entered the library. Antony had had no faintest notion whom he had expected to see therein, but most assuredly it was not the two figures who had confronted him. Bewilderment had passed over his face, and an odd undernote of fear. It was just possible he had taken Nicholas for a ghost. The reassurance on that point had set him fairly at his ease. He had been subservient to Nicholas, extravagantly amused to learn of the trick that had been played. He had been insolently oblivious of Antony's presence. Antony had enjoyed the insolence. When he learnt that his services were no longer required, he had first appeared slightly discomfited. Then he had plucked up heart of grace.

"Going to take matters into your own hands?" he had said to Nicholas. "Excellent, my dear sir, excellent."

Nicholas had glanced down at the said hands.

"I think," he had said slowly, "that they are rather old. No; I have other plans in view."

"Yes?" Curtis had queried.

"I wish to try a new *régime*," Nicholas had said calmly. "I should like to introduce you to my new agent." He had waved his hand towards Antony.

Black as murder is a well-worn and somewhat trite expression, nevertheless it alone adequately described the old agent's expression. And then, with a palpable effort, he had recovered himself.

"A really excellent plan," he had said, with scarcely veiled insolence. "I congratulate you on your new *régime*. They say 'Set a thief to catch a thief'; no doubt 'Set a hind to rule a hind' will prove equally efficacious." He had laughed.

"On the contrary," Nicholas's voice, suave and calm, had broken in upon the laugh, "that is the very *régime* I am now abolishing. 'Set a gentleman to rule a hind' is the one I am about to establish, that is why I have offered the post of agent to Mr. Antony Gray, son of a very old friend of mine."

For one brief instant Curtis had been entirely non-plussed, the cut in the speech was lost in amazement; then bluster had come to his rescue.

"So you have had recourse to a system of spying," he had said with a sneer that certainly did not in the least disguise his fury. "Personally I have never looked upon it as a gentleman's profession."

"The question of a gentleman's profession is not one in which I should readily take your advice, Mr. Curtis," Nicholas had replied, smiling gently.

Curtis had turned to the door.

"I did not come here to be insulted," he had said.

"Neither," Nicholas had retorted sternly, "have I paid you to insult my tenants. You have accused me of a system of spying. You yourself best know whether such a system was justified by the need. Though I can assure you that Mr. Gray was no spy. He believed in my death as fully as you did."

There had been some further conversation,—remarks it might better be termed. The upshot had been that Curtis was leaving Byestry of his own accord on the morrow; Antony took over his new post immediately.

It had not been till Curtis had left that Nicholas had broached the subject of the tea-party the following day, and had requested Antony's presence. The request had been firmly declined, nor could all Nicholas's persuasions move Antony from his resolution.

"I am utterly unsociable," Antony had declared.

Nicholas smiled grimly.

"So am I, or, at any rate, so I was till Miss Devereux took me in hand."

"Miss Devereux!" Antony had echoed.

"Yes, she's at the bottom of this business," Nicholas had assured him, "though what further plot she has up her sleeve I don't know. Why, if it hadn't been—" And then, on the very verge of declaring that Antony himself had been the real foundation of the whole business, he had stopped short. Never in his life had Nicholas betrayed a lady's secret or what might have been a lady's secret. They were pretty much one and the same thing as far as his silence on the matter was concerned.

Well, the long and the short of the whole business was that the tenants of the Chorley Estate were about to receive fair play, and Nicholas was about to emerge from the chrysalis-like

existence in which he had shrouded himself for fifteen years,—an advantage, certainly, in both instances. Only so far as Antony's own self was concerned there didn't seem the least atom of an advantage anywhere. Of course he was fully aware that he ought to see immense advantages. But he didn't.

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"It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all," says one of the poets. Was it Tennyson? But then that depends very largely on the manner of the losing. And in this case!

Antony crossed to the dresser and lighted the small lamp. He had just set it in the middle of the table when he heard the click of his garden gate, and a footstep on his little flagged path.

CHAPTER XXXIX

ON THE OLD FOUNDATION

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Antony stood very still by the table. Once before he had heard that same footfall on his path,—a light resolute step. His face had gone quite white beneath its tan. There was a knock on the door. For one brief second he paused. Then he crossed the room, and opened the door wide.

"May I come in?" asked the Duchessa.

He moved aside, and she came into the room, standing in the lamplight. He stood near her, words, conventional words, driven from his lips by the mad pounding and beating of his heart.

"Might I sit down?" asked the Duchessa a little breathlessly. And she crossed to the settle. Her face was in shadow here, but Antony had seen that it was strangely white.

Still Antony had not spoken.

The Duchessa looked up at him.

"I am nervous," said she, an odd little tremor in her voice.

"Nervous!" echoed Antony, surprise lending speech to his tongue.

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"Nervous," she replied, the odd little tremor still in her voice. "I owe you an apology, oh, the very deepest apology, and I don't know how to begin."

"Don't begin at all," said Antony hoarsely, sternly almost.

"Ah, but I must. Think how I spoke to you. You—we had agreed that trust was the very foundation of friendship, and I destroyed the foundation at the outset."

"It was not likely you could understand," said Antony.

She caught her breath, a little quick intake.

"Would you say the same if it had been the other way about? Would *you* have destroyed the foundation?"

Antony was silent.

"Would you?" she insisted.

"I—I hope not," he stammered.

"And yet you appear to think it reasonable that I should have done so."

He could not quite understand the tone of her words.

"I think it reasonable you did not understand," he declared. "How could you? Nobody could have understood. It was the maddest, the most inconceivable situation."

"Possibly. Yet if the positions had been reversed, if it had been you who had failed to understand my actions, would you not still have trusted?"

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"Yes," said Antony, conviction in the syllable. He did not think to ask her how it was that she understood now. The simple fact that she did understand swept aside, made trivial every other consideration.

"You mean that a man's trust holds good under any circumstances, whereas a woman's trust will obviously fail before the first difficulty?" she demanded.

"I did not mean that," cried Antony hotly.

"No?" she queried mockingly.

"It was not, on my part, a question of *trust* alone," said Antony deliberately. He looked straight at her as he spoke the words.

The Duchessa dropped her eyes. A crimson colour tinged her cheeks, crept upwards to her forehead.

There was a dead silence. Then—

"Will you help me to re-build the foundation?" asked the Duchessa.

"It was never destroyed," said Antony.

"Mine was," she replied steadily. "Will you forgive me?"

"There can be no question of forgiveness," he replied hoarsely.

Her face went to white.

"You refuse?"

"There is nothing to forgive," he said.

Again she drew a quick breath.

"There is," she said.

"I think not," he replied.

The Duchessa looked towards the fire.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because," he replied slowly, "between you and me there can be no question of forgiveness. To forgive, one must acknowledge a wrong done to one. I acknowledge none."

She turned towards him.

"You cared so little, you felt none?"

"No," responded Antony, the words leaping to his lips, "I cared so much I felt none."

"Ah," she breathed, and stopped. "Then you will go back to the old footing?" she asked.

Antony's heart beat furiously.

"I cannot," he replied.

"Why?" she demanded, speaking very low.

Antony drew a deep breath.

"Because I love you," he said quietly.

Again there was a dead silence. At last Antony spoke quietly.

"Of course I have no right to tell you that," he said. "But you may as well know the whole truth now. It was because of that love that I agreed to this business. I had nothing to offer you. Here was my chance to obtain something. I had no notion then that you lived in this neighbourhood. When I found out, I was tempted to let you infer that there was a mystery, some possible explanation of my conduct. It would have been breaking my contract in the spirit, though not actually in the letter. Well, I didn't break it at all, and of course you did not understand. In order to keep my contract I had to deceive you, or at all events to allow you to believe an untruth. Naturally you scorned my deceit, as it appeared to you. It was that that mattered of course, not the social position. I understood that completely. Later, you offered me your friendship. You were ready to trust without understanding. I could not accept your trust. A friendship between us must have led others to suspect that I was not what I appeared to be. That was to be avoided. It had to be avoided. I hurt you then, knowing what I did." He stopped.

"I think you hurt yourself too," she suggested quietly.

The muscles in Antony's throat contracted.

"Come here," said the Duchessa.

Antony crossed to the hearth. He stood looking down at her.

"Kneel down," said the Duchessa.

Obediently he knelt.

"You are so blind," said the Duchessa pathetically, "that you need to look very close to see things clearly. Look right into my eyes. Can't you see something there that will heal that hurt?"

A great sob broke from Antony's throat.

"Ah, don't, dear heart, don't," cried the Duchessa, drawing his head against her breast.

"Will the new agent agree to live at the Manor House?" asked the Duchessa, after a long, long interval composed of many silences though some few words. "Will his pride allow him to accept a small material benefit for a short time, seeing what a great amount of material benefit will be his to bestow in the future?"

Antony laughed.

"I told Mr. Danver I wouldn't use a penny of his money for myself," he said.

"Oh!" She raised her eyebrows in half comical dismay, which hid, however, a hint of real anxiety. Would his pride accept where it did not bestow in like kind? For other reason than this the bestowal would signify not at all.

"You mind?" he asked smiling.

She looked straight at him.

"Not the smallest atom," she declared, utterly relieved, since there was no shadow of false pride

in the laughing eyes which met her own.

“Ah, but,” said Antony slowly, and very, very deliberately, “I never said I would not use it for my wife.”

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EPILOGUE

An old man was sitting in the library of the big grey house. A shaded reading-lamp stood on a small table near his elbow. Its light was thrown on an open book lying near it, and on the carved arms of the oak chair in which the man was sitting. It shone clearly on his bloodless old hands, on his parchment-like face and white hair. A log fire was burning in a great open hearth on his right. For the rest, the room was a place of shadows, deepening to gloom in the distant corners, a gloom emphasized by the one small circle of brilliant light, and the red glow of the fire. Book-cases reached from floor to ceiling the whole length of two walls, and between the thickly curtained windows of the third. In the fourth wall was the fireplace and the door.

There was no sound to break the silence. The figure in the oak chair sat motionless. He might have been carved out of stone, for any sign of life he gave. He looked like stone,—white and black marble very finely sculptured,—white marble in head and hands, black marble in the piercing eyes, the long satin dressing-gown, the oak of the big chair. Even his eyes seemed stone-like, motionless, and fixed thoughtfully on space.

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The big room was very still. An hour ago it had been full of voices and laughter, amazed questions, and half-mocking explanations.

Later the front door had banged. There had been the sound of steps on the frosty drive, receding in the distance. Then silence.

Nicholas’s eyes turned towards the middle window of the three, surveying the heavy hanging curtain.

A whimsical smile lighted up his grim old mouth.

“After all, it wasn’t a wasted year,” he said aloud.

Then he turned and looked round the empty room. It seemed curiously deserted now.

“And the year is not yet ended,” he added. He was amazed at the pleasure the thought gave him.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ANTONY GRAY,—GARDENER ***

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