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Transcriber's note

A Table of Contents has been created for the HTML version. Minor punctuation errors have been corrected without notice. Several words were spelled in two different ways and not corrected; they are listed at the end of this book. A few obvious typographical errors have been corrected, and they are indicated with a mouse-hover and are also listed at the [end](#).

"To Love"

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***"To love is the great amulet which makes
the world a garden."***

R. L. STEVENSON

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"TO LOVE"

By Margaret Peterson : Author of

"The Lure of the Little Drum," "Tony Bellew," etc.

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PATERNOSTER HOUSE, E.C. :: :: 1917

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"TO LOVE"

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CHAPTER I

**"Oh, but the door that waits a friend
Swings open to the day.
There stood no warder at my gate
To bid love stand or stay."**

"You don't believe in marriage, and I can't afford to marry"—Gilbert Stanning laughed, but the sound was not very mirthful and his eyes, as he glanced at his companion, were uneasy and not quite honest. "We are the right sort of people to drift together, aren't we, Joan?" His hands as he spoke were restless, fidgeting with a piece of string which he tied and untied repeatedly.

Joan Rutherford sat very straight in her chair, her eyes looking out in front of her. His words had called just the faintest tinge of colour to her cheeks. It was not exactly a beautiful face, but it was above everything else lovable and appealing. Joan was twenty-three, yet she looked still a child; the lines of her face were all a little indefinite, except the obstinacy of her chin and the frankness of her eyes. Her one claim to beauty, indeed, lay in those eyes; wide, innocent, unfathomable, sometimes green, sometimes brown flecked with gold. They seemed to hint at tragedy, yet they were far more often laughter-filled than anything else. For the rest, Joan was an ordinary independent young lady of the twentieth century who had lived in London "on her own" for six months.

How her independence had come about is a complicated story. It had not been with the approval of her people; the only people she possessed being an old uncle and aunt who lived in the country. All Joan's nearer relations were dead; had died when she was still a child; Uncle John and Aunt Janet had seen to her bringing up. But at twenty-two and a-half Joan had suddenly rebelled against the quiet monotony of their home life. She had broken it to them gently at first, with an obstinate resolve to get her own way at the back of her mind; in the end, as is usually the case when youth pits itself against age, she had won the day. Uncle John had agreed to a small but adequate allowance, Aunt Janet had wept a few rather bitter tears in private, and Joan had come to London to train as a secretary, according to herself. They had taken rooms for her in the house of a lady Aunt Janet had known in girlhood, and there Joan had dutifully remained. It was not very lively, but she had a sense of gratitude in her heart towards Aunt Janet which prevented her from moving. Joan was not thinking of all this as she sat there, nor was she exactly seeing the sweep of grass that spread out in front of them, nor the flowering shrubs on every side. Hyde Park was ablaze with flowers on this hot summer's day and in addition a whole bed of heliotrope was in bloom just behind their chairs. The faint sweet scent of the flowers mixed with Joan's thoughts and brought a quick vision of Aunt Janet. But more deeply still her mind was struggling with a desire to know what exactly it was that swayed her when Gilbert Stanning spoke to her, or when—as more often than not—he in some way or other contrived to touch her. She had met him first at a dance that she had been taken to by another girl and she had known him now about four months. It was strange and a little disturbing the tumult his eyes waked in her heart. The first time he had kissed her, one evening when they had been driving home from the theatre in a taxi, she had turned and clung to him, because suddenly it had seemed as if the whole world was sweeping away from her. Gilbert had taken the action to mean that she loved him; he had never

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wavered from that belief since. He possessed every spare minute of her days, he kissed her whenever he could, and Joan never objected. Only oddly, at moments such as this, her mind would suddenly push forward the terse argument:

"Do you love him, or is it just the little animal in you that likes all he has to give?"

Joan was often greatly disturbed about what she called the beast side of her. During her year in London, under the guidance of another girl far older and wiser than herself, she had plunged recklessly into all sorts of knowledge, gleaned mostly from books such as Aunt Janet and even Uncle John had never heard of, far less read. So Joan knew that there is a beast side to all human nature, and she was for ever pausing to probe this or that sensation down to its root. Her books had taught her other theories too, and very young, very impetuous by nature, Joan rushed to a full acceptance of the facts over which older women were debating. The sanctity of marriage, for instance, was a myth invented by man because he wished to keep women enslaved. Free love was the only beautiful relationship that could exist between the sexes. Frankness and free speech between men and women was another rule Joan asserted, in pursuance of which she had long since threshed out the complicated question of marriage with Gilbert. It was all rather childish and silly, yet pathetic beyond the scope of tears, if you looked into Joan's sunlit eyes and caught the play of dimples round her mouth. Rather as if you were to come suddenly upon a child playing with a live shell.

What Gilbert Stanning thought of it all is another matter; Joan with all her book-learned wisdom had not fathomed his character. He was a man about thirty-two, good-looking, indolent and selfish. He had just enough money to be intensely comfortable, provided he spent it all on himself, and Gilbert certainly succeeded in being comfortable. There had been a good many women in Gilbert's life of one kind and another, but he had never known anyone like Joan before. At times her startling mixture of knowledge and innocence amazed him, and she had fascinated him from the first. He was a man easily fascinated by the little feminine things in a woman. The way Joan's hair grew in curls at the nape of her neck fascinated him, the soft red of her mouth, the way the lashes lay like a spread-out fan on her cheeks and the quick changing lights and colours in those eyes themselves. With Gilbert, when he wanted a thing he generally got it, by fair means or foul; for the moment he wanted Joan passionately, almost insanely. But the way in which she made the path easy for his desire sometimes startled him; he could not make up his mind whether she was playing some very deep game at his expense or whether she really loved him to the exclusion of all caution.

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It was this problem which he had been more or less trying to solve this afternoon. At Joan's continued silence he leaned forward and put his hand over hers where they lay on her lap.

"What are you dreaming of, little girl?" he asked.

The odd flutter which his touch always caused was shaking Joan's heart; she tried, however, to face him indifferently, summoning up a smile.

"I was thinking," she corrected, "not dreaming."

"Well, the thoughts, then," asked the man, his fingers moved caressingly up and down her hand, "what were they?"

"I was thinking," began Joan slowly; her eyes fell from his and she stirred restlessly. "What did you mean just now when you spoke about drifting together?" she asked.

"Little Miss Pretence," he whispered, "as if you didn't know what I meant. If I were well off," he said suddenly (perhaps for the moment he really meant it), "I would make you marry me whether you had new ideas about it or not."

"Being well off wouldn't have anything to do with it," Joan answered, "it is more degrading to marry for money than anything else."

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"Sometimes I believe you think that we are degrading altogether," the man said; he watched the colour creep into her face, "God knows we are not much to boast of, and that is the truth."

Joan struggled with the problem in her mind. "There ought not to be anything degrading about love," she said finally, and this time it was his eyes that fell away from hers.

For a little they sat silent, Joan, for some reason known only to herself, fighting against a strong inclination to cry. Gilbert had taken away his hands, he sat back in his chair, his feet thrust out, head down, eyes glooming at the dust. Joan stole a glance at him and felt a sudden intense admiration for the beauty of his clean-cut profile, his sleek, well-groomed head. Instinctively she put out a timid hand and touched him.

"Are you angry with me about something?" she asked.

It may have been that during that pause Gilbert had been forming a good resolution with all that was best in him to keep from spoiling this girl's life. Her eyes perhaps had touched on some slumbering chord of conscience. Her movement though, the little whispered words, drove all thoughts except the ones which centred round his desire from his mind.

"Joan," he said quickly, his hands caught at hers again, "let us stop playing this game of make-believe. Let us face the future one way or another. I love you, I want you. If you love me, come to me, dear, as you say there can be nothing degrading in love. Let us live our lives together in the

new best way."

It was all clap-trap nonsense and he did not believe a word of it, but the force of his passion was unmistakable. It frightened and held Joan.

"You mean——" she whispered.

"I mean that I want you to come and live at my place," he answered. "I have a decent little flat, as you know. That is not living on my money, O proud and haughty one"—he was so sure of his victory that he could afford to laugh—"you shall buy your own food if you like. And you shall be free, as free as you are now, and—I, Joan," his voice thrilled through her, "I shall love you and love you and love you till you waken to see the world in quite a new light. Joan!"

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His face was very close against hers, the scent of the heliotrope had grown on the sudden stronger and more piercingly sweet, perhaps because the sun had vanished behind the distant line of trees and a little breeze from the oncoming night was blowing across the flower-beds towards them. The quick-gathering twilight seemed to be shutting them in; people passed along the path, young sweethearting couples too happy in each other to notice anyone else. The tumult in Joan's mind died down and grew very still, a sense of well-being and content invaded her heart.

"Yes"—she spoke the word so softly he hardly heard—"I'll come, Gilbert." Then she threw back her head a little and laughed, gay, confident laughter. "It will be rather fun, won't it?" she said.

CHAPTER II

**"Oh, wisdom never comes when it is gold,
And the great price we pay for it full worth.
We have it only when we are half earth,
Little avails that coinage to the old."**

GEORGE MEREDITH.

It was not quite so much "rather fun" as Joan had expected. It had, she discovered, its serious and unpleasant side. Serious, because of the strange undreamt-of woman that it awoke within her, and unpleasant because of the deceit and the telling of lies which Gilbert insisted it must involve. Joan hated deceit, she had one of those natures that can never be really happy with an unconfessed lie on their mind.

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Gilbert won her to do as he thought necessary, first by persuasion and then by using the power which he had discovered he could wield over her by his touch.

"For my sake, darling," he argued, "it is all right for us because we understand each other, but the world would certainly describe me as a cad."

So for his sake Joan told Mrs. Thomas, with whom she had been living, that she had accepted a residential post as private secretary; packed up her boxes and took her departure amidst a shower of good wishes and warnings as to how she was to hold her own and not be put upon. To Aunt Janet, with a painful twinge of regret, Joan wrote the same lie. She wanted to tell the truth to Aunt Janet more even than she wanted to live it out aloud to herself. The memory of Aunt Janet's face with its kindly deep-set eyes kept her miserable and uncomfortable, and the home letters brought no more a feeling of pleasure, only a sense of shame and distaste.

How silly it was to connect shame with what she and Gilbert had chosen as life! Yet, unfortunately for her peace of mind, the word was constantly reverting to her thoughts. "It is the telling lies that I am ashamed of," she would argue hotly to herself, and she would shut her heart to the still small voice and throw herself because of it with more zest than ever into their life together.

Gilbert's flat was high up in one of the top stories of a block of buildings which fronts on to Knightsbridge, bright, airy and cheerful. Not too big, "Just room for the two of us and we shut the world outside," as Gilbert took pleasure in saying. It only consisted of four rooms, their bedroom and dressing-room, the sitting-room and Gilbert's smoking-room, a place that he talked vaguely of working in and where he could entertain his men friends, without bothering Joan, when they called to see him.

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The windows of their bedroom opened out over the green of the Park. Sometimes the scent of the heliotrope crept up even as far as that; whenever it did Joan would have to hold her breath and stand quite still because the fragrance brought—not Aunt Janet now—but Gilbert before her. It had blown in just like that the first night she had been in the room; the memories it could rouse were bewildering, intoxicating, and yet ... Joan would have to push the disturbing thoughts from her and run to find Gilbert if he were anywhere in their tiny domain, to perch on the arm of his chair and rub her face against his coat. His presence could drive away the vague feeling of uneasiness, his hands could win her back to placid contentment or wake in her the restless passionate desire which she judged to be love.

It had been on one of these occasions that, running to find Gilbert, she had flung open the door of his smoking-room and got well inside before she discovered that he had some men with him. Gilbert lifted his head with a frown, that she noticed, while the guests struggled to their feet. There was a little silence while they all looked at her, then, with a muttered excuse, she retreated, closing the door behind her. But before it quite shut she heard one of the men laugh and say:

"Hulloa, Stanning, so that is the secret of our bachelor flat is it? thought you had been lying very low this last two months."

She did not catch Gilbert's reply, she only knew that the sense of shame which had been but a fleeting vision before had suddenly taken sharp, strong hold of her. She stood almost as it were battling against tears.

That evening across their small dining-table, after the waiter from the restaurant downstairs had served the coffee and left them, she spoke to Gilbert, crumbling her bread with nervous fingers, finding it difficult to meet his eyes.

"Those men," she said, "who were here this afternoon, what do they think of me? I mean," she flushed quickly, "what do they think I am?" [Pg 17]

"Think you are," Gilbert repeated, "my dear girl, I suppose they could see you were a woman."

"I mean, had you told them, did they know about us?"

"Silly kid," he smiled at her indulgently, "the world is not so fearfully interested in our doings."

"No, but they are your friends," the hazel eyes meeting his held some wistful question. "Wouldn't they wonder, doesn't it seem funny that they shouldn't be my friends too?"

Gilbert rose, conscious of a little impatience. The strange thing was that since the very commencement of their life together his conscience had not been as easy as he would have liked to have had it. Joan's ideas had been so ridiculously simple and straightforward, she was almost a child, he had discovered, in her knowledge and thoughts. Not that he was a person to pay much attention to principles when they came in contact with his desires, only it annoyed and irritated him to find she could waken an undreamt of conscience in this way. He shook off the feeling, however, with a little laugh, and, rising from the table, crossed over to her, standing behind her, drawing her head back against his heart.

"Not satisfied with our solitude," he teased; "find it dull?"

"No, it's not that," she answered; she had to fight against the temptation to let things go, to lift up her lips for his kiss. "It's because—well, you didn't introduce me, they must have thought it queer."

"Oh, hang it all, dear," he remonstrated, "I could not pass you off as my wife or sister, they would know it was not true. What do you want to know them for anyhow? Sclater works at the office with me and the other man is a pal of his, I have never met him before."

"I see," she agreed; he had not at all understood her, but she doubted if she could quite explain herself. "It doesn't matter, Gilbert." She sat a little away from him, sweeping the crumbs together with her fingers. [Pg 18]

Behind her back Gilbert shrugged his shoulders and allowed the frown to show for a second on his face. Then he turned aside and lit a cigarette.

"Let's do a theatre to-night, Joan," he suggested, "I am just in the mood for it."

She was not just in the mood for it, but she went; and after the theatre they had supper at the Monico and Gilbert ordered a bottle of champagne to cheer them up; with the lights and music all round them and Gilbert's face opposite her, his lips smiling at her, his eyes caressing her, Joan forgot her mood of uneasiness. In the taxi going home she crept close up against him, liking to feel the strong hold of his arms.

"You love me, and I love you, don't I, Gilbert?" she whispered; "that is all that really counts."

"It counts more than all the world," he answered, and stooped to kiss her upturned lips.

She made no new friends in her life with him, the old ones naturally fell rather into the background; it was impossible to keep up girl friendships when she was never able to ask any of them home with her. Once she went back to see Mrs. Thomas, but the torrent of questions, none of which could be answered truthfully, had paralysed her. She had sat dumb and apparently sulky. Mrs. Thomas had written afterwards to Aunt Janet:

"I do not think Joan can be really happy in her new post. She is quite changed, no longer her bright, cheery self."

And that had called forth a long letter from Aunt Janet to Joan. If she was not happy and did not feel well she was to leave at once. It had been her own wish to go to London, they had never liked the idea. "You would not believe, Joan, how dull the house is with only John and me in it, we miss your singing and laughter about the place. Come back home, dear; even if it is only for a holiday, we shall be delighted." [Pg 19]

There was a hint behind the letter that unless she had a satisfactory reply at once she or Uncle John would come up to London to see Joan for themselves! Joan could imagine the agitation and yet firm purpose which would preface the journey. She wrote hastily. She was perfectly happy and ridiculously underworked. Everyone was so good to her, one day soon she would take a day off and run down and see them, they should see how well she was looking.

But the writing of the letter brought tears to her eyes, and when it was sealed up and pushed safely out of harm's way she sat and cried and cried. Once or twice lately she had had these storms of tears, she was so unused to crying that she could not account for them in any way except that she hated having to tell lies. That was it, she hated having to tell lies.

It was about a fortnight later that Gilbert at breakfast one morning looked up from a letter which the early post had brought him with a frown of intense annoyance on his face. Also he said "Damn!" very clearly and distinctly.

Joan pushed aside the paper and looked at him.

"Anything wrong?" she asked; "is it business, or money, or——"

"No, it is only the mater," he answered quickly; "she writes to say she is coming to pay me a little visit, that I am to see if I can get her a room somewhere in the building, she is going to spend two or three days shopping in town and hopes to see a lot of me."

"Oh," said Joan rather blankly. Gilbert never talked very much of his people; once he had shown her a photograph of his mother because she had teased him till he produced it. "Don't you like the idea? Gilbert, was that what you said 'damn' about?"

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"Not exactly," his eyes travelled round the room; "you'll have to clear out, you know," he said abruptly.

"You mean you want her to have our room and take another one in the building for yourself?" asked Joan. "I daresay Mrs. Thomas would give me a bed for a night or two."

"Yes, that is it," he agreed; "and you will have to hide away all traces of yourself, mustn't leave anything suspicious lying about. The old lady might have given me a day or two's notice;" he had returned to his letter, "hang it all, she says she will be here to-morrow."

Joan had pushed her chair back and stood up, her breakfast unfinished. She was staring at his down-bent head, struggling with a wild desire to scream, to cry out against the curtain of shame he was so wilfully sweeping across their life together. She fought down the impulse though and moved over to the window.

"You want me to go away and hide?" she asked from there, her voice dangerously quiet.

He glanced up at her. "Keep out of the mater's way," he acknowledged, "she would have seven fits."

"Why?" asked Joan.

"Why," he repeated, "good Lord, you don't know the mater. She——"

Joan interrupted. "You are ashamed of me," she spoke quickly, her face had flushed. "You have always been a little ashamed of me. You have never really looked at it as I did. I thought——" she broke off and turned away from him, stupid hot tears were blinding her eyes, she did not want to cry, it was so useless and childish.

Gilbert stuffed his mother's letter into his pocket and rose to his feet, stretching a little as he moved.

"Don't be ridiculous, kiddie," he said, "you must see it would not do for you to meet the mater. She is old-fashioned and—well, she would not understand."

"We could make her understand," Joan whispered, "if she saw we both really meant it."

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"Well, I don't want you to try," he answered bluntly.

"Don't you feel the same about me as if I were your wife?" She knew he was close beside her, but she did not turn to look at him.

Gilbert put an arm round her and drew her close. "Of course I do," he said, "but mother wouldn't. One does not exactly introduce one's mother to one's mistress."

The inclination to tears had left Joan, a very set calm had taken its place. Suddenly she knew, as she stood there stiff held within the circle of his arms, that it was all ended. The dream, if it had been a dream, was finished, she could not live in it any longer.

"Very well," she agreed listlessly. "I will see about going away, the place shall be all ready for her to-morrow."

She moved away from him, he did not notice how purposely she shook the touch of his hands from off her.

CHAPTER III

**"Out of my dreams,
I fashioned a flower;
Nursed it within my heart,
Thought it my dower.
What wind is this that creeps within and blows
Roughly away the petals of my rose?"**

M. P.

"That is the end of lying," whispered Joan.

She threw down her cloak to keep the corner seat in the carriage and stepped out on to the platform to see if she could catch sight of a paper boy.

She had not seen Gilbert since the morning. He had had an appointment in the city, he had left it to her to get the flat ready for his mother. And she had done everything, there was nothing that she could reproach herself with. She had engaged an extra room for Gilbert on the next floor, she had bought fresh flowers, she had made the place look as pretty as possible. It had not taken her long to do her own packing, there was nothing of hers left anywhere about. And all morning she had kept the window overlooking the Park tight shut. The scent of flowers should bring no disturbing memories to weaken her resolve. Then when everything had been quite settled she had sat down to write just a short note to Gilbert.

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"I have tried to make you understand a little of all I felt this morning, but it was not any use. You cannot understand. It is just that we have always looked at things differently. I cannot live with you any more, Gilbert; what is the use of trying to explain. It is better just to say—as we agreed that either of us should be free to say—it is all finished, and good-bye."

She had propped the letter up for him to find, where she knew he would look first of all, by his pipe and matches on the mantelpiece. Now she had taken her ticket to Wrotham and wired Aunt Janet to say she was coming. But as she stood waiting for the train to start it occurred to her that she was really watching to see Gilbert's slim, well-built figure push its way through the crowd towards her. The thought made her uneasy, she hoped he would have been late getting home; she doubted her strength of will to stand against him should he appear in person to persuade her.

He did not come, however, and presently with a great deal of noise and excitement, whistles blowing and doors slamming, the train was off and she could sit back in her corner seat with a strange sense of pleasurable excitement at having so far achieved her purpose.

Uncle John was at the station to meet her. A straight-held old figure—in his young days he had been in the army and very good-looking—now the bristling moustache was white and the hair grew in little tufts either side of an otherwise bald head. Ever since Joan could first remember him Uncle John had moved in a world separate from the rest of the household and entirely his own. It was not that he took no interest in them, it was just that he appeared to forget them for long intervals, talking very seldom, and when he did always about the days that were past. He had never married, but there had been one great love in his life. Aunt Janet had told Joan all about it, a girl who had died many years ago; after her death Uncle John had lived for nothing but his regiment. Then he had had to leave it because old age had called for retirement, and he had sent for Aunt Janet to come and keep house for him and together they had settled down in the old home at Wrotham—both unmarried, both very quiet and content to live in the past. Then Joan had descended on them, a riotous, long-legged, long-haired girl of eight, the child of a very much younger, little known brother.

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With the coming of Joan, new life and new surprising interest had awakened in Aunt Janet's heart, but Uncle John had remained impervious to the influence. He was very fond of Joan in his way, but he scarcely ever noticed and he certainly knew nothing about her. He had realized her less and less as she grew up; when he spoke or thought of her now it was always as still a child.

"You are a nice young lady," he greeted her good-humouredly, stooping to kiss Joan at the station; "your Aunt Janet was sure this sudden return meant a breakdown. She is all of a twitter, so to speak, and would have been here to meet you herself only we have got a Miss Abercrombie staying with us. Where's the luggage?"

"I have only brought my small things with me," Joan explained, "the rest are coming on. I am sorry Aunt Janet is worried, and who is Miss Abercrombie?"

"Friend of your aunt's," he answered; he took her bag from her. "I have brought the trap, Janet thought you might be too delicate to walk." He chuckled to himself at the thought and picking up the reins climbed into the cart beside her. "Don't think Sally has been out twice since you left, see how fat she has got."

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The little brown pony certainly answered to the implication. Her sides bulged against the shafts and bald patches were manifesting themselves, caused by the friction.

"What have you been doing then?" asked Joan; "why haven't you been out?"

"Nothing to go for," he answered, "and I have been too busy in the garden. Extended that bit down through the wood." The garden was his one great hobby.

"And Aunt Janet," Joan questioned, "she always used to like taking Sally out."

"I suppose that was when you were here;" he looked down at her sideways, "she missed you, I think, but she potters about the village sometimes." He relapsed into silence, and Joan could see that his thoughts were once more far away.

Several of the villagers came out as they passed through the little village street to bob greetings to the young lady of the manor, as they had always called Joan. Wrotham did not boast many county families; there was no squire, for instance. The Rutherfords occupied the old manor house and filled the position to a great extent, but they owned none of the land in the neighbourhood, and the villagers were not really their tenants. And beyond the Rutherfords there was no one in the village who could undertake parochial work except the vicar, a hard-working, conscientiously mild gentleman, with a small income and a large family. He could give plenty of spiritual advice and assistance, but little else; the old people and the invalids of the parish looked to Aunt Janet for soups and warm clothes and kindly interest.

Wrotham boasted a doctor too. As Joan remembered him he had been a gentleman of very rubicund complexion and rough manners. Village gossip had held that he was too fond of the bottle, but when sober he was kindly and efficient enough for their small needs. He had been unmarried and had lived under the charge of a slovenly housekeeper. As the Rutherfords drove past his house, a square brick building with a front door that opened on to the village street, Joan noticed an unfamiliar air of spruce cleanliness about the front door and the window blinds.

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"Dr. Simpson has had a spring cleaning," she said, pointing out the transformation to Colonel Rutherford.

He came out of his reverie, whatever it was, and glanced at the house. "No," he said, "Simpson has left. There are new people in there. Grant is their name, I think. Young chap and his sister and their old mother. Came to call the other day; nice people, but very ignorant about gardens. Your aunt has taken a great fancy to the young man."

With that the trap turned into the wide open gates of the manor, and Joan, seeing the old house, was conscious of a quick rush of contentment. She had come home; how good it was to be home.

The house, a beautiful grey building of the Tudor days, stood snug and warm amid a perfect bower of giant trees. Ivy and creepers of all sorts clung to its stones and crept up its walls, long tendrils of vivid green. The drive swept round a beautifully kept lawn and vanished through a stone gateway leading into the stable-yard. It was only a pretence at a garden in front. Uncle John always held that the open space which lay at the back of the house and on to which the drawing-room windows opened was the real thing. There, was more green grass, which centuries of care and weeding and rolling had transformed into a veritable soft velvet carpet of exquisite colour that stretched out and down till it met the wood of tall trees that fringed the garden. Flowers were encouraged to grow wild under those trees; in spring it was a paradise of wild daffodils and tulips. That was Aunt Janet's arrangement; Uncle John liked his gardens to be orderly. He was responsible for the straight, tidy flower-beds, for the rose gardens, for the lavender clumps that grew down at the foot of the vegetable garden. For lavender is not really an ornamental flower and Uncle John only tolerated it because of Aunt Janet's scent-sachets.

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Beautiful and old and infinitely peaceful, the sight and colour of it could bring back childhood and a sense of safety to Joan, a sense that Uncle John's figure and face—dear and familiar as they were—had been quite unable to do. London, her life with Gilbert, the rack and tumult of her thoughts during the past six months appeared almost as a dream when seen against this dear old background.

Aunt Janet was waiting their arrival in the hall, and Joan, clambering down out of the trap, ran straight into those outstretched arms.

"Oh, Aunt Janet, it is good to be back," she gasped. Then she drew away a little to take in the tall, trim figure dressed all in black save for a touch of white at neck and wrists; the face stern and narrow, lit by a pair of very dark eyes, the firm, thin-cut mouth, the dark hair, showing grey in places, brushed back so smooth and straight and wound in little plaits round and round the neat head. "You are just the same as ever," Joan said. "Oh, Aunt Janet, it is good to get back."

The dark eyes, softened for the moment by something like tears, smiled at her. "Of course I am just the same, child. What did you expect? And you?"

"Oh, I am I," Joan answered; her laughter sounded unreal even to herself.

"You have been ill," contradicted Miss Rutherford, "it is plain to see all over your face. Thank God, I have got you back."

She brushed aside the sentiment, since it was a thing she did not always approve of.

"Come away in and have your tea. John, leave Mary to carry up Joan's boxes; she will get Dick to help her; they are too heavy for you. Your uncle is getting old," she went on, talking brusquely as she helped Joan off with her coat, "he feels things these days."

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"I haven't been away more than a year, Aunt Janet," laughed Joan; "you talk as if it had been centuries."

"It has seemed long," the other woman answered; her eyes were hungry on the girl's face as if she sought for something that kept eluding her. "A year is a long time to people of our age."

"Dear, silly, old Aunt Janet." Joan hugged her. "You are not a second older nor the tiniest fragment different to what you used to be. I know you don't like being hugged; it makes you untidy; but you have simply got to be just once more."

"You always were harum-scarum," remonstrated Aunt Janet, under this outburst. She did not, however, offer any real objection and they went into the drawing-room hand-in-hand.

A small, thin lady rose to greet them at their entrance and Joan was introduced to Miss Abercrombie. Everything about Miss Abercrombie, except her size, seemed to denote strength—strength of purpose, strength of will, strength of love and hate. She gave Joan the impression—and hers was a face that demanded study, Joan found herself looking at it again and again—of having come through great battles against fate. And if she had not won—the tell-tale lines of discontent that hung about her mouth did not betoken victory—at least she had not been absolutely defeated. She had carried the banner of her convictions through thick and thin.

Joan was roused to a sudden curiosity to know what those convictions were and a desire to have the same courage granted to herself. It gave her a thrill of pleasure to hear that Miss Abercrombie would be staying on for some time. She was a schoolmistress, it appeared, only just lately health had interfered with her duties and it was then that Aunt Janet had persuaded her, after many attempts, to take a real holiday and spend it at Wrotham.

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"Sheer vice on my part, agreeing," Miss Abercrombie told Joan with a laugh; "but everyone argued with me all at once and I succumbed."

"Just in time," Aunt Janet reminded her; "I was going to have given up asking you; even friendship has its limits."

They had tea in the drawing-room with the windows open on to the garden and a small, bright fire burning in the grate. Aunt Janet said she had discovered a nip in the air that morning and was sure Joan would feel cold after London. Uncle John wandered in and drank a cup of tea and wandered out again without paying much attention to anyone.

Aunt Janet sat and watched Joan, and the girl, conscious of the scrutiny and restless under those brown eyes as she had always been restless in the old days with a childish, unconfessed sin on her conscience, talked as lightly and as quickly as she could upon every topic under the sun to Miss Abercrombie. And Miss Abercrombie rose like a sportswoman to the need. She was too clever a reader of character not to feel the strain which rested between her two companions. She knew Aunt Janet through and through, the stern loyalty, the unbending precision of a nature slow to anger, full of love, but more inclined to justice than mercy where wrongdoing was concerned. And Joan—well, she had only known Joan half an hour, but Aunt Janet had been talking of nothing else for the last fortnight.

They kept the subject of Joan's life in London very well at bay for some time, but presently Aunt Janet, breaking a silence that had held her, leaned forward and interrupted their discussion.

"You have not told us why you left, Joan," she said, "or what has been settled about your plans. Are you on leave, or have you come away for good?"

Miss Abercrombie watched the faint pink rise up over the girl's face and die away again, leaving a rather unnatural pallor.

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"I have left," Joan was answering. "I—" Suddenly she looked up and for a moment she and Miss Abercrombie stared at each other. It was as if Joan was asking for help and the other woman trying to give it by the very steadiness of her eyes. Then Joan turned. "Aunt Janet," she said, hurrying a little over the words, "I want to ask you to let us not talk of my time in London. It—it was not what I meant it to be, perhaps because of my own fault, but—"

"You were not happy," said Aunt Janet; her love rose to meet the appeal. "I never really thought you were. I am content to have you back, Joan; we will let the rest slip away into the past."

"Thank you," whispered Joan; the burden of lying, it seemed, had followed her, even into this safe retreat; "perhaps some day, later on, I will try and tell you about it, Aunt Janet."

"Just as you like, dear." Aunt Janet pressed the hand in hers and at that moment Mary, the servant-girl, appeared in the doorway with a somewhat perturbed countenance.

"Please, mum, there is that Bridget girl from the village and her mother; will you see them a minute?"

The charity and sweetness left Miss Rutherford's face as if an artist had drawn a sponge across some painting. "I'll come directly," she said stiffly; "make them wait in my little room, Mary."

"The village scandal," Miss Abercrombie remarked, as the door closed behind the servant; "how are you working it out, Janet? Don't be too hard on the unrighteous; it is your one little failing."

"I hardly think it is a subject which can be discussed before Joan," Miss Rutherford answered.

She rose and moved to the door. "I have always kept her very much a child, Ann; will you remember that in talking to her."

Miss Abercrombie waited till the door shut, then her eyes came back to Joan. The child had grown into a woman, she realized; what would that knowledge cost her old friend? Then she laughed, but not unkindly.

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"I know someone else who has kept herself a child," she said, "and it makes the outlook of her mind a little narrow. Oh, well! you won't like me to speak disrespectfully of that very dear creature, your aunt. Will you come for a stroll down to the woods or are you longing to unpack?"

Joan chose the latter, because, for a second, despite her instantaneous liking for Miss Abercrombie, she was a little afraid. She wanted to set her thoughts in order too, to try and win back to the glad joy which she had first felt at being home, and which had been dispelled by Aunt Janet's questions and her own evasive replies.

"I will do my unpacking, I think," she said, "and put my room straight." She met the blue eyes again, kindly yet keen in their scrutiny. "I understand what you mean about Aunt Janet," she added; "I have felt it too, and, Miss Abercrombie, I am not quite such a child as she thinks; I could not help growing up."

"I know that, my dear," the other answered, "and God gave us our eyes to see both good and evil with; that is a thing your Aunt Janet is apt to forget. Well, run away and do your unpacking; we will meet later on at dinner."

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CHAPTER IV

**"I have forgotten you! Wherefore my days
Run gladly, as in those white hours gone by
Before I learnt to love you. Now have I
Returned to that old freedom, where the rays
Of your strange wonder no more shall amaze
My spirit."**

ANON.

If you see trouble in the back of a girl's eyes look always for a man in the case. That was Miss Abercrombie's philosophy of life. Girls do not as a rule get into trouble over money, for debts or gambling. She had spent the whole of her practical life in studying girls; she knew fairly well the ins and outs of their complicated natures. Joan was in trouble of sorts; what then had become of the man? Until the time came when the girl would be driven to speak—and Miss Abercrombie was sure the time would come sooner or later—she was content to stay silent and observant in the background of events. Often Joan felt as though the shrewd eyes were drawing the unwilling truth from behind her mask of indifference, and she was, in a way, afraid of the little, alert woman who seemed to be taking such an intense though silent interest in her.

For the first fortnight Gilbert wrote every day. To begin with, his letters were cheerful. He was inclined, indeed, to chaff her for losing her temper over his mother's visit.

"The old lady is gone," he wrote on the third day. "You can come back with perfect safety. She never smelt a rat, but tried to talk to me very seriously about taking unto myself a wife. It was on the tip of my tongue once or twice to tell her that I was already as good as married. Don't keep on being stuffy, Joan, hurry up and come back. You can't think what a lot I miss you, little girl, or how much I want you."

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It was the first of his letters that she made any attempt to answer and her reply was not easy to write. She had come very suddenly to her decision as she had stood within the circle of Gilbert's arms that morning and answered his arguments about his mother. Now she was realizing that for weeks before that her allegiance had been wavering. She had no wish to go back to him. She could not understand herself, but the fact was self-evident, even though the scent of heliotrope haunted her days and crept into the land of her dreams. Her letter, when it was finished, struck her as cold and stupid, yet she let it go; she could not somehow make her meaning any clearer.

"Dear Gilbert," she wrote, "I am sorry you do not seem to be understanding that what I wrote in my first letter is really true. It is all finished between us and I am not coming back. There is not anything else to say, except that I should be happier if you did not go on writing. Nothing can change me, and it only keeps open old thoughts."

He wrote in answer to that a furiously angry, altogether unpleasant letter. Joan read it with shrinking horror, it seemed to lay bare all that she had been only half aware of before, the ugliness, the smallness of what she had at first thought was love.

"If you try to marry anyone else," the letter ended on a cruelly ugly note, "remember I can spoil your little game for you, Joan. There is no man who will marry you when they learn the truth."

She tore up his other letters after that; the very sight of his handwriting brought hot shame to her heart.

How much the people of the house noticed she hardly knew. Aunt Janet had fallen into the habit of watching her covertly, pathetically; she was trying in her own way to read the secret hidden away behind a changed Joan. But she did her best to keep her curiosity out of sight; she was very gentle, very anxious to divert Joan's thoughts and keep her happy. [Pg 33]

Uncle John, of course, noticed nothing. Joan helped him to potter about in the garden—they were building a rookery down by the woods—or sometimes she would take him for long walks and he would stump along beside her wrapped in indifferent silence, or else, carried away by some reminiscence of the old days, would start talking about the regiment and the places where he had been stationed. It was only Miss Abercrombie that Joan was really uneasy with, and the end of Miss Abercrombie's visit was in sight.

One afternoon, on a day which had seen one of Gilbert's unopened letters destroyed, Joan and Miss Abercrombie started out together soon after tea to take a basin of jelly to one of Aunt Janet's pet invalids who lived in a cottage away out at what was called the Four Cross Roads.

It was one of those very fine blue days common to September. Just a nip of cold in the air, the forerunner of winter, and overhead the leaves on the trees turning all their various reds and golds for autumn.

"The sky gives one a great sense of distance this afternoon," Miss Abercrombie said presently. "You never see a sky like this in towns; that is why you get into the habit of thinking things out of proportion."

"What makes you say that?" asked Joan; "I mean, how does the distance of the sky affect it?"

"Oh, well, it makes one feel small," the other answered, "unimportant; as if the affairs that worry our hearts out are, after all, of very little consequence in the scheme of existence."

"They are our life," Joan argued, "one has to worry and work things out for oneself." [Pg 34]

"You are a Browningite," laughed Miss Abercrombie; she glanced up sideways at her companion.

"As it were better youth
Should strive through acts uncouth
Towards making, than repose on aught found made."

He is right in a way, though, mind you, I don't know that it pays women to do much in the struggling line."

"I do wonder why you say that," said Joan; "you have always struck me as being, above everything else, a fighter."

"Probably why my advice lies along other directions," admitted Miss Abercrombie; "it is extremely uncomfortable to be a pioneer."

"But in the end, even if you have won nothing, it brings you the courage of having stuck to your convictions."

"Yes," Miss Abercrombie answered dryly, "it certainly brings you that."

They walked in silence again for a while, turning into a short cut to their destination across the fields.

"Your aunt has got convictions too." Miss Abercrombie reopened the conversation, evidently her thoughts had been working along the same lines. "They are uncomfortable things; witness the judgment she metes out to that unfortunate girl in the village."

"You mean Bridget?" Joan's voice had suddenly a touch of fear in it; Miss Abercrombie stole a quick look at her. "I was asking Mary about her the other day."

"Immorality, your aunt calls it," sniffed Miss Abercrombie, "and for that she would quite willingly, good, kind woman as she is, make this child—Bridget is seventeen, you know—an outcast for the rest of her life. Immorality!"

"What would you call it?" questioned Joan; she spoke stiffly, for she was singularly uneasy under the discussion, yet she had always wanted to argue the matter out with Miss Abercrombie.

"I hate the word 'immoral' to begin with," the little woman went on; "not that I am exactly out against regulations. Laws and customs have come into being, there is little doubt about that, to protect the weak against the strong. The peculiar thing about them is that they always wreak their punishments on the weak. Poor Bridget, even without your aunt's judgment, she pays the penalty, doesn't she?" [Pg 35]

"I suppose Aunt Janet is a little hard about these things," Joan admitted. "You see, the idea of going against laws and things has never occurred to her. She has always obeyed, she has never

wanted to do anything else."

"Quite so," agreed Miss Abercrombie; "my dear, don't let us talk about it any more. I always lose my temper, and I hate losing my temper with someone whom I love as much as I do your Aunt Janet."

"But I am interested in what you think," Joan went on slowly; the red crept into her cheeks. "I don't believe in marriage myself; I think people ought to live together if and when they want to, and leave each other when they like."

Miss Abercrombie stared with dismay at the flushed face. "My dear," she said, and her tone had fallen upon far greater seriousness than the former discussion had evoked, "both of those are very rash statements. The problem of life is unfortunately not quite so easily settled."

"But marriage," Joan argued, "marriage, which tries to tie down in hard bonds something which ought only to be of the spirit—I think it is hideous, hideous! I could never marry."

"No," agreed Miss Abercrombie, "a great many of us feel like that when we are young and hot-headed. I nearly said empty-headed. Then we read fat books about the divine right of Motherhood, Free Love and State Maternity. All very well in the abstract and fine theories to argue about, but they do not work in real life. Believe me, the older you get the more and more you realize how far away they all are from the ideal. Marriage may be sometimes a mistaken solution, but at present it is the only one we have."

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"Why do you say that?" asked Joan; for the first time she turned and looked at her companion. "Do you really believe it is true?"

"Yes," nodded Miss Abercrombie. "My dear," she put a hand on Joan's arm, "we women have got to remember that our actions never stand by themselves alone. Someone else has always to foot the bill for what we do. I said just now that laws had been evolved to protect the weak; well, marriage protects the child."

"But if two people love each other," Joan tried to argue, but her words were bringing a cold chill of fear to her heart even as she spoke, "what other protection can be needed?"

"Love is something that no one can define," stated Miss Abercrombie; "but centuries have gone to prove that it is not as binding as marriage, and for the sake of the children the man and woman must be bound. That is the long and short of all the arguments."

"If there is no child?" Joan's fear prompted her to the question; she spoke it almost in a whisper.

Miss Abercrombie paused in her act of unlatching the gate, for they had arrived at the cottage by now, to look up at her. "Ah, there you open wider fields," she assented, "only childless people are and must be the exceptions. One cannot lay down laws for the exceptions."

Mrs. Starkey, the invalid old lady, was garrulous, and delighted to see them. So anxious to tell them all her ailments and scraps of gossip that by the time they got away it was quite late and already the sun was sinking behind the range of hills at the back of the village.

"We will have to hurry," Joan said. "Aunt Janet gets so fussed if one is out after dark."

Hurrying precluded any reopening of the subject they had been discussing, but Joan's mind was busy with all the thoughts it had roused as they walked. The faint hint of fear that had stirred to life in her when Miss Abercrombie had spoken of Bridget was fast waking to very definite panic. She could feel it tugging at her heart and making her breathing fast and difficult. Supposing that the vaguely-dreamed-of possibility had crystallized into fact in her case? How would Aunt Janet think of it; what changes would it bring into her life?

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As they turned into the little village street they came straight into a crowd of people standing round an open cottage door. The crowd was strangely quiet, talking amongst themselves in whispers, but from within the cottage came the sound of wailing, the hysterical crying of old age.

Miss Abercrombie, with Joan following, pushed her way to the front, and with awed faces the villagers drew back to let them pass. At the open door Sam Jones, the village constable, an old man who had known Joan in her very young days, put out his hand.

"Don't you go in now, miss," he said, "it is not for the likes of you to see, and you can do no good. Besides which, your aunt is there already."

But Joan paid no attention to him and, pushing past his outstretched hand, followed Miss Abercrombie.

The inside of the cottage was dimly lit, and scattered with a profuse collection of what appeared to be kitchen utensils, dishes and clothes, all flung about in confusion. The only light in the place glinted on the long deal table and the stiff dead figure stretched out on it, still and quiet, with white, vacant face and lifeless arms that hung down on either side. Water was oozing out of the clothes and dripping from the unbound hair; it had gathered already into little pools on the floor. In the darkest corner of the room a crouched-up form sat sobbing hopelessly, and by the figure on the table Aunt Janet stood, her face in shadow, since she was above the shade of the lamp, but her hands singularly white and gentle-looking as they moved about drying the dead girl's face, pushing the wet, clogged hair from eyes and mouth.

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Joan paused just within the door, the terror of that figure on the table holding her spellbound, but Miss Abercrombie moved brusquely forward so that she stood in the lamplight confronting Aunt Janet.

"So," she said, quick and sharp, yet not over loud, the people outside could not have heard, "Bridget has found this way out. A kinder way than your stern judgment, Janet. Poor little girl."

"I did not judge," Miss Rutherford answered stiffly, "the wages of sin is death."

"Yet you can be kind to her now," snorted Miss Abercrombie; "it would not have been wasted had you been a little kinder before. Forgive me, Janet, I speak quickly, without thinking. You live up to your precepts; everyone has to do that."

The old woman in the corner lifted her face to look at them; perhaps she thought that in some way or other they were reviling the dead, for she staggered to her feet and crossed over to the table.

"It was fear made her do it," she wailed; "fear, and because we spoke her harsh. I hated the shame of it all. Yet, God knows, I would have stood by her in the end. My little girl, my little Bridget!" Sobs choked her, she fell to her knees, pressing her lips to one of the cold, stiff hands.

Joan saw Aunt Janet stoop and lay a gentle hand on the heaving shoulders, she heard, too, a movement of the crowd outside and saw the Vicar's good-natured, perturbed face appear in the doorway. Behind him again was a younger man, stern-faced, with quiet, very steady blue eyes and a firm-lined mouth. All this she noticed, why she could not have explained, for the man was a perfect stranger to her; then the fear and giddiness which all this time she had been fighting against gained the upper hand and, swaying a little, she moved forward with the intention of getting outside, only to fall in a dead faint across the doorway of the cottage.

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CHAPTER V

**"Love wakes men, once a lifetime each
They lift their heavy heads and look.**

**And some give thanks, and some blaspheme,
And most forget, but either way
That, and the child's unheeded dream
Is all the light of all their day."**

The Grants were sitting at breakfast in their small, red-walled dining-room. Richard, commonly called Dick, at the end of the table, Mabel at the one side and Mrs. Grant in the seat of honour at the top. Wherever Mrs. Grant sat was the seat of honour; she was that kind of old lady. Marvellously handsome still, despite her age, with a commanding presence and a nature which had sublime contempt for everyone and everything except herself, she sailed through life exacting service from all and obedience from her children. Why they obeyed her they could not have themselves explained; perhaps it was an inheritance from the dead Mr. Grant, who had worshipped his wife as if she had been some divinity. In her own way Mrs. Grant had always been gracious and kindly to her husband, but he had been altogether a nonentity in her life. Before the children were old enough to see why, they realized that Daddy was only the man who made the money in their house. Mother spent it, buying the luxuries with which they were surrounded, the magnificent toys which they disregarded, as is the way of children, the splendidly expensive clothes, which were a perfect burden to them. Then, just when Dick was beginning to understand, Mr. Grant died.

He had sent for his son—Dick was about eighteen then—and spoken to him just before the end came.

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"You will have to look after your mother, Dick," he had said, clutching at the young, strong hands; "she has always been looked after. She has never had to rough things in her life. And you won't be any too well off. Promise me, promise me, you will always give her of your best."

"Of course, I promise, Dad," he had answered.

Further conversation between then had ceased because Mrs. Grant swept into the room, regal even in the face of death. Dick remembered the incident afterwards with a little twitch of his lips because it was so typical of his mother and it was just at this period that he had begun to criticize her. The sick-room had been in shadowed gloom until her entry; the lights hurt the fast-failing eyes.

"I cannot sit in the dark," stated Mrs. Grant, as she settled herself, with a delightful rustle of silk and a wave of perfume, beside the bed. "You know that, Harry. It always has depressed me, hasn't it?"

"Turn up the lights, Dick," whispered the man, his hand had closed on one of hers; happiness flooded his heart at her presence.

"But you know they hurt your eyes," Dick expostulated; he was new to death, yet he could read the signs well enough to know his father was dying.

"Harry can lie with his eyes shut," answered Mrs. Grant calmly. There was no disagreeableness in her tone: her selfishness was on too gigantic a scale for her ever to be disagreeable.

And Dick had turned up the lights and gone fuming from the room, conscious for the time being of a sense of dislike for his mother's perfection!

It soon faded though; he had been trained too thoroughly in his youth. Once he said to Mabel hotly:

"Why does Mother cry for Dad? She did not really love him, and she just delighted in buying all that expensive and becoming mourning."

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And Mabel had surprised him by replying: "Mother does not really love anyone but herself."

The remark sounded odd from Mabel, who spent her life slaving with apparent devotion in her mother's service. She was a tall, rather colourless girl, with big grey eyes and a quaint-shaped mouth that was always very silent. She moved through the background of their lives doing things for mother. She had always done that; Dick wondered sometimes whether the soul within her would ever flame into open rebellion, but it never did.

By the time Dick had passed his various exams, and was ready to take up a practice somewhere, Mrs. Grant and Mabel had been practically everywhere on the Continent.

"Money is running short," Mabel wrote crisply to Dick; "cannot you do anything in the way of taking a house and settling down, so as to make a home for Mother and me?"

Dick's ambitions lay in the direction of bachelor's diggings and work in London. He thrust them aside and bought what was supposed to be a very good and flourishing practice at Birmingham. Unfortunately Mrs. Grant took a violent dislike to Birmingham. Their house was gloomy and got on her nerves; the air, she said, was laden with smoke which irritated her throat. She developed a cough, quite the most annoying sound that Dick had ever imagined, and he was not easy to irritate. Mother coughed from the time she woke till the time she went to sleep—coughed and remembered old times and wept for Harry, who would at least have taken care not to expose her to such overwhelming discomfort.

At the end of six months Dick threw up the practice in despair and placed himself at her disposal. They put in a year in London, but what Dick earned was quite insufficient to cope with what Mrs. Grant spent and things went from bad to worse.

Mabel never offered any advice until she was asked but when Dick spoke to her finally she was quite definite.

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"You have got to take Mother in hand," she said. "Father never did. He spent his life making money for her to spend, but there is no reason why you should. Get a small practice somewhere in the country where there are no shops and just tell Mother you are going to settle there for five years at least."

"She will get another cough," argued Dick.

"You must let her cough, it won't hurt her," answered Mabel.

Undoubtedly Mrs. Grant did not approve of Wrotham to begin with, but it had its advantages, even for her. She settled very quickly into the role of Lady Bountiful; the villagers gazing upon her with such unmixed admiration that she was moved to remark to Mabel that it was really pleasant doing things for such grateful people. Dick provided her with a victoria and horse in place of the usual doctor's trap, and she could drive abroad to visit this or that protégé in truly regal style. It meant that Dick had to pay all his visits, and some of them very far off and at all sorts of unseasonable hours, on a bicycle, but he never grudged making sacrifices of that kind for her. No one admired his mother in the abstract more than Dick did.

Mabel perhaps resented the extra work it entailed on him, for she loved Dick with the whole force of her self-restrained heart. But, as usual, she kept silent. The villagers could see that she drove out in attendance on Mrs. Grant, but to them she was only an uninteresting shadow that waited on the other's splendour. They often wondered among themselves how Mrs. Grant could have a daughter as drab and uninteresting as Miss Grant; they did not realize how, like a vampire, the older woman lived upon the younger one's vitality. People like Mrs. Grant exist at the expense of those they come in contact with. You either have to live for them or away from them.

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On this particular morning Dick finished his breakfast before either his mother or sister, and pushing back his chair, asked, as he had always asked since the days of his childhood, if he might rise.

"Before I am finished, Dick?" remonstrated Mrs. Grant; "it is not very polite, dear."

"I know," Dick apologized, "but the truth is I have an early call to pay this morning. The people of the Manor House have sent for me; Miss Rutherford the younger is not awfully well, or something."

"Miss Rutherford the younger?" repeated his mother; "I did not know there was a younger; I have never seen her, have I, Mabel?"

"I don't suppose so," Dick answered for his sister; "she has been away in London."

"What is the matter with her?" asked Mrs. Grant. "Why do they want you to see her?"

"I can't know that till I have seen her, can I? Last night she happened to come into the Rendle cottage just after they had brought that poor girl home, and the sight must have upset her; anyway she fainted. I expect that is what Miss Rutherford is worried about."

"It is hardly polite of her not to have brought her niece to call on me," said Mrs. Grant. "Still, if you are going there, dear, and the girl doesn't seem well, tell them I shall be only too happy to come and fetch her for a drive some afternoon. I daresay my carriage is more comfortable than that ramshackle old trap of theirs."

"You are a dear to think of it," he said, stooping to kiss her good-bye. "If you can spare Mabel this afternoon, Mother, I thought perhaps she might come into Sevenoaks with me. I have got to attend a meeting there, and it will be an outing for her."

"If Mabel would like to go, of course she must," Mrs. Grant agreed. "I shall be a little lonely, and to-day is the day I am supposed to have my hair shampooed. Not that it really matters."

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"I could not go any way," Mabel put in for herself. "Mr. Jarvis is coming to tea, Dick; he asked himself last week."

She followed her brother out to the front door.

"The day is going to be full of disagreeables for you," he said, as they stood waiting for his bicycle to be brought round. "Mother's shampoo, I know what that involves, and Mr. Jarvis. Nuisance the fellow is; why can't he see that you dislike him?"

"Oh, I don't exactly," she answered, without meeting his eyes.

She hated him like poison, Dick knew. He wondered rather vaguely why Mabel had lied to him, generally speaking they were too good friends for that to be necessary. Then he dismissed the subject, and his thoughts turned again to the girl he was on his way to see. He had been thinking a great deal of Joan since he had first seen her. The startled, child-like face, the wide frightened eyes, had impressed themselves on his mind the night before. He had lifted her in his arms and carried her outside; the poise of her thrown-back head against his arm stayed in his mind, a very warm memory. Poor little girl, it must have been horrible for her to have come in from the gay placidness of her own life and thoughts to the stark tragedy of Bridget Rendle's death.

He was very ignorant and very reverent in his thoughts about women. He could imagine Joan's sweet, well-ordered life, the fragrance of youth hung about his idea of her. Bridget Rendle had been a girl too, younger perhaps than the other one; but Bridget had dipped into the waters of life, and sorrow and sin had closed over her. The two girls were as far apart as the poles, it seemed almost irreverent to think of them in the same breath.

Aunt Janet met him in the hall when she heard of his arrival.

"I have not told my niece about sending for you," she said; "it might only make her nervous. I am very alarmed about her, Dr. Grant. She has been home now three weeks and she is really not at all like herself. Then that faint last night. I am afraid of fainting-fits; my mother, I may as well tell you, died very suddenly from a heart-attack."

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"It is not likely to be anything of that sort," he told her. "Yesterday's tragedy was quite sufficient to upset very strong nerves."

"I hope not," Aunt Janet agreed; "anyway, I shall feel happier once you have seen her. Will you come this way?"

She led him through the house to a room on the other side of the drawing-room which had been fitted up as a special sanctum for Joan since her return from London.

"I am nervous," she admitted to the doctor with her hand on the door-knob, "she will perhaps be annoyed at my having sent for you." Then she opened the door and they passed in.

Joan was sitting in the far corner near the open window, a book on her lap. But she was not pretending to read; Dick could have sworn that she had been crying as they came in. As she saw her aunt was not alone she stood up quickly and the book fell unheeded to the floor.

"This is the doctor, dear," Aunt Janet began nervously. "I asked him to call and see you. You need a tonic, I am sure you do."

"You sent for him," whispered Joan. Dick felt horribly uncomfortable; it was impossible not to sense the tragedy which hung heavy in the air. "Why, oh why, have you done that, Aunt Janet?"

"I was afraid," the other began; "last night you—" Rather waveringly she came to a full stop, staring at Joan.

The girl had drawn herself up to her full height. She faced them as someone brought suddenly to bay, her hands clenched at her sides, two flags of colour flaming in her cheeks.

"I was going to have told you," she said, addressing herself solely to Aunt Janet, "now you have brought him in he must know it too. But I do not need him to tell me what is the matter with me; I found it out for myself last night. I am not ashamed, I do not even hold that I have done anything wrong; I would have told you before only I did not know it was going to come to this, and for the rest it was like a shut book in my life that I did not want to have to open or look at again. I am like Bridget Rendle," she said, head held very high. "I am going to have a baby. Bridget was afraid and ashamed, but I am neither. I have done nothing to be ashamed of."

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The telling of it sapped at her much boasted courage, and left her whiter than the white wall-paper; Dick could see that she had some ado to keep back her tears.

Aunt Janet seemed to have been paralysed; she stayed where she was, stiff, stricken, and Dick, glancing at her, thought he had never seen such anguish and terror combined on a human face. He felt himself completely forgotten in this crisis. The two women stared at each other. Twice Aunt Janet moistened her lips and tried to speak, but the words died in her throat. When she succeeded at last her voice was scarce recognizable.

"You said—like Bridget Rendle," she whispered; "did you mean what you said?"

"Yes," answered Joan.

The older woman turned towards the door. She walked as if blind, her hands groping before her. "God!" Dick heard her say under her breath, "Dear God, what have I done that this should come upon me?"

As she reached the door Joan called to her, her voice sharp with fear. "Aunt Janet, Aunt Janet, aren't you going to say anything to me?"

"I must hold my tongue," the other answered stiffly, "or I shall curse that which I have loved." Suddenly the anguish in her flamed to white heat. "I would rather have known you dead," she said, and passed swiftly from the room.

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Joan took a step forward, and her foot touched on the book she had let fall. Mechanically she stooped to pick it up, then, because her knees were in reality giving way under her, she stumbled to the chair and sat down again. She seemed to have forgotten the man standing by the door, she just sat there, hands folded in her lap, with her white face and great brown eyes looking unseeingly at the garden.

Dick moved uneasily. He had not the slightest idea what he ought to do; he felt horribly like an intruder. And he was intensely sorry for the girl, even though behind this sorrow lay the shock of a half-formed ideal which she had shattered in his mind. Finally he submerged the man in the doctor and moved towards her.

"I am most awfully sorry for you," he said, "will you let me help you if I can? There may be some mistake, and anyway I could give you something to help with those fainting-fits."

Joan brought her eyes away from the garden and looked at him. "No," she said, "there is no mistake and I do not make a habit of fainting. Yesterday it was different, perhaps I realized definitely and for the first time what it would all mean. I saw Aunt Janet's face as she spoke of the dead girl, and ... I do not know why I am telling you all this," she broke off, "it cannot be very interesting, but I do not want you to think that I feel as Bridget Rendle felt."

"No," he agreed, "you are facing it with more courage than she had been taught to have."

"It is not a question of courage," Joan answered. He was not understanding her, she realized, and for some stupid reason it hurt that he should not, but she must not stoop to further explanations. She stood up, making a stern effort at absolute calmness.

"Good-bye," she said, "I am sorry you should have been troubled to come and that you should have had to go through this sort of scene."

"Good-bye," was all he could answer.

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At the door he turned to look back at her. "If you should need help of any sort at any time," he said, "will you send for me? I should like to feel you were going to do that."

"I cannot promise," she answered, "you see, I shall probably be leaving here quite soon."

And with that he had to be content to leave her.

CHAPTER VI

"And bending down beside the glowing bars

**Murmur, a little sadly, how love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead,
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars."**

Mabel had shampooed her mother's hair, following out with unending patience the minute instructions which the process always involved. She had rinsed it in four relays of hot water, two of lukewarm and one of cold; she had dried it with the hard towel for the scalp and the soft towel for the hair. She had rubbed brilliantine in to give it the approved gloss. The whole proceeding had lasted fully two hours; now she stood and brushed out the long fine threads of grey turning to silver with just the steady gentle pressure which was necessary and which, according to Mrs. Grant, no one but Mabel was capable of producing.

Mrs. Grant liked to have her hair brushed for half an hour after a shampoo, it soothed the irritated nerves. From behind her mother's back Mabel could see her own face in the glass, the sallow cheeks flushed from her exertions, the grey, black-lashed eyes tired and a little angry. Once, long ago, during one of their journeys on the continent, there had been a young naval officer who had loved Mabel for those grey eyes of hers. He had raved about the way the lashes lay like a fringe of shadow round them. He had called them "Dream Eyes," and once he had kissed the lids close shut over them with hard, passionate kisses. Whenever Mabel looked at her eyes in the glass she thought of Jack Donald. She had loved him and she had sent him away because of Mother. He had only been able to offer her his love and the pay of a lieutenant in the Navy; he had not even shown that he liked Mother, he had resented the way Mabel slaved for her. Of course the outlook had been absurd, and Mrs. Grant had said so very plainly. If Mabel married it would have to be someone wealthy someone elderly enough to understand that Mother must live with them. But when he went he took with him all the dreams of Mabel's life; she never looked out into the future to make plans now, she could only look back into the past that held her memories.

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"I hope," said Mrs. Grant suddenly breaking in on her thoughts, "that Dick does not fall in love with this young lady at the Manor."

"Why not?" asked Mabel, "he must fall in love sooner or later."

"Well, then, it must be later and with someone who has a great deal of money. We are quite badly enough off as it is."

"You and I could go away again on our own," suggested Mabel, "you know you said the other day that Wrotham was getting on your nerves."

"Don't be ridiculous," snapped Mrs. Grant, "I should like to know what you think we should live on once Dick has a wife. You say you won't marry Mr. Jarvis or anyone else."

"No," Mabel admitted, "but because I won't marry it hardly seems fair that we should stand in the way of Dick's doing so."

"What do you intend to imply by 'standing in the way'? Really Mabel, sometimes I wonder if you have any love for me, you so habitually and wilfully misconstrue my sentences. Surely it is permissible" (Mrs. Grant's sigh was a model of motherly affection) "for a mother to wish to keep her son, her eldest born, to herself for a little longer. One loses them so once they marry."

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Mabel concealed a swift, rather bitter, smile. "I did not mean to misconstrue anything," she said, "only just the other day I was thinking that perhaps we did rather hamper Dick. He is twenty-seven, you know; it is funny he has never wanted to marry."

"He is waiting for the right girl," Mrs. Grant sighed again.

"And if he happens to find her," thought Mabel to herself, there was no use saying the words aloud, "we are to do our best to prevent him having her. Poor old Dick." Her eyes waked to sudden, vivid affection as she thought of him.

She ran downstairs presently, Mrs. Grant having retired to rest after exertions, to meet Dick just coming in. He had done a round of visits after his call at the Manor house. Visits which had included one to the Rendles' cottage, where he had seen the principal figure of last night's tragedy laid out, as her mother said, for decent burial, "even though it baint a going to be Christian."

The girl had been dressed in something white; white flowers, great beautiful-headed chrysanthemums, lay between her folded hands and against her face. She had been a handsome girl, death had robbed her of her vivid colouring, but it had given her in its stead something dignified and withdrawn, a look of suffering and yet great peace.

Mrs. Rendle was more resigned too this morning; she had cried her heart quiet through the night.

"Bridget is better so," she could confide to Dick as he stood looking down at the girl, "the shame is done away with, sir, and God will look to the sin. I hold there ain't much to fear there, even though they won't bury her in the churchyard."

"No, I don't think there is much to fear," he agreed. "I am sorry about the burial, Mrs. Rendle, I

"Oh, that is not to be helped," she answered. "God will rest her soul wherever she be. Miss Rutherford sent those flowers," she added, "she was rare set agin Bridget to begin with, but she be softened down."

That brought the other tragedy which he had witnessed this morning back to his mind. Not that he had really forgotten it. The picture of Joan, her head high, her cheeks flushed, was one that had imprinted itself very strongly upon his memory. He had given up trying to understand how such a thing could have happened, his own vague happy thoughts of her stirred wistfully behind the new knowledge. And he could not dismiss her altogether from the throne he had designed for her to occupy. There must be some explanation; if only he had not been such an absolute stranger perhaps she would have told him a little more, have given him a chance to understand.

"Well," asked Mabel, "is she nice, Dick, did you like her?" Her eyes were quick to notice the new shadow of trouble on his face.

"Very nice, I think," he answered, hoping his voice sounded as indifferent as he meant it to, "but I really did not see much of her and she is going back to London almost at once." He went past her on into the dining-room. "Is lunch nearly ready," he asked, "I have got to catch that 2.5, you know."

"I'll see about it," Mabel said, "Mother is having hers upstairs."

She turned away to comply, but all the time she was hurrying up the maidservant, and later, while she and Dick sat opposite each other, rather silent, through lunch, her eyes and mind were busy trying to read the secret of Dick's manner. The girl had impressed him strongly, that was evident, but why should she have occasioned this gloom in Dick who so very rarely allowed anything or anybody to ruffle his cheery good humour?

He rode off without letting her glean any explanation, and Mabel wandered into the drawing-room to get it ready for Mrs. Grant's descent. Had Dick really fallen in love? She remembered once before when he had been about eighteen or nineteen, how there had been a girl whom he had rather shyly confessed himself enamoured of. But since the damsel had been quite five years his senior the romance, to Mabel's relief, had faded away. Yet if Dick were ever really to fall in love it would be a deep and unshakable tie; he would be as his father had been, all faithful to the one woman in his life.

It was remembering her father that suddenly brought Mabel's thoughts back to her mother whose absorbing personality had stood so like a giant shadow across all their lives. Would Dick's love be strong enough to fight against his sense of duty and mother's selfishness, for most certainly mother would not help him to achieve his desire unless it ran along the same lines as her own. And if mother prevailed what would life mean for Dick? The same dry empty dreariness that her own days contained, the restless hopes that died too hard, the unsatisfied, cruel dreams? No, no! She had not fought to save her own happiness, but she would fight to the last inch to save Dick's.

Almost as if in answer to her heart's wild outcry the front-door bell rang, and looking up she saw the short stout figure which of late had taken to haunting her thoughts on the door-step.

Mr. Jarvis was an elderly man inclined to be fat, with round, heavy face, very thick about the jaws and unpleasantly small eyes. Yet the expression of the man's face was not altogether disagreeable and a certain shrewd humour showed in the lines of his mouth. He had lived for forty-two years in Wrotham, travelling twice a year to London in connection with his business, but never venturing further afield. His house, a magnificent farm building, lay about twelve miles away on the other side of Wrotham station. It had come down to him through generations of Jarvises, he was reputed to be marvellously wealthy, and he had no shyness about admitting the fact. His favourite topics of conversation were money and horses. He had never married, village gossip could have given you lurid details as to the why and the wherefore had you been willing to listen. Mr. Jarvis himself would have put it more plainly. The only woman he had ever had the least affection for had neither expected nor desired matrimony; she had been content to live with him as his housekeeper. This woman had been dead three years when Jarvis first met Mabel. Quite apart from the fact that of late he had been feeling that it was time he got married, Jarvis had been attracted to Mabel from the first. She was such a contrast to the other women he had known; he admired enormously her slim delicacy, her faintly coloured face, her grey eyes. He liked her way of talking, too, and the long silences which held her; her quiet dignity, the way she moved. He placed her on a pedestal in his thoughts, which was a thing he had never dreamt of doing for any other woman, and before long his admiration melted into love. Then being forty-two the disease took rapid and tense possession. He was only happy when he was with her, able to talk to her now and again, to watch her always.

Dick's impression was that Mabel hated the man. He disliked him himself, which perhaps coloured his view, for hate was not quite what Mabel felt. Had Mr. Jarvis been content to just like her she would have tolerated and more or less liked him. She had thought him, to begin with, a funny, in a way rather pathetic, little man. Ugly, and Mabel had such an instinctive sympathy for anything ugly or unloved. So, to begin with, she had been kind to him; then one day Mrs. Grant had opened her eyes to the evident admiration of the man, mentioning at the same time that from the money point of view he would be a good match, and suddenly Mabel had known that she was afraid. Afraid, without exactly knowing why, very much as is the hapless sheep on his way to the

slaughter-house.

As the maid ushered in Mr. Jarvis a minute or two later this feeling of fear caught at Mabel's heart, and in answer to its summons the warm blood flushed to face and neck as she stood up to receive him.

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"I am early," stammered the man, his eyes on her new-wakened beauty, for it was only in her lack of colour that Mabel's want of prettiness lay, "but I came on purpose, I wanted to catch you alone."

Mabel took what was almost a despairing look at the clock. "Mother won't be down for quite half an hour," she said, "so you have succeeded. Shall we stay here or will you come down to the garden? I want to show you my Black Prince rose, it is not doing at all well."

She moved to the window which opened doorways on to the garden, but Mr. Jarvis made no attempt to follow her.

"Let us stay here," he said, "what I have got to say won't take long and we can do the roses afterwards when Mrs. Grant is about. I guess you could help me a bit if you only chose to," he went on, his voice curiously gruff and unready, "but you won't, you won't even look at me. I suppose those great grey eyes of yours hate the sight of me, and I am a damned fool to put my heart into words. But I have got to," she heard him move close to her and how quickly he was breathing, "I love you, you pale, thin slip of a girl, I want you as a wife, will you marry me?"

The silence when he had finished speaking lay heavy between them. Mabel let him take her hand, though the moist warmth of his gave her a little shudder of aversion, but by no strength of will could she lift her eyes to look at him. She stood as immovable as a statue and the man, watching her from out of his small shrewd eyes, smiled a little bitterly.

"You hate the thought like poison," he said, "yet you don't throw off my hand or yell out your 'No.' Something is in the balance then. Well, marry me for my money, Mabel. I had rather it were love, but if there is anything about me that can win you, I am not going to give you up."

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That flicked at her pride and the honesty of it appealed to her. She lifted her eyes and for the first time she became aware of the real kindness that lay in his.

"I have never hated you," she said slowly, "but I don't and can't love you. Will you take that as your answer?"

The man shook his head. "I was not fool enough to ask—'Do you love me?'" he reminded her; "what I want to know is, 'Will you marry me?'"

"Without love?"—her eyes besought him—"marriage must be hideous."

"I will risk it if you will," he answered. "Sit down, let us talk it out."

He had won back his self-possession, though his eyes were still eager in their demand. Mabel sat down on the window-seat and he pulled up a chair at a little distance from her.

"Look here," he began, "it is like this. I am not a young man, probably I am twelve to fourteen years older than you. If you have heard what the village scandal says about me you can take it from me that it is true; it is better that you should know the worst at once. But until I met you, this I can swear before God, I have never really loved. It is not a question of money this time; I would give my soul to win you. And I don't want you as I have wanted the other women in my life; I want you as my wife."

"Yet you can buy me just as you could them," Mabel whispered.

"No"—again he shook his head. "I am not making that mistake either. I know just why I can buy you. Anyway, let us put that aside. This is the case as I see it. I have money, heaps of it; I have a good large house and servants eating their heads off. I will make Mrs. Grant comfortable; she will live with us, of course, and she is welcome to everything I have got; and I love you. That is the one great drawback, isn't it? The question is. Will you be able to put up with it?"

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Away in the back of Mabel's mind another voice whispered, "I love you." She had to shut her lids over the "Dream Eyes," to hold back the tears.

"Even if things were different," she said, "I could not love you; I have always loved someone else."

Mr. Jarvis sat back in his chair with a quick frown. "Any chance of his marrying you?" he asked.

"No," she had to admit, "there has never been any chance of that."

"I see"—he looked up at her and down again at his podgy, fat hands, clenched together. "My offer still holds good," he said abruptly.

"Oh, I don't know what to say or what to do." Mabel's calm broke, she stood up nervously. It almost seemed as if the walls of the room were closing in on her. "There are so many things to think of; Mother and Dick and——"

Perhaps he understood the softening of her voice as she spoke of Dick, for he looked up at her quickly.

"Yes, there is your brother," he agreed. "I guess he is pretty tired having to look after you two, and he is a clever lad; there ought to be a future before him if he has his chance. Put the weight on to my shoulders, Mabel; they are better able to bear it."

She turned to him breathlessly; it was quite true what he was saying about Dick. Dick had his own life to make. "I have told you the truth," she said. "I don't love you, probably there will be times when I shall hate you. If you are not afraid of that, if you are ready to take Mother and me and let us spend your money in return for that, then—I will marry you."

Mr. Jarvis got quickly to his feet. "You mean it?" he gasped; his face was almost purple, he came to her, catching her hands in his. "You mean it? Mind you, Mabel, you have got to put up with my loving you. I am not pretending that I am the kind of man who will leave you alone."

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"I mean it," she answered, very cold and quiet, because it seemed as if all the tears in her heart had suddenly hardened into a lump of stone.

CHAPTER VII

**"I ride to a tourney with sordid things,
They grant no quarter, but what care I?"**

**I have bartered and begged, I have cheated and lied,
But now, however the battle betide,
Uncowed by the clamour, I ride ride, ride!"**

VICTOR STARBUCK.

Joan did not see Aunt Janet again. Miss Abercrombie carried messages backwards and forwards between the two, but even Miss Abercrombie's level-headed arguments could not move Aunt Janet from the position she had taken up. And Miss Abercrombie was quite able to realize how much her old friend was suffering.

"I never knew a broken heart could bring so much pain," she told Joan; "but every time I look at your aunt I realize that physical suffering is as nothing compared to the torture of her thoughts."

"Why cannot she try to understand. Let me go to her," Joan pleaded. "If only I can speak to her I shall make her understand."

But Miss Abercrombie shook her head. "No, child," she said, "it would be quite useless and under the circumstances you must respect her wishes. I am fearfully sorry for both of you; I know that it is hurting you, too, but when you have wilfully or inadvertently killed a person's belief in you the only thing you can do is to keep out of their way. Time is the one healer for such wounds."

The tears smarted in Joan's eyes, yet up till now she had not cried once. Hurt pride, hurt love, struggled for expression, but words seemed so useless.

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"I had better hurry up and get away," she said; "I suppose Aunt Janet hates the thought of my being near her even."

Miss Abercrombie watched her with kindly eyes. The tragedy she had suspected on the first night was worse even than she had imagined. It stared at her out of the old, fierce face upstairs, it slipped into her thoughts of what this girl's future was going to be.

"Have you made any plans?" she asked; "do you know at all where to go?"

"Does it matter very much?" Joan answered bitterly.

"My dear," Miss Abercrombie spoke gently, "I am making no attempt to criticize, and I certainly have no right to judge, but you have a very hard fight before you and you will not win through if you go into it in that spirit. I do not want to ask questions, you would probably resent them, but will you tell me one thing. Does the man know about what is going to happen?"

"No," answered Joan. "It wouldn't make any difference if he did. It is not even as if he had persuaded me to go and live with him; I want you to understand that I went of my own free will because I thought it was right."

"You will write and tell him," suggested Miss Abercrombie. "That is only fair to him and yourself."

"No," Joan said again, "it was the one thing he was most afraid of; I would not stoop to ask him to share it with me."

Miss Abercrombie put out a quick hand. "You are forgetting that now there is someone else who is dependent on how you fight and whether you win through. You may say, 'I stand alone in this,'

yet there is someone else who will have to share in paying the cost."

The colour swept from Joan's cheek; she choked back the hard lump in her throat. "We will have to pay it together," she said. "I cannot ask anyone else to help."

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The tears, long held back, came then and she turned away quickly. Miss Abercrombie watched her in silence for a minute or two. At last she spoke. "You poor thing," she said slowly and quietly; "you poor, foolish child."

Joan turned to her quickly. "You are thinking that I am a coward," she said, "that I am making but a poor beginnings to my fight. But it isn't that, not exactly. I shall have courage enough when it comes to the time. But just now it is hurting me so to hurt Aunt Janet; I had not reckoned on that, I did not know that you could kill love so quickly."

"You can't," Miss Abercrombie answered. "If her love were dead all this would not be hurting her any more."

So Joan packed up her trunks again, fighting all the time against the impulse which prompted her to do nothing but cry and cry and cry. The chill of Aunt Janet's attitude seemed to have descended on the whole household. They could have no idea of the real trouble, but they felt the shadow and moved about limply, talking to each other in whispers. Miss Janet was reputed to be ill, anyway, she was keeping her room, and Miss Joan was packing up to go away; two facts which did not work in well together. No wonder the servants were restless and unhappy.

Uncle John met Joan on her way upstairs late that evening. His usually grave, uninterested face wore an expression of absolute amazement, it almost amounted to fear.

"Will you come into my room for a minute," he said, holding the door open for her to pass.

Once inside, he turned and stared at her; she had never imagined his face could have worn such an expression. She saw him trying to speak, groping for words, as it were, and she stayed tongued-tied before him. Her day had been so tumultuous that now she was tired out, indifferent as to what might happen next.

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"Your aunt has told me," he said at last. "I find it almost impossible to believe, and in a way I blame myself. We should never have allowed you to go away as we did." He paused to breathe heavily. "I am an old man, but not too old to make a fight for our honour. Will you give me this man's name and address, Joan?"

She had not paused to think that they would look on it as their honour which she had played with. His rather pitiful dignity hurt her more than anything that had gone before.

"I cannot do that," she answered; "there is nothing exactly that you could blame him for. I did what I did out of my own free will and because I thought it was right."

He still stared at her. "Right," he repeated; "you use the word in a strange sense, surely; and as for blaming him"—she saw how suddenly his hands clenched, the knuckles standing out white—"if you will let me know where to find him, I will settle that between us."

Joan moved towards the door. "I cannot," she said; "please, Uncle John, don't ask me any more. I have hurt your honour; it must be me that you punish. I am going away to-morrow, let me go out of your life altogether. I shall not make any attempt to come back."

"You are going to him?" he questioned. "Before God, if you do that I will find you out and——"

"No," she interrupted, "you need not be afraid; I am not going back to him."

With her hand on the door she heard him order her to come back as he had not finished what he had to say, and she stayed where she was, not turning again to look at him.

"You are being stubborn in your sin." How strange the words sounded from Uncle John, who had never said a cross word to her in his life. "Very well, then, there is nothing for us to do except, as you say, to try and forget that we have ever loved you. When you go out of our house to-morrow it shall be the end. Your aunt is with me in this. But you shall have money; it shall be paid to you regularly through my solicitor, and to-night I am writing to him to tell him to render you every assistance he can. You can go there whenever you are in need of help. Miss Abercrombie has also promised your aunt, I believe, to do what she can for you."

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"I would rather not take any money from you," whispered Joan; "I will be able to earn enough to keep myself."

"When you are doing that," he answered grimly, "you may communicate with the solicitor and he will put the money aside for such time as you may need it. But until then you owe it to us to use our money in preference to what could only be given to you in charity or disgrace."

She waited in silence for some minutes after his last words. If she could have run to him then and cried out her fear and dismay and regret, perhaps some peace might have been achieved between them which would have helped to smooth out the tangle of their lives. But Joan was hopelessly dumb. She had gone into her escapade with light laughter on her lips, now she was paying the cost. One cannot take the world and readjust it to one's own beliefs. That was the lesson she was to learn through loneliness and tears. This breaking of home ties was only the first step in the lesson.

She stole out of his presence at last and up to her own room. Her packing was all finished, she had dismantled the walls of her pictures, the tables of her books. Everything she possessed had been given to her by either Uncle John or Aunt Janet. Christmas presents, Easter presents, birthday presents, presents for no particular excuse except that she was their little girl and they loved her. It seemed to Joan as if into the black box which contained all these treasures she had laid away also their love for her. It took on almost the appearance of a coffin and she hated it.

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Miss Abercrombie saw her off at the station next morning. She had given Joan several addresses where she could look for rooms and was coming up to London in about a month herself, and would take Joan back with her into the country. "I want you to remember, though," she added, "that you can always come to me any time before that if you feel inclined. You need not even write; just turn up; you have my address; I shall always be glad to have you. I want to help you through what I know is going to be a very bitter time."

"Thank you," Joan answered; but even at the time she had a ridiculous feeling that Miss Abercrombie was very glad to be seeing the last of her.

After the train had slid out of the station and the small, purposeful figure had vanished from sight she sat back and tried to collect her thoughts to review the situation. She was feeling tired and desperately unhappy. They had let her see, even these dear people whom of all others in the world she loved, that she had gone outside their pale. She was in their eyes an outcast, a leper. She was afraid to see in other people's eyes the look of horror and agony which she had read in Aunt Janet's. Of what use was her book-learned wisdom in the face of this, it vanished into thin air. Hopeless, ashamed, yet a little defiant, Joan sat and stared at the opposite wall of the railway carriage.

At Victoria Station she put her luggage into the cloak-room, deciding to see what could be done in the way of rooms, without the expense of going from place to place in a cab. The places Miss Abercrombie had recommended her to struck her as being expensive, and it seemed to her tortured nerves as if the landladies viewed her with distrustful eyes. She finally decided to take a bus down to Chelsea; she remembered having heard from someone that Chelsea was a cheap and frankly Bohemian place to live in.

London was not looking its very best on this particular morning. A green-grey fog enshrouded shops and houses, the Park was an invisible blur and the atmosphere smarted in people's eyes and irritated their throats. Despite the contrariness of the weather, Joan clambered on to the top of the bus, she felt she could not face the inside stuffiness. She was tired and, had she but owned to it, hungry. It was already late afternoon and she had only had a cup of coffee and a bun since her arrival.

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As the bus jolted and bumped down Park Lane and then along Knightsbridge, she sat huddled up and miserable on the back seat, the day being well in accord with her mood. She was only dimly aware that they were passing the flat where she and Gilbert had lived, she was more acutely conscious of the couple who sat just in front of her—the man's arm flung round the girl's shoulders, her head very close to his.

Waves of misery closed round Joan. A memory, which had not troubled her for some time, of Gilbert's hands about her and the scent of heliotrope, stirred across her mind. She could feel the hot tears splashing on her ungloved hands, a fit of sobbing gulped at her throat. Lest she should altogether lose control of herself she rose quickly and fumbled her way down the steps. The bus had just reached the corner of Sloane Street. She would go across the Park, she decided, and have her cry out. It was no use going to look for rooms in her present state, no landlady would dream of having her.

Half blinded by her tears and the fog combined, she turned and started to cross the road. Voices yelled at her from either side, a motor car with enormous headlights came straight at her out of the fog. Joan hesitated, if she had stayed quite still the danger would have flashed past her, but she was already too unnerved to judge of what her action should be. As if fascinated by the lights she shut her eyes and moved blindly towards them.

There were more sharp shouts, a great grinding noise of brakes and rushing wheels brought to a sudden pause, then the darkness of black, absolute night surged over and beyond the pain which for a moment had held Joan. She floated out, so it seemed, on to a sea of nothingness, and a great peace settled about her heart.

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CHAPTER VIII

**"With heart made empty of delight
And hands that held no more fair things;
I questioned her;—'What shall requite
The savour of my offerings?'"**

E. NESBIT.

"You have got your back against the wall, you have got to fight, you have got to fight, to fight!"

The words pounded across Joan's mind over and over again. She struggled in obedience to their message against the waves of sleep that lapped her round. Struggled and fought, till at last, after what seemed like centuries of darkness, she won back to light and opened her eyes.

She was lying in a long narrow bed, one of many, ranged on both sides down the hospital walls. Large windows, set very high up, opened on to grey skies and a flood of rather cold sunshine. At the foot of her bed, watching her with impartial eyes, stood a man, and beside him two nurses, their neat pink dresses and starched aprons rustling a little as they moved.

Joan's eyes, wide and bewildered, met the doctor's, and he leant forward and smiled.

"That's better," he said, "you have got to make an effort towards living yourself, young lady." He nodded and turned to the nurse at his right hand. "How long has she been in now, Nurse?"

"Ten days to-morrow," the woman answered, "and except for the first day, when she moaned a good deal and talked about having to fight, she has scarce seemed to be conscious."

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Joan's lips, prompted by the insistent voice within her, repeated, "I have got to fight," stiffly.

The doctor came a little nearer and stooped to hear the words, "Yes," he agreed, "that is right, you have got to fight. See if you can get her to talk now and again, Nurse," he added; "she wants rousing, otherwise there is nothing radically to keep her back."

Joan's face, however, seemed to linger in his mind, for, as he was about to leave the ward after his tour of inspection, he turned again to the elder nurse in charge.

"Have you been able to find out anything about bed 14?" he asked.

"No, sir. We have had no inquiries and there was nothing in any of her pockets except a cloak-room ticket for Victoria Station."

"Humph," he commented, "yet she must have relations. She does not look the friendless waif type."

Nurse Taylor pursed up her lips. She had her own opinion as to the patient in bed 14. "There was the unfortunate circumstance of her condition," she mentioned; "the girl may very well have been desperate and lonely."

"Anyway, she hasn't any right to be left like this," the doctor retorted. "If you can get her to talk about relations, find out where they are and send for them. That is my advice."

Nurse Taylor owned a great many excellent qualities; tact and compassion were not among them. Long years spent in a profession which brought her daily into contact with human sin and human suffering had done nothing to soften her outlook or smooth down the hard, straight lines which she had laid down for her own and everyone else's guidance. She disapproved of Joan, but obedience to the doctor's orders was a religion to her; even where she disapproved she always implicitly carried them out.

Next day, therefore, she stopped for quite a long time at Joan's bed, talking in her toneless, high voice. Had Joan any people who could be written to, what was her home address, would they not be worried at hearing nothing from her?

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Joan could only shake her head to all the questions. Very vaguely and in detached fragments she was beginning to remember the time that had preceded her accident. The memory of Aunt Janet's face and Uncle John's parting words was like an open wound, it bled at every touch and she shrank from Nurse Taylor's pointed questions. She remembered how she had sat on the top of the bus with the black weight of misery on her heart and of how the tears had come. She had been looking for rooms; that recollection followed hard on the heels of the other.

When she was well enough to get about she would have to start looking for rooms again, for she had quite definitely made up her mind not to be a burden to Miss Abercrombie. It was her own fight; when she had gathered her strength about her, she would fight it out alone and make a success of it. Half wistfully she looked into the future and dreamt about the baby that was coming into her life. She would have to learn to live down this feeling of shame that burnt at her heart as she thought of him. He would be all hers, a small life to make of it what she pleased. Well, she would have to see that she made it fine and gay and brave. Shame should not enter into their lives, not if she fought hard enough.

Nurse Taylor described her to the junior afterwards as a most stubborn and hardened type of girl.

"The poor thing has hardly got her wits about her yet," the other answered; "she is very little trouble in the wards, we have had worse."

"Well, the doctor can question her himself next time," Nurse Taylor snorted. "I am not here to be snubbed by her sort."

She did not, however, let the matter drop entirely. At the end of her third week Joan was promoted to an armchair in the verandah and there one afternoon, after the teas had been handed round, Nurse Taylor brought her a visitor. A tall, sad-faced, elderly woman, who walked

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with a curiously deprecating movement, seeming to apologize for every step she took. Yet kindness and a certain strength shone at Joan from behind the large, round-rimmed glasses she wore, and her mouth was clean cut and sharp.

"This is Mrs. Westwood." Nurse Taylor introduced them briefly. "She wants to have a little talk with you, Miss Rutherford. If I were you I should tell her about things," she added pointedly. "I do not know if you have any plans made, but you are up for discharge next week."

She bustled off and Mrs. Westwood drew up a chair and sat down close to Joan, staring at the girl with short-sighted, pink-lidded eyes.

"You will wonder who I am," she said at last. "Perhaps you have never noticed me before, but I am a very frequent visitor. We run a mission in the South-West of London, with the object of helping young girls. I want you to talk to me about yourself, to be quite frank with me and to remember, if I seem to usurp on your privacy, that I am an older woman and that my only wish is to help you."

"It is very kind of you," began Joan, "but——"

"You may not need material help," the woman put in hastily; "but, spiritually, who is not in need of help from God."

Joan could think of no suitable reply for this and they sat in silence, the woman studying her face intently. Then presently, flushing with the earnestness of her purpose, she put out a cold hand and took Joan's.

"I think they have left it to me to tell you," she said. "The little life that was within you has been killed by your accident."

The colour flamed to Joan's face. A sense of awe and a feeling of intense relief surged up in her. "Oh, what a good thing!" she gasped, almost before she realized what she said.

Mrs. Westwood sat back in her chair, her eyes no longer looked at Joan. "The child which God had given you even in your sin," she said stiffly. [Pg 68]

Joan leaned forward quickly. "I did not mean just that," she said, "and yet I did. You do not know, you can't guess, how afraid I was getting. Everyone's hand against me, and even the people who had most loved me seeming to hate me because of this."

Her voice trailed into silence before the stern disapproval of the other woman's face. Yet once having started, she was driven on to speak all the jumble of thoughts that had lain in her mind these last two months.

"I was not ashamed or afraid, to begin with," she hurried the words out. "It had not seemed to me wrong. I lived with him because I thought I loved him and we did not want to get married. Then one day he let me see—oh, no, I am not being quite truthful, for I had seen it before—that he was in reality ashamed of our life together. He was acting against his convictions because it amused him. I could not bear that, it seemed to drag our life together through the mud, and I left him."

She could see that Mrs. Westwood was not making the slightest attempt to understand her; still she went wildly on:

"I went home and it seemed all right. My life with him faded away; I suppose I had never really loved him. Then, then they found out about what was going to happen and they turned against me, even Aunt Janet;" her voice broke on the words, she buried her face in her arms, crying like a child. "Aunt Janet, Aunt Janet," she whispered again and again through her tears.

Mrs. Westwood waited till the storm had spent itself, there was no sign of softening upon her face. Remorse and regret she could understand and condone, but this excusing of self, as she called Joan's explanation, struck her as being inexcusably bad.

"And do you now congratulate yourself that by this accident," she laid special stress on the word, "you are to escape the punishment of your sin?" [Pg 69]

Joan raised tear-drowned eyes. "Haven't I been punished enough," she asked, "for something that I did not think was a sin?"

"We cannot make or unmake God's laws in our thoughts," the other answered; "you were wilfully blind to the knowledge that was in your heart."

"Oh, no," Joan began. Mrs. Westwood swept the remark aside and stood up.

"We will not argue about it," she said; "I realize that you are not yet looking for the comfort or promise of pardon which I could lead you to. But, my child, do not delude yourself into the belief that thus easily have you set aside the consequences of your evil. God is not mocked, neither does He sleep. If you should ever be in any real need of help," she ended abruptly, "help which would serve to make you strong in the face of temptation, come to us, our doors are always open."

She dropped a card bearing the address of the mission on Joan's lap and turned to go. Joan saw her call Nurse Taylor and say a few words to her on the way out. For herself she sat on in the dusk. Outside the lamps had been lit, they shone on wet pavements and huge, lurching omnibuses, on fast-driven taxis and a policeman standing alone in the middle of the road. To-

morrow she would have to write to Miss Abercrombie and tell her there was no further need for her very kindly assistance; then she would have to make new plans and arrangements for herself in the future. She would try for a room in one of the girls' clubs that Miss Abercrombie had given her a letter to. She had been shy of going there before, but it would be different now. She could slip back into life and take up her share, forgetting, since the fear was past, the nightmare of terror which had held her heart before. For she had been afraid, what was the use of trying to blind her eyes to the truth? She had not had the courage of her convictions, she had not even wanted to carry her banner through the fight. She was glad, to the very bottom of her heart she was glad, that there was no more need for fighting.

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CHAPTER IX

**"Let this be said between us here,
One's love grows green when one turns grey;
This year knows nothing of last year,
To-morrow has no more to say
To yesterday."**

A. SWINBURNE.

Dick could not bring himself to approve of his sister's marriage. He made no attempt to conceal his real opinion on the subject. In one very heated interview with Mabel herself he labelled it as disgusting to marry a man whom you disliked for his money, or for the things his money can give you.

"But I do not dislike him," Mabel answered, as once before. She was sitting in a low armchair by the window, a piece of sewing in her hands. She laid her work down to look up at him. "He is very fond of me and he will be very good to Mother and myself. There are worse reasons than that for marrying, surely."

"It is Mother, then," stormed Dick. "You are doing it because of Mother."

Mabel shook her head. "No," she said; "I am doing it because to me it seems right and as if it would bring most happiness to all of us. I am not even quite sure that Mother approves."

She need not have had any misgivings on that point. Mrs. Grant was absolutely in her element arranging for the marriage. Mabel had never been quite the beautiful daughter that Mrs. Grant would have liked, that she should marry a Mr. Jarvis was to be expected; he had at least got money, which was always something to be thankful for. She took over the refurnishing and redecorating of his house with eager hands.

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"Mabel has always been accustomed to luxury, Tom," she told Mr. Jarvis; "until Harry died she never wanted for a thing which money could give her."

"And she shall not want now," he answered gravely.

Only once he remarked to Mabel afterwards, showing perhaps the trend of his thoughts: "We appear to be furnishing our house to please your mother, Mabel; seems a pity I cannot save you the trouble of marrying me by asking her instead."

Mabel stirred a little uneasily. "In pleasing her you are pleasing me," she answered, and with a shrug of his shoulders he turned away from the subject.

Mrs. Grant had her own rooms papered with white satin paper and very delicately outlined in gold; she ransacked the Jarvis heirlooms to find appropriate furniture for such a setting, and succeeded very well. The bills for her various suggested improvements passed through Mr. Jarvis' hands, and he commented on them to Mabel with a grim smile.

"She knows how to spend money," he said. "Dick must certainly have found the responsibility heavy."

"She has never learned how not to spend," Mabel explained; "but you must not pass what you think unnecessary."

"My dear, it is part of our bargain," he answered; "I shall not shrink from my share any more than you will."

Mrs. Grant fought very strenuously for a wedding in London, but here for once Mabel opposed her firmly, and the idea had to be abandoned.

"It means, of course, that most of my dearest friends will not be able to come, but I suppose I need not expect that to weigh against your determination," was one of the many arguments she tried, and: "I never dreamed that a daughter of mine would insist upon this hole-and-corner way of getting married" another.

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"It almost looks as if you were ashamed of the man," she said somewhat spitefully to Mabel, the

day the wedding-dress was tried on. "When your father and I were married the church was simply packed. I had a lovely gown"—her thoughts wandered into kindlier channels—"and Harry was very much in love. I remember his hand shaking as he tried to slip the ring on to my finger. I suppose you love Mr. Jarvis?"

The abrupt question coming after the vague memories startled Mabel into sudden rigidity. "I suppose I do," she answered, her white-clad figure mocked her from the glass. "One does love one's husband, doesn't one?"

"Mabel"—Mrs. Grant's voice sounded righteous indignation—"you do say such extraordinary things sometimes and about such solemn subjects. But if you do really love him, then why this desire for secrecy?"

"Dear Mother, being married in the parish church instead of in St. Paul's is not exactly secrecy or a wild desire to hide something on my part. I have always hated big fashionable weddings."

She slipped out of the dress and laid it down on the bed. Mrs. Grant viewed her with discontented eyes.

"I cannot pretend to understand you," she grumbled, "and I don't know why you talk of St. Paul's. I never suggested such a place; Harry and I were married at St. Mary's, Kensington."

Dick, when consulted on the matter, proved even less amenable. "I dislike the whole affair," he answered gruffly; "please don't ask me where it should take place."

He ran up to London himself the week before the wedding. A vague and rather incoherent wish to meet Joan again had kept him restless ever since her abrupt departure. He did not attempt to define his thoughts in any way. The girl had interested him, and startled him out of the even tenor of his beliefs. He hated to think of her turned adrift and left, as the possibility was she had been left, to fend for herself. He had not seen the elder Miss Rutherford since his visit, but rumour in the village ran that Miss Joan had got into disgrace of sorts and been sent away. The servants from the Manor spoke with bated breath of the change which had come over the household; of how Miss Joan's rooms had been locked and her pictures taken down. The world is horribly hard to women when they leave the beaten paths of respectability; he could not bear to think of what she might be suffering, of where it might lead her.

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He walked about somewhat aimlessly for his few days in town, but the chance of meeting anyone in this way is very remote, and of course he did not succeed. He could not, however, shake away the depression which the thought of her brought him.

Mabel came to sit in his smoking-room the night before her wedding, Mrs. Grant having gone early to bed.

"Did you see anyone up in town?" she asked.

Dick shook his head, puffing at his pipe. "Not a soul I knew," he commented, "except Mathews about my job. Wish I hadn't gone; London is a depressing place."

"You rather hoped to meet someone, didn't you?" asked Mabel.

Dick glanced up at her and away again quickly. "What makes you ask that?" he said.

Mabel let the curtain fall back into place; she had been peering out into the street, and turned to face him. "You have shut me outside things, Dick," she spoke slowly, "this last month, ever since my engagement; but shutting me out can't keep me from knowing. You only saw that girl over at the Manor once, but she has been in your thoughts ever since." She came forward, perching herself on the arm of his chair as had been her habit in the old days, one arm thrown round his shoulders to support herself. "Little brother," she asked, "did you think I should not know when you fell in love?"

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Fell in love! How completely the thought startled him. Of course Mabel was utterly mistaken in her wild conjectures. To throw aside the doubt he turned quickly, and put a hand over hers where it lay near him.

"Why do you say I have shut you out?" he parried her question. "Because I lost my temper over your engagement?"

"No." Mabel shook her head. "It was not exactly because of that. I know you have not understood, Dick; I am not even sure that I want you to; and I know that that helped to build a wall between us, but that was not what began it. Never mind"—she bent and kissed the top of his head—"if your secret is not ready to share you shall keep it a little longer to yourself. You will go up to London, won't you, Dick, after Tom and I have come back and Mother has settled down?"

"I suppose so," he agreed; "but I want to get away for a bit first, if I can. Spoke to Mathews when I was in town and he has promised to keep his eyes open for a job on one of those P. and O. liners for me."

"I see," she said; "but when you come back you will settle in town and sometimes you will spare us week-ends from your very strenuous career, won't you?"

"Of course," he answered; his hand tightened on hers. "Mabel," he said suddenly, "you are happy, aren't you; it isn't because of me or anyone else that you are getting married, is it?"

He was not looking at her, therefore she did not have to lie with her eyes. "I am quite happy," she answered softly. "Dear, stupid Dick, how you have fretted your heart out about my happiness."

"I know," he admitted, "I could not bear to think—I mean, love somehow stands for such a lot in people's lives, I——" he broke off, and stood up abruptly. "You will think I am a sentimental ass, but I have always wanted you to have the best of things, Mabel, and I have been horribly afraid that Fate, or Mother, or perhaps even I, were shoving you into taking the second best."

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"You have wanted the best for me, Dick," she answered, "that counts for a lot."

Then one of those dull silences fell between them that come sometimes to two people who love with their whole hearts and who have been trying to speak some of their thoughts to each other—a silence that stood between them almost as it were with a drawn sword, while Dick puffed at his pipe and Mabel stared at her white hands, showing up against the darkness of her dress. Then finally she moved, standing up, and just for a second their eyes met.

"Good-night," she said across the silence, "it is late, Dick, I meant to be in bed ages ago."

"Good-night," he answered, and she turned quickly and went from the room.

Mrs. Grant kept everyone, including herself, in a state of unexplained fuss from the moment when early morning light woke her on the day of Mabel's marriage till the moment when, much to Dick's embarrassment, she collapsed into his arms, sobbing bitterly, in the vestry where they had all gone to sign their names.

At the reception she slightly recovered her spirits, but broke down again when the time came for the couple to depart. They were going to Paris for a fortnight's honey-moon; Mabel had stipulated that they should not be away for longer than that. Jarvis Hall was ready for their return; already Mrs. Grant was using one of the motors and ordering crested paper with the address on it for her own letters. But Dick, Mabel knew, was simply aching to be quit of it all, and away on his own. He had arranged to hand over the practice and proposed to take a two years' trip abroad. It was only in the complete freedom of Dick that she would know that part of her plan was being fulfilled.

When she drew back her head after the final farewells had been waved and the house was out of sight it was to meet Jarvis' intent, short-sighted stare. His glasses magnified the pupils of his eyes to an unusual extent when he was looking straight at anyone.

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"Well," he said, "that's done. Till the last moment, Mabel, I rather wondered if you would go through with it. But I might have known," he went on quickly, "you are not the sort to shrink from a bargain once it is made."

Her hand lay passive in his, she did not even stir when he leaned forward to kiss her. What he had said was perfectly true, the bargain had been made, she was not one of those who shirk payment.

CHAPTER X

**"And you shall learn how salt his food who fares
Upon another's bread; how steep his path,
Who treadeth up and down another's stairs."**

D. G. ROSSETTI.

There are some natures which cannot live with any happiness in drab surroundings. Atmosphere affects everyone more or less; but whereas there are a few fortunate ones who can rise triumphant to a certain contentment through squalor and ugliness, there are a great many more who find even cheerfulness very hard to attain to under like circumstances.

The shut-in dinginess of Digby Street, the gloomy aspect of Shamrock House, cast such a chill across Joan's spirits that, as she stood hesitating with her hand on the bell, the instinct came to her to scramble back into the cab and tell the man to drive her anywhere away from such a neighbourhood. Of course it was absurd, and the cabman did not look as if he would be in the least willing to comply. He had treated her with a supercilious disbelief in there being any tip for him as soon as he had heard of her destination. Joan had gone to Victoria Station to collect her luggage, and it had been both late and dark before the need for a cab had arisen. She had elected not to leave the hospital till after tea; somehow, when it had come near to going, her courage, which she had been bolstering up with hope and promises of what she should do in her new life, had vanished into thin air. Perhaps more than anything else she lacked the physical strength which would have enabled her to look cheerfully into the future. The hospital had been a place of refuge, she hated to leave it.

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This feeling grew upon her more and more as she sat back in a corner of the cab while it rumbled along the Vauxhall Bridge Road. There seemed always to be a tram passing, huge giant vehicles that shook the earth and made a great deal of noise in their going. The houses on either side

were dingy, singularly unattractive-looking buildings, and the further the cab crawled away from Victoria Street the deeper the shade of poverty and dirt that descended on the surroundings. Digby Street and Shamrock House were the culminating stroke to Joan's depression.

Miss Abercrombie had written recommending it to her as a Girls' Club where she would probably get companionship and advice on the question of work. "You won't like it," she had added, "but it is very conveniently situated and ridiculously cheap." So Joan had described her destination to the cabman as a ladies' club, somewhere in Digby Street. He had answered with a sniff, for it was here that he had lost sight of his tip, that he supposed she meant the Home for Working Girls that lay in those parts. Looking up at the large, red-fronted building, with its countless uncurtained windows, Joan realized that the man's description was probably nearer the truth than her own.

She was to learn later that on this particular occasion she saw Digby Street at its very worst, for it was Saturday night, and barrows of fish, meat and vegetables stood along the pavements, illuminated by flares of light so that all the ugliness was only too apparent. Little children played in and out, under the barrows and along the gutters; a public-house stood at the corner near Shamrock House, and exactly opposite the Salvation Army added its brass band and shrill voices to the general tumult.

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Joan's first timid attempt at the bell produced no answer, nor her second. By this time the cabman had dismounted her box and stood staring at her in sullen disapproval, while a couple of very drunk but cheerful costers argued with each other as to whether they ought not to help the young lady to get in. Her third effort was perhaps more violent, for, to her relief, she could see the dim light in the hall being turned up and the door was opened on the chain and very slightly ajar. A couple of bright eyes peered at her through this opening, then, having apparently satisfied their owner that Joan was neither dangerous nor drunk, the door was further opened, and Joan could see into the red-tiled hall and passage with its numbered, white-painted doors.

"What do you want?" asked the lady of the eyes; a small, plump person with grey hair brushed back very straight from an apple-red face.

"I want a room," Joan explained. "I have been recommended to come here. I do hope you have one to spare."

The little lady moved aside and beckoned to the cabman. "You can come in," she said, "and the man had better fetch in your box. I thought it was one of those troublesome children when you first rang, it was so very violent, and they make a point of trying to break the bells."

"I am so sorry," Joan murmured meekly, an apology she realized was expected from her. "I was so dreadfully tired and no one seemed to be going to answer."

"We do not keep a staff of servants to answer the bell day and night," the woman answered. "Still, I am sorry you were kept waiting. Will you come in here"—she opened a door a little way down the passage—"this is my office. I must see your letter of recommendation before I let you talk about the rooms, that is one of our rules."

Joan paid the cabman and followed her inquisitor into the office. Miss Nigel let down the front of the desk, opened a large ledger and donned a pair of spectacles. "Now," she said, "who are you, what are your references, and who recommended you?"

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Fortunately Miss Abercrombie had remembered to send a letter of introduction. Joan produced it and handed it to Miss Nigel. "My name is Joan Rutherford," she added; "I did not know about having to have references."

Miss Nigel peered at her over the tops of her glasses; she only used them for reading and could not see out of them for other purposes. "We have to make a point of it in most cases," she answered, "but also I judge by appearances. In your case this letter from Miss Abercrombie—her name is in our books although I do not know her personally—will be quite sufficient. Now, how much do you want to pay?"

"As little as possible," Joan confessed, "only I would like to have a room to myself."

"Quite so," the other agreed, "and in any case, all our cubicles are taken. They are, of course, cheaper than anything else." She ran her finger down the lines of the ledger. "I can let you have a room on the top floor which will work out to fifteen and six a week. That includes breakfast, late dinner, lights and baths. There is a certain amount of attendance, but we expect the girls to make their own beds and keep the rooms tidy."

Fifteen and six a week. Joan attempted to make a rapid calculation in her head, but gave up the idea. It sounded at least quite absurdly cheap, she would not have to spend very much of Uncle John's allowance before she got some work to do for herself. The future seemed suddenly to shut her in to a life enclosed by the brick walls of Shamrock House with its attendant neighbourhood of Digby Street.

"That will do," she answered, "it sounds very nice."

"Yes," agreed Miss Nigel; she closed the desk and stood up, "for the price, we offer exceptional advantages. If you will carry up what you need for to-night, I will show you to your rooms."

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It occurred to Joan as she followed her guide up flights of carpetless stone stairs that her new abode resembled a prison more than anything else. The long bare passages were broken up by

countless doors all numbered and painted white in contrast to the brick-coloured walls. The sound of their footsteps echoed mournfully through the bareness and seeming desolation of the place. From one of the landing windows she caught a blurred picture of the streets outside, the lit-up barrows, the crowd just emerging from the public-house. She was to get very used and very hardened to the life in Digby Street, but on this, her first evening, it caught at her senses with a cold touch of fear.

On the top floor of all Miss Nigel opened the first door along the passage and ushered Joan into the room that was to be hers. It was so small that its one window occupied practically the whole space of the front wall. A narrow bed stood along one side, and between this and the opposite wall there was scarce room for a chair. At the foot of the bed stood the wash-stand and the chest of drawers facing each other, with a very narrow space in between them. But it was all scrupulously clean, with white-washed walls and well-scrubbed furniture, and the windows opened over the roofs of the neighbouring houses. Very far up in the darkness of the sky outside a star twinkled and danced.

Miss Nigel looked round at the room with evident satisfaction. "You will be comfortable here, I think," she said; "we do our best to make the girls happy. We expect them, however, to conform to our rules; you will find them explained in this book." She placed a little blue pamphlet on the dressing-table. "Lights are put out at ten, and if you are later than that, you have to pay a small fine for being let in, a threepenny door fee, we call it. Everyone is requested to make as little noise as possible in their rooms or along the passages, and to be punctual for dinner."

With one more look round she turned to go. Half-way out, however, a kindly thought struck her, and she looked back at Joan. [Pg 81]

"Dinner is at seven-thirty," she said. "I expect you will be glad to have it and get to bed. You look very tired."

Joan would have liked to ask if she could have dinner upstairs, but one glance at the book of rules and regulations decided her against the idea. Shamrock House evidently admitted of no such luxury, and on second thoughts, how ridiculous it was to suppose that dinner could be carried up five flights of stairs for the benefit of someone paying fifteen and six a week all told. She was too tired and too depressed to face the prospect of a meal downstairs, she would just have to go to bed without dinner, she concluded.

The House woke to life as she lay there, evidently the inhabitants returned about this time. Joan remembered the cabman's somewhat blunt description and smiled at the memory. A Home for Working Girls. That was why it had seemed so silent and deserted before, shops and offices do not shut till after six. But now the workers were coming home, she could hear their feet along the passages, the slamming of doors, voices and laughter from the room next hers. Home! This narrow, cold room, those endless stairs and passages outside, they were to be home for the future. The hot tears pricked in her eyes, but she fought against tears. After all, she had been very lucky to find it, it was cheap, it was clean; other girls lived here and were happy, someone had laughed next door.

"I have got to take you firmly in hand," Joan argued with her depression. "It is no use making a fuss about things that are all my own fault. I tried to play with life and I did not succeed. It is too big and hard. If I had wanted to work it out differently I ought to have been very strong. But I am not strong, I am only just ordinary. This is my chance again, and in the plain, straight way I must win through." She spoke the words almost aloud, as if challenging fate: "I will win through." [Pg 82]

CHAPTER XI

**"Will my strength last me? Did not someone say
The way was ever easier all the way?"**

H. C. BEECHING.

Youth can nearly always rely upon sleep to build up new strength, new hope, new courage. If you have got to a stage in your life when sleep fails you, if night means merely a long tortured pause from the noises of the world, in which the beating of your heart seems unbearably loud, then indeed you have reached to the uttermost edge of despair. Joan slept, heavily and dreamlessly, save that there was some vague hint of happiness in her mind, till she was wakened in the morning by a most violent bell ringing. The dressing-bell at Shamrock House, which went at seven o'clock, was carried by a maid up and down every passage, so that there was not the slightest chance of anyone oversleeping themselves.

Joan dressed quickly; the faint aroma of happiness which her sleep had brought her, and which amounted to cheerfulness, stayed with her. She remembered how Miss Abercrombie had once said to her: "Oh, you are a Browningite," and smiled at the phrase, repeating to herself another verse of the same poem:

"And I shall thereupon
Take rest ere I be gone,
Once more on my adventure brave and new."

She felt almost confident of success this morning; her mind was busy with plans of the work she would find. She was glad to feel herself one in a giant hive of workers, all girls like herself, cutting out their lives for themselves, earning their own living.

Breakfast brought with it a slight disillusionment. The dining-room in Shamrock House is in the basement; chill and dreary of aspect, its windows always dirty and unopenable, because at the slightest excuse of an open window the small boys of the neighbourhood will make it their target for all kinds of filth. Rotting vegetables, apple-cores, scrapings of mud; there is quite sufficient of all that outside the windows without encouraging it to come in. Six long deal tables occupy the space of the room, and it is one of the few amusements which the children of Digby Street possess to gather at the railings and watch the inhabitants of Shamrock House being fed.

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It was the last flight of stairs into the basement which damped Joan's enthusiasm for her new home. As she stood hesitating in the doorway, for there were a great many people in the room, and the tables seemed crowded, she caught Miss Nigel's eye.

"You will find a seat over there," the lady called out to her, waving a hand in the direction of the furthest table. "Help yourself to bacon, which is on the hot case near the fire, and come here for your tea or coffee. By the way, which do you like?"

Joan asked for tea, and having secured her cup and a small piece of unappetizing bacon, she found her way over to the indicated table. A girl sat at the head of it, and since she was ensconced behind a newspaper and apparently paying no attention to anybody, Joan chose the chair next her. She felt on the sudden shy and unwilling to make friends with anyone, the chill of the room was striking into her heart.

She had presently to rouse her neighbour, however, to ask her to pass the salt, and at that the girl lifted a pair of penetrating eyes and fixed Joan with an intent stare.

"New arrival?" she asked.

"Yes," Joan admitted. "I came last night."

"Humph!" the girl commented. "Well, don't touch the jam this morning. It is peculiar to Shamrock House—plum-stones, raspberry-pips and glue." She swept the information at Joan and returned to her paper.

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She was a big girl with rather a heavy face and strong, capable-looking hands. Despite her manners, which were undeniably bad, Joan would almost have described her as distinguished but for the fact that the word sounded ridiculous amid such surroundings.

"Looking for work?" the girl asked presently.

"Yes," Joan answered again, "only I am not sure what sort of work to look for, or what I should like to do."

The girl lifted her eyes to stare at her once again. "It isn't generally a case of 'like,'" she said, "more often it is necessity. In that case"—she reached out a long arm for the bread—"Fate does not as a rule give you much time in which to make up your mind; she pushes you into something which you hate like hell for the rest of your life."

"You aren't very cheerful," remonstrated Joan.

"Oh, well, I never am that," agreed the other, "nor polite. You ask Miss Nigel if you want a true estimate of my manners. But I have lived here ten years now and I have seen girls like you drift in and out by the score. The feeding or the general atmosphere doesn't agree with them, and our ranks are maintained by beings of a coarser make, as you may see for yourself."

She rose, crumpling her paper into a ball and throwing it under the table.

"My name is Rose Brent," she said. "What is yours?"

"Rutherford," Joan answered, "Joan Rutherford. I hope I shan't drift quite as quickly as you foretell," she added.

Secretarial work was what she had really made up her mind to try for, though she had not had the courage to confess as much to her breakfast companion. She had, after all, had a certain amount of training in that and hoped not to find it so very impossible to get a post as a beginner somewhere. Her first visit to the nearest registry office, however, served to show her that her very slight experience was going to be of little use to her. The registry lady was kind, sufficiently interested to appear amiable, but not at all reassuring in her views as to Joan's prospects.

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"I am afraid I cannot hold out very much hope," she said, after five minutes' crisp questioning of Joan. "You have, you see, so very few qualifications, and the market is rather over-stocked with girls who can do just a little. My strong advice to you is to continue your shorthand; when you are a little more experienced in that we ought to have no difficulty in placing you. Good morning; please see that the hall door shuts properly, the latch is very weak."

Her business-like manner, the absolute efficiency which shone around her, and the crowded aspect of the waiting-room—all girls who could do just a little, Joan presumed—caused her heart to sink. Finding work was not going to be as easy as she had first supposed.

She roamed from office to office after that for several days, to be met everywhere with the same slight encouragement and frail promises to help. Finally, thoroughly discouraged, she bought papers instead, and turned to a strict perusal of their various advertisements.

One in particular caught her eye.

"Wanted a pupil shorthand typist. Tuition in return for services.—Apply Miss Bacon, 2, Baker Street, W."

It was late in the afternoon of the day before Joan found her way to Baker Street, for she had had several other places to call at and she was in addition very tired. Going from place to place in search of work had reduced her to a painful knowledge of her own absolute incompetency and the general uselessness of life. A brass plate on the door of No. 2 conveyed the information: "Miss Bacon. Fourth floor. Shorthand and Typing. Please ring and walk up."

Joan rang and followed the instructions. On the very top landing a girl stood, holding a candle in her hand, for up here there was no light of any sort. The grease dripped down her skirt and on to the floor.

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"Do you want Miss Bacon?" she asked.

Joan nodded, too breathless to say anything.

The girl turned into the dim interior and threw open a door, snuffing the candle at the same time.

"If you will wait here," she said, "Miss Bacon will be with you in a minute."

Joan looked round on a moderately large, dust-smothered room. Dust, that is to say, was the first thing to strike the eye of the beholder. The windows were thick in dust, it lay on tables and chairs and on the two typewriters standing unused in a corner of the room. The room gave one the impression of being singularly uninhabited. Then the door opened and shut again, and Joan turned to face the owner.

Miss Bacon's figure, like her furniture, seemed to have taken on a coating of dust. Timid eyes looked out at Joan from behind pince-nez set rather crookedly on a thin nose. One side of her face, from eye to chin, was disfigured by an unsightly bruise. Miss Bacon dabbed a handkerchief to it continually and started explaining its presence at once.

"You may be surprised at my face"—her voice, like her eyes, was timid—"but I am short-sighted and last night stumbled on the stairs, hitting my face against the top step. It was exceedingly painful, but it is better now. What can I do for you?"

Joan murmured something sympathetic about the top step, and explained that she had come in answer to the advertisement. Miss Bacon's face fell. "I had hoped you were a client," she owned. Then she pulled forward a chair for herself and asked Joan to be seated.

It appeared that Joan would receive excellent tuition in shorthand and free use of the typewriters. If any typing work came in she would be expected to help with it, but for the rest she could devote the whole of her time to studying and practising on the machines. Miss Bacon was a little vague as to the other pupils, but Joan gathered that there was a shorthand class and two other typewriters in another room.

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"My other pupils are, of course, on a different footing," Miss Bacon told her. "Generally I require a fee of at least ten guineas, but in your case, as I shall require you to do a little work for me, I shall be content to take less. That is to say, four guineas, everything included."

"There is nothing about paying in the advertisement," Joan ventured. "I am afraid it is quite impossible for me to pay that."

Miss Bacon took off her glasses and polished them with nervous hands. "I do not want to seem unreasonable," she said; "after you have worked for me you will certainly be able to obtain a well-paid post elsewhere; my pupils invariably move on in that way. I guarantee, of course, to find situations. If I could meet you in any way—supposing you paid me two guineas now and two guineas when you moved on?"

"It is awfully kind of you"—Joan hesitated on the words—"but I am afraid I can't really afford it, not even that."

Miss Bacon relinquished the idea with a heartfelt sigh. "My dear," she confided suddenly, "I know what poverty is. Shall we say one pound to begin with?—you must remember that these are very exceptional terms."

Joan thought a moment. It seemed almost certain, from what she had gleaned from the various agencies, that getting a post without training was an impossibility, and most of the training centres asked for at least twenty-five guineas. Perhaps in refusing this offer she was letting a good chance slip by her, and, though she hated to make free use of it, there was always Uncle John's money, to fall back on.

"I think I will come if you will let me do it in that way," she decided finally; "when would you like me to start?—to-morrow?" [Pg 88]

"The sooner the better." Miss Bacon rose with a smile of almost intense relief. "I have had no one for the last fortnight and the place is getting very untidy. You will pay the first pound in advance," she added; "I hope you will bring it with you to-morrow."

She seemed painfully anxious for the money; if Joan had not been so tired she might have thought the fact suspicious. As it was she went back to Shamrock House with a lightened heart. It was not a very attractive or promising post; if she were to judge by outside appearances and by Miss Bacon's last remark her chief duties were to include those of general cleaning up and dusting. But that would be all in the day's work. Some little confidence and hope were beginning to creep back into her heart. She had secured her first post; Miss Bacon held out vague visions of the triumphs to which it might lead. Surely in time she would get away from the nightmare of the last two months; in time even Aunt Janet would forgive her, and meanwhile her foot was on the lowest rung of the ladder; work should be her world in future. She would work and fight and win. There was still, as Miss Abercrombie would have said, a banner to be carried. She would carry it now to the end.

CHAPTER XII

**"Our life is spent in little things,
In little cares our hearts are drowned;
We move with heavy laden wings
In the same narrow round."**

For the first week in her new post Joan was kept very busy putting things—as Miss Bacon described it—to rights. She had also, she discovered, to run errands for Miss Bacon several times during the course of a day; to buy paper for the typewriters, to fetch Miss Bacon's lunch, on one occasion to buy some cooling lotion for Miss Bacon's bruise. Of the other pupils she saw no sign, and even the girl who had admitted her on the first night did not put in an appearance, but this Miss Bacon explained by saying that Edith was delicate and often forced to stay away through ill health. [Pg 89]

Joan refrained from asking questions; she realized herself that she had stumbled on to something that was nearly a tragedy. The hunted look in Miss Bacon's face, the signs of poverty, the absolute lack of work told their own tale. As a running business 2, Baker Street, was an evident failure, but there was no reason why, with a little application, she should not make it serve her purpose as a school. The lack of tuition was its one great drawback; there seemed no signs whatsoever of the promised shorthand lessons. Finally Joan plucked up her courage one morning in the second week, and invaded Miss Bacon's private office.

"What about my shorthand?" she inquired from just within the doorway; "when shall I begin?"

Miss Bacon had changed her shoes for a pair of bedroom slippers and was occupying the arm-chair, immersed in the newspaper. She started at Joan's abrupt question, the movement jerking the glasses from off her nose. She picked them up nervously and blinked at Joan.

"What did you say?—shorthand? Oh, yes, of course! It is really Edith's duty to take you in that; still, as she is not here, I propose to dictate to you myself after lunch. My first duty in the mornings is to master the newspaper; there might be some openings advertised." She turned again to her news-sheet. "Why not employ yourself practising on the typewriter?" she suggested.

Joan would have liked to reply that she was tired of practising sentences on the typewriter and hungry for some real work to do, but she had not the heart to be unkind to the poor little woman. She spent a disconsolate morning and stayed out for lunch longer than usual. On her return Miss Bacon was waiting for her on the top of the stairs. [Pg 90]

"My dear," she said in an excited voice, "some work has come in. A man has just brought it, and he must have it by to-morrow morning. I hope you will be able to get it done, for I have promised, and a lot may depend on it."

So much depended on it that she herself decided to help Joan with the work. She was not, it appeared, even as experienced as Joan, and by 6.30 the two of them had only completed about half the typing. Joan's back ached and her fingers tingled, but Miss Bacon's eyes behind the glasses were strained to the verge of tears, two hectic spots of colour burned in her cheeks and her fingers stumbled and faltered over the keys.

As the clock struck seven Joan straightened herself with a sigh of relief.

"It is no use," she said, "we cannot get it done; he will have to wait for his silly old papers."

The blood died suddenly out of Miss Bacon's face, her mouth trembled. "It must be done," she answered; "you do not understand. It is the first work that has been brought to us for weeks. The

man is a stranger; if it is well done and up to time he will give us some more; besides he will pay"—for a second she lifted her eyes and looked at Joan—"I must have the money," she said.

Her face, working under the stress of some strong emotion, was painful to see. She was so weak, so useless, so driven. Joan looked away hastily and went on with her work. From time to time, though, she stole a glance at Miss Bacon. It was dreadful to know that the poor old woman was crying; quietly, hopelessly, great drops that splashed on to her fingers as they stumbled over the keys.

At last Joan could bear it no longer, she rose quickly and crossed over to Miss Bacon, putting her hands over the useless fingers.

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"Don't you bother with it any more, Miss Bacon," she said. "I am nearly through with my share now and I can come early to-morrow and get it all done before breakfast. It is silly to work away at it now when we are both tired out."

Miss Bacon gulped down her tears and looked up nervously. "You think you can," she asked; "you have realized how important it is?"

"Yes," Joan told her, "and I know I can. I won't disappoint you, really I won't. Let us go across the road and get some tea before we go home," she suggested.

Miss Bacon looked away again hastily. "You go," she muttered, "I don't need tea, I—"

"You are going to come and have tea with me," Joan interrupted. It had flashed on her that Miss Bacon had not even the money for that.

Over the hot buttered toast and the tea Miss Bacon poured out her troubles to Joan. They came, once she had started, in an unquenchable flood of reminiscences. The little woman had reached the last inch of endurance; the kindly sympathy, the touch of Joan's hands broke down all barriers of reserve or caution. She had been a governess, it appeared, and during all her years of service she had laid by enough money to buy the business at Baker Street.

"I got it cheap," she owned. "I can see now that the other people must have failed too, and I have no head for business. I am absolutely at the end of things now; if I died to-morrow it would be a pauper's funeral. I often think of that when I see a gorgeous hearse and procession passing through the street."

Her words were ridiculous, but real tragedy looked out of her eyes. "Ruin stares me in the face," she went on, "from every paper I read, from every person I meet. I have no money, not even enough to buy food, as you have guessed. Ruin! and I have not the courage to get out of it all. I have never been very brave."

"But I think you have been brave," Joan tried to reassure her. "You have held on for so long alone. And I expect we have turned a corner now, things will be better to-morrow."

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Miss Bacon stared at her teacup with hopeless eyes. "That is what I used to think at first," she said, "to-morrow will be better than to-day—it never has been yet."

She rose to go, and Joan, prompted by a sudden quick desire to help, leant forward and caught hold of her coat. The tragedy of the withered figure, the stupid, aimless face, struck her as the cruellest thing she had yet seen in life. What were her own troubles compared to this other's dull facing of loneliness, failure and death.

"You must cheer up, you really must," she begged; "and as for the money part, let me pay down the rest of my fee now. I have got three pounds out with me; do take it, please do, you see it really is yours."

Taking the money seemed to add an extra gloom to Miss Bacon's outlook; none the less she did not require very much persuading, and Joan, pressing it into her hand, piloted her across the road and saw her into the Underground station.

It was the last glimpse she was to have of the quaint figure which had crossed her life for so short a time, but that she did not realize. She only knew that her heart ached because she had been able to do so little to help, and because Miss Bacon's story had brought suddenly to her mind a knowledge of how terribly hard life can be to those who are not strong enough to stand against it.

True to her word, she arrived at Baker Street very early the next morning and the momentous piece of typewriting was finished before Miss Bacon's usual hour of arrival. Joan put it on the table with the old lady's paper and went out to get some breakfast, as she had had to leave Shamrock House before seven.

She was greeted on her return by the girl who had let her in on the first night. There was a man with her who had taken possession of Miss Bacon's chair and who was reading the paper morosely, both elbows on the table.

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He glanced up at Joan as she entered. "Is this Miss Bacon, by any chance?" he asked, bringing out the words with a certain grim defiance.

Edith interrupted Joan's disclaimer by a shrill laugh. "Lor' bless you, no, she is one of the pupils, same as me." She turned to Joan. "Did you pay anything to join?" she asked. Joan resented the

familiarity of her tone. "Would have liked to have warned you the other night, but Bacon was too nippy."

Joan flushed slightly. Disregarding the interruption she spoke quickly, answering the man's question:

"Miss Bacon must be ill, I am afraid," she said; "it is so very late for her, she is nearly always here by ten. She will probably be here to-morrow if you care to come again."

Again Edith giggled and the man frowned heavily.

"Well, she probably won't," he answered. "She has done a bunk, that's the long and short of it, and there is not a blasted penny of what she owes me paid. Damn the woman with her whining, wheezing letters, 'Do give me time—I'll pay in time.' Might have known it would end in her bunking."

"I don't think you ought to speak of her like that," Joan attempted; "after all, it is only that she does not happen to be here this morning. She would have let me know if she had not been coming back."

"Oh, would she?" growled the man; "well, I don't care a blasted hell what you think. I don't need to be taught my business by the likes of you."

From the passage to which she had retired Edith attracted Joan's attention by violent signs. "There is no use arguing with him," she announced in an audible whisper, "he's fair mad; this is about the tenth time he's missed her. Come out here a minute, I want to talk to you."

Joan went reluctantly. She disliked the girl instinctively, she disliked the dirty white blouse from which the red neck rose, ornamented by a string of cheap pearls, and the greasy black ribbon which bound up Edith's head of curls.

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"Are you being a fool?" the girl asked, "or are you trying to kid that man? Haven't you cottoned to old Bacon's game yet?"

"I am sorry for Miss Bacon, if that is what you mean," Joan answered stiffly.

"Sorry!" Edith's face was expressive of vast contempt. "That won't save you from much in this world. I tell you one thing, if you lent the old hag any money yesterday you won't see her again this side of the grave, so there isn't any use your hanging about here waiting for that."

Joan favoured her with a little collected stare. "Thank you," she said, "it is very thoughtful of you to think of warning me." She left her and walked back deliberately into the room where the man was sitting. "There were some typed sheets lying on the top of the paper," she said; "do you mind letting me have them back."

"Yes I do," he answered briefly; "man called in for them a little while back and that is five shillings towards what the old hag owes me, anyhow."

It was in its way rather humorous that she should have worked so hard to put five shillings into such an objectionable pocket. Joan felt strongly tempted to argue the matter with him, but discretion proving wiser than valour, she left him to his spoils and retired into the other room. She would not leave the place, she decided, in case Miss Bacon did turn up; it would be very disagreeable for her to have to face such a man by herself.

By lunch time the man stalked away full of threats as to what he would do, and Edith went with him. Joan stayed on till six, and there was still no sign of Miss Bacon. It was strange that she should neither have telephoned nor written.

Over dinner at Shamrock House that night she told Rose Brent the story of her fortnight's adventure, ending up with the rash impulse which had led her to pay up the four guineas because Miss Bacon had seemed in such bitter need. The girl met her tale with abrupt laughter.

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"I am afraid what your unpleasant acquaintance of this morning told you is probably true," she said. "After all, if you went and handed out four guineas it was a direct temptation to the poor old woman to get away on."

"I don't believe she would take it just for that," Joan tried to argue. "I know she wanted it awfully badly, but it was to help her pull through and things were going to run better afterwards. I don't believe she would just take it and slip away without saying a word to me."

"Faith in human nature is all very well," the other answered, "but it is awfully apt to let you down, especially in the working world."

"I shall go on believing for a bit," Joan said; "she was looking so awfully ill yesterday, it may just be that she could not come up to office to-day."

"May be," Rose agreed. "When you are tired of waiting for the return of the prodigal let me know and I will see if I cannot get you in somewhere. I ought to be able to help. And look here, my child, never you pay another penny for tuition on those lines; you could get all the learning you need at the County Council Night Schools, and it is a good deal cheaper."

Joan put in two days at No. 2, Baker Street, waiting for the return of Miss Bacon or for some message which might explain her absence, but nothing and no one came. On the morning of the

third day she found that the stout and bad-tempered man had carried out his vague threats. The place had been taken possession of, already they were removing the typewriters and tables under the direction of a bailiff. Even the plate bearing Miss Bacon's name had vanished, and boards announcing the top flat to let flaunted themselves from the area railings.

After that Joan gave up the hope. Sometimes she wondered if after all Miss Bacon had found the necessary courage to be done with it all, and if her silence betokened death. It was more likely though that the poor old lady had merely sunk one rung lower on the ladder of self-esteem and was dragging out a miserable existence somewhere in the outside purlieu of London.

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CHAPTER XIII

**"Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?"**

R. BROWNING.

Following Rose's suggestion, and because for the time being there really seemed nothing for her to do, unless she could show herself a little better trained, Joan joined the County Council Night Schools in the neighbourhood. She would go there five evenings in the week; three for shorthand and two for typing. Her fellow scholars were drawn from all ages and all ranks—clerks, office boys, and grey-headed men; girls with their hair still in pig-tails, and elderly women with patient, strained faces, who would sit at their desks plodding through the intricacies of shorthand and paying very little attention to what went on all round them.

The boy and girl section of the community indulged in a little rough and tumble love-making. Even long office hours and the deadly monotony of standing behind desk or counter all day could not quite do away with the riotous spirit of youth. They giggled and chattered among themselves, and passed surreptitious notes from one form to the other when Mr. Phillips was not looking.

Mr. Phillips, the shorthand master, was a red-faced, extremely irascible little man. He came to these classes from some other school in the city where he had been teaching all day, and naturally, by the time evening arrived, his none too placid temper had been stretched to breaking-point. He was extremely impatient with any non-comprehension of his complicated method of instruction; and he would pass from row to row, after his dictation had been finished, snatching away the papers from his paralysed pupils and tearing them into fragments had the exercise been badly done.

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Joan noticed the man who sat next her on the first and every night. He was quite the worst person she had ever seen at learning anything. He was not by any means young, grey already showed in the hair above his ears, and his forehead wrinkled with innumerable lines. He had, she thought, the most pathetic eyes, large and honest, but quite irredeemably stupid.

"I can't make head or tale of it," he confessed to her on the second night. "And Mr. Phillips gets so annoyed with me, it only muddles me more."

"Why do you bother to learn?" she asked. It seemed rather strange that a man of his age should have to struggle with so elementary a subject.

"I have worked in an office for the last ten years," he explained. "The new boss has suddenly decided that shorthand is necessary. I don't know," he spoke rather vaguely, his eyes wandering round the room, "but it is just possible he might ask me to go if I did not master it. I have been there so long I hardly like to have to look for another place."

"It seems such a shame," Joan told Rose afterwards, "that these people can never get a place where they feel really safe. They live always expecting to be turned off at a moment's notice, or to have somebody put in on top of them. Everybody seems to be fighting against everybody else; doesn't anyone ever stop to help?"

The older girl laughed. "Why, yes," she said. "The world, or at least the people in it, are not so bad as all that. Only life is a case of push and struggle, and it is only natural that people should want to get the best they can for their money. Also it wouldn't be fair if the ones who worked best were not preferred to the others."

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Mr. Simpson, Joan's perplexed friend of the shorthand class, was certainly one of the stupidest people she had ever met, yet she was terribly sorry for him. He was the butt of the class, which did not add to the hilarity of his position, because of the torrent of abuse which he always drew from Mr. Phillips at some stage in the evening.

"Now," Mr. Phillips would call out, starting the lesson by a blackboard demonstration, "silence and attention, please."

He would draw a series of strokes and dashes on the blackboard, calling out their various meanings, and the class would set itself to copy them. The lesson would proceed for some time in silence, save for Mr. Phillips' voice, but presently the bewilderment caused by so many new

outlines would terrify Mr. Simpson and he would lean forward to interrupt, stammering, as he always did when nervous.

"Why is 'M' made like that?" he would say. "Wouldn't it be much better if it were made the other way?"

"Why, why?" Mr. Phillips would thunder. "If you would just learn what you are taught, sir, and not try to think, it would be a great deal pleasanter for the rest of us."

Mr. Simpson would get a little red under the onslaught, but his eyes always retained their patient, perplexed expression. He seemed impervious to the impression he created in the back row. "Laughing-stock of the whole class," Mr. Phillips called him in a moment of extreme irritation, and the expression caught on.

"I am so silly," he said to Joan. "I really am not surprised that they think me funny."

She was the one person who was ever nice to him or who did attempt to explain things to him. Sometimes they would get there a little early and she would go over his exercises with him. He might be thick-skinned to the want of tolerance which the rest of the class meted out to him; he was undoubtedly grateful to Joan for the kindness she showed him.

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One evening on his way to class he plucked up courage to purchase a small buttonhole for her, and blushed a very warm red when Joan took his offering with a smile and pinned it into her coat.

"How nice of you," she said. "I love violets, and these smell so sweet."

"They are not half sweet enough for you," he managed to say, stuttering furiously.

Joan had a moment's uneasiness. Surely the wretched little man was not going to fall in love with her? She glanced sideways at him during the class and what she saw reassured her. His clothes, his dirty hands, his whole appearance, put him in a different world to herself. However kind she might be to him, he surely could not fail to recognize that it was only the same kindness which would prompt her to cross the road to give a penny to a beggar?

Unfortunately Mr. Simpson belonged to a class which is very slow to recognize any difference in rank save that of wealth. He was a humble little man before Joan, but that was because he was by nature humble, and also because he was in love. He thought her very wonderful and beautiful beyond his range of words, but he imagined her as coming from much the same kind of home as his own, and she seemed to exist in the same strata of life.

A night or two after the flower episode he fixed adoring eyes on her and asked if he might be allowed to see her home.

"Well, it is rather out of your way," Joan remonstrated, she had so often seen him trudge off in the opposite direction.

"That is of no consequence," he replied, with his usual stutter.

The streets were dark, quiet, and deserted. Now and then as they hurried along, for Joan walked as fast as she could to ward off conversation, they passed a solitary policeman doing his beat, and dim, scarce seen lovers emerged out of the shadows holding each other's hands.

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"Will you not take my arm?" Mr. Simpson ventured presently. He was slightly out of breath in his effort to keep up with her.

"No, thank you," Joan answered. The whole occurrence was too ridiculous, yet for once in her life her sense of humour was failing her. "And I wish you would not bother to come any further, it is quite unnecessary."

Her tone was more than chilly. Mr. Simpson, however remained undaunted. His slow and ponderous mind had settled on a certain course; it would need more than a little chilliness to turn it from its purpose.

"I was going to ask you," he went on, "whether you would do me the honour of coming to the theatre one evening? If you have a mind that turns that way sometimes."

"No, thank you," answered Joan once more. "I never go to theatres, and I shouldn't go with you in any case," she added desperately, as a final resource.

"I meant no offence," the man answered, humble as ever. "I should always act straight by a girl, and for you—"

"Oh, don't, please don't," Joan interrupted. She stopped in her walk and faced round on him. "Can't you see how impossible it would be for me——" she broke off abruptly, rather ashamed of her outburst. "I am going to be a snob in a minute, if I am not careful," she finished to herself.

"I know I am not amusing, or anything," the man went on; "but you have always seemed so kind and considerate. If I have offended in any way, I am more than sorry."

Joan felt that he was frowning as he always frowned in hopeless perplexity over his shorthand.

"I am not offended," she tried to explain more gently. "Only, please do not ask me to go out with you again, or offer to walk home with me. Here we are anyway, this is where I live." She turned

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at the bottom of Shamrock House steps and held out her hand to him. "Good-night," she said.

Simpson did not take her hand, instead he stared up at her; she could see how shiny and red his face was under the lamp.

"You are not angry with me?" he stuttered.

"Why, no, of course not," Joan prevaricated. Then she ran up the steps and let herself into the hall without looking back at him.

For two or three days she attempted to ignore the man's presence in class next her, and Simpson himself in no way intruded. He had taken her snubbing like a man; from the height of his dreams he had fallen into an apathetic despair; the only effect it had on him was to make him stupider than ever at his work. Then one evening, with a face working rather painfully, he told her that he did not intend to come any more.

"I am going to another centre," he said, gathering his books together and not looking at her.

"Has Mr. Phillips been too much for you?" she asked, wilfully ignoring the deeper meaning behind his words.

"No," he answered, "it is not that. It may seem quite absurd," he went on laboriously, "but I want to ask you to let me have your note-book. I have got a new one to give you in its place." He produced a packet from his pocket and held it out to her.

Later on, when she thought over the thing, she smiled. A note-book seemed so singularly unromantic, but at the time she felt nearer tears. The look in his eyes haunted her for many days. She had been the one glimpse of romance in his dreary existence, and she had had to kill the dream so ruthlessly.

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CHAPTER XIV

**"It seems her heart was not washed clean
Of tinted dreams of 'Might have been.'"**

RUTH YOUNG.

There followed a weary time for Joan. The poem she had repeated on her first morning at Shamrock House had to be recalled again and again and fell away finally from its glad meaning in the bitter disillusionment which looking for work entailed. Wherein lay the value of cheerfulness when day after day saw her weary and dispirited from a fruitless search, from hope-chilling visits to registry offices, from unsuccessful applications in answer to the advertisements which thronged the morning papers? She went at it at first eagerly, hopefully. "To-day I shall succeed," was her waking motto. But every evening brought its tale of disappointment.

"There is no one in the world as useless as I am," she thought finally.

"It is only just a bad season," Rose Brent tried to cheer her up; "there is lots of unemployment about; we will find something for you soon."

But to Joan it seemed as if the iron of being absolutely unwanted was entering into her soul.

There was only one shred of comfort in all this dreariness. Life at Shamrock House was so cheap that she was eating up but very little of Uncle John's allowance. She wondered sometimes if the old people at home ever asked at the Bank as to how her money matters stood, or had they shut her so completely out of their lives that even that was of no interest to them? Miss Abercrombie wrote fairly regularly, but though she could give Joan news of the home people she had to admit that Aunt Janet never mentioned or alluded to her niece in any way.

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"She is harder than I thought she could be," wrote Miss Abercrombie; "or is it perhaps that you have killed her heart?"

Once Joan's pride fell so low that she found herself writing Aunt Janet a pathetic, vague appeal to be allowed to creep back into the shelter of the old life. But she tore the letter up in the morning and scattered its little pieces along the gutter of Digby Street. Digby Street was sucking into its undercurrents her youth, her cheerfulness, her hope; only pride was left, she must make a little struggle to hold on to pride, and then news came from Miss Abercrombie that Aunt Janet had been ill and that the Rutherfords had gone abroad. Apart from her fruitless journeys in search of work, her days held nothing. She so dreaded the atmosphere of Shamrock House that very often she would have to walk herself tired out of all feeling before she could go back there; sometimes she cried night after night, weak, stupid tears, shut up in the dreariness of her little room, and very often her thoughts turned back to Gilbert—the comfort of their little flat, the theatres, the suppers, the dances and the passion-held nights when he had loved her. More and more she thought of Gilbert as the dreariness of Digby Street closed round her days.

If her baby had lived, would life have been easier for her, or would it only have meant—as she

had first believed in her days of panic that it would mean—an added hardship, a haunting shame? It was the lack of love in her life that left so aching a void, the fact that apparently no one cared or heeded what became of her. The baby would at least have brought love to her, in its little hands, in its weak strength that looked to her for shelter.

"I should be happier," she said once stormily to Rose, "if I could have a cat to keep. I think I shall buy a kitten."

The other girl had looked at her, smiling dryly. "Pets are strictly against the rules in Shamrock House," she reminded her.

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It was in one of her very despondent moods that Joan first met the young man with blue eyes. She never knew him by any name, and their acquaintance, or whatever it could be called, came to an abrupt end on the first occasion when he ventured to speak to her. Womanlike, she had been longing for him to do so for some time, but resented it bitterly when he did. Perhaps something faintly contemptuous, a shadowed hint that he had noticed her interest in him, flamed up the desire to snub him in her heart, or perhaps it was a feeling of self-shame to find herself so poor a beggar at friendship's gate.

For a week he had met her at the same place and followed her on her way down Victoria Street. Then one night, just as they came under the lights of Vauxhall Clock tower, he spoke to her.

"Doing anything to-night?" he said. "Shall we dine together?"

She turned from him in a white heat of anger, more with herself than with him, though that, of course, it was not given him to know. But he caught a glimpse of her face and read his answer, and since he was in reality a nice boy, and insult had been the last thought in his mind, he took off his hat quickly and apologized.

"I am sure I beg your pardon," he said; "I can see that I have made a mistake."

Joan did not answer him, she had moved quickly away in the direction of Digby Street, but as she passed by the dingy houses she knew that he was not following any more, and she felt the hot, hard lump in her throat which is so difficult to swallow. She had wanted to go to dinner with him, she had wanted to, that was the thought that mocked at her all night.

It was one evening about a fortnight after that episode that Rose called Joan into her room on their way upstairs.

"I want to talk to you," she said, closing the door behind them. "Has Miss Nigel spoken yet?"

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"To me?" asked Joan; "what about?"

"I see, then, she hasn't," Rose answered, "but she will soon. Did you notice that the night before last Miss Wembly, who sits at the next table to ours, had a guest to dinner?"

"No," Joan admitted; "but why? What has it got to do with me?"

"I am coming to that," the other answered; she stood with her head averted, looking for a cigarette. "I am always a damned silent person myself," she went on, "and I do not think anyone can accuse me of being curious about their pasts. I do not want to know a blessed thing about yours, for instance, but that guest of Miss Wembly's was a nurse from St. George's Hospital."

"Oh," said Joan blankly; she was standing just within the door, her back against the clothes that hung on it.

"Well," Rose hurried on, "it has gone all round the place like lightning. They aren't fond of you because they hate me and we are friends. Yesterday one of them took the story to Miss Nigel and she is going to ask you to leave."

"What story?" asked Joan; she had not followed the other's swift deduction.

Rose lit a cigarette and held out the case to Joan. "Have one," she said, "and come and sit down. As I said before, I am not asking for personal history, I am telling you the facts as they affect this place. They say you were to have had a baby, and you are not married."

She shrugged her shoulders and sank into a chair.

"You mean," whispered Joan, "that the nurse told them that?"

"I suppose so," Rose admitted; "anyway, Miss Nigel spoke of it to me to-day. She is not a bad sort, Miss Nigel, she was very kind to me once, but she is going to tell you to go."

"What have you thought of it?" asked Joan.

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"I don't think about other people's affairs," Rose answered. "Come and sit down, I have got some jam for you after the powder, for I believe I have found a job for you. But first you must move into diggings, these clubs are all in a league, every one of them will be shut to you."

"You are not bothering to ask if it is true," said Joan. She moved forward and sat down, her hands clenched on her lap. "I suppose——"

Rose interrupted, putting a swift hand on hers. "Don't," she said, "don't deny it or tell me the truth, whichever you were thinking of doing. It does not matter to me. Because I like you I have

interfered as much as I have so that you may be prepared for Miss Nigel's attack." She smiled. "It will be an attack too—having a baby and no husband to people like Miss Nigel is worse than any criminal offence."

"Yes," Joan admitted. A vision of Aunt Janet's horror-stricken face came across her mind. "When I heard that it had been killed in the accident, I was glad, glad. I had not got the courage to go on and brave it out. I was glad to think that I could start life again, that no one would know or look at me like the people at home had looked at me when they knew. And now——"

"And now?" Rose repeated; she was studying Joan's face with her eyes half closed, a peculiar trick she had when her thoughts were unpleasant.

"And now it doesn't seem worth while going on any longer," Joan burst forth. "There must be other lives that are better worth living than this. Do you know that for the last ten days I have made fifteen shillings addressing envelopes from nine till six. It would be better, surely it would be better, to be what people call bad!"

Rose watched the flushed face. "If a life of that sort would give you any pleasure," she spoke slowly, "I should say live it by all means. The trouble is, it would not please you. If you care to listen, I will tell you a bit of my own story. It is not altogether pleasant, but in your present frame of mind it will not do you any harm to hear it."

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She paused a moment, head thrown back, blowing smoke-rings to the ceiling.

"I came to London ten years ago," she began presently, "and I was twenty-one at the time. I had been keeping house for a brother in India, and I had had a good time, but a spirit of restlessness had come upon me and I would not leave him alone till he let me come home and start on my own. I had, of course, no people. Poor brother, he gave way after many arguments, knowing as little as I did about the life here, and I came. He died the year afterwards of enteric. I had been on an allowance from him before, but when he died that stopped and I was left absolutely penniless. You have had a bad time in that way, but I had a worse one. Still I was young and strong, and, above all, I was a fighter, so I won through. I got a post as typist in a city office and I drifted to Shamrock House. My working hours were lengthy, sometimes it was after half-past seven before I came out of office. Then I would hurry through the crowded streets, as you do now, and always that walk, through gaily lighted pleasure-seeking crowds, would end for me in the dark dreariness where Great Smith Street turns away from Victoria Street, a ten-minute walk through one of London's poorest neighbourhoods, and—Shamrock House! Those were the days in which I did my hardest kicking against fate; it was so unjust, so unfair, and all the while youth and power to enjoy, which is the heritage of youth, were slipping past me. That is how you feel, isn't it?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes," Joan said.

"I know," Rose answered softly; "well, wait and hear. I was in this mood, and feeling more than usually desperate, when I met the woman. I need not give her a name, not even to you; I doubt if I ever knew her real one. I had seen her several times, perhaps she had noticed me, though she had quaint, unseeing eyes that appeared to gaze through you blankly. She was a beautiful woman with an arresting beauty hard to define, and she used, as far as I could see, neither paint nor powder. One evening, just as I was turning into Great Smith Street, I found her at my elbow."

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"'You live down there,' she asked in a curious, expressionless way as if she hardly expected an answer.

"I was startled at her talking to me and at the same time interested.

"'Yes,' I said.

"'It is dark and very dreary,' she went on, talking almost to herself, 'why do you choose such a life?'

"I think the bitterness of my mood must have sounded in my answer, for suddenly she turned to me and laid a hand on my arm.

"'Leave it then,' she whispered, her face close up against mine, 'leave it, come home with me.'

"'Home with you,' I repeated, thoroughly astonished, and at that moment a policeman, tall and stolid, strolled across the road towards us.

"'Don't let him hear what we are saying,' whispered the extraordinary woman; 'just turn back with me a little way and I will explain to you.'

"Well, I went. Perhaps you can realize why, and I saw for a little into the outside edge of life as lived by these women. I wonder how I can best convey to you the horror and pity of it, for we—despite the greyness of our lives—have something within ourselves to which we can turn, but they have weighed even hopes and dreams with the weights of shame, and found their poor value in pounds, shillings and pence. That is why their eyes as they pass you in the streets are so blank and expressionless. Each new day brings them nothing, they have learnt all things, and the groundwork of their knowledge is—sin."

She rose abruptly and moved across to the window, pulling aside the blue-tinted curtains, staring out over miles and miles of roof-covered London. From far in the distance Big Ben shone down on

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her, a round, dim face in the darkness.

"You are wondering why I stayed with the woman," she went on presently. "The answer is easy and may make you smile. I met a man, one of the many she brought to the house, and fell in love with him. I was stupid enough to forget my surroundings and the circumstances under which he had met me, or I dreamt that to him also they were only the outside wrappers of fate, easy to fling aside. Does it sound like a thrilling romance, and am I making myself out to be the heroine of one crowded hour of glorious life? Because my hour was never glorious."

She repeated the last word with a wry laugh and turned to face Joan. "I don't know why I have raked up all this," she said. "I thought it had lost its power to hurt; but I was mistaken. I have liked you, perhaps that is the reason, and I have wanted to save you from making the same mistake as myself. For before you plunge out of monotony you must see that there is nothing in your heart that can be hurt, as these women have to be hurt every hour of their lives."

Joan could find nothing to say; the other girl's confidence had been so overpowering, it left her tongue-tied and stupid. Rose came back after a little silence and sat down opposite her again.

"I am sorry," she said, "I have talked you into a mood of black depression; never mind, perhaps you will have learnt something from it none the less. And meanwhile, things are going to be better for you; it is no loss having to leave Shamrock House, otherwise you might grow into the house as I have. You will have to see about getting a room to-morrow, and then if you can meet me in the afternoon, I will take you and introduce you to your job. It is quite a nice one, I hope you will like it."

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Joan stood up. "I don't know what to say," she began; "you—oh, if only we could wipe out the past," she flamed into sudden rebellion, "and start afresh."

Rose laughed. "I don't know about that," she said—the inevitable cigarette was in her mouth again—"I for one would be very unwilling to lose a wisdom which has been so dearly bought."

CHAPTER XV

"No one has any more right to go about unhappy than he has to go about ill bred."

R. L. STEVENSON.

Joan was not to start her new work till the following Monday. She was to be typist—her first real post filled her with some degree of self-conscious pride—to the Editor of the *Evening Herald*. Rose had herself worked on the paper some years ago and was a friend of the Editor's.

"I want you to give a girl I know a chance, Mr. Strangman," she had pleaded; "she is clever and well-educated, but she needs experience. Take her, there is a good man, while your slack time is on, and she will be game for anything when you get busy again."

Mr. Strangman twisted long nervous fingers into strange positions.

"I don't know about this girl," he said; "we are never slack at the office."

It was a pet fallacy of his that he was the hardest-worked man in London. Rose smiled. "But her typing is quite good," she argued, "and you are such an easy dictator, I am sure she will get on all right."

She had been exceptionally pleased when Mr. Strangman reluctantly gave way. Joan would, she hoped, take kindly to newspaper work, and it might open up new roads to her.

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Meanwhile Joan had been out on her own and taken a room for herself in a house standing in a quiet, withdrawn square in the neighbourhood of King's Road, Chelsea. To call it a room was to dignify it by a title to which it could lay no real claim. It was an attic, up the last rickety flight of stairs, with roofs that sloped down within two feet of the ground, and a diminutive window from which one could get but the barest glimpse of the skies. Still it had possibilities, its aspect was not so terribly common-place as had been that of the other rooms which Joan had seen that morning. The sloping roofs, the small pane of glass which looked out higher than the neighbouring chimney-tops, were in their way attractive. She would take it, she told a somewhat surprised landlady, and would pay—everything included—ten shillings a week for the noble apartment. The "everything included" swept in breakfast—"Such as a young lady like yourself would eat, Miss"—the woman told her, and attendance. Suppers and fires she would have to provide for herself, though Mrs. Carew was prepared to cook for her; lunch, of course, fell in office hours.

On Saturday, therefore, and having forestalled Miss Nigel's request by announcing that she was leaving for good, Joan moved her luggage over to her new home and took possession.

"I am going to like it better than I liked being at Shamrock House," she told Rose, who had come to assist in the moving. "It is more my own, I can do just as I like here."

Rose was craning her neck to see out of the window's limited compass. "Just as you like," she repeated, laughing as she spoke, "on twenty-five shillings a week and an attic. You are not ambitious, my child."

She turned round to face the room; even in mid afternoon, with the sun shining outside, it was dim—the corners in positive darkness. "I don't think I should have chosen it," she said; "there is no sun, and"—she shook the thought off—"who else is in the house, did you ask?"

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"There was not any need to," Joan answered. "Mrs. Carew, that is my landlady, you know, told me all their family histories while I was making up my mind whether I would come or not. Wait a minute," she paused in her unpacking to tick them off on her fingers. "There is the ground floor lady, who is an artist's model. No need to work just now though, for the last gentleman that painted her took a fancy to her and is paying for her at present. Drawing-room floor, old foreign lady who never seems to get out of bed. Second floor, retired army officer, 'fond of drink, more's the pity,'" she mimicked Mrs. Carew's voice, "and second floor back, young lady actress, who is not perhaps as good as she might be, 'but there, you can't always be blaming people'; and third floor, me! Doesn't sound respectable does it? But after Miss Nigel I am afraid of respectability."

Rose watched her with narrowed eyes. "It sounds anything but respectable," she agreed; "do not make a fool of yourself, kid, it won't be worth it, it never is."

"I am not likely to," Joan answered her. "My one real regret in leaving Shamrock House is that I shall not have you to talk to, oh, and the baths. Mrs. Carew does not hold with carrying too much water up these stairs."

"I am glad I rank before the baths," Rose laughed. She extricated herself from behind the luggage. "I will come and look you up sometimes," she announced, "though it probably won't be often; I am a bad hand at stirring myself out to see anyone in the evenings. Good-night, and I hope you will get on all right with Strangman, he is a kind little man really."

She went. Joan sat listening to her feet echoing down the stairs; a mouse could set the whole house creaking. She felt very much alone; Shamrock House, full as it had been of uncongenial companions, had yet been able to offer some distraction from one's own society.

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The new office, to which she wended her way on the Monday morning, lay in a side alley opening off Fleet Street, a rickety old building, busy as a hive of bees in swarming time. The steep, wooden stairs, after she had been asked her business by the janitor in the box office and put in charge of a very small, very dirty boy, led her up and up into the heart of the building—past wide-open doors where numerous men sat at desks, the floor round them strewn with papers; up again, past rooms where the engines throbbed and panted, shaking the building with their noisy vibrations; up still further, till they landed her at that withdrawn and sacred sanctum, the Editor's room. Here worked Mr. Strangman and his satellites; spiders, in fact, in the centre of their cleverly-constructed web, throwing out feelers in search of news to all quarters of the globe.

Anything less like a spider than Mr. Strangman it would have been difficult to imagine. He was an alert, nervous man, with bright, kind eyes, a flexible mouth and very restless hands. His whole nature hung on wires, as if—which was indeed the case—his mental capacity was too big and overpowering for his physical strength. His manners under the strain of work were jerky and abrupt, but otherwise he was a very kindly and genial man. To Joan he was excessively polite, and so afraid that her capabilities might not come up to his expectations that for the first few days he left her practically with no work to do. She sat in a large, well-lit—if draughty—room, opposite Mr. Strangman at his table.

It was one of her duties, she discovered, to keep the aforesaid table tidy, and in time she learned that here more than anywhere else she could be of service to the man. He had an awe-inspiring way of piling up his desk with scraps of paper, cuttings, and slips, and stray manuscripts, and it was always under the most appalling muddle that the one small, indispensable news-slip would hide itself.

The Magazine Page-faker and the News-gleaner sat in the same room, the latter at a table next Joan. He was a stout man with a beaming smile and an inexhaustible supply of good temper. He would sit over his work, which as far as she could see consisted solely of running his eye over the day's papers and cutting out what appeared to be workable news, making a great deal of noise with his feet on the floor, a gigantic cutting-out scissors in his hand and a whistle which never varied its tune from early morning till late in the evening—a soft, subdued, under-his-breath whistle, Joan never even discovered what the tune was. He was, despite this disadvantage, an indefatigable worker and an ever-ready helper, always willing to do other people's work for them if necessary.

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Of the other people on the staff Joan saw very little; the reporters came early in the morning to take their orders for the day, and threw in their copy downstairs in the evening. Sometimes they would come upstairs to discuss some feature of their day's work with Mr. Strangman, or to put in an article to the Literary Editor, but, as a whole, she hardly learned to know them, even by name. Then there were the office boys, a moving, fluctuating crowd; always in mischief, always dirty, always irrepressibly cheerful. For the rest, her work—one might almost say her life—lay between the four walls of the office room, with the shaking vibrations of the engines under her feet and the musty, curious smell of papers in the making and pile upon pile of papers that had been made all round her.

She arrived at 9.30 and left about 6 p.m., and by then she was too numbed—for the working of a typewriter is monotonous work—to do anything save walk with the hurrying crowds as far as Charing Cross and take a bus from there to Montague Square. But since work filled her days she had less time for discontent or depression. Sometimes she would be tempted to wander off the direct route on her way home and she would walk up to Piccadilly and past the region of brightly-lighted shops, watching the faces in the crowd round her, envying those who met friends and stopped to talk to them, following with rather wistful eyes the couples who passed, hand clasped in hand; but generally speaking she was too tired in the evenings to do anything save go straight home, eat a hasty supper and tumble into bed.

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Of Rose she saw, as the other had prophesied, very little. Joan realized that friendship, if their brief companionship could have been called such, counted for very little in Rose's life. The girl seemed entirely to ignore her once she was from constant sight, and since Joan could not herself call at Shamrock House and Rose habitually forgot to pay her promised visits, the friendship, such as it had been, faded away into the past.

The other inhabitants of 6, Montague Square, she saw very rarely. Occasionally she would encounter Miss Drummond, the downstairs tenant, paying off her taxi at the door—a tall, handsome girl, rather overblown in her beauty, who invariably stared at Joan with haughty defiance and stalked into her own room, calling loudly for Mrs. Carew. Once Joan had stumbled over the retired military gentleman from the second floor, sound asleep, in a very undignified position, half way up her own little stairs. The incident had brought with it a shudder of fear, and from that day onwards Joan was always careful to lock her door at night.

Miss Fanny Bellairs, the erring damsel on the second floor back, kept such strange hours that she was never visible; but Mrs. Carew had a large stock of not very savoury anecdotes about her which she would recount to Joan during the process of laying supper. As not even an earthquake would have stopped Mrs. Carew's desire to impart information, Joan gave up the attempt to silence her. Indeed, she sometimes listened with a certain amount of curiosity, and Fanny Bellairs assumed a marvellous personality and appearance in her mind's eye.

That the original did not in the least come up to her expectations was something of a surprise. About three months after her first arrival at Montague Square Joan reached home rather late one evening to find her room already occupied. A girl sat, her feet tucked underneath her, on the principal chair under the lamplight; she had been crying, for a tight, damp ball of a handkerchief lay on the floor, and at the sound of Joan's entry she turned a tear-stained face to greet her.

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"I thought you were never coming"—the voice held a plaintive sob in it—"and I am that down-hearted and miserable."

Joan put down her things hastily and came across. "I am so sorry," she said, groping through her mind to discover who her visitor might be; "did Mrs. Carew tell you I was in?—how stupid of her."

The girl in the chair gulped back her tears and laughed. "No, she didn't," she contradicted; "she told me that you wouldn't want to see me if you were in; that the likes of you did not know the likes of me, and that I was not to come up. But I came"—she held out impulsive hands. "I guess you aren't angry," she said; "when I get the silly hump, which isn't often, I go mad if I have to stay by myself. I'll be as good as"—she glanced round the room—"as good as you," she finished, "if you will let me stay."

"Why, of course," said Joan. "I don't know what Mrs. Carew can have been talking about. I don't know you, so I can't see how she can have thought I would not want to see you."

"I can though." The girl shook forward a sudden halo of curls and laughed in a way which it was impossible to resist. "I am Fanny, from downstairs, and Mrs. Carew is a silly old woman who talks a lot, but she is not stupid enough not to know the difference between a girl like you and a fly-by-night like me. Now I have shocked you," she went on breathlessly, seeing Joan's flush, "just when I was setting out to be good. I'll bite my tongue out and start again."

She coughed once with alarming intensity. Joan moved slowly away and took off her hat and coat. So this was Fanny Bellairs, the girl whose doings provided such a purple background for her own dull existence. She looked again at the little figure, lying back now, eyes closed, lips tremulous from the struggle for breath which her fit of coughing had brought her. It was a perfectly-fashioned face, though when Joan had time to study it, she could see that the colouring was just a little crudely put on and that it had smudged in the shadows under her eyes where the tears had lain. She was such a thin, small slip of a girl, too, little dimpled hands and a baby face under the gold curls. Fanny opened her eyes at that moment, wide and innocent, and answered Joan's glance with a wistful smile.

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"Thinking of all Mrs. Carew ever said about me?" she asked. "I am not as bad as she sometimes paints me. Still"—she stood up—"I'll go, if you would rather I did. Hate to make a nuisance of myself."

She moved slowly—it was, in reality, reluctantly—towards the door, and Joan came out of her reverie with a start.

"Please don't go," she said quickly. "You must think I am awfully rude, but really I was not thinking about Mrs. Carew or anything so disagreeable. I was thinking how pretty you were, and wondering how old you could be."

The girl at the door stopped and turned back. Laughter filled her eyes, yet there was a little hint of mockery behind the mirth.

"Go on!" she said, "you and your thoughts! I know just what they were, my dear; but it doesn't matter to me, I am used to it. Twenty-two, at your service, mum"—she came a little away from the door and swept Joan a curtsey—"and everything my own, even my hair, though you mayn't believe it."

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CHAPTER XVI

**"Pale dreams arise, swift heart-beats yearn,
Up, up, some ecstasy to learn!
The spirit dares not speak, afar
Youth lures its fellow, like a star."**

ANON.

Fanny was a real daughter of joy. The name is given to many who in no sense of the word near its meaning. To Fanny, to be alive was to laugh; she had a nature which shook aside the degradation of her profession much as a small London sparrow will shake the filthy water of the gutters from off his sky-plumed wings. She brought such an atmosphere of sunshine and laughter into Joan's life that the other girl grew to lean on it. The friendship between them ripened very quickly; on Fanny's side it amounted almost to love. Who knows what starvation of the heart side of her went to build up all that she felt for Joan? Through the dreary days that followed, and they sapped in passing at Joan's health and courage, Fanny was nearly always at hand, with fresh flowers for the attic, with tempting fruit for Joan to eat in place of the supper which night after night she rejected. Fanny would sometimes be away for weeks at a time. She still followed her profession as an actress, Mrs. Carew would tell Joan, and on those occasions Joan missed her intolerably. But Fanny herself never spoke about her life, and Joan never questioned her.

Autumn faded into winter; winter blew itself out in a cold and boisterous March, and spring crept back to London. Nowhere else in the world does she come so suddenly, or catch at your heart with the same sense of soft joy. You meet her, she catches you unawares, so to say, with your winter clothes on.

"What is this?" she whispers, blowing against your cheeks. "Surely you have forgotten my birthday, or you would never have come out in those drab old clothes."

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Then with a little shake of her skirts she is gone, and your eyes are opened to the fact that the trees have put forth brave green buds, and that yellow crocuses and white snowdrops are dancing and curtsying to you from odd corners of the Park.

Joan's life at the *Evening Herald* Office, once the first novelty had worn off, and because it was spring outside, became very monotonous and very tiring. She nearly always ended the days conscious of a ridiculous desire to cry at everything. Because the buses were crowded, because the supper was greasy and unappetizing, or because Fanny was not at home to welcome her.

There was one afternoon in particular, on a hot, airless day in June, when Joan reached the last point of her endurance. Everything had combined to make the office unendurable. One of Mr. Strangman's most agitated moods held him. Early in the morning he had indulged in a wordy argument with Chester, the Literary Page editor, on the question of whether or not the telephone was to be used by the office boys to 'phone telegrams through to the post office. It was a custom just founded by Strangman and it saved a certain amount of time, but Chester—a thin, over-worked, intellectual-ridden gentleman, was driven nearly mad by occult messages, such as the following:

"Hulloa, hulloa, is that telegrams? Take a message please for the *Evening Herald*. What, can't hear? That's your fault, I am shouting and my mouth is near the tube. Look alive, miss. Listening? Well: to Davids. D for daddy, a for apples, v for varnish, i for I. I said I for i! Got it now? D for daddy again," and so on.

"The truth of it is," said Mr. Chester, during a pause in one of these wordy tussles, "I, or that telephone, will have to go, Strangman. I cannot work with it going on."

"My dear fellow"—Strangman was all agitation at once—"what is to be done? The messages must go and I must hear them sent or the boys would put in wrong words. I am sure it is not any pleasanter for me than it is for you; I have also got to work."

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"T for Tommy, I keep telling you—Tommy, Tommy," the lad at the 'phone shrieked triumphantly.

Mr. Chester threw down his papers, pushed back his chair, and rose, tragic purpose on his face.

"It is not to be borne," he ejaculated.

"Oh, very well," stuttered Mr. Strangman, "that means, I suppose, that I shall have to do the

'phoning myself. Here, boy, get out, give me that."

And thereupon the message started over again, but this time breathed in Mr. Strangman's powerful whisper.

He certainly seemed to be able to manipulate it with less noise, only he soon wearied of the effort, and future wires were deputed to Joan. So, in addition to her other tasks, she had had the peculiarly irritating one of trying to induce attention into post office telephone girls.

Then, too, Mr. Strangman had not felt in the mood to dictate letters, with the result that at a quarter to six seven of them had to be altered and retyped. Joan was still sitting at her machine in a corner of the hot, noisy office, beating out: "Dear Sir, In answer to yours, etc.," when the clock struck six. Her back ached, her eyes throbbled, she was conscious of a feeling of intense hatred against mild, inoffensive Mr. Strangman.

That gentleman, having discovered the lateness of the hour by chance, kept her another quarter of an hour apologizing before he signed the letters.

Then he looked up at her suddenly.

"Do you think," he said, "that you could report on the dresses for us to-morrow night at the Artists' Ball?"

"I report?" Joan looked at him in astonishment; women reporters were disapproved of on the *Evening Herald*.

"I know it is unusual," Mr. Strangman admitted. "But Jones is ill, and our other men will all be busy on important turns. I just thought of you in passing; it is a pity to waste the ticket." [Pg 121]

"I could try." Joan made an effort to keep the eagerness out of her voice.

"Yes, that is it, you could try. We should not want much," he added; "and it is not part of your duties as a secretary; still, you might enjoy it, eh?"

"Why, I should love it," she assented; hate was fast merging back into liking.

Strangman cackled his customary nervous laugh. "Then that is settled," he said, "and here is the ticket. You will have to have a fancy dress, hire it, I suppose, since the time is so short. That, and a taxi there and back, will come out of the paper. Hope it is a good show, for your sake."

Afterwards, when she looked back at that evening, at the Artists' Ball, Joan was ashamed to remember the eager heat of excitement which took possession of her from the moment when she stepped out of the *Evening Herald* taxi and ran along the passage to the ladies' cloak-room. She had, it seemed to her, no excuse; she was not young enough to have made it pardonable and she had long ago decided that the intoxication of life could be no longer hers. Its loss was to be part of the bitter lesson fate had taught her. Yet as she saw herself in the glass, a ridiculous figure in black flounces with just one scarlet rose pinned at her waist and another nodding on the brim of her hat, she could not keep the excitement from sparkling in her eyes and the colour of youth was certainly flaming in her cheeks. Fanny had fitted her out with clever fingers as a black Pierrette. A Pierrette, taken from the leaves of some old French book, with her hair done in little dropping curls just faintly powdered, as if a mist of snow lay over the brown.

She was young, after all, and the music called to her with insistent voice. "I am looking nice," Joan confided to her reflection, "and I will have a good time just for to-night." [Pg 122]

Then she turned and went quickly, walking with light feet and eager eyes that sought for adventure into the crowded room.

It gave her first of all an immense sense of space. The whole opera house had been converted into a ballroom. There were hundreds of people present, and every imaginable fancy dress under the sun. Brilliant colours, bright lights and the constant movement of the crowd made up a scene of kaleidoscopic splendour.

There was a waltz in progress and Joan stood for a little with her back to a pillar of one of the boxes, bewildered by the noise and moving colours. Standing opposite her, in the shadow of the other looped-up curtain, was a man. A Pierrot to her Pierrette, only his costume was carried out in white, and on his head, instead of the orthodox hat, he wore a tight-bound black handkerchief. His eyes, for some reason, made her restless. It was not that he stared exactly, the man's whole figure was too blatantly bored for that, but there was something in their expression which made her look and look again. At their sixth exchange of glances the man smiled, or so it seemed to Joan, but the next moment his face was sombre again. None the less there had been something in her idea, for before the next couple of dancers swung past her the man had moved from the shadow of his curtain and was standing near her.

"Don't think it is awful impudence on my part," he said, "but are you here all alone?"

Now there was just something in his voice that, as far as most women were concerned would sweep away all barriers. He spoke, in short, like a gentleman. Joan looked up at him.

"Yes," she admitted; she caught her breath on a little laugh. "I am here as a reporter, you know; it is business and pleasure combined."

Once more his eyes made her uncomfortable and she dropped hers quickly.

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"That is strange," said the man gravely, "for I am a reporter too."

He was certainly not speaking the truth. Joan was not inclined to believe that Fleet Street had ever produced reporters the least like her companion. Still, what did it matter? just for this evening she would throw aside convention and have a good time.

"How awfully fortunate," she answered, "because you will be able to help me. I am new to the game."

"Well then," he suggested, "let us dance to the finish of this waltz and I will point out a few of the celebrities as we pass them."

Just for a second Joan hesitated, but her feet were tingling to be dancing.

"Couldn't we do it better standing here?" she parried.

"No," he assured her, "we could not do it at all unless we dance; movement helps my memory."

He was a most perfect dancer. No one, so numberless women would have told Joan, could hold you just as Robert Landon did, steer you untouched through the most crowded ballroom as he did, make himself and you, for the time being, seem part and parcel of the swaying tune, the strange enchantment of a waltz.

Joan was flushed and a little breathless at the close; they had danced until the last notes died on the air, and she had forgotten her mission, the celebrities, everything, indeed, except the dance and its bewildering melody. The man looked down at her as she stood beside him, an eager light awake in his eyes. His voice, however, was cool and friendly.

"You dance much too well to be a reporter," he said.

"What a ridiculous remark!" Joan retorted; "one cannot dance all day, can one? Besides, I am not even a real reporter. I am only a typist."

"That is worse, to think of you as that is impossible," he said. "Let us go outside and find somewhere to sit."

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"But what about our reporting," Joan remonstrated; "I thought you were going to point out celebrities?"

"Time enough for that," he answered. "I am going to take you out on to a balcony meanwhile. There will only be the stars to look at us, and I am going to pretend you are a fairy and that you live in the heart of a rose, not a typist or any such awful thing."

Joan laughed. "I wish you could see my attic," she said. "It is such a funny rose for any fairy to live in."

They sat out four dances, or was it more? Joan lost count. Out here on the balcony, with only the stars as chaperon and a pulse of music calling to them from the ballroom, time sped past on silver wings. For Joan the evening was a dream; to-morrow morning she would wake, put on her old blue coat and skirt, catch her bus at the corner of the square and spend the day in sorting and arranging Mr. Strangman's papers. To-night she was content to watch the bubble held before her by this man's soft words, his strange, intent eyes; she made no attempt to investigate it too closely. But for Landon the evening was one step along an impulse he intended to follow to the end. He was busy laying sure foundations, learning all there was to know of Joan's life and surroundings, of the difficulties that might lie in the way of his desire, of the barriers he might have to pull down.

"Things are not going to end here," he told Joan, as, the last dance finished, they stood among the crowd waiting for a taxi. He had helped her on with her cloak and the feel of his strong warm hands on her shoulder had sent the blood rushing to Joan's heart.

"I don't see how it is not going to end," she answered; "you must remember I am not even a reporter."

"No, and I am," he smiled; "I had forgotten."

He moved to face her, and putting his hands over hers, fastened up her cloak for her. It seemed his hands lingered over the task, and finally stayed just holding hers lightly.

"I am going to see it does not end, none the less," he said. "I shall come and fetch you at your office this day next week and you shall dine with me somewhere and go on to a theatre. What time do you get out of office?"

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"At about six," Joan answered; "but how can you? Why, we do not even know each other's names!"

"No more we do, and I don't want to, do you?" He smiled down at her undecided eyes. "I would rather think of you as Pierrette than Miss anything, and I shall be Pierrot. It is a romance, Pierrette; will you play it?"

"Yes," she answered slowly, but her eyes fell away from his.

CHAPTER XVII

**"Aye, thought and brain were there, some kind
Of faculty that men mistake
For talent, when their wits are blind,—
An aptitude to mar and break
What others diligently make."**

A. L. GORDON.

Impulse had always been a guiding factor in Robert Landon's life. If he saw a thing and wanted it, impulse would prompt him to reach out his hand and snatch it; if the thing were beyond his reach, he would climb—if necessary—over the heart of his best friend to obtain it; should it prove of very fragile substance and break in his hands, he would throw it away, but its loss, or the possible harm he had inflicted in his efforts to obtain it, brought no regrets. He made love deliriously, on fire himself for the moment, but never once had he so far forgot himself as to come from the flame in any way singed. Many tragedies lay behind the man, for impulse is hardly a safe guide through life; but he himself was essentially too level-headed, too selfish, to be the one who suffered.

He had spoken and danced and made love to Joan on an impulse. Beyond that, he set himself down seriously and painstakingly to win her. Most women, he knew, like to be carried forward on the wings of a swift-rushing desire, but there was some strange force of reserve behind this girl's constant disregard of his real meaning in the game they played. She was willing, almost anxious to be friends; it did not take him long to find out how lonely and dreary had been the life she was leading. She went out with him daily; it became a recognized thing for him to fetch her in his small car every evening at office. Sometimes they would dine together at one of the many little French restaurants in Soho, and go to a theatre afterwards; sometimes they would just drive about the crowded lighted streets, or slip into the Park for a stroll, leaving the car in charge of some urchin for a couple of pennies. Since he was out on the trail, as his friends would have said, every other interest in his life was given up to his impulse to beat down this girl's reserve, but all his attempts at passionate love-making left her unresponsive. She would draw back, as it were, into her shell, and for days she would avoid meeting him. Going out some back way at the office and never being at home when he called at Montague Square. Then he would write little notes to her and bribe the office-boy to deliver them, begging her pardon most humbly—he played his cards, it may be noticed, very seriously—imploring her to be friends again. And Joan would forgive him and for a little they would be the best of companions. [Pg 126]

But through it all, and though she shut her eyes more or less to the trend of events, Joan's mind refused to be satisfied. She was restless and at times unhappy; she had her hours of wondering where it would all end, her spells of imagination when she saw Landon asking her to marry him. When she thought about it at all it always ended like that, for she could not blind her eyes to the fact of the man's love for her. Then she would shun his society, and endeavour to build up a wall of reserve between them, for it was her answer to his question that she could not bring herself to face. [Pg 127]

It was on one of these occasions that she made up her mind definitely to break with him altogether. She wrote him a short note, saying that she was going to be dreadfully busy at office and that as she had another girl coming to stay with her—both statements equally untrue—she was afraid it would be no use his calling to fetch her.

Landon accepted this attitude in silence, though one may believe it did something to fan the flame of his passion, and for ten whole days he left her entirely alone. Then he wrote.

Joan found the letter waiting for her on the hall table when she came home one evening after a peculiarly dull and colourless day. It had been delivered by hand and was addressed simply to "Pierrette, In the Attic." Mrs. Carew must have been a little surprised at such a designation. Joan took it upstairs to read, lingering over the opening of it with a pleasurable thrill. The days had been very grey lacking his companionship.

"Dear Pierrette," Landon had written, "is our romance finished, and why? The only thing I have left to comfort me is a crushed red rose. You wore it the first evening we ever met. Pierrette, you are forgetting that it is summer. How can you wake each morning to blue skies and be conventional? Summer is nearly over, and you do not know what you are missing. Come out and play with me, Pierrette; I will not kiss even your hands if you object. I can take you down next Sunday to a garden that I know of on the river, and you shall pick red roses. Will you not come, Pierrette?"

Joan sat on in the dark of her little attic (for if the lamp was not required before supper Mrs. Carew had a way of not bringing it up until it was quite dark) with the letter on her lap. She was making up her mind to tell Landon about Gilbert, about her principles which had been rather roughly shaken, about her ideas, which still held obstinate root in her mind. If he loved her enough not to mind what was past, why should she not marry him? She had proved once how [Pg 128]

bitter it was to stand against the convictions of the world alone. His fortnight's absence had shown her how unbearable the dullness of her days had become; she could not struggle on much longer. Her mind played with the prospect of consenting, of how it would open up new worlds to her, of what a change it would bring into her life.

It was with a conviction anyway that great things might be in the balance that she stepped into Landon's car on Sunday afternoon and settled herself back against the cushions. They disregarded the fortnight's lapse in their friendship; neither referred to it in any way, and Landon was exceptionally cheerful and full of conversation on the drive out. Joan was content to sit quiet and listen and to let her eyes, tired of dusty files and hours of typewriting, feast on the country as they flashed past.

The garden that he had promised her proved all that his descriptions had claimed. It lay at the back of an old stone house, off the high road and away from the haunts of the ordinary holiday makers. Landon had chanced on it once and the place had taken a great hold on his imagination. One could be so alone at the foot of the garden, where it sloped down to the water's edge, that one could fancy oneself in a world of one's own.

The house itself was a quaint, old-fashioned building with small rooms and tiny windows, but the walled-in garden where the roses grew, and the river garden, which stretched right down to the brim of the river with its fruit trees and tall scented grasses, were both beautiful. They had tea out there, and they picnicked on the grass, watching the sun's reflections playing hide and seek in the river.

After tea, Landon insisted on strolling round and collecting all the roses he could lay his hands on for Joan. He threw them finally, a heavy heap of scented blossoms, on to her lap. He said their colour was reflected in her cheeks, their beauty in her eyes. [Pg 129]

"It is a shame to have picked them so early," Joan remonstrated; "they will die now before we get home."

"Let them," he answered, "at least they have had their day and done well in it." He threw himself down on the grass beside her. "Aren't they glorious, Pierrette?" he said; but his eyes were not on the flowers.

Joan stirred uneasily. The great moment was drawing closer and closer, she was growing afraid, as are all women when the sound of Love's wings comes too near them.

"I wish you wouldn't call me by that name any more," she said, "because——"

"Well, why because?" Landon asked as she hesitated. "One of the things that do not seem quite right to you, like kissing, or holding hands?" He took up one of the roses from her lap and pulled it to pieces with ruthless hands. "What a puritan you are!" he went on abruptly. "Do you know we can only love once, isn't your heart hungry for life, Pierrette? Sometimes your eyes are."

"Don't!" said Joan quickly, "that is another thing I wish you would not do, make personal remarks; it makes me feel uncomfortable."

"Why don't you tell the truth?" he asked fiercely. "Why don't you say afraid?"

"Because it does not," she answered; her eyes, however, would not meet his. "I think uncomfortable describes it better."

Landon stared at her with sombre eyes. He was beginning to tire of their pretty game of make believe; perhaps impulse was waning within him. Anyway he felt he had wasted enough time on the chase. But to-day Joan seemed very charming, and her fear, for he could see plainly enough that she was afraid, was fanning the flame of his desire into a new spurt of life.

"I am going to make love to you, Pierrette," he said; "I am going to wake up that cold heart of yours. Does the thought frighten you, Pierrette? because even that won't prevent me doing it." [Pg 130]

He had drawn her close to him, she could feel his arms round her like strong bands of iron. Joan lifted a face from which all the colour had fled to his.

"Don't, please don't!" Her bewildered mind struggled with all the carefully thought-out things she was going to have said to him. But the crisis was too overwhelming for her; she could only remember the one final thought that had been with her. "You may not want to marry me when you know about me," she whispered, and ended her words with a sob.

The man laughed triumphantly. "I don't want to marry you," he answered, "I want to love you and make you for a little love me, and this is how I begin the lesson." He bent his face to hers quickly, kissing her passionately, fiercely, on the lips.

For a second such a tumult of passionate amazement shook Joan that she stayed quiet in his arms. Then everything that was strong, all the inherited purity in her nature, came to her aid and summoned her fighting forces to resist. She struggled in his arms furiously, she had not known she held such stores of strength; then she wrenched herself free and stood up. Fear, if fear had been the cause of her early discomfort, had certainly left her; it was blind, passionate rage that held her silent before him.

The man rose to his feet and essayed a laugh, but it was rather a strained effort. "That was a most undignified proceeding, Pierrette," he said; "what on earth made you do it?"

"How dared you?" flamed Joan. "How dared you speak to me, touch me like that?"

"Dared?" the man answered; he was watching her with mocking eyes and something evil had come to life on his face. Cold anger that she should have made a fool of him and a baulked passion which could very easily turn to hate. "This outburst is surely a little ridiculous. What did you think I wanted out of the game? Did it really occur to you that I was going to ask you to marry me? My dear girl!" He shrugged his shoulders, conveying by that movement a vast amount of contempt for her dreams. "And as for the rest, I have never yet met a woman who objected to being kissed, though some of them may pretend they do."

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Joan stared at him; he had stooped and was gathering up the roses that lay between them. Rage was creeping away from her and leaving her with a dull sense of undignified defeat. Once again she had pitted the ideal of a dream against a man's harsh reality, and lost. Love! She had dreamed that this man loved her, she had held herself unworthy of the honour he paid her. This was what his honour amounted to—"I have never yet met a woman who objected to being kissed."

She turned away and walked blindly towards the house.

Landon caught her up before she reached the gate of the garden. His arms were full of the roses and apparently he had won back to his usual good nature.

"Having made ourselves thoroughly disagreeable to each other," he said, "let us make it up again for the time being. It is all rather absurd, and you have got to get back to town somehow or other."

He helped her into the car with just his usual solicitude, tucking the rug round her and laying the pile of roses on her lap; but on the way home he was very silent and from the moment they started till the time came for saying good-bye he did not speak a word to her.

As they stood together, while Joan was opening the door with her latch key, he put his hand for a moment over hers.

"Good-bye, Pierrette," he said, "I am sorry you won't have anything to do with me. I should have made you happy and given you a good time. Sometimes it is a pity to aim too high; you are apt to miss things altogether."

Fanny was waiting in Joan's room when she got back, tucked up in her favourite position in the arm-chair. She had been away for the last ten days on one of her periodical trips. "My!" she gasped, disentangling herself to greet the other; "what roses, honey! Straight from the country, aren't they, and a car—I can hear it buzzing outside. Is it your young man?" She paused on the thought tip-toe with excitement, her eyes studying Joan across the flowers she had seized. "And is he straight? the other sort won't do for you; you would hate yourself in a week."

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Joan subsided on to the bed, taking off her hat with hands that shook over the task.

"No," she answered, "he is not straight, Fanny; but it doesn't matter, because I have finished with him. Take away the flowers with you, will you? they seem to have given me a headache."

Fanny dropped the roses in a shower and trod them under foot as she ran to Joan. "He has hurt you;" she spoke fiercely, flinging her arms round the other girl. "God, how I hate men at times! He has hurt you, honey."

"Only my pride," Joan admitted; but the tears so long held back came in a flood now; she laid her head down on Fanny's shoulder and sobbed and sobbed.

The other girl waited till the storm had passed; then she rose to her feet and bundling the roses together with an aggressive movement opened the door and flung them out into the passage.

"I have got an idea," she said; "you have been about fed up with office for months past. Well, why not chuck it? Come with me. I have got a job in a show that is going on tour next week. There is room in the chorus, I know; come with me, won't you?"

Her earnestness made Joan laugh. "What shall I come as, Fanny? I cannot sing, and I have never acted in my life."

"That is nothing," Fanny went on impatiently. "You are young, you are pretty; you can dance, I suppose, and look nice. I can get you taken on to-morrow, for old Daddy Brown, that is the manager, is a friend of mine, and while he is a friend he will do anything for me. Oh, come, do come." She caught hold of Joan's hands. "It will be great, we shall be together, and I will show you that there is fun in life; fun, and love, and laughter."

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She was laughing herself hysterically, her figure seemed poised as if for an instant outbreak into the dance she spoke of. Joan watched her with envious eyes. Fanny's philosophy in life was so plain to see. She took things that came her way with eager hands; she seemed to pass unscathed, unsullied, through the dregs of life and find mirth in the dreariest surroundings. And to-day Landon had broken down one more barrier of the pride which kept Joan's feet upon the pathway of self-respect. Of what use were her ideals since they could not bring her even one half hour's happiness? The road stretched out in front of her empty and sunless.

These thoughts swept through her mind almost in the space of a second. Then she rose quickly to her feet.

"I'll come, Fanny," she said; "it really amounts to turning my back on a battle; still I will come."

CHAPTER XVIII

**"To fill the hour—that is happiness: to fill
The hour and leave no crevice for repentance."**

ANON.

"Daddy Brown, this is the girl I spoke to you about; will she do?"

That had been Joan's introduction to the manager of the Brown travelling company. He was a large man, with his neck set in such rolls of fat that quick movement was an impossibility. His eyes, small and surrounded by a multitude of wrinkles, were bloodshot, but for all that excessively keen. Joan felt as they swept over her that she was being appraised, classed, and put aside under her correct value in the man's brain. His hair, which in youth must have grown thick and curly, had fallen off almost entirely from the top of his head, leaving a small island sprouting alone in the midst of the baldness. This was known among the company as "The Danger Mark," for when the skin round it flushed red a fearful storm was brewing for somebody.

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He sat in front of a table littered with papers, in a small, rather dirty office, the windows of which opened on to Bedford Street. With the window open, as he kept it, the noise of the Strand traffic was plainly audible.

He eyed Joan slowly and methodically; then his glance turned back to Fanny. "What can she do?" he asked heavily.

"Oh, everything," Fanny answered with a little gasp; "and she can share my dressing-room and all that."

"Humph!" grunted the man; once more his small, shrewd eyes travelled all over Joan.

"Well, perhaps, she will do." He agreed finally, "Mind you are in time at the station to-morrow. Cut along now, girls, I am busy."

Fanny was jubilant all the way home. "I thought I should be able to work it," she bubbled; "it will be fun, honey, to-morrow we are due at Tonbridge and the tour ends at Sevenoaks. All little places this time. But mind you, it is the first rung of the ladder for you. Brown's is a good company to start with. *Country Girl, Merry Widow, Waltz Dream.*" She ticked them all off on her fingers one by one. "You are glad about it, aren't you?" she broke off suddenly to ask.

"Of course I am glad," Joan answered quickly, "and it is sweet of you to have got it for me. Perhaps I am a little nervous; it strikes me one might get very frightened of Mr. Brown."

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"What, Daddy? He is all right if you know how to manage him, and he won't bother you." Fanny took a quick look at her. "You aren't his sort."

Was she really glad? Joan pondered the matter over when Fanny had at last betaken herself to her own room. At any rate she had, as it were, burnt her boats. She had left the *Evening Herald*, she had told Mrs. Carew to sublet her rooms. At least it would be good to get away from London for a bit.

Mrs. Carew had been quite frank and decided in her views on the subject.

"For a young lady like you to go off with the likes of 'er," this referred to Fanny, "it hardly seems seemly to me, Miss. Not that Miss Bellairs ain't all right in her own way, but it is not your way. Mark my words, Miss, you will regret it."

"And if I do," Joan had answered, "I can always leave and come back here, can't I, Mrs. Carew? I am sure you will always do your best to put me up even if this room is let."

"If I have a corner; Miss, you shall 'ave it and welcome. Nice and quiet young lady you have always been, and I know something of young ladies, I do."

It was evident, even in her efforts to be polite, that she considered Joan's present line of action to be one of deterioration. Was it, after all, a wise move, Joan wondered rather vaguely, as she packed away her few possessions. There was a great deal in Fanny's nature that she disapproved of, that could at times even fill her with disgust. In itself, that would merely hold her from ever coming to look at life from Fanny's standpoint. And perhaps she would find in the existence, which Fanny claimed to be full of love and laughter, something to satisfy the dull aching discontent which had wrenched at her heart all this last summer. Aunt Janet, Uncle John, the old home-life, the atmosphere of love and admiration, these had been torn from her, she needed something to take their place.

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They met the rest of the company next day at the station. Fanny introduced them all to Joan, rather breathlessly.

"Mr. Strachan, who plays our hero, and who is the idol of the stalls. Mr. O'Malley, our comic man. Mr. Whistler, who does heavy father parts, wig and all. Mr. Jimmy Rolls, who dances on light toes and who prompts when nothing else is doing. The ladies, honey, take their names on trust, you will find them out sooner or later."

There were, Joan discovered, eight other ladies in the company. She never knew more than four of them. Mrs. O'Malley, Grace Binning, a small soft-voiced girl, Rhoda Tompkins, and Rose Weyland—a very golden-haired, dark-eyebrowed lady, who had been in some far back period, so Fanny contrived to whisper, a flame of Brown's.

Of the men, Joan liked Mr. Strachan best; he was an ugly man with very pleasant eyes and a rare smile that lit up the whole of his face. He seemed quiet, she thought, and rather apart from the others.

The journey down to Tonbridge proved slightly disastrous. To begin with, thanks to Daddy Brown himself, the company missed the best train of the day and had to travel by one that meant two changes. On arrival at Tonbridge at four o'clock in the afternoon they found that one of the stage property boxes had gone astray. Considering that they were billed to appear that evening at eight and the next train did not arrive till ten-thirty, the prospect was not a promising one.

"Always merry and bright," as Jimmie, the stage prompter, remarked in an aside to Strachan. "By the way, is it the *Arcadians* that we are doing to-night?"

"How the hell can we do anything," growled Daddy Brown, the patch of skin round his danger-mark showed alarmingly red, "if that box does not appear. Who was the blasted idiot who was supposed to be looking after it?"

"Well, it was and it was not me, Sir," Jimmie acknowledged; "the truth is that I saw it labelled all right and left it with the rest of the luggage to look after itself. I suppose——"

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"Oh, what is the use of talking," Brown broke in impatiently; he had thrust his hat back on his fiery head, the lines of fat above his collar shone with perspiration. "You had better go on, all of you, and see about getting rooms; the first rehearsal is in an hour, box or no box, and don't you forget it."

"I don't see," wailed Mrs. O'Malley, almost as soon as his back was turned, "how we are to live through this sort of thing. What is the use of a rehearsal if none of our things are going to turn up?"

"I guess there will be a performance whether or no," Fanny told her. "Come along, honey," this to Joan, "seize up your bag and follow me; we have got to find diggings of sorts before the hour is up."

Joan found, as they trudged from lodging-house to lodging-house, that the theatrical profession was apparently very unpopular in Tonbridge. As Fanny remarked, it was always as well to tell the old ladies what to expect, but the very mention of the word theatre caused a chill to descend on the prospective landladies' faces. They found rooms finally in one of the smaller side streets; a fair-sized double bedroom, and a tiny little sitting-room. The house had the added advantage of being very near the theatre, which was just as well, for they had barely time to settle with the woman before they had to hurry off for the rehearsal.

"It won't do to be late," Fanny confided to Joan. "Daddy is in an awful temper; we shan't get any champagne to-night unless some of us soothe him down."

At the small tin-roofed theatre supreme chaos reigned upon the stage and behind it. Daddy Brown, his hat thrown off, his coat discarded, stormed and raged at everyone within hearing. *The Country Girl* had replaced *The Arcadians* on the bill; it was an old favourite and less troublesome to stage. Fanny was to play *Molly*; it was a part that she might have been born for. Daddy Brown won back to his good humour as he watched her; her voice, clear and sweet, carried with it a certain untouched charm of youth, for Fanny put her whole heart into her work.

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Joan felt herself infected by the other's spirit, she joined in the singing, laughing with real merriment at her chorus partner. The stage boards cracked and creaked, the man at the piano watched the performers with admiring eyes—the music was so familiar that it was quite unnecessary for him to follow the notes. Daddy Brown and the box office man, sole occupants of the stalls, saw fit to applaud as the chorus swung to a breathless pause.

"That's good, that's good," Brown shouted. "Just once more again please, ladies, then we'll call a rest. Don't want to tire you out before to-night."

The dance flourished to its second end and Fanny flung herself exhausted against the wings. Her cough was troubling her again, shaking her thin body, fighting its way through her tightened throat.

"It's worth it though," she laughed in answer to Joan's remonstrance; "it is the only time I really live when I am dancing, you see."

The rehearsal dragged out its weary length, but not until Brown had reduced all the company to such a state of exhaustion that they could raise no quiver of protest to any of his orders. A man of iron himself, he extracted and expected from the people under him the same powers of endurance which he himself possessed. Since Fanny and Joan could not go home to their

lodgings, the time being too short, Strachan escorted them out to obtain a meal of sorts before the evening's performance. Short of Daddy Brown's hotel, which stood close to the theatre and which they were all reluctant to try, there did not appear to be any restaurants in the neighbourhood and they ended up by having a kind of high tea at a little baker's. "Eggs are splendid things to act on," Strachan told Joan.

The girls, however, on their return found a bottle of champagne and two glasses waiting for them in Fanny's dressing-room. It had been sent with Mr. Brown's compliments to Miss Bellairs. The sight of it sent up Fanny's spirits with a bound.

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"I did not know how I was going to get through the evening," she confessed, "but this will put new life into us."

She insisted upon Joan having a glass, and the latter, conscious that in her present state of tiredness she could hardly stand, far less dance, sipped a little of the clear, bubbling liquid—sipped till the small room grew large, till her feet seemed to tread on air, and her eyes shone and sparkled like the brightest of stars on a dark night.

The theatre after that, the crowded rows of faces, the music and the thunder of applause—the audience were good-tempered and inclined to be amused at anything—passed before her like some gorgeous light-flecked dream. When the soldiers in the back row took up the words of Fanny's song and shouted the refrain she felt swept along on the wings of success.

At the fall of the curtain Daddy Brown patted her on the back. He was by this time radiant with cheerfulness once more.

"You will do, young lady," he said. "We'll have to see if we can't work in a special dance for you;" and Fanny flung her arms round Joan in wild joy. "You're made, honey," she whispered, "if Brown has noticed you, you're made. I always said you could dance."

It was very thrilling and exciting, but the champagne was beginning to lose its effect. The world was growing grey again. Joan's head throbbed, and she felt self-consciously inclined to make a fool of herself. She sat very silent through the supper to which Brown treated the company at his hotel. There were about twenty people present, nearly all men; Joan wondered where they had been collected from, and she did not quite like the look of any of them. Fanny was making a great deal of noise, and how funny and tawdry their faces looked under the bright light. After supper there was a dance, the table was pushed aside, and someone—Joan saw with surprise that it was Daddy Brown—pounded away at a one-step on the piano. Everyone danced, the men, since there were not enough ladies to go around, with each other.

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Fanny, wilder, gayer than ever, skirts held very high, showed off a new cake-walk in the centre of the room. Her companion, a young, weak-looking youth, was evidently far from sober, and the more intricate the step, the more hopelessly did he become entangled with his own feet, amidst shouts of amusement from the onlookers.

Joan turned presently—she had narrowly escaped being dragged into the dance by a noisily cheerful gentleman—to find Strachan standing beside her. He was watching her with some shade of curiosity.

"Why don't you go home?" he suggested; "it isn't amusing you and I can see you are tired. We get used to these kind of shows after a time."

"I think I will," Joan agreed; "no one will mind if I do, will they?"

"Not they, most of them are incapable of noticing anything." A cynical smile stirred on his face. "It is no wonder," he commented, "that we are known as a danger to provincial towns. You see the state of confusion we reduce the young bloods to." His eyes passed round the room and came back to Joan with a shade of apology in them. "A bad night, for your first experience," he said; "we are not always as noisy as this. Come along though, I'll see you home, if I may, my rooms are somewhere down your street."

Joan lay awake long after she had got into bed, and when she did at last drop off to sleep it was to dream strange, noise-haunted dreams, that brought her little rest. It was morning, for a faint golden light was invading the room, when she woke to find Fanny standing at the foot of the bed. A different Fanny to any Joan had ever seen before, tired and blowsy-looking, her hair pulled about her face, the colour rubbed in patches from her cheeks and lips.

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"My word, it has been a night;" she stood swaying and peering at Joan. "It's life though, isn't it, honey?"

Then a wild fit of coughing seized her and Joan had to scramble out of bed and give what help she could. There was no hope of sleep after that, and when Fanny had been helped to bed Joan took up a chair to the window and drew aside the curtain.

Her mind was a tumult of angry thoughts, but her heart ached miserably. If this was what Fanny called life and laughter, she had no wish to live it.

CHAPTER XIX

**"I did not choose thee, dearest. It was Love
That made the choice, not I."**

W. S. BLUNT.

All the way up the river from the Nore after they had picked up the pilot the ship moved through a dense fog. A huge P. & O. liner, heavily laden with passengers and mails, she had to proceed cautiously, like some blind giant, emitting every two minutes a dolorous wail from her foghorns.

"Clear the way, I am coming," was the substance of the weird sound, and in answer to it shrill whistles sounded on all sides, from small fleets of fishing-boats, coal hulks, and cargo boats bound from far-off lands.

"We are here too," they panted in answer; "don't run us down, please."

It was eerie work, even for the passengers, who remained in blissful ignorance of the danger of their situation. By rights the ship should have been in dock before breakfast; they had planned the night before that an early dawn should see them awake and preparing to land; yet here was eleven o'clock, and from what the more hardy of them could learn by direct questioning of those in authority, they had not as yet passed Canvey Island. Dick Grant, ship's doctor and therefore free of access to inquirers, underwent a searching examination from all and sundry. The P. & O. regulations are, that the officers shall not talk or in any way become friendly with any of the passengers; the ship's doctor and the purser share the responsibility of looking after their clients' comfort, well-being, and amusement. On occasions such as a fog, when the hearts of passengers are naturally full of questions as to where they are, how long will the fog last, is there any danger, and ought we to have on our life-belts, these two afore-mentioned officials have a busy time. Dick felt that Barton, the purser in question, had played him rather a shabby trick, for Barton had asserted that the work of sorting out passengers' luggage and seeing to their valuables would confine him to his office till the ship docked, which excuse left Dick alone to cope with the fog-produced situation.

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Dick had been at sea now for close on two years. He had shifted from ship to ship, had visited most of the ports in the near and far East. This was his last voyage; he was going to go back and take up life in London. From Marseilles he had written to Mabel telling her to expect him the week-end after they got in.

His journeyings had given him many and varied experiences. The blue eyes had taken unto themselves some of that unwavering facing of life which seems to come almost always into the eyes of people who spend their lives upon the sea. He had learned to be patient and long-suffering with the oddities of his patients, passengers who passed through his hands on their brief journeyings; he had seen the pathos of the sick who were shipped with the full knowledge that they would die ere the first port was reached, simply because the wistful ache of home-sickness would not allow them to rest. Home-sickness! Dick had known it keep a man alive till the grey cliffs of Dover grew out of the sea and he could fall back dead and satisfied.

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Board ship throws people together into appalling intimacy; Love springs full-winged into being in the course of an afternoon; passion burns at red-heat through drowsy, moon-filled nights. Almost wilfully, to begin with, Dick had flung himself into romance after romance; perhaps unknown to himself, he sought to satisfy the hunger of heart which could throb in answer to a dream, but which all reality left untouched. He played at love lightly; he had an ingrained reverence for women that even intercourse with Anglo-Indian grass-widows and the girl who revels in a board-ship flirtation was unable altogether to eradicate. He made love, that is to say, only to those women who first and openly made love to him; but it is to be doubted whether even the most ardent of them could boast that Dicky Grant had ever been in love with them. They slipped out of his ken when they disembarked at their various ports, and the photographs with which they dowered him hardly served to keep him in mind of their names. And a certain weariness had grown up in his heart; he felt glad that this was to be his last voyage. He had put in two good crowded years, but he was no nearer realizing his dream than he had been on the day when Mabel had said to him: "Did you think I should not know when you fell in love?"

Dick was thinking of this remark of Mabel's as he stood by himself for the time being, right up by the front of the ship peering into the fog, and with the thought came a memory of the girl with the brown eyes who had stood to face him, her hands clenched at her sides, as she told her piteous tale. Piteous, because of its very bravado. "I am not afraid or ashamed," she had claimed, while fear stared out of her eyes and shame flung the colour to her face. What had the past two years brought her? Had she stood with her back to the wall of public opinion and fought her fight, or had the forces of contempt and blame been too strong for her?

A very light hand on his arm brought him out of his thoughts with a start, and he turned to find a small, daintily-clad lady standing beside him.

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"How much longer shall we be?" she asked; "and when am I going to see you again, Dicky, once we land?"

She had called him Dicky from the second day of their acquaintance. Mrs. Hayter always called men by their Christian names, or by nicknames invented by herself.

Dick let his eyes linger over her before he answered—immaculately dressed as ever—the wildest storm saw Mrs. Hayter with her hair waved, the other ladies claimed—small, piquante face, blue eyes and a marvellous complexion despite her many seasons spent in the East. She was the wife of an Indian Civilian, a tall, grey-headed man, who had come on board to see her off at Bombay. Dick had been rather struck with the tragedy of the man's face, that once he had seen it; he connected it always for some unexplainable reason with Mrs. Hayter's small, soft hands and the slumberous fire in her blue eyes. Not that Dick was not friendly with Mrs. Hayter; he had had on the contrary rather a fierce-tempered flirtation with her. Once, under the spell of a night all purple sea and sky and dim set stars, he had caught her to him and kissed her. Kissed the eager, laughing mouth, the warm, soft neck, just where the little pulse beat in the hollow of her throat. She had practically asked him to kiss her, yet that, he reflected in his cooler mood the next morning, was no excuse for his conduct, and, rather ashamed of himself, he had succeeded in avoiding her fairly well until this moment. He had not the slightest desire to kiss her again; that was always the sad end to all his venturings into the kingdom of romance.

"Where are you going to?" he answered her last question first; "if it is anywhere near London, I shall hope to look you up."

Mrs. Hayter laughed, a little caught-in laugh. "Look me up, Dicky, between you and me! Never mind, you funny, shy, big boy, you shall put it that way if you like. As a matter of fact, I am going to stay at the Knightsbridge Hotel for a week or so on my way through to my husband's people. Why don't you come there too?"

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The invitation in her voice was unmistakable and set his teeth on edge. "It's too expensive for me," he answered shortly; "but I will come and call one day if I may."

"Of course," she agreed, "let's make it dinner the day after to-morrow. Dicky," she moved a little closer to him, "is it me or yourself you are angry with about the other night?"

"Myself," Dick said dryly, and had no time for more, for on the second a shiver shook the ship, throwing Mrs. Hayter forcibly against him, and the air was suddenly clamorous with shrill whistles, cries, and the quick throb of engines reversed.

Through the fog, which with a seeming malignity was lifting, veil upon thick veil, now that the mischief was accomplished, Dick could see the faint outlines of land; gaunt trees and a house, quite near at hand, certainly within call. Mrs. Hayter was in a paroxysm of terror, murmuring her fright and strange endearing terms all jumbled together, and the deck had waked to life; they seemed in the centre of a curious, nerve-ridden crowd. It was all very embarrassing; Dick had to hold on to Mrs. Hayter because he knew she would fall if he let her go, and she clung to him, arms thrown round his neck, golden hair brushing against his chin.

"There's not a particle of danger," a strong voice shouted from somewhere in the crowd. Dick could recognize it as the captain's. "Please don't get alarmed, ladies, it is quite unnecessary, with any luck we will be off almost immediately."

In that he proved incorrect, for, heavily weighted as the *India* was, she stayed firmly fixed in Thames mud. By slow degrees the fog lifted and showed the long lines of the shore, and the solitary house standing out like a sentinel in the surrounding flatness.

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Dick had succeeded in disentangling Mrs. Hayter's arms and had escorted her to a seat.

"I am afraid I have given myself away hopelessly," she whispered, clutching him with rather a shaky hand. "Did anybody see us?"

"Everybody, I should think," he told her gravely, "But, after all, most things are excusable in a possible wreck."

"Yes," she agreed, "only Mrs. Sandeman is all eyes to my doings, and on one occasion she even wrote Robert. Cat!"

The last expression was full of vindictiveness. Dick was seized with a disgust for his own share in the proceedings; he hoped devoutly that Mrs. Sandeman, a rather austere-faced, tight-lipped woman, would not write and disturb Robert's peace of mind for any doings of his. Also he took a mental resolve to see no more of Mrs. Hayter.

By four o'clock all the passengers, with a mild proportion of their luggage, had been transferred to small tugs for transport to Tilbury; for on a further examination into the state of affairs it had been found that the *India* would probably remain where she was until a certain lightening of her freight should make it easier for her to refloat.

It was three days later, in fact, before Dick reached London. He found two letters waiting for him at his club; one from Mabel, telling him how glad they would be to see him, could he not make it earlier than the week-end; and one from Mrs. Hayter. Would he come and dine with her that evening? He need not trouble to answer, she was dining all alone and would not wait for him after half-past seven.

"If you can't come to dinner," she had added, "look in afterwards; there is something I rather particularly want to say to you."

He dressed for the evening meal in a vague state of discontent. He had not the slightest intention of going to Mrs. Hayter's, still the thought of her, waiting for him and expecting him, made him uneasy. At one moment he meditated telephoning to her to tell her he was unavoidably prevented from coming, but dismissed the excuse as being too palpably a lie. He was restless, too, and at a loss as to how to spend his evening, the loneliness of being by himself in London after a two years' absence was beginning to oppress him. None of his old pals seemed to be in town—anyway they did not turn up at the club. Finally he decided to look in at the Empire, or one of the neighbouring music-halls, and strolled forth in that direction.

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London certainly seemed no emptier than usual. Streams of motor-cars, taxis, and buses hurried along Piccadilly, the streets were busy with people coming and going. Out of the shadows just by the Burlington Arcade a woman spoke to him—little whispered words that he could pass on without noticing; but she had brushed against him as she spoke, the heavy scent she used seemed to cling to him, and he had been conscious in the one brief glance he had given her, that she was young, pretty, brown-eyed. The incident touched on his mind like the flick of a whip. He stared at the other women as they passed him, meeting always the same bold yet weary invitation of their eyes, the smile which betokened nothing of mirth. And as he stared and passed and stared again it grew on him that he was in reality searching for someone, searching those street faces in the same way as once before he had sought among the passers-by for one girl's face. The thought was no sooner matured than he hated it—and now he tried to keep his eyes off these women passing by, loathing the thought of their nightly pilgrimage, of their shame-haunted trade.

The Empire performance hardly served to distract his thoughts. He was out in the streets again before the ballet turn came on even. It had started to rain, a slight, indefinite drizzle; Leicester Square presented a drab and dingy appearance. The blaze of lights from the surrounding theatres shone on wet streets and slippery pavements. A drunken woman who had been ejected from the public-house at the corner stood leaning against a neighbouring lamp-post; her hat had fallen askew, stray, ragged wisps of hair hung about her face, from time to time she lifted up her voice and shouted at the children who had gathered in a ring to watch her antics. Life was horribly, hurtfully ugly at times. Dick would have liked to have shaken his shoulders free of it all and known himself back once more on the wind-swept deck of an outgoing steamer.

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He strode off in the direction of Trafalgar Square, and still dim, draggled shapes haunted his footsteps, leered at him from the shadows, brushed against him as he passed. As he turned into the lighted purlieus of the Strand he paused for a moment, undecided which course to take next, and it was then that he saw Joan again.

She was standing a little in front of him on the edge of the pavement, evidently waiting for a bus. Another girl stood near her, talking in quick, childish excitement, recounting some conversation, for she acted the parts as she spoke. Joan seemed to pay very little attention to her companion, though occasionally she smiled in answer to the other's laughter.

He had recognized her at once! Now he stood with his eyes glued on her, taking in every detail of her appearance—the wide-brimmed hat, the little lace collar showing outside her jacket, the neat shoes.

Even as she talked Fanny's bird-like eyes darted here and there among the crowd and lit presently on the young man, so palpably staring at her companion. She edged nearer to Joan and nudged her.

"You have got off, honey," she whispered. "Turn your eyes slowly and you will catch such a look of devotion as will keep you in comfort for the rest of your life."

Joan flushed: Fanny could always succeed in bringing the hot blush to her face, even though she had been on tour with the company now for two months. Also she still resented being stared at, though Fanny was doing her best to break her in to that most necessary adjunct of their profession. Rather haughtily, therefore, she turned, and for a second his eyes met hers, bringing a quick, disturbing memory which she could in no way place.

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At any other time Dick would have taken off his hat and claimed acquaintance; just for the present moment, though, something held him spellbound, staring. Fanny giggled, and Joan, having had time to raise her feelings to a proper pitch of anger, let her eyes pass very coldly and calmly from the top of the young man's hat to the tip of his boots and back again. Contempt and dislike were in the glance, what Fanny called her "Kill the worm" expression. Then No. 11 motor-bus plunged alongside, and "Here we are at last!" called Fanny, dragging at Joan's arm.

With a sense of victory in her heart, since the young man had obviously been quelled by her anger, Joan climbed up to the top of the bus and sat down in a seat out of sight. Fanny, however, turned to have a final look at the enemy from the top step. As the bus moved, she saw him shake himself out of his trance and start forward.

"Good-night," she called in cheerfully affectionate tones; the conductor turned to stare up at her. "Some other day; can't be done to-night, sonny."

Then she subsided, almost weak with laughter at her own joke, beside a righteously irritated Joan.

"Nearly had the cheek to follow us, mind you," she told her, amid gasps; "properly smitten, he

was."

"I wish you had not called out to him," said Joan stiffly. "It is so—so undignified."

Fanny quelled her laughter and looked up at Joan. "Undignified," she repeated; "it stopped him from coming, anyway. You don't look at things the right way, honey. One must not be disagreeable or rude to men in our trade, but one can often choke them off by laughing at them."

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CHAPTER XX

**"Love lent is mortal, lavished, is divine.
Not by its intake is love's fount supplied,
But by the ceaseless outrush of its tide."**

"And there is little Dickie," Mabel said; she stood, one hand on the cot, her grey eyes lowered—"he has brought such happiness into my life that sometimes I am afraid."

The baby. Some women were like that, Dick knew. A child could build anew their world for them and make it radiant with a heaven-sent wonder. He had never thought of Mabel as a mother. He had been almost afraid to meet her after two years away—her letters had given him no clue to her feelings; but then she rarely wrote of herself and she had never been the sort of person to complain. So he had come down to Sevenoaks rather wondering what he would find, remembering their last talk together the day before her wedding. Mabel had met him at the station and driven him back to the house in their car. She had talked chiefly about himself; was he glad to be back?—had he enjoyed the years away?—what plans had he made for the future? But her face, her quiet grey eyes had spoken for her. He knew she was happy, only the reason, the foundation of this happiness, had been a mystery to him until this moment.

"Little Dickie," he repeated, leaning forward to peer at the small atom of humanity who lay fast asleep. "You have called it after me, then?"

Mabel nodded. "Of course; and don't call him 'it,' Dick; he is a boy."

A sudden intuition came to her, she lifted her eyes to Dick's. "Tom wanted him called that, too," she said, speaking a little quickly; "but that is not wonderful, because Tom always wants just exactly what he thinks I do. We will go downstairs now, shall we, Dick? You know Mother insisted upon a dinner-party in your honour this evening, and we are going on to some awful theatre in Sevenoaks afterwards."

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"Good Lord!" groaned Dick; "why did you let her?"

"I thought you wouldn't be too pleased," Mabel admitted; "but surely you must remember that it is no use arguing with mother about what she calls—amusing us. She took the tickets as a pleasant surprise yesterday when she was in Sevenoaks. As Tom says, 'Let's be amused with a good grace.' Dick"—she paused on the lowest step to look up at him—"you haven't the slightest idea of how good Tom is; he spoils mother almost as much as father did, and yet he manages her."

"And you," said Dick, "are absolutely and entirely happy, Mabel?"

"Absolutely and entirely," she answered; he could see the truth of her words shining in her eyes.

Mrs. Grant loved dinner-parties and going-on to the theatre. It is to be believed that she imagined that the younger people enjoyed them too, because, for herself, she invariably went to sleep half-way through the most brilliant performance—earlier, were the show not quite so good. Dick remembered many unpleasant entertainments in his youth which could be traced to this passion of Mrs. Grant's. She would drill them into amusement, becoming excessively annoyed with them did they not show immediate appreciation, and pleasure is too fragile a dream for such treatment; it can be very easily destroyed.

Dick and Mabel found her downstairs, giving the final orders as to the setting out of the table to a harassed and sulky-looking maid. Everything had always to be done in Mrs. Grant's own particular way, even down to the placing of the salt-spoons. She was the bane of the servants' lives when they were new-comers; if they lived through the persecution they learned how best to avoid her gimlet eyes and could get a certain amount of amusement out of hoodwinking her. Dick contrived to display the correct amount of pleasure at the festivity in prospect for him. He wondered at the back of his mind how glad his mother really was to see him, and strolled away upstairs presently to his own room to unpack and change.

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The first had already been accomplished for him by Tom's valet, and the man apparently proposed to stay and help him change, murmuring something about a hot bath being ready.

"Thanks," answered Dick, "then I will manage for myself; you need not wait."

He stood for some time, the man having slipped discreetly away, staring out of the wide-open

window. It was still late summer, and the days stayed very hot. Beyond the well-kept lawn at the back of the house the fields stretched away till they reached the fringe of the forest, and above the trees again rose the chalk hills that lay, he knew, just behind Wrotham. He was thinking vaguely of many things as he stood there; first of Mabel and the new happiness shining in her eyes. Mabel and her small son; thank heaven, she had won through to such content, for if anyone deserved to be happy it was Mabel. Then little moments from the past two years strayed into his mind. Hot, sun-blazing ports, with their crowds of noisy, gesticulating natives; the very brazen blue of an Indian sky over an Indian sea; the moonlit night that had made him kiss Mrs. Hayter; he could almost feel for one second the throb of her heart against his. Then, like a flash, as if all his other thoughts had been but a shifting background for this, the principal one, Joan's face swung up before him. Where had she been going to that night? Who had her companion been? Why had not he had the courage to speak to her, to follow her at least, and find out where she lived? She was in London, anyway; he would have, even at the risk of hurting Mabel's feelings, to get back to London as soon as possible. It was a huge place, certainly, to look for just one person in, but Fate would bring them together again; he had learned to be a believer in Fate. There was truth, then, behind all the strange stories one heard about Love. A girl's voice, some face in the crowd, and a man's heart was all on flame. The waters of common-sense could do nothing to quench that fire. He would search, ridiculous and absurd as it seemed, till he found her—and then.... His thoughts broke off abruptly; there was a sound from downstairs which might be the dinner-bell, and he had not even had his bath yet.

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The dinner-party, specially arranged by Mrs. Grant for Dick's benefit, consisted of a Mr. and Mrs. Bevis, who lived in a large new house on the other side of the park, their two daughters, Dr. English, who had taken Dick's place at Wrotham, and a young man from Sevenoaks itself. "Someone in a bank," as Mrs. Grant described him.

Dick's health was drunk and his mother insisted on "Just a little speech, dear boy," which thoroughly upset his temper for the rest of the evening, so that he found it difficult to be even decently polite to the eldest Miss Bevis, whom he had taken in to dinner. The talk turned, after the speech-making episode, to the theatre they were bound for, Mr. Jarvis asking young Swetenham if he knew anything of the company and what it was like.

"Rather," the youth answered, "been twice myself this time already. They are real good for travellers. Some jolly pretty girls among them."

"Musical comedy, isn't it?" Mrs. Bevis asked. "Dorothy has always so wanted to see *The Merry Widow*."

"Well, that is what they are playing to-night," Swetenham assured her, "and I hear it is Miss Bellairs' best part. She is good, mind you, in most things, and there is a girl who dances top-hole."

"I don't know why we have never heard of it before," Mrs. Bevis meandered gently on; "it is so clever of you, Mrs. Grant, to have found that there was a theatre in Sevenoaks at all. I am sure we never dreamed of there being one."

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"They use the town hall," Dr. English put in. "If we can guarantee a large enough audience, I expect they will favour us at Wrotham."

"Oh, what a splendid idea," cried the youngest Miss Bevis; "fancy a real live theatrical company in Wrotham."

"I hope it will stay at 'fancy,'" grunted Mr. Bevis. "From what I remember of travelling companies, Wrotham is better without them."

Despite all Swetenham's praise and the Miss Bevis' enthusiastic anticipation Dick settled into his seat in the fourth row of the so-called stalls with the firm conviction that he was going to be thoroughly bored.

"The one consolation," he whispered to Mabel on their way in, "is that mother will not be able to sleep comfortably. I don't want to appear vicious, but really that is a consolation."

Mrs. Grant had apparently come to the same conclusion herself, for she was expressing great dissatisfaction in a queenly manner to the timid programme seller.

"Are these the best seats in the house?" they could hear her say. "It is quite absurd to expect anyone to sit in them for a whole evening."

Mabel had to laugh at Dick's remark, then she went forward to soothe her troubled parent as much as possible. "It isn't like a London theatre, mother, and Tom has ordered one of the cars to stay just outside. The minute you get tired he will take you straight home. He says he does not mind, as he has so often seen *The Merry Widow* before."

"Oh, well," Mrs. Grant sighed, and settled her weighty body into one of the creaking, straight-backed wooden chairs of which the stalls were composed. "So long as you young people enjoy yourselves I do not really mind."

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Swetenham had purchased a stack of programmes and was pointing out the stars on the list to the youngest Miss Bevis. The back of the hall was rapidly filling, and one or two other parties strolled into the stalls. The orchestra had already commenced to play the overture rather shakily.

"Music, and bad music at that," groaned Dick inwardly. He took a despairing glance round him and wondered if it would be possible to go and lose himself after the first act. Then the lights went out abruptly and the curtain went up.

The beginning chorus dragged distinctly; Dick heard Swetenham whispering to his companions that it would be better when the principals came on. In this he proved correct, for the *Merry Widow* girl could sing, and she could also act. Fanny's prettiness, her quick, light way of moving, shone out in contrast to her surroundings. High and sweet above the uncertain accompaniment her voice rose triumphant. The back of the house thundered with applause at the end of her song.

"Now wait," announced Swetenham, "the girl who dances comes on here. She hasn't any business to, it is not in the play, but old Brown finds it a good draw."

Mechanically the stage had been cleared, the characters sitting rather stiffly round the ball-room scene while the orchestra was making quite a good effort at "The Merry Widow Waltz." There was a second's pause, then down from the steps at the back of the stage came a girl; slim, straight-held, her eyes looking out over the audience as if they saw some vision beyond. It had taken Daddy Brown three very heated lessons to teach Joan this exact entrance. She was to move forward to the centre of the stage as if in a dream, almost sleep-walking, Fanny had suggested, the music was calling her. She was to begin her dance languidly, unwillingly, till note by note the melody crept into her veins and set all her blood tingling. "Now for abandon," Daddy Brown would exclaim, thumping the top of the piano with his baton. "That is right, my girl, fling yourself into it." And Joan had learned her lesson well, Daddy Brown and Fanny between them had wakened a talent to life in her which she had not known she possessed. Dance, yes, she could dance. The music seemed to give her wings. If she had seen her own performance she would probably have been a little shocked; she did not in the least realize how vividly she answered the call.

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When she had finished she stood, flushed and breathless, listening to the shouted and clapped applause.

"Do it again, miss," a man's voice sounded from back in the hall. She tried to find him, to smile at him—that was more of Fanny's teaching. But Daddy Brown allowed no encores, it was only for a minute that she stood there, bowing and smiling, in her ridiculously short, flounced skirt and baby bodice, then the rest of the chorus moved out to take their places, and she vanished into the side wings again.

From the moment of her entry till the last flutter of her skirts as she ran off, Dick sat as if mesmerized, leaning slightly forward, his hands clenched. Every movement of her body had stabbed, as it were, at his heart. He had not heard the call of the music, he could not guess at the spirit that was awake in her, he only saw the abandon—of which Daddy Brown was so proud—the painted face, the smiles which came and went so gaily at the shouted applause. Common-sense might not kill love, but this! The knowledge that even this could not kill love was what clenched his hands.

At the end of the first act Swetenham leant across and asked if he was coming out for a drink. It may have been that the younger man had noticed Dick's intense interest in the dancer, or perhaps it was merely because he wished to air a familiarity which struck him as delightfully bold, anyway, as they strolled about outside he put a suggestion to Dick.

"If you can arrange to stay on after the show," he said, "and would care to, I could take you round and introduce you to those two girls, the one who dances and Miss Bellairs."

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"Miss Bellairs," Dick repeated stupidly, his mind was grappling with a far bigger problem than young Swetenham could guess at.

"Yes," the other answered, "I met her last time she was down here, and the other is a great pal of hers."

He looked sideways at his companion as they went in under the lights; it occurred to him that Grant was either in a bad temper or had a headache, he looked anyway not in the least jovial. Swetenham almost regretted his rash invitation.

"Thank you," Dick was saying, speaking almost mechanically, "I should like to come very much. It doesn't in the least matter about getting home."

Swetenham glanced at him again. "If it comes to that," he said, "I have a motor-bike I could run you in on."

The fellow, it suddenly dawned on him, had gone clean off his head about one of the girls. Swetenham could understand and sympathize with him in that.

Dick managed to convey the information that he was staying on to Mabel during the third act. She looked a little astonished; Dick, in the old days, had been so scornful about young men's stage amusements. Anyway, it did not affect the party very much, for Mrs. Grant and Mr. Jarvis had already gone home, and Mabel was giving Dr. English a lift.

"Shall I send the motor back for you?" she asked, just as they moved away.

Dick shook his head. "Swetenham is going to give me a lift out," he answered her, and Dr. English chuckled an explanation as they rolled away.

"What it is to be young, eh, Mrs. Jarvis? One can find beauty even in the chorus of a travelling company."

But was that the explanation? Mabel wondered. Dick's face had not looked as if he had found anything beautiful in the performance. [Pg 158]

Swetenham and Dick made their way round to the side entrance of the town hall which acted as stage door on these occasions, after they had seen the rest of the party off, and Swetenham found someone to take his card up to Miss Bellairs.

"We might take them out to supper at the 'Grand,'" he suggested, as they waited about for the answer. "I don't know about the new girl, but Miss Bellairs is always good fun."

"Yes," agreed Dick half-heartedly. He was already regretting the impulse which had made him come. What should he do, or how feel or act, when he really met Joan face to face? His throat seemed ridiculously dry, and he was conscious of a hot sense of nervousness all over him which made the atmosphere of the night very oppressive. The boy who had run up with Swetenham's card came back presently with a message.

"Would the gentlemen come upstairs, Miss Bellairs was just taking off her make-up."

"Come on," Swetenham whispered to Dick; "Fanny is a caution, she doesn't mind a bit what sort of state you see her in."

The boy led them up the stairs, through a small door and across what was evidently the back of the stage. At the foot of some steps on the further side he came to pause outside a door on which he knocked violently.

"Come in," Fanny's voice shrilled from inside; "don't mind us."

The boy with a grin threw the door open and indicated with his thumb that Swetenham and Dick might advance. He winked at them as they passed him, a fund of malignant impudence in his eyes. The room inside was small and scattered with a profusion of clothes. Fanny, attired in a long silk dressing wrap, sat on a low chair by the only table, very busy with a grease-pot and a soft rag removing the paint from her face. She turned to smile at Swetenham and held out her hand to Dick when he was introduced with a disarming air of absolute frankness. [Pg 159]

"You catch me not looking my best," she acknowledged; "just take a seat, dears; I'll be as beautiful as ever in a jiffy."

Joan—Dick's eyes found her at once—was standing in a corner of the room behind the door. She had changed into a blouse and skirt, but the change had evidently only just been completed. The fluffy flounces of her dancing skirt lay on the ground beside her and the make-up was still on her face. At this close range it gave her eyes a curiously beautiful appearance—the heavy lashes, the dark-smudged shadows, adding to their size and brilliancy. She did not come forward to greet the two men, but she lifted those strange eyes and returned Dick's glance with a stare in which defiance and a rather hurt self-consciousness were oddly mixed.

The tumult of anger and regret which had surged up in his heart as he had watched her dance died away as he looked at her; pity, and an intense desire to shield her, took its place. He moved forward impulsively, and Fanny, noticing the movement, turned with a little laugh.

"I had forgotten," she said; "my manners are perfectly scandalous. Joan, come out of your corner and be introduced. Mr. Swetenham is going to take us to supper at the 'Grand,' so he has just confided into my shell-like ear. I can do with a bit of supper, can't you?"

Joan dragged her eyes away from Dick. The painted lashes lay like stiff threads of black against her cheeks. "I don't think I will come," she answered. "I am tired to-night, Fanny, and I shan't be amusing."

She turned away and reached up for her hat, which hung on a peg just above her head. "I think I would rather go straight home," she added.

Fanny sprang to her feet and caught at her companion with impulsive hands, dragging her into the centre of the room. [Pg 160]

"Nonsense," she said, "you want cheering up far more than I do. Here, gentlemen," she went on, "you perceive a young lady suffering from an attack of the blues. If you will wait two minutes I'll make her face respectable—doesn't do to shock Sevenoaks—and we will all go to supper. Meanwhile let me introduce you—Miss Rutherford, known in the company as Sylvia Leicester, the some dancer of the Brown show."

"If Miss Rutherford does not feel up to supper," Dick suggested—he wanted, if possible, to help the girl out of her difficulty; he realized that she did not want to come—"let us make it another night, or perhaps you could all come to lunch with me to-morrow?"

Again Joan had lifted her eyes and was watching him, but now the defiance was uppermost in her mind. His face, to begin with, had worried her; the faint hint of having seen him somewhere before had been perplexing. She always disliked the way Fanny would welcome the most promiscuous acquaintances in their joint dressing-room at all times. She thought now that it must have been contempt which she had read in this man's eyes, and apart from their attraction—for in an indefinite way they had attracted her—the idea spurred her to instant rebellion.

"No, let's go to supper," she exclaimed; "Fanny is quite right, I do want to be cheered up. Let's eat, drink, and be merry."

She turned rather feverishly and started rubbing the make-up off her face with Fanny's rag. The other girl, meanwhile, slipped behind a curtain which hung across one side of the room and finished her dressing, carrying on an animated conversation with Swetenham all the time.

Dick drew a little closer to Joan. "Why do you come?" he asked. "You know you hate it and us."

Under the vanishing paint the colour flamed to Joan's face and died away-again. "Because I want to," she said; "and as for hating—you are wrong there; I don't hate anything or anyone, except, perhaps, myself." The last words were so low he hardly heard them. [Pg 161]

They strolled across to the Grand Hotel; it was Fanny's suggestion that they should not bother with a cab. She walked between the two men, a hand on each of them. Joan walked the further side of Swetenham, and Dick had no chance of seeing her even, but he knew that she was very silent, and, he could gather, depressed. At supper, which they had served in a little private room, and over the champagne, she won back to a certain hilarity of spirit. Swetenham was entirely immersed in amusing and being amused by Fanny, and Joan set herself—Dick fancied it was deliberately—to talk and laugh. It was almost as if she were afraid of any silence that might fall between them. He did not help her very much; he was content to watch her. Absurd as it may seem, he knew himself to be almost happy because she was so near him, because the fancied dream of the last two years had come to sudden reality. The other feelings, the disgust and disappointment which had lain behind their first meeting, were for the time being forgotten. Now and again he met her eyes and felt, from the odd pulse of happiness that leapt in his heart, that his long search was over. So triumphantly does love rise over the obstacles of common sense and worldly knowledge—love, which takes no count of time, degrees, or place.

He had her to himself on the way home, for Fanny had elected to go for a spin in Swetenham's side-car, suggesting that Dick and Joan should go home and wait up for them.

"We shan't be long," Swetenham assured Dick, remembering too late his promise to take the other man home, "and it is all right waiting there, they have got a sitting-room."

So Joan and Dick walked home through the silent streets and all pretence of gaiety fell away from Joan. She walked without speaking, head held very high, moving beside him, her face scarce discernible under the shadow of her hat. It was not to be believed that she was quite conscious of all she meant to this man; but she could not fail to know that he was attracted to her, she could not help feeling the warmth with which his thoughts surrounded her. And how does Love come to a woman? Not on the same quick-rushing wings which carry men's desires forward. Love creeps in more assiduously to a woman's thoughts. He brings with him first a sense of shyness, a rather wistful longing to be more worthy of his homage. Unconsciously Joan struggled with this intrusion into her life. The man had nice eyes, but she resented the tumult they roused in her. Why was he not content to find in her just a momentary amusement, why did his eyes wake this vague, uncomfortable feeling of shame in her heart; shame against herself and her surroundings? [Pg 162]

At the door of the lodgings she turned to him; for the first time he could see her face, lit up by a neighbouring lamp.

"Do you want to come in?" she asked, her voice hesitated on the words. "I do not want to ask you," her eyes said as plainly as possible.

"No," he answered, "I would much rather you did not ask me to." Then suddenly he smiled at her. "We are going to be friends," he said. "I have a feeling that I have been looking for you for years; I am not going to let you go, once found."

He said the words so very earnestly, there was no hint of mockery in them, it could not seem that he was laughing at her. She put her hand into the one he held out.

"Well, friends," she said; an odd note of hesitation sounded in her voice. [Pg 163]

CHAPTER XXI

**"Love can tell, and Love alone,
Whence the million stars were strewn;
Why each atom knows its own;
How, in spite of woe and death,
Gay is life, and sweet is breath."**

R. BRIDGES.

Dick walked home. It was a good long tramp, but he was glad of the exercise and the opportunity it gave him to arrange his thoughts into some sort of order. He had spoken to Joan, carried away by the moment, as they stood to say good-night, impelled to frankness by the appeal of her eyes.

Now, slowly, reason gathered all its forces together to argue against his inclination. It would be wiser to break his half-made promise to the girl, and stay out of her life altogether. Immeasurable difficulties lay in the way of his marrying her. There was the child, her present position, his people's feelings and his own dismay as he had watched her dancing on the stage and seen her smiling and radiant from the applause it awoke. He had built his dreams on a five minutes' memory and for two years the girl's eyes had haunted him, but none the less it was surely rather absurd. Even love, strong, mysterious power as it is, can be suppressed and killed if a man really puts his mind to it.

At this moment, though of course Dick was not aware of the psychological happening, Love raised a defiant head amid the whirl of his thoughts and laughed at him—laughed deliberately, the sound echoing with all the old joy of the world, and Dick fell to thinking about Joan again. Her eyes, the way she walked, the undercurrent of sadness that had lain behind her gaiety. How good it would be to take her away from all the drabness of her present life and to bring real laughter, real happiness to her lips and eyes!

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"I will marry her," he decided stormily, as he turned in to the drive of the house. "Why have I been arguing about it all this time? It is what I had made up my mind to do two years ago. I will marry her."

And again Love laughed, filling his heart with an indefinable glow of gladness.

His night mood stayed with him the next morning and started him singing most riotously in his bath. Mabel heard him and smiled to herself. It was good to listen, to him and know him so cheerful; whatever it was that had disturbed him the night before had evidently vanished this morning.

After breakfast, as was always her custom in summer, she took little Dickie out on to the lawn to sit under the big wide trees that threw so grateful a shade across the green. Big Dick joined them there with his pipe and he sat beside them in silence. It was very pleasant in the garden with the bluest of blue skies overhead and the baby chuckling and crowing in the very first rapture of life on the grass at their feet. Presently, however, a stern nurse descended on the scene and laughter was changed to tears for one short minute before the young gentleman, protesting but half-heartedly, was removed. Then Dick turned to Mabel.

"I am going in to Sevenoaks again," he announced, "and shall probably spend the day there. Would you like me to explain myself, Mabel?"

"Why, yes, if you care to," she answered, "and if there is anything to explain."

Dick nodded in apparent triumph. "Yes," he said, "there is something to explain all right, Mabel." He smiled at her with his eyes. "I have got a secret, I'll give you three guesses to reach it."

"No," Mabel spoke quickly, "I would rather you told me, Dick. Do you remember how once before I tried to dash in on your secret and how you shut me out. When it is ready to tell, I thought then, he will tell it me."

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"Well, it is ready now," Dick said. "In a way it is the same old secret. I was shy of it in those days, Mabel, but last night it dawned on me that it was the only thing worth having in the world. I am in love, insanely and ridiculously. Do you know, if you asked me, I should tell you with the most prompt conceit that to-day is a beautiful, gorgeously fine day just because I woke up to it knowing that I was in love."

A spasm of half-formed jealousy snatched at Mabel's heart. She had always wanted Dick to fall in love and marry some nice girl, yet the reality was a little disturbing.

"Dick," she exclaimed, "and you never told me, you never said a word about it in your letters."

"I could not," he answered, "because in a way it only happened last night. Wait," he put his hand on her knee because she seemed to be going to say something. "Let me explain it first and then do your bit of arguing, for I know you are going to argue. You spoke just now about that other talk we once had before your marriage; do you remember what you said to me then? 'Did you think I should not know when you fell in love?' You had guessed the secret in my heart, Mabel, almost before I knew it myself." He leant forward, she noticed that suddenly his face flushed a very warm red. "Last night I saw her again; she was the dancer, you may have noticed her yourself. That was why I stayed behind. I wanted to put myself to the test, I wanted to meet her again."

He sat up straight and looked at her; she could see that some strong emotion was making it very difficult for him to speak.

"It is not any use trying to explain love, is it?" he asked. "I only know that I have always loved her, that I shall love her to the end."

Mabel sat stiffly silent. She could not meet his eyes. She was thinking of all the scandal which had leapt to life round Joan's name once the Rutherfords had left the village. She was remembering how last night Tom had said: "That little dancer girl is hot stuff."

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"Dick," she forced herself to speak presently, "I have got to tell you, though it hurts and you will hate me for doing it, but this girl is not the kind of person you can ever marry, Dick. It is a kind of infatuation"—she struggled to make her meaning clear without using cruel words—"if you knew

the truth about her, if—"

He stopped her quickly. "I know," he answered, "I have always known."

She turned to face him. "You knew," she gasped, "about the child?"

"Yes," he nodded, his eyes were very steady as they met hers. "That day when I was called in to see her, do you remember, she spoke out before her aunt and myself. She told us she was like Bridget Rendle. 'I am going to have a baby,' she said, 'but I am not ashamed or afraid. I have done nothing to be ashamed of.' Do you know how sometimes," he went on slowly, "you can see straight into a person's soul through their eyes. Well, I saw into hers that day and, before God, Mabel, it was white and innocent as a child's. I did not understand at the time, I have not understood since, what brought her to that cross way in her life, but nothing will alter my opinion. Some day I hope she will explain things, I am content to wait for that."

What could she find to say to him? Her mind groped through a nightmare of horror. Dick's happiness meant so much to her, she had planned and thought of it ever since she could remember.

"Love is sometimes blind," she whispered at last. "Oh, my dear, don't throw away your life on a dream."

"My love has wide-open eyes," he answered, "and nothing weighs in the balance against it."

"Don't tell the others, Dick," she pleaded on their way back to the house; "leave it a little longer, think it out more carefully." [Pg 167]

"Very well," he agreed, "and for that matter, Mabel, there is as yet nothing to tell. I only let you into my secret because, well, you are you, and I want you to meet her. You will be able to judge then for yourself better than you can from all my ravings."

She did not answer his suggestion then, but later on, as he was getting into the car to drive to Sevenoaks, she ran down the steps to him.

"Dick," she said quickly, "ask her to come out to tea some day and bring one of the other girls if she likes. Tom is never in to tea; there will just be mother and me."

"Bless you," he answered; his eyes beamed at her. "What a brick you are, Mabel, I knew you would turn up trumps about it."

It took him some time to persuade Joan to accept the proffered invitation. It took her, for one thing, too near her old home, and for another she was more than a little disturbed by all Fanny's remarks on the subject. Fanny had come back from her drive with Swetenham full of exciting information to give Joan about "the new victim," as she would call Dick.

"Do you know, honey," she confided, waking Joan out of a well simulated slumber, "I believe he is the same young man as was so taken with you that evening in the Strand. You remember the day we spent in town? It is love at first sight, that is what it is. Young Sockie"—that was her name for Swetenham, invented because of his gorgeous socks—"tells me he has never seen a chap so bowled over as the new victim was by your dancing, and he asked to be brought round and introduced. Did you catch him staring at you all through the dinner, and, honey, did he try to kiss you when he brought you home?"

"Of course not," Joan remonstrated; "I wish you would stop talking nonsense and get into bed. It is awfully late and I was asleep." [Pg 168]

"That is only another sign then," Fanny went on, quite impervious to the other's requests. "You take it from me, honey, if a man falls really in love he is shy of kissing you. Thinks it is kind of irreverent to begin with. You mark my words, he will be round again to-morrow. Honey," she had a final shot at Joan's peace of mind just before she fell asleep, "if you play your cards well, that man will marry you, he is just the kind that does."

Joan lay thinking of Fanny's remarks long after the other had fallen asleep. She was a little annoyed to find how much impression the man had made on her; the idea was alarming to one who fancied herself as immune as she did from any such attraction. But until Fanny had burst in she had been pleased enough with the vague thoughts which his eyes had waked to life. If you took the dream down and analysed it as Fanny had rather ruthlessly done, it became untenable. Probably this man only thought of her as Landon had thought of her; she was not content to burn her fingers in the same fire.

Short of being extremely disagreeable, however, she could not avoid going out to lunch with him the next day, as Fanny had already accepted the invitation, and once with him, it was impossible not to be friends with Dick, he set himself so assiduously to please her. He did not make love to her; Fanny would have said he just loved her. There is delicate distinction between the two, and instinctively Joan grew to feel at her ease with him; when they laughed, which they did very often, their laughter had won back to the glad mirth of children.

Fanny watched over the romance with motherly eyes. She had, in fact, set her heart upon Joan marrying the young man. He came to the theatre every evening, but it was not until the sixth day of their acquaintance that Fanny was able to arrange for him to spend the afternoon alone with Joan. She had tried often enough before, but Joan had been too wary. On this particular [Pg 169]

afternoon, half way through lunch and after the three of them had just arranged to go out into the country for tea, Fanny suddenly discovered that she had most faithfully promised to go for a drive that afternoon in young Swetenham's side-car.

"I am so awfully sorry," she smiled at them sweetly, "but it doesn't really matter; you two will be just as happy without me."

"We could put it off and go to-morrow," suggested Joan quickly.

"We can go to-morrow too," Dick argued, and Fanny laughed at him.

"Don't disappoint him, honey, it's a shame," she said with unblushing effrontery, "and if it is a chaperon you are wanting, why, Sockie and I will meet you out there."

So it was arranged, and Dick and Joan started off alone. They were to drive out to a farmhouse that Swetenham knew of, where you got the most delicious jam for tea. Joan was a little shy of Dick to begin with, sitting beside him tongue-tied, and never letting her eyes meet his. From time to time, when he was busy with the steering, she would steal a glance at him from under her lashes. His face gave her a great sense of security and trust, but at times her memory still struggled with the thought that she had met him somewhere before.

Dick, turning suddenly, caught her looking at him, and for a second his eyes spoke a message which caused both their hearts to stand still.

"Were you really afraid of coming out with me alone?" he asked abruptly; he had perhaps been a little hurt by the suggestion.

"No, of course not," Joan answered; she hoped he did not notice how curiously shaken the moment had left her. "Only I thought it would probably be more lively if we waited till we could take Fanny with us. I am sometimes smitten with such awful blanks in my conversation."

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"One does not always need to talk," he said; "it is supposed to be one of the tests of friendship when you can stay silent and not be bored. Well, we are friends, aren't we?"

"I suppose so," Joan agreed; "at least you have been very kind to us and we do all the things you ask us to."

"Doesn't it amount to more than that?" Dick asked; his eyes were busy with the road in front of him. "I had hoped you would let me give you advice and talk to you like a father and all that sort of thing." His face was perfectly serious and she could hear the earnestness behind his chaff.

"What were you going to advise me about?" she asked.

"Well, it is this theatre game." Dick plunged in boldly once the subject had been started. "You don't like it, you know, and you aren't a bit suited to it. Sometimes when I see you dance and hear the people clapping you I could go out and say things—really nasty things."

"You don't like it?" she said. "I have tried to do other things too," she went on quickly, "but you know I am not awfully much good at anything. When I first started in London, it is two years ago now, I used to boast about having put my hand to the plough. I used to say I wouldn't turn back from my own particular furrow, however dull and ugly it was. But I haven't been very much use at it, I have failed over and over again."

"There are failures and failures," he answered. "There was a book I read once, I don't remember its name or much about it, but there was a sentence in it that stuck in my mind: 'Real courage, means courage to stand up against the shocks of life—sorrow and pain and separation, and still have the force left to make of the remainder something fine and gay and brave.' I think you have still got that sort of courage left."

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"No," whispered Joan. She looked away from him, for her eyes were miserably full of tears. "I haven't even got that left."

They had tea, the four of them, for strange to tell Fanny did deem it expedient to keep her promise, and it was after tea that Dick first mooted the idea of their coming out to tea with his people the next day.

Fanny was prompt in her acceptance. "Of course we'll come, won't we, honey," she said. "My new muslin will just come in for it."

"It won't be a party," Dick explained, his eyes were on Joan, "just the mother and my sister. Not very lively I am afraid, still it is a pretty place and I'll drive you both ways."

He came to the theatre again that night. Fanny pointed him out to Joan in a little aside as she stood beside her in the wings, but Joan had already seen him for herself. She could put no heart into her dancing that night, and she ran off the stage quickly when the music ceased, not waiting to take her applause.

"Feeling ill to-night?" Daddy Brown asked her. He eyed her at the same time somewhat sternly; he disapproved of signs of weakness in any of the company.

"I suppose I am tired," Joan answered. Only her own heart knew that it was because a certain couple of blue eyes had shown her that they wished she would not dance. "I am getting into a ridiculous state," she argued to herself; "why should it matter to me what he thinks? It must not,

it must not."

"You did not dance at all well to-night, honey," Fanny added her meed of blame as the two of them were undressing for the night. "But there, I know what is wrong with you. You are in love, bless your heart, and so is he. Never took his eyes off you while you were dancing, my dear—I watched him."

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The rather hurt feeling in Joan's heart burst into sudden fire. "I am not in love," she said, "and neither is he. Men do not fall in love with girls like us, and if you say another word about it, Fanny, I won't go out to tea to-morrow; I won't, I won't!"

Fanny could only shrug her shoulders. The words "girls like us" rather flicked at her pride. Later on, however, when they were both in bed and the room in darkness save for the light thrown across the shadows by the street lamp outside, she called softly across to Joan:

"You are wrong, honey," she said, "about men and love. They do fall in love with us, sometimes, bless them, even though we aren't worth it. And anyway, you are different, why shouldn't he love you?"

Joan made no answer, only when she fell asleep at last it was against a little damp patch of pillow and the lashes that lay along her cheeks were weighed down by tears.

CHAPTER XXII

"A man who has faith must be prepared not only to be a martyr, but to be a fool."

C. CHESTERTON.

It did not need much intuition on Mrs. Grant's part to know herself suspicious of Dick's behaviour. She listened to Mabel's information about the two young ladies he was bringing to tea with her eyes lowered. Mabel had not volunteered the information till Mrs. Grant had noticed that there were two extra cups provided for tea. They always had tea out under the trees if it was fine enough, so there had been nothing surprising in that, but Mrs. Grant's eyes had spotted the extra cups even while they stayed piled up one within the other in the shade of the silver tea-pot.

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"Two girls to tea," she commented; "who are they, Mabel?"

"Well, I really don't know," Mabel admitted, nobly untruthful, out of a desire not to prejudice Mrs. Grant from the beginning. "I fancy Dick met them at Sevenoaks, anyway, he was having lunch with them yesterday."

"And dinner every day this week," supplemented Mrs. Grant. "Did he meet them on his travels?"

"He did not say so," Mabel answered, "only just that he was seeing a good deal of them at Sevenoaks, and I thought it would be nice to ask them out here."

"Mabel," said Mrs. Grant, with intense seriousness; she lifted her eyes from her work and fixed them on her daughter, "do you not think it is very probable that Dick has become entangled? I have even wondered lately whether he may not be secretly married to some awful woman."

"Dear mother," laughed Mabel—though the first part of the sentence rather hurt her, it was the truth—"why secretly married? What has Dick done to deserve such a suspicion?"

"His manner has been peculiar ever since the first night he came home," Mrs. Grant explained, "and he has an uneasy way of trying not to be left with me alone. The other day I thought of going to see him very early in the morning when I happened to be unable to sleep, and, Mabel, his door was locked!"

"If you had knocked he would probably have opened it," Mabel suggested. "It is hardly likely that he keeps his wife concealed upstairs, is it?"

"You may laugh," Mrs. Grant spoke with an expression of hurt pride on her countenance, "but surely a mother can see things in her son which other people miss. Dick is in love, and not nicely in love, or he would not be so shy about it."

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Further discussion was prevented, for at this point the motor, bringing Dick and his guests, came round the sweep of the drive and drew up at the front door. Mabel went across the lawn to meet them. She had schooled herself to this meeting for Dick's sake, and to please him; she could not, however, pretend to any pleasure in the prospect. It was only natural that she should view Joan with distrust. Dick had allowed himself to become entangled; all unknowingly Mother had expressed the matter in a nutshell.

She picked out Joan as being the girl at once; her eyes sped past Fanny's muslin-clad figure even as she was greeting her, and rested on the other girl's face. Pale, for Joan was very nervous of this afternoon, wide-eyed, the soft brown hair tucked away under the small, round-shaped hat. She was pretty and very young-looking. Mabel, seeing her, and remembering all the old stories in

connection with her, was suddenly sorry for her very childishness. Then she hardened her heart; the innocence must at least be assumed, and the girl—Mabel had made up her mind as to that—should not win Dick as a husband without some effort being made to prevent her.

Because of this sense of antagonism between them, for Joan had not missed the swift glance, the cold hardening of her hostess' face, it was a relief to have Fanny between them. Fanny was talking very hard and fast, it was quite unnecessary for anyone else to say anything.

"My," she gasped, standing and staring round her with frank approval, "you have a beautiful place here. Dr. Grant has been telling us about it till we were mad to see it. Joan and I live in London; there is not much in the way of trees round our place, nothing but houses, and dirty pavements and motor-buses. I always say"—she took Mabel into her confidence with perfect friendliness—"that there is nothing so disagreeable in this world as a dirty pavement; don't you agree with me?"

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"The country is nicer than town, certainly," Mabel answered. "We are having tea over there under the trees; will you come straight across, or would you like to go in and take off your motor-veils?"

"We will do nicely as we are," Fanny did all the talking for the two of them; Joan so far had not opened her lips. "It is such a little drive from Sevenoaks, and I am just dying for tea."

Mabel led the way across the lawn, with Fanny chattering volubly beside her, and Dick followed with Joan.

"The sister is a dear," he tried to tell her on the way across, for in some way he suddenly felt the tension which had fallen between the two women; "only she is most awfully shy. She is one of those people who take a lot of knowing."

"And I am one of the people that she doesn't want to know," Joan answered. She was angry with herself for having come. A feeling of having lost caste, of being a stranger within these other people's friendship, possessed her. It set Dick's kindness, his evident attraction on a plane of patronage, and brought her to a sullen mood of despair. Why had she ventured back on to the borderline of this life that had once been hers? Mabel's cold, extreme politeness seemed to push her further and further beyond the pale.

Tea under these circumstances would have been a trying meal if it had not been for Fanny. Fanny had dressed with great care for this party, and she had also made many mental resolutions to "mind what she was saying." Her harshest critic could not have said that she had not made herself look pretty; it was only Joan's hurt eyes that could discover the jarring note everywhere in the carefully-thought-out costume. And Fanny realized that Joan, for some reason or other, was suffering from an attack of the sulks. She plunged because of it more and more recklessly into conversation. Fanny always felt that silence was a thing to be avoided at all costs.

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"The War will make a lot of difference to us," she attempted finally, all preceding efforts having fallen a little flat. "Daddy Brown says, if there is war between Germany and England, there won't be any Spring tours."

"But of course there will not be War," Mrs. Grant put in with great precision; "the idea is impossible nowadays. And may I ask what a Spring tour is?"

"Tom says the city is getting very uneasy," Mabel plunged into the breach. "It does seem an absurd idea, but of course Germany has been aching to fight us for years."

"Horrors, the Germans, don't you think?" chipped in Fanny; "they do eat so nastily."

"No doubt you meet a great many foreigners, travelling about as you do," Mrs. Grant agreed politely.

"Do you know this part of the country at all?" Mabel questioned Joan, then flushed herself at the absurdity of the question; "I suppose not, if you live most of your time in London."

Joan lifted hard eyes. "I lived down here as a child," she said stiffly.

"And in London"—Mabel was doing her best to be friendly—"have you nice rooms? Dick tells me you live all alone; I mean that your home is not there."

"I live in an attic," Joan answered again, "and I have no home."

"Your son is ever so much too fond of the theatre," Fanny's voice broke across their monosyllabic conversation. "He is there every night, Mrs. Grant."

"And do you also go to the theatre every night?" Joan heard the petrified astonishment in Mrs. Grant's tone and caught the agitated glance which Mabel directed to Dick. The misery in her woke to sharp temper.

"Fanny has let the cat out of the bag," she said, leaning forward and speaking directly to Mrs. Grant. "But I am afraid it is unpleasantly true. We are on the stage, you know; Dr. Grant ought to have warned you; it was hardly fair to let you meet us without telling you."

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A pained silence fell on the party; Mrs. Grant's face was a perfect study; Dick's had flushed dull red. Mabel stirred uneasily and made an attempt to gather her diplomacy about her.

"It was not a case of warning us," she began; "you forget that we saw you ourselves the other night when you played *The Merry Widow*. Won't you have some more tea, Miss Leicester?"—Joan had been introduced to them under that name.

A great nervousness had descended upon Fanny. She had talked a great deal too much, she knew, and probably Joan was furiously angry with her. But beyond that was the knowledge that she had—as she would have expressed it herself—upset Joan's apple-cart. Real contrition shone in the nervous smile she directed at Mrs. Grant.

"I'm that sorry," she said, "if I have said anything that annoyed you; but you mustn't mix me up with Joan; she is quite different. I——"

"Fanny!" Joan interrupted the jumbled explanation. "You have nothing to apologize for. We eat and look very much like ordinary people, don't we?"—she stared at Mabel as she spoke—"it is only just our manners, and morals that are a trifle peculiar. If you are ready, Fanny, I think we had better be getting back."

Dick stood up abruptly; he did not meet Mabel's eyes, but she could see that his face was very white and angry.

"I am driving you back," he said, "if you do not mind waiting here I will fetch the motor round."

He took the girl's side straight away without hesitation. Mabel caught her breath on the bitter words that rose to her lips. Joan's outburst had been an extraordinary breach of good manners; nothing that had happened could in any way excuse or condone it. Yet it was not Joan that Dick was angry with, but herself.

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"I very much regret you should feel as you do," she said to Joan, after Dick had gone off to fetch the motor; "your friend and yourself were my guests; we none of us had the slightest desire to be rude to you."

"Oh, no," flamed Joan in answer; "you did not want to be rude, you just wanted to make us understand quite plainly the difference that lay between us. And you have made us realize it, and it is I that have been rude. Come along, Fanny"—the motor could be seen coming along the drive; she swept to her feet—"let us go without talking any more about it."

She turned, saying no good-byes, and walked away from them. Fanny hesitated a moment, her eyes held a pathetic appeal and there were tears near the surface. She felt she had ruined Joan's chances of a suitable marriage.

"I am sorry," she whispered; "it all began beautifully, and—Joan isn't like me," she hurried out again, "she is proud and—well, you would understand"—she appealed to Mabel—"for you are proud, too—if you had to earn your money as she has to."

Then she turned and hurried after her retreating companion. Something that she had said stayed, however, like a little pin-prick, in Mabel's thoughts. It brought her to a sudden realization of Joan's feelings and regret that she had not succeeded in being nicer to the girl.

"If Dick is married to either of those two young ladies," said Mrs. Grant heavily, "he is ruined already." She rose majestically and gathered up her work. "I have been thoroughly upset," she announced, "and must go and lie down. Perhaps when Dick comes back you will point out to him that some explanation is necessary to me for the extraordinary scene I have just been through. I shall be ready to see him in an hour."

Fanny wept a few tears on the drive home. It had all been her fault, she explained between sniffs to Joan.

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"And I promised not to talk too much," she gulped. "Oh, honey, don't let it stand between him and you"—she nodded at Dick's back, for he was occupying the front seat alone—"I shall never forgive myself if you do."

"Don't fuss, Fanny," Joan answered; she was beginning to feel thoroughly ashamed of her ill-mannered outburst. "And for goodness' sake don't cry. You have not brought anything more between us than has always been there."

"Oh, I wish we hadn't gone," wailed Fanny. "He wants to marry you, Joan; they always do if they introduce their mothers to you."

For no reason whatsoever, for she had not thought of him for months, a memory of Gilbert flashed into Joan's mind. Her eyes were fixed on the back of Dick's head, and it was strange—the feeling that surged over her as she brought these, the two men in her life, before her mind's eye. Perhaps it was only at that very moment that she realized her love for Dick; realized it and fought against it in the same breath. She had known him so short a time; he had been kind to her; but what, after all, did that amount to? When the company left Sevenoaks he would probably never see her or think of her again. Does one build love from so fleeting a fancy?

None the less the thought brought her to a mood of gentleness and she could not bear to let him go away thinking her still hurt and angry. As he helped her out of the car she smiled at him.

"I am sorry that I lost my temper and was rude," she said. Fanny had fled indoors and left them tactfully alone. "I don't know what you must think of me." Her eyes fell away from his, he saw the slow red creeping into her cheeks.

"Don't," he spoke quickly, he was for the moment feeling very vindictive against Mabel. "When you apologize you make it ten times worse. It was not your fault the least little bit in the world."

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"But it was," she answered; she looked up at him. "If you must have the honest truth, I was jealous from the moment I got out there. And jealousy hurts sometimes, you know, especially when it is mixed up with memories of something you once had and have lost for ever."

"That is nonsense," Dick said. It was in his heart to propose there and then, but he held it back. "I meant you to enjoy yourself, I hoped you would like Mabel, and you did not—thanks to her own amiability. Am I forgiven?"

"We forgive each other," she answered; she put her hand into his, "and good-night, if not good-bye. To-morrow is our last performance, you know, we leave the next day."

"And even with that it is not good-bye," he told her. "I shall be at the theatre to-morrow night."

Mrs. Grant and Dick had one very stormy and decided interview. That is to say, Mrs. Grant stormed and wept, Dick merely stated quite quietly and very definitely that he intended to follow Joan to London and that he was going to do his best to make her marry him.

"You do not mind how much you break my heart," Mrs. Grant sobbed, "your mother is of no consequence to you. My years of love and devotion to you when you were a baby count for nothing. You throw them all aside for this impossible, outrageous girl."

"Nothing is to be gained by calling her names," Dick answered, "and there is no reason why your heart should break, Mother. When you see her again—"

"Never," interrupted Mrs. Grant dramatically, "never. Even as your wife I shall always refuse to meet her."

"You must do as you please about that," Dick answered, and turned and went from the room.

Upstairs he met Mabel just coming out of the nursery and would have passed her without speaking, but that she put out a hand to stop him.

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"Dick," she said, "you are awfully angry with me, I know, and I realize that more or less it was my fault. But I wanted and I still want to be friends with her. You know how sometimes, even against one's will, one stiffens up and cannot talk."

"I know you never were any use at dissembling," he answered. "I had hoped you might like her, but you evidently did not do that."

"I do not think I gave myself a chance," Mabel spoke slowly. "I had been arguing against her in my own mind ever since you told me about her. You see I am being truthful, Dick. It was just because one half of me wanted to like her and the other half did not, that the result was so disastrous."

Dick laughed. "Disastrous just about describes it," he admitted. "I am going to marry her, Mabel, though mother does threaten to break her heart."

"I know," Mabel nodded. "I knew from the very first moment I saw your eyes when they looked at her. Perhaps that was what made the unpleasant side of me so frigid. Will you give me her address, Dick, in London? Next week, when I am up there with Tom, I will call and make it up with her. If I go all alone I shall be able to explain things."

"And what about mother's broken heart?" Dick questioned.

Mabel shook her head. "It won't break," she said. "As soon as you are married she will start thinking that she arranged the match and saying what a good one it is."

Again Dick laughed, but there was more lightness in the sound now. He put his two hands on her shoulders and looked down at her.

"You are a good sort, Mabel," he said; "this afternoon I thought you were the most horrible sister a man could have, and that just shows how little even I know you."

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"No," she answered; her eyes held a shadow of pain in them. "It is not that, it is just that a man in love is sometimes blind to everything and everybody excepting the woman he is in love with. She is a lucky girl, Dick, I nope she realizes how lucky."

CHAPTER XXIII

**"But through all the joy I knew—I only—
How the hostel of my heart lay bare and cold,
Silent of its music, and how lonely!
Never, though you crown me with your gold.
Shall I find that little chamber as of old!"**

F. BANNERMAN.

Brown called an early rehearsal next morning. They were to play *The Waltz Dream* as their last performance, for on leaving Sevenoaks the company was to break up, and just at the very last moment, before the curtain had come down on the previous night's performance, Grace Binning—the girl who usually played the part of Franzi—had fallen down and sprained her ankle. Who was to play her part? Fanny proposed Joan for the vacant place, but Brown was dubious, and Joan herself not at all anxious for the honour. She had more or less understudied the part, every member of the chorus took it in turn to understudy; but the question was whether it would not be better if Fanny's understudy took the part of the Princess and Fanny played Franzi. It was a character which she had often scored it. Against this had to be set the fact that Fanny's voice was needed for songs which the Princess had to sing, and that Franzi had very little singing to do. What she did have could be very largely cut.

Anyway the whole company assembled at 10.30, and Brown put them through their paces. Finally he decided on Joan; she had already achieved popularity by her dancing, the audience would be kind to her. If she saved up her voice for her duet with Strachan and her one little solo at the fall of the curtain, Brown thought she might be heard beyond the footlights.

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"Now look slippy," he ordered, "only the principals need stay. We will just run through the thing, Miss Leicester, and see if you know what to do."

Joan found herself living out the part of Franzi as she rehearsed. It seemed somehow to fit into her own feelings.

"Now love has come to me, I pray,
That while I have the chance to,
I still may have the heart to play
A tune that you can dance to."

Franzi's one brief night of love which shone out, showing all the world golden, and then the little singer creeping back into the shadows with a broken heart but gay words on her lips.

"I still may have the heart to play
A tune that you can dance to."

Brown thought as he watched her that she showed promise as an actress. Why had he not noticed it before. He meditated a proposal by which she should be persuaded to join the company again when it started out on its Spring tour. Fanny had told him that Joan was tired of the life and meant to go back to office work, but if she had talent, that was of course absurd. Perhaps he had not done enough to encourage her. To-morrow he would have a good long talk with her and point out to her just how things stood.

Fanny, too, was impressed by Joan's powers. "You act as if you really meant it, honey," she said. "You make me want to cry in that last bit where Franzi goes off and leaves me, a bloated aristocrat on the throne, with my erring husband beside me. You make me think you feel it."

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"Perhaps I do," Joan answered; "perhaps I am going back alone."

"But why," Fanny cried out; she ran to Joan and threw her arms round the other girl, they were in the dressing-room making up for the evening performance. "Why, honey? He is ready to go with you."

"And the Prince was ready to go with Franzi," Joan answered, "but she would not take him, not back into her land of shadows. Oh, Fanny, you are a dear, romantic soul, but you don't understand. Once, long ago when I was young, doesn't that sound romantic, there were two paths open to me and I chose the one which has to be travelled alone. If I dragged him on to it now it would only hurt him. You would not want to hurt something you loved," her voice dropped to a whisper, "would you?"

"No," Fanny admitted. She had drawn a little back and was watching Joan with wide eyes. "But ——" she broke off abruptly. "I haven't any right to ask," she said, "but do you mean that there is something which you have done that you would be ashamed to tell him."

"Not exactly ashamed," Joan answered, "it would hurt him to know, that is all. I came to London two years ago because I was going to have a baby. It was never born, because I was in an accident a few months before it should have come."

"But why tell him, why tell him?" Fanny clamoured. "Men have lots of secrets in their lives which they don't tell to good women, why must they want to know all about our pasts. I have always thought I should tell a man just exactly as much as I wanted to and not a whisper more. Honey," she drew close again and caught hold of Joan's hands, "it doesn't pay to tell them, the better they are the more they bring it up against you. If they don't say anything you can see it in their eyes. 'She has been bad once,' they say, 'she may always be bad again.'"

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"Yes," agreed Joan. "It does not pay to tell them, as you say. That is why I am going to go back to my own shadows alone, because if you love a person you cannot keep a secret from him."

"But it wouldn't exactly be a secret," Fanny pleaded, "it would just be something that it was no business of his to know."

Joan laughed. "Your philosophy of life, Fanny, is delightful. But if you don't hurry up with your dressing you will be late when the call boy comes."

She had the dressing-room to herself presently, for she did not have to appear until the second act, and as she sat there, reading over her part, the call boy put in his head with an impish grin.

"A gentleman left these for you, miss," he held out a large bunch of violets, "most particular you should get them before you went on, he was, and he will be round again after the show. Same gentleman," he winked at her, "as has been here most regular like since the third night."

"All right, Tommy, thank you," Joan answered. She held out her hands for the violets. They were very sweet-scented and heavy; she let them fall on the dressing-table, but after Tommy had vanished, whistling shrilly along the passage, she bent forward and buried her cheeks and lips in their fragrance. Her tears smarted in her eyes. This man had grown so suddenly dear to her that it hurt her almost more than she could bear to shut him out of her life.

When Fanny danced into the room presently it was to find her standing before the looking-glass, and against the soft blue of her waistbelt the violets showed up almost like a stain.

"He's there," Fanny told her, "third from centre in the second row. Young Swetenham is with him, but none of the women folk, praise be to heaven. Have you asked him to the supper afterwards?"

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"No," Joan admitted, "and, Fanny, if it could possibly be arranged and Brown would not be very hurt, would it matter if I did not come myself? I feel so much more like going home to bed."

"Doesn't do to mope," Fanny remonstrated. "Why not bring him along and have one good evening to finish?"

She studied the other's face. "There," she added impulsively, "if you don't feel like it you shan't be made to do it. Bother Daddy Brown and his feelings. You stay here quiet and let us all get away; we will be walking over to the 'Queen's,' you see, then you can slip out after we have gone and cut home on your own. I will tell Brown you are over-wrought after the show, it is quite natural you should be."

"Yes," admitted Joan; she hesitated on her way out, for the call boy had just run down the passage shouting her name, "and, Fanny, if he is there"—she met the other girl's eyes just for a moment—"take him along with you, will you? I—I am afraid of meeting him to-night."

Joan caught Dick's eyes just for a second before she began her first song, but she was careful not to look his way again. For the rest she moved and acted in a dream, not conscious of the theatre or the audience. Yet she knew she must be playing her part passably well, for Strachan whispered to her at the end of the duet: "You are doing splendidly." And Brown himself was waiting to greet her with congratulations when she ran into the wings for a moment.

The heat of the theatre killed her violets; they were crushed and dead at the end of the second act, yet when she changed for the third she picked them up and pinned them in again. Franzi's part in the third act is very brief. She is called in to give evidence of the Prince's infidelity, and instead she persuades the Princess that her husband has always loved her. Then, as the happy pair kiss one another at the back of the stage, Franzi turns to the audience, taking them, as it were, into her confidence:

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"Now love has come to me, I pray,
That while I have the chance to,
I still may have the heart to play
A tune that you can dance to."

Joan's voice broke on the last line, the little sob on which she caught her breath was more effective than any carefully-thought-out tragedy. With her eyes held by those other eyes in the audience she took the violets from her belt and held them, just for a second, to her lips. Then they fell from her hands and she stood, her last farewell said, straight and silent, while the house shouted over what they considered to be a very fine piece of acting. They would have liked to have had her back to bow to them after the fall of the curtain, but Joan would not go, and Fanny brought Brown to realize that if the girl were worried in any way she would probably wax hysterical.

"Fine acting," Brown kept repeating over and over again. Joan heard him vaguely. He was so impressed by it, however, that he sent for some champagne and insisted on their all drinking her health on the spot. There, however, he was content to leave it, and presently the company slipped away, one after the other, and Joan and Fanny were left alone.

"You really think you won't come on, honey?" Fanny tried a final argument before she followed the others. "He has sent up his card, you know; he is waiting downstairs for you."

"I simply can't, Fanny," Joan answered. "You go, like a dear, tell him anything you like; that I have gone on with Brown, or that I am coming later; only just persuade him to go away with you, that's all I ask."

Fanny looked at her reflectively, but she did not say anything further, gathering her cloak round her and going from the room.

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Joan waited till the place seemed silent and deserted save for the call boy's shrill whistle as he

strolled round, locking up the various dressing-rooms. She did not want him to see her as she groped her way back to the front of the stage and stooped to feel in the dark for her bunch of violets. It was quite ridiculous, but she could not leave them to lie there all night and be swept into the rubbish-basket in the morning. It took her a minute or two, but at last her hands closed on them and she stood up and moved into the light just as he came dashing along the passage.

"Hulloa," he called out to her, "you still here, miss? Everyone else has gone. You might have got shut in."

"I am just going myself," she answered; "and I knew you were here, Tommy; I heard you."

He followed her to the door and stood watching her along the street with curious eyes. To his mind it seemed strange that she should have stayed on after the others had gone. It betokened something that she wished to hide from prying eyes, and his were not satisfied till he saw a man's figure come forward out of the darkness and meet her.

"Thought as much," commented Tommy, the worldly-wise. "Gent of the violets, I suppose. Not likely they would be going to a crowded supper-party."

"I thought you were never coming," Dick was saying quickly to Joan. "Miss Bellairs told me you weren't feeling very well and were going straight home. I was just screwing up my courage to come upstairs and find out for myself what had happened to you."

So Fanny had failed her. Joan, guessing the other's purpose, smiled ruthfully.

"I had a headache," she admitted, "and I could not face a supper-party. I am so sorry you should have waited about, though; I had hoped you would go on with Fanny."

"Hoped!" said Dick. "Did you think I would?"

They had turned in the direction of the girls' lodgings and were walking very fast. Joan set the pace, also she was rather obstinately silent. Dick walked in silence, too, but for another reason. Clamorous words were in his heart; he did not wish to say them. Not yet, not here. Up in London, in her own place, when she would be free from the surroundings and trappings of theatrical life, he was going to ask her to marry him. Till then, and since his heart would carry on in this ridiculous way because she was near him, there was nothing for it but silence.

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At the door of the house, though, he found his tongue out of a desire to keep her with him a little longer.

"You played splendidly to-night," he said, holding her hand. "Were those my violets you kissed at the end?"

"Yes," she answered; the words were almost a whisper, she stood before him, eyes lowered, breathing a little fast as if afraid.

The spell of the night, the force of his own emotion shook Dick out of his self-control. The street was empty and dimly lit, the houses on either side shuttered and dark. The two of them were alone, and suddenly all his carefully thought-out plans went to the wind.

"Joan," he whispered. She was all desirable with her little fluttered breath, her eyes that fell from his, her soft, warm hand. "Joan!"

Joan lifted shut eyes and trembling lips to his; she made no protest as he drew her into his arms, his kiss lifted her for the time being into a heaven of great content. So they clung together for a breathing-space, then Joan woke out of her dream and shuddered away from him, hiding her face in her hands.

"Oh, don't," she begged, "please, please don't!"

Her words, the very piteousness of her appeal, remembering all her circumstances, hurt Dick. "My dear," he said, "don't you understand; have I made you afraid? I love you; I have always loved you. I was going to have waited to ask you to marry me until next week when I came to you in town. But to-night, because I love you, because you are going away to-morrow, I couldn't keep sensible any longer. And anyway, Joan, what does it matter?—to-day or to-morrow, the question will always be the same. I love you, will you marry me, dear? No, wait." He saw her movement to answer. "I don't really want you to say anything now, I would rather wait till we meet in town next week. You are not angry with me, are you, Joan? You are not afraid of my love?"

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But Joan could make no answer, only she turned from him and ran up the steps; the bunch of violets lay where she had dropped them when he caught her hands, but neither of them noticed it. He saw her face for a second against the lighted hall and a little to his dismay he could see that she was crying. Then she had gone and the door shut to behind her quickly.

Dick waited about for a little, but she made no sign, and finally he turned rather disconsolately away. One thought, however, was left to comfort him through the night, the memory of her soft, yielding hands, the glad surrender of her lips.

**"Ah, sweet, and we too, can we bring
One sigh back, bid one smile revive?
Can God restore one ruined thing,
Or he who slays our souls alive
Make dead things thrive?"**

A. C. SWINBURNE.

Early morning brought Joan a letter from Dick. She had hardly slept all night. Once she had got up, determined to write him; the truth would look more cold and formal in a letter, but her courage had failed her, and instead she had sat crouched over the table, her body shaken with a storm of tears. Then Fanny had come in, an after-supper Fanny, noisy and sentimental, and she had had to be helped to bed, coughing and explaining that "life was good if you only knew how to live it." Joan had crept back to her own bed once the other girl had fallen asleep, and she had lain with wide eyes watching the night turn from blackness to soft grey, from grey to clear, bright yellow. There were dark shadows round her eyes in the morning, and her face was white and strained-looking.

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"DEAR HEART," Dick had written:

"Is it cheek to begin a letter like that to you? Only after last night I seem to know that you love me and that is all that really matters. I am coming to 6, Montague Square, on Tuesday afternoon at five o'clock to get my answer. Doesn't that sound precise? I would like to come to-day, but I won't because I don't want to hurry you. Oh, dear heart, I love you!—I have loved you for longer than you know of just at present. That is one of the things I am going to explain to you on Tuesday,

"Yours ever,
"DICK GRANT."

Fanny was much perturbed by Joan's appearance when she was sufficiently awake to notice it.

"My, honey, you do look bad," she gasped. "Daddy Brown will see I was talking the truth last night, which is a good thing in one way. He was most particularly anxious to see you last night, was very fussed when he found you hadn't come." She paused and studied Joan's face from under her lashes. "Did you meet him?" she inquired finally.

"Yes," Joan admitted; she turned away from the other's inquisitive eyes. "He walked home with me."

"I told him you had a headache and were not coming to supper with us," Fanny confessed. "It is no use being annoyed with me, honey. I thought it over and it seemed to me that by saying 'No' to him because of something that happened before he knew you, you were cutting off your nose to spite your face. Not that I personally should tell him," she added reflectively; "he is too straight himself to understand a woman doing wrong; but that is for you to decide. One thing I do know: it won't make a pin's worth of difference to his wanting to marry you; he is too much in love for that."

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She was saying aloud the fear which had knocked at Joan's heart all night. It might be true that Dick was too much in love to let what she had to tell him stand between them. But afterwards, when love had had time to cool, when trust and good-fellowship would be called on to take the place of passion, when he saw her, perhaps, with his child in her arms, how would he look at her then? Would he not remember and regret, would not a shadow stand between them, a shadow from the one sin which no man can forgive in a woman? She was like a creature brought to bay; he had guessed that she loved him; what arguments could she use, how stand firm in her denial against that knowledge?

For a little she had thought of the possibility of his taking her just as Gilbert had done. She was not worthy to be his wife, but she would be content, she knew, to follow him to the end of the world. Not because she viewed the matter now in the same light as she had done in those days. She had never loved Gilbert; if she had, shame and disgrace would have been powerless to drive her from his side, and she would have wanted him to marry her, just as now she wanted marriage with Dick. It seemed to her that, despite pioneers and rebels and the need for greater freedom, which she and girls like her had been fighting for, the initial fact remained and would always remain the same. When you loved you wanted to belong to the man absolutely and entirely; freedom counted for very little, you wanted to give him your life, you wanted to have the right to bear his children. That was what it all came down to in the end; Love was bigger and stronger than any ideas, and marriage had been built upon the law of Love.

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Daddy Brown came round in the course of the morning to talk over his new idea for Joan's future. It appeared that if she was willing to think it over, he would pay for her to have singing and dancing lessons during the winter. That was, of course, provided the War did not come off. If it did, as he had said once before to Fanny, there would not be any Spring tours for the Brown Company.

"But war isn't likely," he spoke heavily. "England has too much to lose to go running into it if she can steer clear, and there's my offer, my girl. I think, from what I saw last night, that if you like to put your heart into it you ought to make something of an actress. You have distinct ability, and you have charm, which is on the good side too."

Joan was hardly in the mood to pay much attention to her future prospects; the present loomed too forbiddingly ahead of her. She would let him know, she told him finally; she was most awfully grateful to him for his suggestion, but she must have at least a fortnight to think things out and decide what she was going to do.

"Very well," Brown agreed, he rose to take his leave; "but mind you, it is worth considering, young lady; you don't get such an offer every day."

Fanny was staying behind for another day; she had some amusement in store with Swetenham which she did not want to miss, but the rest of the company, Joan included, caught the three o'clock train back to town. Joan could not refuse to go with them, but the journey was one long torture to her; she wanted to get right away by herself; there was only one day left in which to plan and make ready for Dick's visit. Some of Brown's ponderous remarks as to the probable effect of a war on the theatrical profession had filtered down to the junior members of the company. They talked together rather mournfully as to what the winter might be going to mean for them. "If it knocks pantomimes, we are done," Grace Binning summed up the situation. But Grace Binning was inclined to be mournful; as Mrs. O'Malley said, her sprained ankle would keep her out of work in any case for six weeks.

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At Victoria Station Strachan ferreted out Joan's luggage and hailed a taxi for her.

"Good-bye," he said to her at the last—they had always been very good friends, with a little encouragement he might have considered himself in love with her—"and good luck. Also, if you will excuse me saying so, Miss Rutherford, I should marry that faithful young man. You are not a bit suited or happy in our life."

Then he drew back his head quickly and smiled at her as the taxi started off.

Joan had written to Mrs. Carew, asking her to see about a room, and found to her relief that her old attic was still at her disposal.

"Thought you would find it homelike," Mrs. Carew panted up the stairs in front of her, "and for that matter it has been shut up since you left. Bad year for letting this has been."

Obviously the room had been shut up since she left. Joan struggled with the fast-closed window and threw it open, but even so the place retained an atmosphere of overpowering stuffiness, and presently, not staying to unpack or open the letter which had been waiting for her on the hall table, she sallied out again in search of fresh air.

She would walk to Knightsbridge, she decided, and so on through the Park. If she tired herself out perhaps she would be able to sleep when she went to bed, and sleep was what she needed almost more than anything else.

The Park was deserted and sun-swept; it had been an exceptionally hot summer, the trees and bushes seemed smothered under a weight of dust. Joan found a seat in sight of one of the stretches of water and opened her letter. It was from Miss Abercrombie, that she had known from the envelope, and written from the Rutherford home at Wrotham.

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"DEAR JOAN," the letter ran:

"Your people are home, they have just come back from abroad and had a very tiresome journey over because of the mobilization on the Continent. Janet wrote, or rather your uncle wrote for her, asking me to be here to meet them. Janet is very ill, she will never be able to walk or stand up again in her life. They have tried all sorts of things for her abroad, now it has come to the last. All day, and most of the night, for she sleeps very badly, she lies flat on her back, and all the time her eyes seem to be watching for something. She speaks very little, everything seems to be shut away in her heart, but yesterday—after having first talked the matter over with your uncle—I went up to her room and asked her point blank: 'Janet, aren't you eating out your heart for Joan?' and she nodded stiffly, the tears in her eyes. So I sat right down and told her all about you: about your accident, about the hard (child, I know it has been hard) fight you have had, and at the end I said: 'Shall I send for her, Janet?' This time when she nodded the tears were streaming down her face. So I am sending for you. Don't let pride or anger stand between you, enough anguish has been caused already on both sides, and she is practically dying. Come, child, show a charity which your struggle will have taught you, and help to make her going a little easier, for she has always loved you, and her heart breaks for the need of you."

It was a very sentimental letter for Miss Abercrombie to have written. And Aunt Janet was dying; quite long ago Joan had forgiven the hardness from her, there was no bitterness in her heart now, only a great sense of pity. She would go, of course she would go. Like a flash it came to her that she might just slip away and leave no address, no message to Dick. But even with the thought came the knowledge that she would only be shelving the difficulty for a little; he would wait, he would search till he found her. She did not think he would be very easy to put off.

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With Miss Abercrombie's letter open on her lap, she sat and watched the people passing by her. She was thinking of all her life since she had first come to London; Gilbert, their time together—strange how that memory had no more power to hurt—the black days that had followed, Rose and Fanny. Of them all perhaps she had loved Fanny the best; Fanny's philosophy of life was so delightfully simple, she was like some little animal that followed every fresh impulse. And she never seemed to regret or pay for her misdeeds. Apparently when you sinned calmly in the full knowledge that it was sin, you paid no penalty; it was only when you sinned attempting to make new laws for yourself and calling it no sin that the burden of retribution was so heavy to bear.

A man was coming down the path towards her; she did not notice him, although he was staring at her rather intently. Opposite to her he came to a pause and took off his hat.

"Hallo," he said, "I am not mistaken, am I, it is Pierrette."

She lifted startled eyes to his and Landon laughed at her. He had forgotten all about her till this moment, but just for the time being he was at a loose end in London when all his friends were out of town, and with no new passion on to entertain him. Pierrette, were she willing, would fill in the gap pleasantly; they had not parted the best of friends, but he had forgotten just enough for that memory not to rankle. He sat down on the chair beside her and took one of her hands in his.

"Where have you been, Pierrette? And what have you been doing? Also, are you not glad to see me, and whose love letter were you reading?" [Pg 197]

"It is not a love letter." Joan took her hand away and folding up Miss Abercrombie's letter, slipped it into her purse. "It is from my people, asking me to come home, and I am going."

"Going, when I have only just found you again!"

His tone, his whole manner was unbearably familiar. Joan turned with quick words of resentment on her lips, but they were never said. A sudden thought came across her brain. Here was something with which she could fight down and kill Dick's purpose. Better, far better than any confession of hers, better than any stating of the truth, however bluntly put, would be this man's easy familiarity, his almost air of ownership. She found herself staring at Landon. What had she ever seen in him that was either pleasant or attractive? She hated his eyes, and the way they looked at her, the too evident care which had been expended on his appearance, his long, shapely hands.

"Well, Pierrette, when you have finished studying my personal appearance," Landon broke in, "perhaps you will explain yourself more explicitly. Why are you flying from me just when I have found you? And, Pierrette, what about supper to-night at Les Gobelins?"

"I can't do that," Joan spoke quickly. She had clenched her hands in her lap; he did not notice that, but he could see that the colour had fled from her face. "And I have got to go away the day after to-morrow. But couldn't you come and have tea with me to-morrow at 6, Montague Square? Do, please do."

What was she driving at? Landon caught his breath on a laugh. Was it the last final flutter before she had to go back to home life and having her wings cut? Or was she throwing herself into his arms after having fought so furiously—he remembered that she had fought the last time, perhaps she had learned her lesson; perhaps the poor little devil had really fallen in love with him, and had been eating her heart out all this time. That was almost amusing. She had never, even in their days of greatest friendship, asked him into her room before, though he had often suggested coming. [Pg 198]

"Why, Pierrette, of course," he said. Then he laughed out loud. "And I'll bring some red roses, afterwards we will go out to supper, and it shall be like old times."

"Afterwards," Joan repeated. The excitement had left her, she sounded on the instant very tired, "I don't know about afterwards, but bring the red roses and come at half-past four, will you?" She stood up, "I must go home," she said, "I have got to pack and get everything ready before to-morrow."

He could not understand her mood in the least, but he could draw his own conclusions from her invitation. It set him whistling softly on his way home. The tune he selected was one that was being played everywhere in London at the time. It fitted into his thoughts excellently:

"Just a little love, a little kiss,
I will give my life for this."

Poor, silly little Pierrette! Why had she fought with him before and wasted so much precious time? As a matter of fact, he broke off his whistle as the startling truth flashed on him, he might quite easily have forgotten all about her in the interval, and then where would she have been? [Pg 199]

CHAPTER XXV

**"I have left you behind
In the path of the past;**

**With the white breath of flowers,
With the best of God's hours,
I have left you at last."**

DORA SIGERSON.

Mrs. Carew was in a state of discontent which amounted almost to anger.

"I knew such kind of things were bound to happen," she grumbled fiercely, "if she joined in with a girl like that Miss Bellairs. I have never held and I never will hold with young ladies having men to tea in their bedrooms."

"Why don't you just tell her so?" suggested her helpmate from his customary entrenched position in an armchair behind the newspaper. "It would be a good deal cheaper than breaking the kitchen china, Maria."

"Tell her!" snorted Mrs. Carew. "She don't give me a chance. Cool as a cucumber she turns to me this morning, she says: 'Oh, I've two gentlemen to tea this afternoon, Mrs. Carew, just show them up when they come.' Then she 'ops it out of the front door like a rabbit. 'Gentlemen,' indeed, and she with not so much as a screen round her bed."

"Perhaps they are her brothers," ventured Mr. Carew.

Mrs. Carew came to a pause beside him and swept aside his paper. "Brothers!" she repeated, "now, Arthur, you know better than to say that. What I say and what I always shall say is: Let 'em do what they like outside, poor motherless girls that they are, but in my house things have got to be run straight. I won't have them bringing men in here."

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"Well, hang it all, Maria, what do you want me to do? Go upstairs and turn the gents out?"

"We'll see," said Mrs. Carew darkly. She grabbed up the tea-tray and made for the door. "Tomorrow I shall tell her it is not to happen again."

"All right, you tell her," her husband muttered behind her retreating back. "Can't think, though, why you don't leave the girls alone. However they start it always ends that way. You and I have seen quite a number take to the streets, and you don't do much to prevent them short of grumbling at them."

"They shan't do it in my house," reiterated Mrs. Carew; she stumped in dignified protest from the room, and upstairs to the offender's attic.

The first guest had already arrived, so Mrs. Carew could not voice her disapproval; she expressed it, however, in a glare which she directed towards him, and the noise with which she dumped down the tea-tray. The room was full of flowers, which did not add to her approval; she detected in them a sure sign of immorality. Great, beautiful red roses, nodding from every vase, filling the air with their rather heavy scent. The visitor also inspired her with a sense of distrust. He looked what Mrs. Carew described as "a man about town." She had been fond of Joan; behind her anger lay a small hurt sense of pity; she was too nice a young lady to go the way of the others.

She opened the door to Dick a little later with a sour face, and she did not even trouble to take him upstairs.

"Miss Rutherford is high up as you can get"—she jerked her thumb upwards—"it's the only door on the landing, you can't mistake it."

With that she left him, and Dick found his own way upstairs. He had stayed away all day till the exact hour he had named, with some difficulty, but with a punctilious sense of doing right. Joan had not answered his letter and he looked upon her silence as an admission that she loved him, but there were a great many things between them that would have to be talked over first coldly and sensibly. He had thought the matter out and he had decided that he would not leave it all to her, to tell or not to tell as she thought best, which had been his first idea. He would help her by telling her that he had always known, and that it made no difference. He wanted to make her confession as easy as possible.

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It was not until after he had knocked that he realized with a shock of disappointment that Joan was not alone. He could hear her talking to somebody, then she moved across the room and pulled the door open. He saw only her first of all, his eyes sought hers and stayed there. He could notice that she seemed very pale, and almost frightened looking, and that she had dressed for the afternoon in black. Some long clinging stuff, and up near where the blouse opened at the neck she had pinned in one red rose, its warm and velvety petals lying against the white of her neck. The room seemed full of the scent of the roses too, and a little oppressive. Dick held his breath as he looked at her; to him she seemed so beautiful as to be almost amazing; then he came a little further into the room and his eyes took in the other occupant. A man sat, or rather lounged, on the sofa, pulled up under the window. He was watching the meeting with curious eyes, and in his hands he held another rose, the same sort as the one Joan wore. When Dick's eyes met his, he smiled, and laying the rose aside, stood up.

"Did not know it was to be a tea-party, Pierrette," he said, "you ought to have warned me."

Joan had shut the door and moved forward into the centre of the room. She was evidently very nervous over something; Landon was more than a little amused, though also inclined to be annoyed.

"Oh, it isn't a tea-party," she was saying. "It's just us three. Doctor Grant, this is Mr. Landon. Will you have this chair?—it is really the only one which is quite safe to sit on."

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Dick took the proffered chair stiffly; he was conscious of a bitter sense of disappointment, tinged with disapproval. It was, of course, different for himself, but he loathed to see the other man so much at home in this quaint little dust-laden attic where Joan lived. Her bed stood against the wall, a black counterpane of sorts thrown across it; her brush and comb, the little silver things for her dressing-table were scattered about on the top of the chest of drawers standing near. The place would have been sacred to him; but how did this other man look at it? And why had Joan asked him? Was it a deliberate attempt to shield herself from something she dreaded? or did it mean that, after all, she had only been playing with him—that the fluttered surrender of her lips had been but a flirt's last fling in the game of passion? If a man is really very much in love, as was Dick, and something occurs to make him lose his temper, it is sure to end in rapid and sometimes lasting disaster. After the first five minutes Dick made no attempt even to be polite to Landon. Rage, blind, merciless rage, and a sense of having made a damned fool of himself, throbbed in his mind as he watched Joan talking to the other man, and saw the evident familiarity which lay between them. Yet he could not get up and go away; he would not leave her, not till he had hurt her as much as she was now hurting him.

For Landon, the amusement of baiting the other man's evident misery soon palled. He was a little annoyed himself that Joan should have seen fit to drag him in as such a cat's-paw, for a very few minutes of their threesome had shown him what his part was intended to be. It meant in addition that the girl had fooled him, and that he had wasted his background of red roses. It was all very annoying and a very stupid way of spending the afternoon, for no one could imagine that there was any amusement to be got out of a bad tea in squalid surroundings—thus mercilessly but almost truthfully did he dismiss the atmosphere of Joan's attic—with a girl palpably in love with someone else. Landon rose presently with his most languid air of boredom.

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"Sorry, Pierrette," he said; "must fly, but I leave my roses behind me as a memory. They are not what I should call my lucky flower." He turned to Dick, who stood up with a grim face and stern-set mouth. "Good-bye, Doctor Grant; delighted to have met you: if Pierrette feels like it, get her to tell you about our last venture into the rose world. Romantic tale, isn't it, Pierrette?" He laughed, lifting her hand to his heart very impressively. "But ours has always been a romance, hasn't it? That is why we christened each other Pierrot and Pierrette." He let go her hand and bowed gravely. Joan followed him to the door. "I'll come and see you out," she said; she had not realized until the moment came how horribly afraid she was of Dick. "You might lose your way."

"Oh no," Landon assured her; he shot one last slightly vindictive glance at Dick; "I know it by heart." Then he laughed and went from the room, shutting the door behind him.

Joan stayed where she was, a seeming weight on her lids, which prevented her lifting her eyes to look at Dick. But she was intensely conscious of him, and round her heart something had closed like a band of iron. At last, since he said nothing and made no sign, she moved forward blindly and sat down in the nearest chair.

"Aren't you ever going to speak again?" she whispered.

Her words shook Dick out of his silent self-restraint. Hot anger, passionate reproaches, fought for speech in his throat; he drove them back.

"Is this your answer to my question?" he said finally. "It would have been simpler to have put it some other way. But you may at least congratulate yourself on having succeeded. You have killed something that I had thought to be almost eternal." He drew in his breath sharply, but passion was shaking him now, it had to have its say. "I have loved you," he went on hoarsely, "ever since I first saw you. Common sense has argued against you; pride has fought to throw you out of my life; but against everything your face has lived triumphant. I don't know why God makes us feel like that for women of your stamp, why we should bring such great ideals to so poor a shrine. I am talking arrant nonsense, just raving at you, you think, and I sound rather absurd even to myself. Only—my God! you don't know what you have done—you have broken my faith in you; it was the strongest, the best thing in my life."

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Joan crouched down in the chair; she seemed to be trying to get as far away from his voice as possible; she sat with her head buried in her arms.

"I built up a dream about you two years ago," Dick went on. "You don't remember anything about me; but our meeting, your face as you stood that day with your back to the wall, were stamped on my heart as with a branding-iron. Of all the foolish things that a man could do perhaps I chose the worst; for ever as I stood and watched you the shadow of shame grew up beside you, and other people turned away from you. But I thought I saw further than the rest; I imagined that I had seen through your eyes, because already I loved them, into your soul. There is some mistake here, I argued, some mystery which she herself shall one day make clear to me." Joan had lifted her head and was staring at him. "From that day I started building my dream. I went abroad, but the memory of your face went with me; I used to make love to other women, but it was because I looked for you in their eyes. Then I came home and I saw you again. Suddenly my dream crystallized into clear, unshakable fact; I loved, I had always loved you; nothing that other people

could say against you would have any effect. It lay just with you, and to-day you have given me your answer and broken with your own hand the dream." [Pg 205]

He turned towards the door; Joan staggered to her feet and ran to him. The vague memory in her mind had leapt to life; his eyes had often reminded her of someone. She remembered now that he was the young doctor that Aunt Janet had sent for. She remembered her own defiance as she had faced him and the pity in his eyes.

"Dick," she whispered, "Dick, I didn't know, I didn't understand. I thought—oh, don't go away and leave me just like this, I might explain." Her torrent of words broke down before the look on his face; she fell to her knees, clutching at his hands. "Won't you listen? It was because I was afraid to tell you; I was afraid, afraid."

Her position, the paroxysm of tears which, once they came, she could in no way stop, disquieted him. He shook her hands from him. "And because you were afraid," he said stiffly, "I suppose you had the other man here to protect you." Then his mood changed.

"Whatever you have done," he said, "it isn't any business of mine. Please forgive me for ranting like a schoolmaster, and please don't cry like that. While I sat there watching that other man and feeling that everything my heart had been set on was falling to pieces all round me, I wanted to hurt you back again. It's a pugnacious sensation that one gets sometimes, but it's gone now; I don't want you to be hurt. It was not your fault that I lifted you up in my heart like that; it is not altogether your fault that you have fallen. Perhaps you did not know how cruel you were being when you had that other man here to make clear to me something you did not wish to put into words yourself. I have said some beastly things to you, and I am sorry for them. Please don't let them worry you for long."

Then he had gone, before she had time to speak or lift her hands to hold him. Gone, and as she crouched against the door the sound of his feet trod into her heart, each step a throb of agony. [Pg 206]

Mrs. Carew was holding forth to Fanny in the hall as Dick swung past them. He did not glance at them even, and Fanny did not have a chance to call out to him, he went so rapidly, slamming the door behind him.

"Not as how they haven't left at seasonable hours," Mrs. Carew went rambling on; "but I 'as always said and always will say, I don't hold with such doings in my house."

"What doings?" Fanny expostulated. "For goodness, old Carew, do try and make yourself more clear; who has been carrying on and how?"

"Miss Rutherford," Mrs. Carew announced. She was viewing Fanny with unfriendly suspicion. "Only came back from this 'ere theatrical show yesterday, and to-day she has two men to tea with her in her bedroom."

"Two men?" repeated Fanny. "Did you know they were coming?"

"Ask them," snorted Mrs. Carew. "And what I said is——"

"Oh, run away, Carew," Fanny broke in, "with your nasty suspicion. It's all my bad example, you'll be saying next. Bring up some tea for me, there's an old dear; I'm fairly parched for a drink."

But before she went into her own room Fanny ran upstairs and knocked softly on Joan's door. There was no answer and no sound from within the room; yet when she tried turning the handle, and pushing her foot against the door, it was to find it locked. What did it all mean? Two men to tea, Dick's face as he had passed through the hall, and Joan's locked door? That was a problem which Fanny set herself to disentangle in her own particular way. [Pg 207]

CHAPTER XXVI

**"Of all strange things in this strange new world
Most strange is this;
Ever my lips must speak and smile
Without your kiss.
Ever mine eyes must see, despite
Those eyes they miss."**

F. HEASLIP LEE.

How Joan lived through the hours that followed she never knew. Heart and brain seemed paralysed; things had lost their power to hurt. When Fanny crept upstairs in the early morning and knocked timidly at the door, Joan opened it to her. She had no wish to see Fanny; she did not want to talk about yesterday, or explain what had happened; but vaguely through her absolute misery she realized that life had still to be gone on with, and that Fanny was one of the items of life which it was no use trying to disregard. As a matter of fact, until she opened the door and caught Fanny's look of dismay, she did not remember that she was still in her black afternoon

frock, nor the fact that she had spent most of the night crouched against the door as Dick had left her.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" Fanny whispered; she came quickly into the room and threw warm, loving arms round Joan. "You haven't been to bed at all; why didn't you let me in last night? I'd have helped you somehow or other."

Joan stood limply in the embrace, but she did not turn and cling to Fanny, or weep as the other girl rather wished she would.

"How ridiculous of me," she answered. "I must look a strange sight this morning."

Fanny became practical on the moment, since sympathy was evidently not desired. "Well, you'll start right away now," she stated, "and get out of your things. It's early yet, only about seven; I will brush your hair for you, and you will slip into bed. You needn't get up until late to-day, you know."

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"I haven't the slightest desire to sleep," Joan told her; none the less she was obeying the other's commands. "And I have got to catch an early train."

"You are going away?" gasped Fanny.

"Back home," Joan answered. "They have sent for me; my aunt has been ill. Oh, it's not for good, Fanny"—she almost laughed at the other's amazed face—"I shall be back here before long."

"I hope not;" Fanny spoke, for her, fiercely. "I shall hate to lose you, honey, but after all I don't stand for much, and you aren't meant for this kind of world. You can't get the fun out of it I can, it only hurts you." She was brushing out the soft brown hair. "What happened yesterday?" she asked suddenly, her head on one side.

Joan moved from under the deft hands and stood up. "You want to know why I am looking like a tragedy queen this morning," she said. "It isn't strange you should be curious; I must seem quite mad. Yesterday"—she caught her hands to her throat—"was what might be called a disastrous failure. I tried to be very clever, and I was nothing but a most awful fool. He knew, he had known all the time, the thing which I had been so afraid to tell him. It had not made any difference to his loving me, but yesterday I had that other man here, you remember him, don't you? You might almost recognize his roses." Her eyes wandered round the room, her hands came away slowly from her throat; she had seemed to be near tears, but suddenly the outburst passed. "That's all," she said dryly, "Dick drew his own conclusions from the man being here. I tried to explain, at least I think I tried to explain. I know I wanted to hold him back, but he threw aside my hands and went from the room. I shan't ever see him again, Fanny, and the funny thing is that it doesn't really seem to matter this morning."

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"Oh, you poor thing," Fanny whispered again. She did not say much else, because for the present words were useless. Otherwise her own mind was full of consoling reflections. A man, after all, is not so easily turned aside from what must have been a very big purpose in his life. Already Fanny could look into the future and say "Bless you, my children," in her heart. She had been afraid, drawing her conclusions from Dick's face and Joan's silence, that things were very much worse. Joan might, for instance, have told the truth, and Dick, man-like, might have resented it.

She ran downstairs presently and came up again with the breakfast, fussing round Joan till the other made an attempt to eat something, pouring out her tea for her, buttering her toast. "I should very much like to see you have a jolly good cry, honey," she confessed when the pretence at breakfast had finished. "It would do you a world of good. But since you don't seem able to, I shall pull the curtains and you must try and sleep. I'll come and call you again at ten."

Joan lay quite still in the dim and curtained room, but she did not either sleep or cry. She did not even think very much. She could just see the pattern of the wall-paper, and her mind occupied itself in counting the roses and in working out how the line in between made squares or diamonds.

It was like that all day; little things came to her assistance and interested her enormously. The collection of flowers which Fanny had got on her new hat; the map on the wall of the railway carriage; the fact that the station master at Wrotham seemed to have grown very thin, and was brushing his hair a new way. Uncle John met her as once before at the station, and almost without thinking Joan lifted her face. He stooped very gravely to kiss it. "You are welcome home, Joan," he said. "We have been lonely without you."

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The sound of his voice brought back to her mind the last time he had spoken to her, and she was suddenly nervous and tongue-tied. A fat Sally still rubbed her sides against the shafts, nothing had been changed. It was just about this time she had come home two years ago, only now nervousness and a confused sense of memories that hurt intolerably swept aside all thoughts of pleasure and relief.

Uncle John made no further remark after his greeting until they were driving down the village street. Then he turned to her suddenly.

"There is going to be war between England and Germany," he said. "Did you see any signs of excitement in London this morning?"

War! Joan realized on the instant that for the past four days she had not even looked at a paper.

Daddy Brown had mentioned some such possibility in connection with his Spring tour, and the members of the company had discussed the prospect with varying shades of excitement on their way up to London. But for herself, her own interests, her own griefs had so swamped her that she had not even noticed the greater tragedy which loomed ahead. Yet what a curious thrill lay in the word; it could rouse her to sudden interest as nothing else had been able to do all day; she could feel the nerves in her body tighten, and she sat a little more erect.

"War, with Germany!" she repeated. "I haven't read the papers, Uncle John. Has it come as near as that?"

"They have invaded Belgium," he answered, "on their way through into France. We couldn't stand aside now if we wanted to. To-night, I expect war will be declared. That was why I asked you if you had seen any signs of excitement in the streets; the papers say that the crowds have been clamouring for war for the last three days."

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She could not tell him that she had sat in the cab counting the daisies in Fanny's hat. "What will it mean?" she asked.

"Something bigger than we have ever tackled before," he answered. "It will mean millions of money and millions of men. I don't see much down here, grubbing about among my plants and weeds, but I have kept an eye on Germany." A most unusual excitement was shaking him. "In my young days it was a myth, 'one day Germany will declare war on us.' It has come true too late for me. I'd give everything I possess to get back into the regiment, but they wouldn't have me. This will be a world-shaking war, and I am too old to take part in it." The excitement left his voice as they turned in at the gate. "Your aunt is very ill," he said. "I meant to have warned you before, but somehow I can't think of anything but the one thing these days. You must not be shocked at her appearance."

Miss Abercrombie was waiting to receive them where Aunt Janet had waited for their other home-coming. "Did you bring any news from London?" she asked quickly; the same light shone in her eyes as in Uncle John's. "Has anything been settled yet?"

Joan shook her head. "I have been living this last week with my eyes shut," she confessed; "till Uncle John told me, I did not even know that anything was going to happen."

Miss Abercrombie looked beyond her; the blue eyes had narrowed, a strange expression of intentness showed in her face. "I have always tried not to," she said, "and yet I have always hated the Germans. I wish I was a man." She turned abruptly. "But come upstairs, child, your aunt had her couch moved close to the window this morning, she has lain watching the drive all day. You will find her very changed," she added. "Try not to show any signs of fear. She is very sensitive as to the impression she creates. Every week it creeps a little higher, now she cannot even move her hand. From the neck downwards she is like a log of wood."

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"And she is dying?" whispered Joan.

"Mercifully," the other answered. "My dear, we could not pray for anything else."

She opened the door and motioned to Joan to go in. "I have brought her to you, Janet," she said. "Now is your heart satisfied?"

Joan waited for a moment in the doorway. A long, low couch stood by the window, the curtains were drawn back and the head of the couch had been raised up, so that a full stream of light fell upon the figure lying on it. But Aunt Janet's face itself was a little in the shadow, and for the moment it looked very much like Joan's old memories. The straight, braided hair, the little touch of white at the throat, the dark, searching eyes. A nurse, a trim upheld figure in blue, stood a little behind the couch out of sight of Aunt Janet's eyes, so that she could frown and beckon to Joan to come forward unseen by the woman on the couch. But Aunt Janet had noticed the slight hesitation, her face broke into the most wistful smile that Joan had ever seen.

"I can't hold out my arms to you, Joan," she said; "but my heart aches for you, all the same."

Joan took a little step forward; "Aunt Janet," she whispered. Then all that had been bitter between them vanished, and much as she had used to do, when as a child she sought the shelter of those dear arms, she ran forward, and, kneeling by the couch, pressed her warm cheek against the lifelessness of the other's hand. "I have come home, Aunt Janet," she said, "I have come home."

The nurse with one glance at her patient's face tiptoed from the room, leaving them alone together, and for a little they stayed silent just close touching like that. Presently Aunt Janet spoke, little whispered words.

"I hardened my heart," she said, "I would not let you creep back; even when God argued with me I would not listen. My life finished when I sent you from me, Joan, but so long as I could hold myself upright and get about, I would not listen. I am a hard, grim old woman, and I took it upon myself to judge, which is after all a thing we should leave to God. This is my punishment—you are so near to me, yet I cannot lift a hand to touch you. I shall never feel your fingers clinging to mine again."

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"Oh, hush, hush, Aunt Janet," Joan pleaded. "Why should you talk of punishment?"

"When you were a child," the old voice went on again, "you would run to me at the end of your

day's playing. 'Read me a story,' you would say, and then we would sit hand in hand while I read aloud to you something you knew almost by heart. When I dream now I feel your little warm hands in mine, but I can't feel your lips, Joan, not even when you lay them against my hand as you do now. Nor your tears, dear, silly child, I have made you cry with my grumbling. Joan, look up and see the happiness in my eyes to have you back."

And Joan looked. "I never meant to hurt you as I did, Aunt Janet," she said; "do you believe that?"

Just for a second the lids closed down over the dark eyes. "I hurt myself," Aunt Janet answered, "far more than you hurt me. Put your face down close, so that I can kiss you just once, and then you shall draw up a chair and we will talk sensibly. Nurse will be severe to-night if I excite myself."

Miss Abercrombie put her head in at the door presently and suggested taking Joan downstairs to tea. "Nurse is just bringing up yours," she said. "I know from the expression of her face that she thinks it is time that you had a little rest."

"Very well," Aunt Janet agreed, "take her away, Ann, but bring her back again before I go to bed. Has any news come through yet?"

Miss Abercrombie shook her head. "Colonel Rutherford has just gone over to the station to find out," she added. [Pg 214]

Uncle John came back with no further information. He was evidently in a strong state of agitation, he confessed that the question which the Government was settling was like a weight on his own conscience. "It is a question of honour," he kept repeating, "England cannot stand aside."

"Know we not well how seventy times seven
Wrongs our mighty arms with rust,
We dared not do the will of Heaven,
Lest Heaven should hurl us in the dust."

Miss Abercrombie quoted to him.

He stared at her with puzzled old eyes. "I don't think that can apply to England," he said. "And in this case the people won't let them. We must have war."

A curious, restless spirit seemed to have invaded the household. Joan sat with Aunt Janet for a little after dinner till the nurse said it was time for bed, after that she and Miss Abercrombie, talking only in fits and starts, waited up for Colonel Rutherford, who had once more tramped down to the station in search of news.

"Nothing has come through," he had to admit on his return; "but I have arranged with the people of the telegraph office to send on a message should it come. We had better get off to bed meanwhile."

Tired as she was, Joan fell asleep almost at once, to dream of Dick—Dick attired, through some connection of her thoughts, in shining armour with a sword in his hand. The ringing of a bell woke her, and then the sound of people whispering in the hall. She was out of bed in a second, and with a dressing-gown half pulled about her, she ran to the top of the stairs. The hall was lit up, the front door open. Uncle John was at it, talking to a man outside; Miss Abercrombie stood a little behind him, a telegram form in her hand. She looked up at the sound of Joan's feet. "It's war," she called softly. "We declared war to-night." [Pg 215]

From somewhere further along the passage there was the abrupt sound of a door being thrown open. "Miss Abercrombie, Colonel Rutherford," the nurse's voice called, "quick, quick! I am afraid Miss Rutherford is dying! Someone must run for the doctor at once, please."

CHAPTER XXVII

**"Life is good, joy runs high,
Between English earth and sky;
Death is death, but we shall die
To the song on your bugles blown—England,
To the stars on your bugles blown."**

W. E. HENLEY.

Dick went out into the still night air from the close atmosphere of Joan's room, his mind a seething battleground of emotions—anger, and hurt pride, and a still small sense of pain, which as time passed grew so greatly in proportion that it exceeded both the other sensations. He had said very bitterly to Joan that she had broken his dream, but, because it had been broken, it none the less had the power to hurt intolerably. Each fragment throbbled with a hot sense of injustice and self-pity. He had not the slightest idea what to do with himself: every prospect seemed equally distasteful. He walked, to begin with, furiously and rather aimlessly down in the direction

of the Embankment. The exercise, such as it was, dulled his senses and quieted a little the tumult of his mind. He found himself thinking of other things. The men to-day in his Club had been discussing the possibility of war, they had been planning what they would do; instinctively, since the thought of Joan and the scene he had just left were too tender for much probing, his mind turned to that. As he stamped along he resolved, without thinking very deeply about it, that he would volunteer for active service, and speculated on the possibility of his getting taken on at once.

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"Doctors will be very needful in this war," one man had said at the Club.

"Yes, by Gad," another had answered. "We have got some devilish contrivances these days for killing our brother men."

Looked at from that point of view, the idea seemed strange, and Dick caught his breath on the thought. What would war mean? Hundreds of men would be killed—hundreds, why it would be more like thousands. He had read descriptions of the South African war, he had talked with men who had been all through it.

"We doctors see the awful side of war, I can tell you," an old doctor had once told him. "To the others it may seem flags flying, drums beating, and a fine uplifting spectacle; but we see the horrors, the shattered bodies, the eyes that pray for death. It's a ghastly affair."

And yet there was something in the thought which flamed at Dick's heart and made him throw his head up. It was the beating of drums, the call of the bugles that he heard as he thought of it; the blood tingled in his veins, he forgot that other pain which had driven him forth so restless a short hour ago.

The great dark waters of the river had some special message to give him this evening. He stood for a little watching them; lights flamed along the Embankment, the bridges lay across the intervening darkness like coloured lanterns fastened on a string. Over on the other side he could see the trees of Battersea Park, and beyond that again the huddled pile of houses and wharfs and warehouses that crowded down to the water's edge. He was suddenly aware, as he stood there, of a passionate love for this old, grey city, this slow-moving mass of dark waters. It symbolized something which the thought of war had stirred awake in his heart. He had a hot sense of love and pride and pity all mingled, he felt somehow as if the city were his, and as if an enemy's hand had been stretched out to spoil it. The drumming, the flag-waving, and the noise of bugles were still astir in his imagination, but the river had called something else to life behind their glamour. It did not occur to him to call it love of country, yet that was what it was.

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His walk brought him out in the end by the Houses of Parliament, and he found himself in the midst of a large crowd. It swayed and surged now this way and now that, as is the way of crowds. The outskirts of it reached right up to and around Trafalgar Square. When Dick had fought his way up Parliament Street he could see a mass of people moving about the National Gallery, and right above them Nelson's statue stood out black against the sky.

"If they want war, these bally Germans," someone in the crowd suddenly shouted in a very hoarse and beery voice, "let's give it them."

"Yes, by God!" another answered. "Good old England, let's stand by our word."

"We have got men behind the guns," declaimed a third.

But such words were only as the foam thrown up by a great sea; the multitude did no real shouting, the spirit that moved them was too earnest for that. There were women among the crowd, their eager, excited faces caught Dick's attention. Some were crying hysterically, but most of them faced the matter in the same way that their menkind did. Dick could find no words to describe the curious feeling which gripped him, but he knew himself one of this vast multitude, all thinking the same thoughts, all answering to the same heart-beats. It was as if the meaning of the word citizen had suddenly been made clear to his heart.

He moved with the shifting of the crowd as far as Trafalgar Square, and here some of the intense seriousness of the strain was broken, for round and about the stately lions of Nelson's statue a noisy battle was raging. Several Peace parties, decked with banners inscribed "No War" and "Let us have peace," were coming in for a very rough five minutes at the hands of the crowd. Rather to his own surprise Dick found himself partaking in the battle, with a sense of jubilant pride in his prowess to hit out. He had a German as his opponent, which was a stroke of luck in itself, but in a calmer moment which followed on the arrival of the police, he thought to himself that even that was hardly an excuse for hitting a man who was desirous of keeping the world's peace. Still the incident had exhilarated him, he was more than ever a part of the crowd, and he went with them as far as Buckingham Palace. Some impulse to see the King had come upon the people; they gathered in the square in front of the Palace, and waited in confident patience for him to appear.

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Dick was standing at the far end of the Square, pressed up against the railings. In front of him stood two women, they were evidently strangers to each other, yet their excitement had made them friends, and they stood holding hands. One was a tall, eager-faced girl; Dick could not see the other woman's face, but from her voice he imagined her to be a good deal older and rather superior in class to the girl. It was the younger one's spirit, however, that was infectious.

"Isn't it fine?" she was saying. "Aren't you proud to be English? I feel as if my heart was going to jump out of my mouth. They are our men," she went on breathlessly; "it is a most wonderful

thought, and of course they will win through, but a lot of them will die first. Oh, I do hate the Germans!" Her whole face flushed with passionate resentment.

"One need not hate a nation because one goes to war with it," the other woman answered. Dick thought her voice sounded very tired.

"Yes, one need," the girl flamed. "We women can't fight, but we can hate. Perhaps we shouldn't hate so much if we could fight," she added as a concession. [Pg 219]

"I am married to a German," Dick heard the other woman say bitterly. "I can't hate him."

He saw the girl's quick face of horror and the way she stood away from her companion, but just at that moment some impulse surged the crowd forward and he lost sight of them. Yet the memory of the woman's voice and the words she had said haunted him. War would mean that, then, the tearing apart of families, the wrecking of home life.

"The King, the King!" the crowd yelled and shouted in a million voices. "God save the King."

Dick looked up to the Palace windows; a slight, small figure had come out on to one of the balconies and stood looking down on the faces of the people. Cheer upon cheer rose to greet him, the multitude rocked and swayed with their acclamation, then above the general noise came the sound of measured music, not a band, but just the people singing in unison:

"God save our gracious King,
Long live our noble King,
God save the King."

The notes rose and swelled and filled the air, the cry of a nation's heart, the loyalty of a people towards their King.

The sheer emotion of it shook Dick out of the sense of revelry which had come upon him during his fight. He pushed his way through the crowd, and climbed over the railings into the darkness of St. James's Park. It was officially closed for the night, but Dick had no doubt that a small bribe at the other side would let him out. The Queen and the little Princes had joined the King on the balcony. Looking back he could see them very faintly, the Prince was standing to the salute, the Queen was waving her handkerchief.

His Club was crowded with men, all equally excited, all talking very fast. Someone had just come back from the House. War was a dead certainty now, mobilization had been ordered, the Fleet was ready. [Pg 220]

"Our Army is the problem, there will have to be conscription," was the general vote.

Dick stayed and talked with the rest of them till long after twelve. Morning should see him offering his services to the War Office; if they would not have him as a doctor he could always enlist. One thing was certain, he must by hook or by crook be amongst the first to go.

"We will have to send an Expeditionary Force right now," the general opinion had been, "if we are to do any good."

Dick thought vaguely of what it would all mean: the excitement, the thrill, an army on the march, camp life, military discipline, and his share of work in hospital. "Roll up your sleeves and get at them," his South African friend had described it to him. "I can tell you, you don't have much time to think when they are bringing in the wounded by the hundred."

Not till just as he was turning into bed did he think again of Joan. Such is the place which love takes in a man's thoughts when war is in the balance. The knowledge of her deceit and his broken dream hurt him less in proportion, for the time he had forgotten it. He had been brutal to her, he realized; he had left her crouched up on the floor crying her heart out. Why had she cried?—she had achieved her purpose, for she could only have had one reason in asking the other man to meet him. He could only suppose that he had frightened her by his evident bad temper, and for that he was sorry. He was not angry with her any longer. She had looked very beautiful in her clinging black dress, with the red rose pinned in at her throat. And even the rose had been a gift from the other man. Well, it was all ended; for two years he had dreamed about love, for one hour he had known its bitterness. He would shut it absolutely outside of his life now, he would never, he need never, thanks to the new interests which were crowding in, think of Joan again. [Pg 221]

He opened his window before getting into bed and leaned out. The streets were deserted and quiet, the people had shouted themselves hoarse and gone home. Under the nearest lamp-post a policeman stood, a solid, magnificent figure of law and order, and overhead in a very dark sky countless little stars shone and twinkled. On the verge of war! What would the next still slumbering months bring to the world, and could he forget Joan? Is not love rather a thing which nothing can kill, which no grave can cover, no time ignore?

CHAPTER XXVIII

"Errors, like straws, upon the surface flow;

The wave of enthusiasm caused by the War swept even Fanny into its whirlpool of emotion. For several days she haunted the streets, following now this crowd, now that; buying innumerable papers, singing patriotic songs, cheering the soldiers as they passed. She wanted to dash out into the road, to throw her arms round the young soldiers and to kiss them, she was for the time being passionately in love with them. It was her one pathetic and rather mistaken method of expressing the patriotism which surged up in her. She could not have explained this sensation, she only knew that something was so stirred within her that she wanted to give—to give of her very best to these men who symbolized the spirit of the country to her. Poor, hot-hearted little Fanny; she and a great many like her came in for a good deal of blame during the days that followed, yet the instinct which drove them was the same that prompted the boys to enlist. If Fanny had been a man she would have been one of the first at the recruiting station. So submerged was she in her new excitement that Joan and Dick in their trouble slipped entirely out of her mind, only to come back, with the knowledge that she had failed to do anything to help, when, on coming back one afternoon to Montague Square, she saw Mabel standing on the steps of No. 6. To be correct, Mabel had just finished talking to Mrs. Carew and was turning away. Fanny hastened her walk to a run and caught the other up just as she left the step.

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"You were asking to see Joan, Miss Rutherford," she panted. "Won't you come in and let me tell you about her?"

Mabel had hardly recognized her. Fanny, dressed up in her best to meet Joan's possible future relations, and Fanny in her London garments, which consisted of a very tight dress slit up to well within sight of her knee, and a rakish little hat, were two very different people. And whereas the Fanny of Sevenoaks had been a little vulgar but most undeniably pretty, this Fanny was absolutely impossible—the kind of person one hardly liked to be seen talking to. Yet there was something in the girl's face, the frank appeal of her eyes, perhaps, that held Mabel against her will.

"The woman tells me that Miss Rutherford has left," she spoke stiffly. "I was really only going to call upon her."

"Yes, I know she's gone," Fanny nodded, "back to her people. But there is something between her and your brother that awfully badly wants to be explained. Won't you come in and let me tell you? Oh, do, please do."

She had caught hold of the other's sleeve and was practically leading her back up the steps. Mabel had not seen Dick since he had left Sevenoaks. He had written a note to their hotel saying he was most awfully busy, his application for service had been accepted, but pending his being attached to any unit he was putting in the time examining recruits. He had not mentioned Joan, Mabel had noticed that; still she had promised to call and make it up with the girl, and Mabel was a person who always religiously kept her promises. But if there had been any disagreement, as Fanny's anxiety to explain showed, then surely it was so much the better. Here and now she would wash her hands of the affair and start hoping once again for something better for Dick.

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Fanny had opened the door by this time and had led the way inside. "My room is three flights up," she said. "Will you mind that? Also it is probably dreadfully untidy. It generally is."

This was where Mabel, following the wise guidance of her head, ought to have said: "I am not coming, I really haven't time," or some excuse of that sort. Instead she stepped meekly inside and followed the girl upstairs. Perhaps some memory of Dick's face as he had spoken of Joan prompted her, or perhaps it was just because she felt that in some small way she owed Joan a reparation.

Fanny's room was certainly untidy. Every chair was occupied by an assortment of clothes, for before she had gone out that morning Fanny had had a rummage for a special pair of silk stockings that were the pride of her heart. She bundled most of the garments on to the bed and wheeled forward the armchair for Mabel to sit in.

"I never can keep tidy," she acknowledged. "It used to make Joan fair sick when we shared rooms on tour. Joan is so different from me." Suddenly she threw aside pretence and dropped down on her knees before the armchair, squatting back on her heels to look at Mabel. "That is what I do want you to understand," she said, earnestly. "Joan is as different to me as soap to dirt. She is a lady, you probably saw that; I am not. She is good; I don't suppose I ever have been. She is clean all through, and she loves your brother so much that she wanted to break her heart to keep him happy." She looked down at her hands for a second, then up again quickly. "I'll tell you, it won't do any harm. Mind you, usually, I say a secret is a secret though I mayn't look the sort that can keep one. Joan told me about it at the beginning when I chaffed her about his loving her; and he does, you know he does. It seems that when she first came to London she had funny ideas in her head—innocent, I should call it, and sort of inclined to trust men—anyway, she lived with some man and there was to have been a baby," she brought the information out with a sort of gasp.

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"I knew that," Mabel answered, "and because of it I tried to persuade my brother not to marry her."

"I suppose it is only natural you should," Fanny admitted, "though to me it seems that when a woman has a baby like that, she pays for all the fun that went before." She threw back her head a little and laughed. "Oh, I'm not moral, I know that, but Joan is, that's what I want you to understand. Anyway, Joan left the man, or he left her, which is more likely, and the baby was never born. Joan was run over in the street one day and was ill in hospital for a month. That was what Joan came up against," she went on, "when she fell in love with your brother. Tell him, I said, it won't make a pin's worth of difference to his love—and it wouldn't. But Joan did not believe me, she had learned to be afraid of good people, some of them had been real nasty to her, and she was afraid."

"She need not have been," Mabel said. The girl was so earnest in the defence of her friend that one could not help liking her. "Dick knew about it all the time."

Fanny nodded. "Yes, Joan told me that on the day after he had been here. It would have been fairer if he had said so from the beginning. You see," she leant forward, most intense in her explanation, "Joan thought, and thought and thought, till she was really silly with thinking. He had told her he was coming here on Monday to ask her to marry him, and she loved him. I should have held my tongue about things, or whispered them to him as I lay in his arms, holding on to him so that he could not push me away, but Joan isn't my sort. She just couldn't bear to tell him, I guess she was afraid to see his face alter and grow hard. Do you blame her because she was afraid? I don't really know the rest of the story," she finished, "because I was away, but I think Joan got hold of the silly notion that the best thing to do was to have another man hanging about here when Dr. Grant called. She thought it would make him angry, and that he would change his mind about wanting to marry her on the spot. And she pretty well succeeded. I had just got back and was standing in the hall, when Dr. Grant got back from her room and went out. He did not notice me, his face was set white and stern like people's faces are when they have just had to shoot a dog they loved. The other man meant nothing to her, nothing; why she hasn't even seen him for months, and she never liked him. Oh, can't you explain to your brother, he would listen to you." She put her hand on Mabel's knee in her earnestness and pulled herself a little nearer. "It's breaking both their hearts, and it's all such a silly mistake."

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"Are you not asking rather a lot from me?" Mabel said quietly; she met the other's eyes frankly. "Putting aside all ideas, moral or immoral, don't you understand that it is only natural that I should want my brother to marry some girl who had not been through all that Miss Rutherford has?"

The quick tears sprang to Fanny's eyes. "If he loves her," she claimed, "is not that all that matters?"

"He may love again," Mabel reminded her.

Fanny withdrew her hand and stayed quiet, looking down at the ground, blinking back her tears. "You won't help," she said presently. "I see what you mean, it doesn't matter to you what happens to her." She lifted her head defiantly and sprang to her feet. "Well, it doesn't matter, not very much. I believe in love more than you do, it seems, for I do not believe that your brother will love again, and sooner or later he will come back to her." She paused in her declamation and glanced at Mabel. "Is he going to the War?" she asked quickly.

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"Yes," Mabel assented; she had stood up too and was drawing on her gloves. "He may go at any moment, as soon as they need him. You think I am awfully hard," she went on; "perhaps I am. Dick means a lot to me; if I find that this is breaking his heart I will tell him, will you believe that? But if he can find happiness elsewhere I shall be glad, that is all."

Fanny huddled herself up in the armchair and did a good cry after she had gone. Joan's thread of happiness seemed more tangled than ever; her efforts to undo the knots had not been very successful. There was only her belief in the strength of Dick's love to fall back on, and love—as Fanny knew from her own experience—is sometimes only a weathercock in disguise, blown this way and that by the winds of fate.

The night post brought a letter from Joan. It was written on black-edged notepaper:

"DEAR FANNY,

"Aunt Janet is dead. She died the night after I got here. The nurse says it was the joy of seeing me again that killed her. She was glad to have me back, I read that in her eyes, and it is the one fact that helps me to face things. Death stands between us now, yet we are closer to each other than we have been these last two years. And she loved me all the time, Fanny; sometimes it seems as if love could be very unforgiving. I must stay on down here for the time being; Uncle John needs someone, and he is content that it should be me. The War overhangs and overshadows everything, and it is going to be a hard winter for us all. I suppose he hasn't been back" (Fanny knew who was meant by "he") "to see me. It's stupid of me to ask, but hope is so horribly hard to kill.

"Yours ever,
"JOAN."

Fanny wrote in answer that evening, but she made no mention of Mabel's visit. "Dr. Grant has joined, I hear," she put rather vaguely. "But of course one knew he would. All the decent men are

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going. London is just too wonderful, honey, I can't keep out of the streets. All day there are soldiers going past; I love them all, with a sort of love that makes you feel you want to be good, and gives you a lump in your throat. They say we have already sent thousands of men to Belgium, though there has not been a word about it in the papers, but I met a poor woman in the crowd today who had just said good-bye to her son. I wish I had got a son, only, of course, he would not be old enough to fight, would he? Write me sometimes, honey, and don't lose heart. Things will come all right for you in the end, I sort of know they will."

To Joan her letter brought very little comfort despite its last sentence. Dick had joined; it did not matter how Fanny had come by the news, Joan never doubted its truth. He would be among the first to go, that she had always known, but would he make no sign, hold out no hand, before he left? The War was shaking down barriers, bringing together families who perhaps had not been on speaking terms for years, knitting up old friendships. Would he not give her some chance to explain, to set herself right in his eyes? That was all she asked for; not that he should love her again, but just that they should be friends, before he went out into the darkness of a war to which so many were to go and so few return.

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CHAPTER XXIX

"Who dies, if England lives?"

RUDYARD KIPLING.

The black days of September lay like a cloud over the whole country. News came of the fall of Namur; the retreat from Mons; the German Army before the gates of Paris. There was one Sunday evening when the newspaper boys ran almost gleefully up and down the London streets, shouting in shrill voices: "The whole of the British Expeditionary Force cut to pieces." The nation's heart stood still to hear; the faces of the men and women going about their ordinary work took on a strained, set expression. The beating of drums, the blowing of trumpets, the cheering of crowds died away; a new stern feeling entered into the meaning of war.

Dick felt sometimes as if all were expressed in the one word England. The name was written across all their minds as they stared into the future waiting for the news, real news of that handful of men standing with their backs to the walls of Paris, facing the mighty strength of the German Army. England! What did it matter if some hearts called it Scotland, some Ireland, some the greater far-off land of the Dominions? the meaning was the same. It was the country that was threatened, the country that stood in danger; as one man the people rallied to the cry of Motherland. And over in France, with their backs to the walls of Paris, the soldiers fought well!

"Who dies, if England lives?" Kipling wrote in those early days of the war, putting into words the meaning which throbbed in the hearts of the people. Statesmen might say that they fought for the scrap of paper, for an outraged Belgium, because of an agreement binding Great Britain to France; the people knew that they fought for England! And to stay at home and wait with your eyes staring into the darkness was harder perhaps than to stand with your back to the wall and fight. They were black days for the watchers, those early days of the War.

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The one thought affected everyone in a different way. The look in their eyes was the same, but they used a different method of expressing it. Dick threw himself heart and soul into his work; he could not talk about the War or discuss how things were going on, and he was kept fairly busy, he had little time for talking. All day he examined men; boys, lying frankly about their age in order to get in; old men, well beyond the limit, telling their untruths with wistful, anxious eyes. Men who tried so hard to hide this or that infirmity, who argued if they were not considered fit, who whitened under the blow of refusal, and went from the room with bitten lips. From early morning till late at evening, Dick sat there, and all day the stream of old men, young men, and boys passed before him.

Fanny took it in quite a different way. Silence was torture to her; she had to talk. She was afraid and desperately in earnest. The love in her heart was poured out at the foot of this new ideal, and to Fanny, England was typified in the soldiers. The night on which the paper boys ran abroad shrieking their first casualty list Fanny lay face downwards on her bed and sobbed her heart out. She visualized the troops she had watched marching through London, their straight-held figures, their merry faces, their laughing eyes, the songs they had shouted and whistled haunted her mind. They had not seemed to be marching to death; people had stood on the edge of the pavement to cheer them, and now—"cut to pieces"—that was how the papers put it. It made her more passionately attached to the ones that were left. It is no exaggeration to say that quite gladly and freely Fanny would have given her life for any—not one particular—soldier. Something of the spirit of mother-love woke in her attitude towards them.

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Down in quiet, sleepy little Wrotham the tide of war beat less furiously. Uncle John would sometimes lose his temper completely because the place as a whole remained so apathetic. The villagers did not do much reading of the papers; the fact that the parson had a new prayer introduced into the service impressed them with a sense of war more than anything else. But

even Wrotham felt the outside fringe of London's anxiety during the days of that autumn. One by one, rather sheepishly, the young men came forward. They would like to be soldiers, they would like to have a whack at them there Germans. No thought of treaties or broken pledges stirred them, but England was written across their minds just the same. Uncle John woke to new life; he had been eating out his heart, knowing himself useless and on the shelf, when every nerve in his body was straining to be up and doing. He instituted himself as recruiter-in-chief to the district. He would walk for miles if he heard there was a likely young man to be found at the end of his tramp; his face would glow with pride did he but catch one fine, healthy-looking specimen.

He inaugurated little meetings, too, at which the Vicar presided, and Uncle John held forth. Bluntly and plainly he showed the people their duty, speaking to them as he had used to speak in the old days to his soldiers. And over their beer in the neighbouring public-house the men would repeat his remarks, weigh up his arguments, agree or disagree with his sentiments. They had a very strong respect for him, that at least was certain; before Christmas he had persuaded every available unmarried man to enlist.

The married men were a problem; Joan felt that perhaps more than Uncle John did. Winter was coming on; there were the children to clothe and feed; the women were beginning to be afraid. Sometimes Joan would accompany Uncle John on his tramps abroad, and she would watch the wife's face as Uncle John brought all his persuasion to bear on the man; she would see it wake first to fear, and then to resentment. She was sorry for them; how could one altogether blame them if they cried, "Let the unmarried men go first." Yet once their man had gone, they fell back on odd reserves of pride and acquiescence. There was very little wailing done in the hundreds of small homes scattered all over England; with brave faces the women turned to their extra burden of work. Just as much as in the great ones of the land, "for England" burned across their hearts.

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Joan's life had settled down, but for the outside clamour of events, into very quiet routine. Her two years' life in London was melting away into a dream; only Dick and her love for Dick stood out with any intensity, and since Dick made no sign to her, held out no hand, she tried as much as possible to shut him from her thoughts. Aunt Janet had died in her sleep the night war was declared; she had never waked to consciousness. When the doctor, hastily fetched by Uncle John, had reached her room, she had been already dead—smiling a little, as if the last dream which had come to haunt her sleep had been a pleasant one.

"Joy killed her," the nurse declared. Certainly she lay as if very content and untroubled.

"I believe," Miss Abercrombie told Joan, "that she was only staying alive to see you. My dear, you must not blame yourself in any way; she is so much better out of it all."

"No, I don't blame myself," Joan answered. "We had made friends before she died; there isn't a wall between us any longer."

The villagers ransacked their gardens to send flowers to the funeral. Aunt Janet's grave was heaped up with them, but in a day or two they withered, and old Jim carried them away on his leaf heap. After that every week Joan took down just a handful and laid them where she thought the closed hands would be, and, because in so doing she seemed to draw a little closer to Aunt Janet, and through Aunt Janet to the great God beyond, her thoughts would turn into prayer as she stood by the grave. "Dear God, keep him always safe," she would whisper. Then like a formless flash of light the word "England" would steal across her prayer; she did not need to put the feeling into words; just like an offering she laid it before her thought of God and knew its meaning would be understood. So thousands of men and women pray, brought by a sense of their own helplessness in this great struggle near to the throne of God. And always the name of England whispers across their prayers.

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Just when the battle of the Marne was at its turning-point Dick got his orders to go. He was given under a week to get ready in, the unit, a field hospital, was to start on Saturday and the order came on Monday. One more day had to be put in at the recruiting depot; he could not leave them in the lurch; Tuesday he spent getting his kit together, Wednesday evening saw him down at Sevenoaks.

As once before, Mabel was at the station to meet him. "It's come, then," she said. "Tom is wild with envy. Age, you know, limits him to a volunteer home defence league."

"Bad luck," answered Dick. "Of course I am very bucked to be really going, Mabel. It is not enlivening to sit and pass recruits all day long."

"No," she agreed. "One wants to be up and doing. I hope I am not awfully disloyal or dreadfully selfish, but I cannot help being glad that my baby is a baby. Mother has knitted countless woollies for you"—she changed the subject abruptly; "it has added to poor Tom's discontent. He has to try on innumerable sleeping-helmets and wind-mufflers round his neck to see if they are long enough. Yesterday he talked rather dramatically of enlisting as a stretcher-bearer and going, out with you, but they wouldn't have him, would they?"

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Dick laughed, but he could realize the bitterness of the other man's position when Tom spoke to him that night over their port wine.

"Mabel is so pleased at keeping both her men under her wing," he confided, "that she doesn't at all realize how galling it is to be out of things. I would give most things, except Mabel and the boy, to be ten years younger."

"Still, you have Mabel and the boy," Dick reminded him. "It comes awfully hard on the women having to give up their men."

"That's beyond the point," Tom answered. "And bless you, don't you know the women are proud to do it?"

"But pride doesn't mend a broken life," Dick tried to argue against his own conviction.

Tom shook his head. "It helps somehow," he said. "Mabel was talking to some woman in the village yesterday, who has sent three sons to the war, and whose eldest, who is a married man and did not go, died last week. 'I am almost ashamed of him, Mum,' the woman told Mabel; 'It is not as if he had been killed at the war.' Oh, well, what's the use of grouching; here I am, and here I stick; but if the Germans come over, I'll have a shot at them whatever regulations a grandmotherly Government may take for our protection. And you're all right, my lad, you are not leaving a woman behind you."

That night, after he had gone up to his own room, the thought of Joan came to haunt Dick. For two months he had not let himself think of her; work and other interests had more or less crowded her out of his heart. But the sudden, though long expected, call to action brought him, so to speak, to the verge of his own feeling. Other things fell away; he was face to face once again with the knowledge that he loved her, and that one cannot even starve love to death. He wanted her, he needed her; what did other things, such as anger and hurt pride, count against that. He had only kissed her once in his life, and the sudden, passionate hunger for the touch of her lips shook his heart to a prompt knowledge of the truth. He must see her again before he left, for it might be that death would find him out there. War had seemed more of a game to begin with; that first evening when he had shouted with the others round Trafalgar Square he had not connected War with Death, but now it seemed as if they walked hand in hand. He could not die without first seeing Joan again.

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He thought of writing her a short note asking her to be in when he called, but the post from Jarvis Hall did not go out till after twelve; he could get to London quicker himself. After breakfast he told Mabel that he found he had to go away for the day.

"Something you have forgotten—couldn't you write for it, Dick?" she asked. "It seems such a shame, because we shall only have one more day of you."

"No," he answered; he did not lift his eyes to look at her. "As a matter of fact it is somebody that I must see."

He had not written about or mentioned Joan since he had gone away from Sevenoaks last; Mabel had hoped the episode was forgotten. It came to her suddenly that it was Joan he was speaking of, and she remembered Fanny's long, breathless explanation and the girl's rather pathetic belief that she would do something to help. She could not, however, say anything to him before the others.

"Will the eleven-thirty do for you?" Tom was asking. "Because I have got to take the car in then."

"It seems a little unreasonable, Dick," Mrs. Grant put in. She had not been the best of friends with him since their violent scene together; her voice took on a querulous tone when she spoke to him. "Who can there be in London, that you suddenly find you must see?" She, too, for the moment, was thinking of the outrageous girl.

"I am sorry," Dick answered. "It is my own fault for not having gone before. I'll try and get back to-morrow."

Mabel caught him afterwards alone on his way out to the garden to smoke a pipe. She slipped a hand through his arm and went with him.

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"Mother is upset," she confided. "I don't think she can be awfully well; just lately she cries very easily."

"She always used to"—Dick's voice was not very sympathetic. "Do you remember how angry I was at the way she cried when father died?"

"Yes," Mabel nodded. "All the same, she does love you, Dick; it is a funny sort of love, perhaps, but as she gets older it seems to me that she gets softer, less selfish. And, Dick, I think she feels—as indeed I do, too—that you have grown away from us. It is not the War, though that takes men from us women, too; it is more just as if we were out of sympathy with one another. Are we?"

"What a funny thought." Dick smiled down at her. "There has never been, as you know, much sympathy between mother and myself. But for you, Mabel, things will always be the same between us. I trust you with everything I have."

"And yet you aren't quite trusting me now," she answered. "You are going up to London to see this girl, aren't you, Dick?—and all this time you have never written or spoken to me about her."

"I have been trying to forget," he confessed. "I thought, because of something she did to me, that I was strong enough to shut her outside my life. But last night the old battle began again in my mind, and I know that I must see her before I go out. It is more than probable, Mabel, that I shall not come back. I can't go out into the darkness without seeing her again."

Mabel's hand tightened on his arm. "You mustn't say that, Dick," she whispered. "You have got to

come back."

They walked in silence and still Mabel debated the question in her mind. Should she stand out of events, and let them, shape themselves? If Dick went to London and found Joan gone, what would he do then? Perhaps he would not see Fanny and the landlady would not be able to tell him where Joan was. Wrotham would be the last place in which he would look for her, and on Saturday he was leaving for the front. It was only just for a second that her mind wavered; she had initially too straight a nature for deceit.

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"Dick," she said, coming to a standstill and looking up at him, "you needn't go to London. Miss Rutherford"—she hesitated on the word—"Joan, is back at Wrotham."

"At Wrotham?" he repeated, staring at her.

"Yes," she answered, "Old Miss Rutherford died two months ago. They had sent for Joan; I believe she arrived the day her aunt died, and she has stayed there ever since. Once or twice I have met her out with Colonel Rutherford. No, wait"—she hurried on, once she had begun. "There is something else I must tell you. I went, you know, to see her in London, but I found that she had left. As I was coming away I met the other girl—I cannot remember her name, but she came here to tea—she insisted on my going back with her; she had something she wanted to tell me about Joan. It was a long, rather jumbled story, Dick; only two facts stand out of it. One was that the baby was never born; Joan was in some sort of accident when she first went back to London; and the other thing was that this girl wanted me to use my influence to persuade you that Joan really loved you; that what had angered you that night was all a mistake." She broke off short, and began again quickly. "I did not promise, Dick; in fact I told the girl I would do nothing to interfere. 'If he can find his happiness anywhere else I shall be glad,' I said. And that is what I felt. I don't try and excuse myself; I never wanted you to marry her if you could forget her, and, Dick, I almost hoped you had—I was not going to remind you."

"I see," said Dick. His pipe had gone out. He lit it again slowly and methodically. "Mabel," he said suddenly, "if I can persuade Joan to marry me before I go out, will you be nice to her as my wife?"

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"You can't marry her, Dick," Mabel remonstrated, "there isn't time. But if you will trust me again beyond this, I promise to be as nice to her as you would like me to be."

"But I can, and what's more, I will," Dick answered. "I've shilly-shallied long enough. If she'll have me, and it would serve me jolly well right if she turned me down—it shall be a special licence at a registry office on Saturday morning. My train doesn't leave till two-thirty." He stood up very tall and straight. Mabel thought she had never seen him look so glad to be alive. "And now," he added, "I am going straight across to ask her. Wish me luck, Mabel."

She stood up, too, and put both her hands on his. "You aren't angry with me?" she whispered. "Dick, from the bottom of my heart, I do wish you luck, as you call it."

"Angry? Lord bless you, no!" he said, and suddenly he bent and kissed her. "You've argued about it, Mabel, but then I always knew you would argue. I trust you to be good to her after I'm gone; what more can I say?"

CHAPTER XXX

"But love is the great amulet which makes the World a Garden."

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.

Colonel Rutherford and Joan had had breakfast early that morning, for Uncle John was going to London to attend some big meeting, at which, much to his own secret gratification, he had been asked to speak. He rehearsed the greater part of what he was going to say to Joan during breakfast, and on their way down to the station. He had long ago forgiven, or forgotten, which was more probable still, Joan's exile from his good graces. After Aunt Janet's funeral, when Joan had spoken to him rather nervously, suggesting her return to London, he had stared at her with unfeigned astonishment.

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"Back to London," he had said, "whatever for?"

"To get some more work to do," Joan suggested.

His shaggy eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Preposterous notion," he answered. "I never did agree with it. So long as a girl has a home, what does she want to work for? Besides, now your aunt is not here, who is going to look after the house and things?"

The question seemed unanswerable, and since he had apparently forgiven the past, why should she remind him? She realized, too, that he needed her. She wrote asking Fanny to send on her things, and settled down to try and fill her mind and heart, as much as possible, with the daily round of small duties which are involved in the keeping of a house.

This morning on her way back from the station, having seen Uncle John into his train for London, she let fat Sally walk a lot of the way. The country seemed to be asleep; for miles all round she could see across field after field, not a creature moving, not a soul in sight, only a little dust round a bend of the road showed where a motor-car had just passed. It occurred to her that her life had been just like that; the quiet, seeming, non-existence of the country; a flashing past of life which left its cloud of dust behind, and then the quiet closing round her again.

"The daily round, the common task,
Shall furnish all we need to ask."

She hummed it under her breath.

"Room to deny ourselves—"

Perhaps that was the lesson that she had needed to learn, for in the old days her watchword had been:

"Room to fulfil myself."

If it was not for Uncle John now she would have liked to have gone back to London and thrown herself into some sort of work. Women would be needed before long, the papers said, to do the work of the men who must be sent to the firing-line. But Uncle John was surely the work to her hand; she would do it with what heart she had, even though the long hours of sewing or knitting gave her too much time to think.

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Sally having been handed over to the stable-boy, Joan betook herself into the dining-room. Thursday was the day on which the flowers were done; Mary had already spread the table with newspaper, and collected the vases from all over the house. They had been cleaned and fresh water put in them; she was allowed to do as little work as possible, but the empty flower-basket and the scissors stood waiting at her hand. The gardener would really have preferred to have done the flower-cutting himself, but Aunt Janet had always insisted upon doing it, and Joan carried on the custom. There were only a few late roses left, but she gathered an armful of big white daisies.

As she came back from the hall Joan saw Dick waiting for her. The maid had let him in and gone to find "Miss Joan." Strangely enough the first thought that came into her mind was not a memory of the last time that they had met or a wonder as to why he was here; she could see that he was in khaki, and to her it meant only one thing. He was going to the front, he had come to say good-bye to her before he went. All the colour left her face, she stared at him, the basket swinging on her arm, the daisies clutched against her black dress.

"Joan," Dick said quickly; he came towards her. "Joan, didn't the maid find you, didn't they tell you I was here? What's the matter, dear; why are you frightened?"

He took the flowers and the basket from her and laid them down on the hall table. Mary coming back at the moment, saw them standing hand in hand, and ran to the kitchen to tell the others that Miss Joan's young man had come at last.

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"Isn't there somewhere you can take me where we can talk?" Dick was saying. "I have such an awful lot to say to you."

"You have come to say good-bye," Joan answered. She looked up at him, her lips quivered a little. "You are going out there."

Then he knew why she had been afraid, and behind his pity he was glad.

"Joan," he whispered again, and quite simply she drew closer to him and laid her cheek against his coat, "does it really matter to you, dear?"

His arms were round her, yet they did not hold her as tightly as she clung to him. "Must you go?" she said breathlessly. "There are such hundreds of others; must you go?"

Dick could not find any words to put the great beating of his heart into, so he just held her close and laid his lips, against her hair.

"Take me into that little room where I first saw you," he said presently. "I have remembered it often, Joan; I have always wanted to come back to it, and have you explain things to me there."

She drew a little away and looked up at him. "What you thought of me the other night"—she spoke of it is yesterday, the months in between had slipped awry—"wasn't true, Dick. I——"

He drew her to him quickly again, and this time he kissed her lips. "Let's forget it," he said softly. "I have only got to-day and to-morrow, I don't want to remember what a self-satisfied prig I was."

"Is it to be as soon as that?" she asked. "And I shall only have had you for so short a time."

"It is a short time," Dick assented. "But I am going to make the best of it; you wait till you have heard my plans."

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He laughed at her because she pointed out that the flowers could not be left to die, but he helped her to arrange them in the tall, clean vases. They won back to a brief, almost childish, happiness over the work, but when the last vase had been finished and carried back to its proper place, he caught hold of her hands again.

"Now," he said, "let's talk real hard, honest sense; but first, where's my room?"

She led him silently to the little room behind the drawing-room. She had taken it over again since her return; the pictures she liked best were on the walls, her books lay about on the table. The same armchair stood by the window; he could almost see her as he had seen her that first morning, her great brown eyes, wakened to newfound fear, staring into the garden.

"You shall sit here," he said, leading her to the chair. It rather worried him to see the dumb misery in her eyes. "And I shall sit down on the floor at your feet. I can hold your hands and I can see your face, and your whole adorable self is near to me, that's what my heart has been hungering for. Now—will you marry me the day after to-morrow, before I go?"

"Dick," she said quickly; she was speaking out of the pain in her heart, "why do you ask me? Why have you come back? Haven't you been fighting against it all this time because you knew that I—because some part of you doesn't want to marry me?"

His eyes never wavered from hers, but he lifted the hands he held to his lips and kissed them. "When I saw you again in that theatre in Sevenoaks," he said, "it is perfectly true, one side of me argued with the other. When I came to your rooms and found that other man there, green jealousy just made me blind, and pride—which was distinctly jarred, Joan"—he tried to wake an answering smile in her eyes—"kept me away all this time."

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"Then why have you come back?" she repeated.

"Because I love you," he answered. "It is a very hackneyed word, dear, but it means a lot."

"But it doesn't always stay—love," she said. "Supposing if afterwards those thoughts came back to worry you. What would it mean to me if I saw them in your eyes?"

"There isn't any reason why they should. Listen, dear"—he let go her hands and sat up very straight. "Let's go over it carefully and sensibly, and lay this bugbear of pain once and for all. Before you knew me or I knew you, you loved somebody else. Perhaps you only thought you loved him; anyway, I hope so; I am jealous enough of him as it is. Dear, I don't ask you to explain why you gave yourself to this man, whether it was impulse, or ignorance, or curiosity. So many things go to make up our lives; it is only to ourselves that we are really accountable. After to-day we won't dig over the past again. At the time it did not prevent me falling in love with you; for two years I thought about you sometimes, dreamed of you often. I made love to a good many other women in between; don't think that I show up radiantly white in comparison to you; but I loved just you all the time. I saw you in London once, the day after I landed, and I made up my mind then to find out where you lived, and to try and persuade you to marry me."

He waited a minute or two; his eyes had gone out to the garden; he could see the tall daisies of which Joan had carried an armful waving against the dark wall behind them. Then he looked back at her very frankly.

"It is no use trying to pretend," he said, "that I was not shocked when I first saw you dancing. You see, we men have got into a habit of dividing women into two classes, and you had suddenly, so it seemed to me, got into the wrong one. Dear little girl, I don't want to hurt you"—he put his hand on her knee and drew a little closer, so that she could feel him leaning against her. "I am just telling you all the stupid thoughts that were in me, so that you can at last understand that I love you. It only took me half a night to realize the mistake I had made, and then I set about—you may have noticed it—to make you love me. When I came up to London I had made up my mind that you did love me; I was walking as it were on air. It was a very nasty shock that afternoon in your room, Joan; I went away from it feeling as if the end of the world had come."

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"Oh, I know, I know," she said quickly. "And I had meant it to hurt you. I wanted to shake you out of what I thought was only a dream. I had not the courage to tell you, and yet, that is not quite true. I was afraid if I told you, and if you saw that I loved you at the same time, you would not let it make any difference. I did not want you to spoil your life, Dick."

"You dear girl!" he answered. "On Monday," he went on slowly, "I got my orders for France. They are what I had been wanting and hoping for ever since the War started, and yet, till they came, funnily enough, I never realized what they meant. It seems strange to talk of death, or even to think of it, when one is young and so horribly full of life as I am—yet somehow this brings it near to me. It is not a question of facing it with the courage of which the papers write such a lot; the truth is, that one looks at it just for a moment, and then ordinary things push it aside. Next to death, Joan, there is only one big thing in the world, and that is Love. I had to see you again before I went; I had to find out if you loved me. I wanted to hold you, so that the feel of you should go with me in my dreams; to kiss you, so that the touch of your lips should stay on mine, even if death did put a cold hand across them. He is not going to"—he laughed suddenly and stood up, drawing her into his arms—"your face shall go before me, dear, and in the end I shall come home to you."

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"What can I say?" Joan whispered, "You know I love you. Take me then, Dick, and do as you wish with me."

They talked over the problem of his people and her people after they had won back to a certain degree of sense, and Dick told Joan of how Mabel had wished him luck just as he started out.

"You are going to be great friends," he said, "and Mother will come round too, she always does."

"I am less afraid of your Mother than I am of Mabel," Joan confessed. "I don't believe Mabel will ever like me."

Dick stayed to lunch and waited on afterwards to see Colonel Rutherford. He had extracted a promise from Joan to marry him on Saturday by special licence. He would have to go up to town to see about it himself the next day; he wanted to leave everything arranged and settled for her first. He and Joan walked down to the woods after lunch, and Joan tried to tell him of her first year in London, and of some of the motives that had driven her. He listened in silence; he was conscious more of jealousy than anything else; he was glad when she passed on to talk of her later struggles in London; of Shamrock House, of Rose Brent and Fanny.

"And that man I met at your place," he asked. "You did not even think you loved him, did you, Joan?"

"No," she answered quickly, "never, Dick, and he had never been to my room before. He just pretended he had been to annoy you because I suppose he saw it would hurt me."

Colonel Rutherford arrived for tea very tired, but jubilant at the success of the meeting, which had brought in a hundred recruits. He did not remember anything about Dick, but was delighted to see him because he was in uniform. The news of the other's early departure to the front filled Colonel Rutherford with envy.

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"What wouldn't I give to be your age, young man," he grunted.

Joan slipped away and left them after tea, and it was then that Dick broached the subject of their marriage.

"I have loved her for two years," he said simply, "and I have persuaded her to marry me before I leave on Saturday. There is no reason why I should not marry, and if I die she will get my small amount of money, and a pension."

Colonel Rutherford went rather an uncomfortable shade of red. "You said just now," he said, "that you were the doctor here two years ago. Did you know my niece in those days?"

"I only saw her once," Dick admitted. "I was called in professionally, but I loved her from the moment I saw her, sir."

"God bless my soul!" murmured Colonel Rutherford. A faint fragrance from his own romance seemed to come to him from out the past. "Then you know all about what I was considering it would be my painful duty to tell you."

"Yes," Dick answered, "I know."

The other man came suddenly to him and held out his hand. "I don't know you," he said, "but I like you. We were very hard on Joan two years ago; I have often thought of it since; I should like to see a little happiness come into her life and I believe you will be able to give it her. I am glad."

"Thank you," Dick said. They shook hands quite gravely as men will. "Then I may marry her on Saturday?"

"Why, certainly, boy," the other answered; "And she shall live with me till you come back."

"You are very lucky, Joan," he said to his niece after Dick had gone away. "He is an extremely nice chap, that. I hope you realize how lucky you are."

Joan did not answer him in so many words. She just kissed him good-night and ran out of the room. To-night of all nights she needed Aunt Janet; she threw a shawl round her shoulders presently and stole out. The cemetery lay just across the road, she could slip into it without attracting any attention. This time she brought no gift of flowers, only she knelt by the grave, and whispered her happiness in the prayer she prayed.

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"God keep him always, and bring him back to me."

CHAPTER XXXI

**"God gave us grace to love you
Men whom our hearts hold dear;
We too have faced the battle
Striving to hide our fear.**

**"God gave us strength to send you,
Courage to let you go;
All that it meant to lose you
Only our sad hearts know.**

**"Yet by your very manhood
Hold we your honour fast.
God shall give joy to England**

When you come home at last."

Not till she felt Mabel's soft warm lips on her cheek and knew herself held in the other's arms, did Joan wake to the fact that the marriage was finished and that she was Dick's wife. All the morning she had moved and answered questions and smiled, when other people smiled, in a sort of trance, out of which she was afraid to waken. The only fact that stood out very clear was that Dick was going away in the afternoon; every time she saw a clock it showed that the afternoon was so many minutes nearer.

"You have got to help me to be brave," she had said to Dick the night before. "Other women let their men go, and make no outward fuss. I don't want to be different to them."

"And you won't be," he had answered, kissing her. "If you feel like crying, just look at me, and as your lord and master, I'll frown at you to show that I don't approve." [Pg 247]

He himself was in the wildest, most hilarious of spirits. As he had said to Joan, the thought of death had only touched upon his mind for a second; now the mere idea of it seemed ridiculous. He was going out to help in a great fight, and he was going to marry Joan. She would be waiting for him when he came back; what could a man want more?

The Rutherfords came up on Friday to spend the night before the wedding in town, and in the evening Joan and Dick went to a theatre. It was, needless to say, his idea, but he did it with a notion that it would cheer Joan up. If you want to know real misery, sit through a musical comedy with someone you love more than the whole world next to you, and with the knowledge that he is going to the War the next day in your heart. Joan thought of it every moment. When the curtain was up and the audience in darkness, Dick would slip his hand into hers and hold it, but his eyes followed the events on the stage, and he could laugh quite cheerfully at the funny man's antics. Joan never even looked at them; she sat with her eyes on Dick, just watching him all the time. When they had driven back to the hotel at which the Rutherfords were staying, and in the taxi Dick had taken her into his arms and rather fiercely made her swear that she loved him, that she was glad to be marrying him, some shadow from her anguish had touched on him, it seemed he could not let her go. "Damn to-morrow!" he said hoarsely, and held her so close that the pressure hurt, yet she was glad of the pain as it came from him.

She could not ask him into the hotel, for they had no private sitting-room, so they said good-night to each other on the steps, with the taxi driver and the hotel porter watching them.

"To-morrow, then, at twelve," Dick had whispered. "But I am going to bring Mabel round before then; she gets up at about eleven, I think." [Pg 248]

"To-morrow," Joan answered; her eyes would not let him go.

They stood staring at each other for a minute or two while the taxi-cab driver busied himself with the engine of his car, and the hall porter walked discreetly out of sight. Then Dick lifted his hand quickly to the salute and turned away.

"Drive like hell!" he said to the man. "Anywhere you please, but end me up at the Junior Conservative Club."

"Couldn't even kiss her," communed the man to himself. "That's the worst of being a toff. Can't kiss your girl if anyone else happens to be about."

Mabel had been very nice to Joan the next morning. She had buried all thoughts of jealousy and dismay, and when she looked into the other girl's eyes she forgave her everything and was only intensely sorry for her. Mrs. Grant had, very fortunately, as Dick said, stuck to her opinion and refused to have anything to do with the wedding. She had said good-bye to Dick on Friday morning with a wild outburst of tears, but he could not really feel that it meant very much to her.

"Mother will have forgotten in a week that she disapproved," Mabel told Joan. "You must very often come and spend the day with us."

Then they had driven down to the registry office, all four of them, and in a dark, rather dingy little room, a man with a curiously irritating voice had read aloud something to them from a book. Now they stood outside in the sunshine again, Mabel had kissed Joan, and Uncle John was blinking at her out of old eyes that showed a suspicion of tears in them. A big clock opposite told her the time was a quarter to one; in an hour and three-quarters Dick would be gone.

They had lunch in a little private room at a restaurant close to Victoria Station. Joan tried to eat, and tried to laugh and talk with the others, because Mabel had whispered to her on the way in: "You've got to help Dick through the next hour, it isn't going to be easy for him." And that had made Joan look at him with new eyes, and she could see that his face was very white, and that he seemed almost afraid to look at her. [Pg 249]

After lunch Mabel and Colonel Rutherford went on ahead and left the two young people to say their good-bye alone. When they had gone Dick pushed the things in front of him on the table aside, and laid his head down on his hands. "My God!" she heard him say, "I wish I had not got to go."

He had been so pleased before, so excited over his different preparations, so wildly keen to be

really on the move at last. Joan ran to him quickly; kneeling on the floor by his side, throwing her arms around him. Her own fears were forgotten in her desire to make him brave again.

"It won't be for long, Dick," she whispered. "I know something right inside my heart tells me that you will come back. It is only like putting aside our happiness for a little. Dear, you would be wretched if you could not go. Just having me would not make up to you for that."

He turned and caught her to him quickly. "If I had had you," he said harshly, "it would be different. It would make going so much easier."

"You will come back," she answered softly. Her eyes held his, their hearts beat close and fast against each other.

"It seems," he said a minute or two later, "that it is you who are helping me not to make a fuss, and not the other way about as we arranged." He stood up, slowly lifting her with him. "It is time we were off, Joan," he said. "And upon my soul, I need some courage, little girl. What can you do for me?"

"Well, if I cry," suggested Joan, her head a little on one side—she must be cheerful, she realized; it was funny, but in this she could be stronger than he, and she must be for his sake—"I am sure you would get so annoyed that the rest would be forgotten."

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"If I see you cry," he threatened, "I shall get out even after the train has started, and that will mean all sorts of slurs on my reputation."

They walked across to Victoria Station and came in at once to a scene of indescribable noise and confusion. Besides Dick's unit there was a regiment going. The men stood lined up in the big square yard of the station. Some had women with them, wives and mothers and sweethearts; children clung to the women's skirts, unnoticed and frightened into quietness by the sight and sound of their mothers' grief. Railway officials, looking very important and frightfully overworked, ran in and out of the crowd. The train was standing at the platform, part of it already full, nearly every window had its little group of anxious-faced women, trying to say good-bye to their respective relatives in the carriage.

Dick and Joan walked the length of the train, and found that Dick's man had stowed away his things and reserved a place for his master in one of the front carriages. Then Colonel Rutherford and Mabel joined them and they all talked, trying to keep up an animated conversation as to the weather; would the Channel crossing be very rough; what chance was there of his going to Boulogne instead of to Havre; Joan stood close to Dick, just touching him; there was something rather pathetic in the way she did not attempt to close her hand upon the roughness of his coat, but was content to feel it brushing against her. The regimental band had struck up "Tipperary"; the men were being marshalled to take their places in the train. Joan wondered if the band played so loud and so persistently to drown the noise of the women's crying. One young wife had hysterics, and had to be carried away screaming. They saw the husband, he had fallen out of the ranks to try and hold the girl when the crying first began, now he stood and stared after her as they carried her away. Quite a boy, very white about the face, and with misery in his eyes. Joan felt a wave of resentment against the woman; she had no right, because she loved him, to make his going so much the harder to bear.

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A porter ran along the platform calling out, "Take your seats, please, take your seats." Uncle John was shaking hands and saying good-bye to Dick, "I'll look after her for you," Joan heard him say. Then Mabel moved between them for a second, and pulling down Dick's head, kissed him. After that, it seemed, she was left alone with Dick; Colonel Rutherford and Mabel had gone away. How desperately her hand for the second clutched on to the piece of his coat that was near to her! She could not let him go, could not, could not. The engine whistle emitted a long thin squeak, the soldiers at the back of the train had started singing the refrain of "Tipperary." Just for a second his arms were round her, his lips had brushed against hers. That was all it amounted to, but she had looked up at him and she had seen the need in his eyes.

"Good-bye," she whispered. There was not a vestige of tears or fright in her voice. "You will be back soon, Dick. It is never good-bye."

"No," he agreed. "Never good-bye."

Then he had gone; not a minute too soon, for the train had already started. She could not even see his face at the window, a great blackness had come over her eyes, but she stood very straight held, waving and smiling.

A crowd of the soldiers' wives ran past her up the platform, trying to catch on to the hands held out to them from the windows. The men cheered and sang and sang again. It could only have been one or two seconds that she stood there, then slowly the blackness lifted from her eyes. A word had risen in her heart, she said it almost aloud; the sound of it pushed aside her tears and brought her a strange comfort. "England." It was the name that had floated at the back of her prayers always when she prayed for Dick. She was glad that he had gone, even the misery in her heart could not flood out that gladness: "Who dies, if England lives?"

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Mabel was standing near her and slipped her hand into hers. "Come away, dear," she heard Mabel say; "Colonel Rutherford has got a taxi for us."

Joan was grateful to Mabel. She realized suddenly that the other woman, who had also loved

Dick, had been content to stand aside at the last and leave them alone. She turned to her like a child turns for comfort to someone whom instinctively it knows it can trust.

"I have been good," she said, "haven't I? I haven't shed a tear. Dick said I wasn't to, and, Mabel, you know, I am glad that he has gone. There are some things that matter more than just loving a person, aren't there?"

"Honour, and duty, and the soul of man," Mabel answered. She laughed, a little strange sound that held tears within it. "Oh, yes, Joan, you are right to be glad that he has gone. It will make the future so much more worth having."

"Yes," Joan whispered. Her eyes looked out over the crowded station; the little groups of weeping women; the sadder faces of those who did not weep and yet were hopeless. Her own eyes were full of great faith and a radiant promise. "He will come back, I know he will come back," she said.

Outside the band played ceaselessly and untiringly to drown the sound of the women's tears:

"It's a long way to Tipperary,
It's a long way to go;
It's a long way to Tipperary
To the dearest girl I know.

"Farewell, Piccadilly, farewell, Leicester Square,
It's a long, long way to Tipperary
But my heart's right there."

THE END

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Transcriber's note

Minor punctuation errors have been corrected without notice. The following words were spelled in two different ways and were not changed:

arm-chair, armchair
ball-room, ballroom
over-worked, overworked

A few obvious typographical errors have been corrected and are listed below.

Page 11: "older women were belating" changed to "older women were [debating](#)".

Page 22: "settled the had sat" changed to "settled [she](#) had sat".

Page 32: "at firs thought was love" changed to "at [first](#) thought was love".

Page 51: "must be ome explanation" changed to "must be [some](#) explanation".

Page 53: "ushered in M Jarr.vis" changed to "ushered in [Mr. Jarvis](#)".

Page 59: "talking to each other in whsipers" changed to "talking to each other in [whispers](#)".

Page 81: "Half-olay out," changed to "[Half-way](#) out,".

Page 107: "the crowded steeets" changed to "the crowded [streets](#)".

Page 140: "ladies to go ground" changed to "ladies to go [around](#)".

Page 151: "found her downstars" changed to "found her [downstairs](#)".

Page 162: "s not to be believed" changed to "[was](#) not to be believed".

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